

Film Programme
School of English, Film, Theatre and Media Studies
Victoria University of Wellington

**CONSTRUCTING A BIOPIC-SCREENPLAY:
FICTIONAL INVENTION IN THE BIOPIC WITH SCANT EVIDENCE**

A Creative Practice PhD thesis

Indranil Chakravarty
(ID: 300372866)

Supervisors:
Dr. Ann Hardy
Dr. Tim Groves
Dr. Giacomo Lichtner

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Abstract

As a creative practice research project, this thesis sets out to write a screenplay about Suresh Biswas (1861-1905), a little-known Bengali adventurer who was a wild-life trainer and circus-performer in Europe and later became a Captain in the Brazilian army. The early biographies of Biswas, based on limited and unreliable evidence, pose a challenge to the screenwriter in terms of narrative reconstruction of his life as a biopic. While more information has become available recently, this project examines the creative and critical issues associated with researching this figure, overcoming the problem of scant evidence and positioning him within a presentist context. Drawing on Rosenstone's conceptual model for understanding how historical knowledge manifests in fictional narratives, it investigates the nature and function of fictional inventions in biopics and the ways in which screenplays make creative use of evidence. In writing Biswas' biopic, I use the microhistorical research method, knowledge about biopic script-drafting processes, and Bhabha's notion of 'vernacular cosmopolitanism' to present Biswas as a non-Western, non-elite 19th century cosmopolitan, thereby constructing a counter-narrative to the dominant discourse of cosmopolitanism as a matter of exclusive Western, elite privilege. I argue that it is through a judicious mix of fictional invention and a diligent study of evidence that a screenwriter can get closer to the historical subject. The thesis thus initiates in practice, moves to biopic history and criticism, reverts to practice with knowledge about research and writing that not only enables me to overcome my screenwriting problem but also leaves behind a set of insights for other screenwriters working with scant biographical evidence.

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INTRODUCTION

The thesis centres around the writing of a specific biopic-screenplay and sets out to address the challenges it poses and the questions it raises. These questions relate to the screenwriter's conundrum when reliable evidence on the biographical subject is very limited demanding an inquiry into methods of research and writing that may enable the reconstruction of a life that would otherwise rely almost entirely on fictional invention with little regard for biographical/historical facts. In the attempt to find answers and accomplish my intention of writing the screenplay, I embark on a close study of biopics, particularly the ones where the screenwriters had successfully overcome the problem of scant evidence on the subject.

While the critical component acknowledges that fictional invention is inevitable in all kinds of biopics in the context of well-established (though evolving) conventions of the genre, the nature and function of these inventions and their complex relationship with evidence are my key concerns. The inquiry thus has a dual focus. On one hand, I try to find methods of research that can enable me to expand the body of evidence on (and around) the subject. On the other hand, I try to understand how fictional inventions can facilitate a screenwriter to effectively tell a life-story by assimilating evidence and making the subject relevant to contemporary audiences though apparently evidence and invention may seem to work at cross-purposes. I use a 'presentist' approach in the screenplay (where the past is made to comment on the present) with a simultaneous engagement with the socio-cultural contexts of the characters in the past and the present. Throughout this thesis, I have emphasised a double allegiance to the pursuit of evidence and fictional invention in search of the historical subject while also pointing out that evidence becomes embedded within invention in such complex ways that decoding it often demands close, informed examination.

The 'Subject' of the Biopic ¹

Since this study is concerned with the fictionality of biopic, i.e. the screenwriter's invention in relation to verifiable evidence, it is important to start with a definition of the key term. At the outset, the 'biopic' (the biographical fiction film) must be distinguished from its

¹ I am trying to evoke here a double-meaning to the term 'subject': firstly, the biopic is an area of study, and secondly, in the structuralist sense, it implies a process of construction through signifying practices that are both unconscious and culture-specific.

related but more pervasive genres: biographical documentary and docudrama. Though they are both fact-based, the latter two are non-fictional formats, of which the docudrama often makes use of dramatisations and enactment to make the film more visually appealing to its viewers. As Bill Nichols observes, the epistemological borderline between fiction and documentary has become increasingly blurred over the past few decades (xiv). However, unlike the documentary or docudrama, the biopic is an avowedly fictional format where the construction of coherent characters and plot is of central importance. In order to maintain my focus on the fictional invention of real lives, I restrict my domain of inquiry to the theatrical feature by excluding both the documentary and the docudrama (for their predominantly non-fictional status) and the TV biography (i.e., films that are produced and distributed by a television network in contrast to theatrical films intended for theatrical exhibition). As Anthony Friedmann explains, the TV-film demands a separate study due to its different time-formats, target audience, writing-conventions and structural demands (223-245).² Screenwriter Peter Morgan distinguishes the approach of the docudrama and the biopic:

... biographical filmmaking [biopic] is different from documentary filmmaking; its *responsibilities* are different ... there is an unspoken covenant between you and the audience, where the audience is expecting you to bring something to it that is beyond conventional, documentarian, accuracy-based treatments.” (Novak and Huber 6, italics added)

In other words, the biopic-screenwriter is less beholden to verifiable evidence than the documentary filmmaker while being more obligated to fictional invention, making it a more focussed area for this study.

However, there may be disagreements about this distinction, particularly with Alan Rosenthal who, in his manual on biopic/docudrama screenwriting, uses the word ‘docudrama’ as an all-encompassing term that “covers an amazing variety of dramatic forms” of which the biopic is a part (16). Rosenthal does not define the biopic anywhere but broadly makes a distinction between two types of ‘docudrama’: “biography and entertainment,” based on lives and “reconstructive investigations,” based on events (17). He acknowledges that writing-conventions in film or TV, fiction or documentary, are significantly different:

² Television has produced such a vast amount of biographical material that it needs to be studied on its own terms. Since 1999, there has been a popular 24-hour TV channel called *The Biography Channel* which in 2007 was rebranded as *Bio* (Dempsey) to include reality-oriented programming and was further rebranded as *FYT* in 2014 to include “life-style” programming alongside biography (Malone).

First, whereas the feature film can be any length, ... a docudrama on a U.S. TV network at prime time is usually written in two-hour segments. ... A second point, and a consequence of those commercials, is that the drama is usually constructed in seven acts instead of three, with four of them coming in the last hour. Obviously, the writing is geared so that there is a climax plus a question mark at the end of each act ... (57)

However, Rosenthal brings all 'types' together in his screenwriting manual on the basis that they are all reality-based and have "a higher responsibility for accuracy and truth than fiction" (16). He thus makes the untenable suggestion that biopic is non-fiction or aligns closely with it. I reject Rosenthal's conflation of biopic within docudrama and none of the biopic scholars maintain this distinction. Its problem lies in that, far from identifying fictionality (invention) in such films, it merges disparate film-genres where, according to Rosenthal's own admission, "there is a tremendous overlap in the categories" (17). It is important to maintain the distinction in order to arrive at a precise definition of the biopic.

In search of a definition, we may turn to the first meticulous and systematic book-length study of the biopic: George F. Custen's *Bio/Pics: How Hollywood Constructed Public History* (1992). He briefly defines the biopic as a film based on "the life of a historical person, past or present" (5). Importantly, Custen emphasises how such film narratives draw on pre-existing narratives: "Biography is mediated through the creation of and competence in symbol systems, and the cinematic version of such mediation has antecedents long before there was a film industry" (5). He thus locates the biopic-narrative as cinematic inscription of narratives, palimpsests that often existed in other forms, in print, oral culture or even as traces "found on prehistoric slabs and scraps of papyrus" (5). The biopic, he argues, "was a known commodity almost from the film's beginning" (6). In defining the biopic, Custen's characterisation of the genre as necessarily a re-telling, is fundamentally important to this study in search of identifying how screenwriters often rework earlier inventions in constructing new narratives.

However, there are several films that deal with people's lives but cannot be considered biopics though they claim to be 'based on a true/real story.' A wide range of life-based stories have always existed where references to the actual person are elided in order to avoid litigation, copyright issues and to allow the producer/screenwriter deviation from evidence 'for dramatic purposes.' The best-known case of this is Welles' *Citizen Kane* (1941) where audiences were aware that it was based on the life of the media-magnate William Randolph Hearst, though he was not mentioned in the film. In these screenplays, fictional inventions cannot be assessed vis-à-vis

verifiable evidence because the real-life connection is denied. I will refer to these life-narratives as *quasi-biopics*, a phenomenon pervasive in contemporary Indian popular cinema since 2000s (Varma's *Sarkar*, Ratnam's *Guru*, etc.) but these films will remain outside the purview of my study.³

Dennis Bingham, author of the next landmark study of the biopic, in *Whose Lives Are They Anyway: The Biopic as Contemporary Film Genre* (2010) does not offer any clear definition but suggests a broader range of possibilities: "every biopic is supposed to have a basis in reality" (7). He describes it through its function: "The biopic narrates, exhibits, and celebrates the life of a subject in order to demonstrate, investigate, or question his or her importance in the world; to illuminate the fine points of a personality; and for both artist and spectator to discover what it would be like to be this person" (10). He illustrates this through a close analysis of eighteen biopics, ranging from those that he calls 'classical' to the 'neo-classical' and the 'postmodern', each of which perform those tasks in different ways through the act of narration, serving as an "inspirational" or a "cautionary tale" (68, 302).

Bingham was fully aware of the conundrum of a certain kind of life-narrative that fulfills both his and Custen's criteria and yet cannot be considered biopics. Films like Allen's *Zelig* (1983), Zemeckis' *Forrest Gump* (1994) or Jackson/Botes' *Forgotten Silver* (1995) use a mock-biopic mode where the protagonist is entirely fictional and whose 'real' existence is endorsed with constructed archival evidence (such as 'The March of Time' newsreel in *Citizen Kane*). These films will be referred as *faux-biopics* (Bingham 49). Like *quasi-biopics*, they will remain outside the concerns of this thesis, for the same reason. In fact, if *Citizen Kane* could be considered a biopic, it would be a faux-biopic as well since Kane is fictional. Bingham, however, dedicates an entire chapter to *Citizen Kane* as it anticipates and problematises the key issues of the contemporary biopic (50-71). Ira Bruce Nadel, a biography theorist, characterises biographical fiction as "fundamentally a narrative which has as its primary task the enactment of character and place through language" (8). For biopic that 'language' is audiovisual, governed by the conventions of fiction. With these deliberations in mind, I would propose a definition of the biopic as *a film based on the life of a historical person, past or present, where the person is clearly mentioned in the film and where the life-story, whole or partial, is narrated through the use of fictional devices.*

³ The term has been in circulation in film-journalism and has been used extensively by Rachel Dwyer in an essay on contemporary Indian biopics (Brown and Vidal 67-81).

The biographical subject at the core of this thesis is Suresh Biswas (1861-1905), a man born in a remote Bengal village in British India in a family of modest resources. Some people in Bengal who still recall his name, remember Biswas as one who fought a tiger with his bare hands at the age of fifteen in order to save some English hunters. He subsequently moved to Calcutta, from where he travelled to London and across Europe, US and South America as a tiger/lion-trainer in major international circus companies of the time. He supposedly spoke seven languages and settled in Brazil, raised a family, joined the Army and distinguished himself as a Captain, leading Brazilian soldiers during two major naval revolts. Biswas never returned to India after he left it at the age of 17.

We have six letters (and a seventh one of uncertain authorship) as testimony to his life-story which he had sent from Brazil to his uncle in India (translated by me from the original Bengali with notes in the Appendix: “The Letters”). These letters provide information about ten years of his life: 1887-1897. There are also two 19th century biographies: one in English, another in Bengali, both published around 1899, the former reprinted by a university press in 2018. They do not provide any verifiable evidence of his life or of the claims he made in the letters (except two photographs, of Biswas and his Brazilian wife, which he had sent through one of the letters). In fact, they contain little additional biographical information beyond the content of the letters. Though all claims made by Biswas remained unconfirmed for over a century, recent archival research by Maria Barrera-Agarwal in 2016, has confirmed several details as authentic (such as circus posters that prominently feature him as the main attraction and his role in the Brazilian Army during the Naval Revolts). However, large parts of his life still remain unverifiable. These sources and their contents have been discussed in detail in Chapter 4.

Almost forgotten in contemporary India, Biswas’ life demands attention now with a relevance that goes beyond the confines of India or any particular nation. As Benedict Anderson demonstrates in his pioneering work, *Imagined Communities*, the pathways of travel in the nineteenth century from the colonies to the metropolitan centres, whether in India or elsewhere, were considered the domain of powerful elites (207-211). Biswas’ life, however, offers a case that complicates such well-ensconced narratives of travel by important people across national boundaries (particularly, colonial) questioning whether the ability to live harmoniously among diverse cultures was only a matter of Western, elite privilege. I set out to construct Biswas’ life as a non-Western, non-elite counter-narrative to remind us that neither is transnational travel a recent by-product of globalisation nor is cosmopolitanism exclusive to the West. For making

such a claim, I link Biswas' preparedness for cosmopolitanism to his vernacular (i.e. indigenous, autochthonous) origins, a phenomenon that the postcolonial scholar, Homi Bhabha calls "vernacular cosmopolitanism" ("Unsatisfied" 191).

As the Anglo-Ghanaian philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah observes, "Personal history is a small inlet to public history" (*Ethics of Identity* 214). In fact, the popular appeal of the biopic lies in that it allows us to experience a 'public history' through the 'personal history' of an individual with whom we may or may not be familiar. In the process of cinematically experiencing that life, the present becomes inextricably connected with the past through the narrative agency of the screenwriter. Indian postcolonial scholars and fiction-writers (Dipesh Chakrabarty, Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, etc.) are often quick to point out that one of the ways of disrupting dominant Eurocentric narratives about the past is to counter it with the accounts of lesser-known lives who have often been the outliers of history: non-Western peoples, women, poor, undocumented migrants, slaves and social minorities even in the West. These lives can offer alternative viewpoints that become particularly significant in the case of the biopic because it has been primarily a Hollywood genre, firmly rooted to a Eurocentric version of history, as several scholars discussed in the subsequent chapter point out (Joanny Moulin, Ella Shohat and Robert Stam). With their proliferation across the world, these mainstream biopics have reinforced a worldview that further marginalises non-Western, non-white, non-elitist, 'ordinary' subjects.

However, one of the practical difficulties of narrating lesser-known lives is that they are often poorly documented and verifiable historical evidence is elusive. Amitav Ghosh, a major Indian novelist of historical fiction who constructs "networks and traces" of people across continents through his novels, explains in an interview the difficulty of finding sources:⁴

The elite, who have a voice, are covering their tracks while, with other Indian modes of dispersal, the traces are so very slight and there are so few. To me it's absolutely astonishing that across the entire nineteenth century, as millions and millions of Indians are being whisked off here and there around the world, you don't find a written trace of these movements, there's not a pen diary, nothing, no ordinary migrant who has explained themselves on paper or created any kind of trace. (Boehmer and Mondal 31)

In other words, extant 19th century sources in Indian or Chinese history, as Ghosh explains, speak through and of, the privileged classes only (31). Whether literary or cinematic, fiction is

⁴ References without page-numbers imply that they are web-based documents (MLA8).

often a means of recovering and mapping the ‘traces’ of the global flows of people, ideas, objects and cultures in order to give voice to the *subaltern* (i.e. social groups that are excluded, displaced and subjugated to silence by social institutions). Natalie Zemon Davis, a key reference point in this thesis, also emphasises the importance of “decentering history” through “the move to working people and ‘subaltern classes’; to women and gender; to communities defined by ethnicity and race; to the study of non-Western histories and world or global history, in which the European trajectory is only one of several models” (“Decentering History” 188).

It thus demands of the screenwriter to find ways to reconstruct such lives through historical research on one hand and fictional invention on the other, with a conscious awareness of the biopic’s conventions. That is why, at the outset, I seek to understand the biopic in terms of its relationship between evidence and fictional invention through the critical discourses around it (Custen, Bingham, Rosenstone, etc.). Biographical ‘evidence’ (a term discussed in Chapter 1) or traces left behind by an individual, may be sparse but those traces may be broadened by extending the canvas of research to contextual histories, networks and connections that the individual may have had with other people and public events. Fictional invention gives those disparate ‘traces’ a narrative form while abiding by (and occasionally subverting) the conventions of the genre.

Research Questions and Thesis Structure

The overarching research question that connects the critical and creative components of this thesis is as follows:

Can close studies of fictional invention in biopics and research into Biswas’ life-and-times allow me to overcome the problem of scant evidence in the writing of a biopic-screenplay on him?

This question is addressed in complementary ways in the two components. In the critical component, I embark on a set of questions that move from the general to the specific:

What is the nature and function of fictional inventions in biopics and how do they relate to factual evidence?

If I undertake a close study of biopics which are based on scant evidence, what knowledge about screenwriters’ research and writing methods can I derive through the critical analysis of screenplays and testimonies of the script-drafting process?

Since the creative segment has two components (historical research for Biswas' biography and biopic-screenwriting itself), there are two corresponding areas of concern:

How can I use my knowledge of research methods learnt in the critical component to unearth biographical and circumstantial evidence about Biswas' life?

In relation to the problem of screenwriting itself, the key questions would be as follows:

How I can effectively use fictional invention while incorporating available evidence?

Can I use the idea of 'vernacular cosmopolitanism' to construct the screenplay and make Biswas' life relevant to contemporary Indian audiences?

The critical component undertakes a close study of fictional invention in the biopic through the critical discourses around it. Since screenwriting and research practices can be better understood through case-studies (Macdonald 7; Batty "Screenwriting Studies" 66), in Chapter 3, I select biopics which were developed out of scant biographical evidence and examine their methods of research and inventions. I identify four different but overlapping narrative approaches that screenwriters tend to use when working with limited evidence. These reflections serve as guiding principles for my own project where I draw upon some of the research methods and narrative approaches.

Chapter 1 defines the key terms of the thesis such as 'evidence' and 'invention', observing the relatively recent rise of the genre as a pervasive social phenomenon. It then sets out to seek answers about the nature and function of invention through a review of biopic literature that includes academic scholars, practitioners and manual-writers. It identifies insights about why certain fictional inventions are made, what purposes they serve and their relationship with verifiable evidence. The research methodology of the thesis is discussed in the context of these discussions.

Chapter 2 explains the concept of 'vernacular cosmopolitanism' based on a critique of both postcolonial theory and Eurocentric notions of cosmopolitanism. While these are discussed here in critical terms, they are deployed in creative terms in the screenplay. The chapter explains how different scholars (Bhabha, Breckenridge, Werbner, etc.) have identified cosmopolitanism practices among subaltern populations in the non-Western world and how these have often been depicted by fiction writers. The concept is made further relevant in the context of contemporary India by juxtaposing and contrasting it with the pervasive rise of political Hinduism, academically referred to as 'saffronisation'. The latter section of this chapter highlights how the notion of

vernacular cosmopolitanism has been used here as an interpretative framework to reconstruct Biswas' life as a corrective to the official history of cosmopolitanism which is presumed to be a matter of exclusive Western, elitist privilege.

Chapter 3 sets out to identify biopics that are based on very limited evidence and investigates their research methods and screenwriting strategies. Through case studies of a discreetly chosen sample of four biopics from across the world, I identify four narrative approaches in biopics that frequently overlap. The analysis is based on testimonies of the development process. A set of observations pertaining to research methods and screenwriting techniques are deduced which serve as a reference frame for research methods and screenwriting practice deployed in this thesis. It thus proposes a conceptual model of biopic-screenplay techniques in cases of limited evidence that can be used by other screenwriters.

Chapter 4 examines all biographical sources on Suresh Biswas, primary and secondary, deriving a resource-base of reliable (and not-so-reliable) evidence on him, most of which have been used in some way in the screenplay. It thus separates fact from fiction at the outset. It outlines Biswas' social-historical contexts and the research methods used in this thesis with the intention to contextualise and explain the motivation and functions of fictional inventions and the use of dramatic elements used to structure the screenplay. This chapter is thus the thematic bridge that connects the critical component with the creative artefact (screenplay).

The biopic-screenplay titled *Hometowns*, marks the culmination of all the research exploration in the thesis on both the biopic and the biographical subject, combining evidence with fictional invention. It performs research through the act of screenwriting itself, creating fictional situations that illustrate the difficulties of writing a biopic with little reliable evidence on one hand and on the other, the commercial imperatives of the film industry, specifically in India. It also develops a form that reveals the sources, methods of research and specific screenwriting techniques that have been theoretically evolved in the critical component. It is through a combination of such techniques and overriding thematic concerns elaborated in Chapter 2 that the screenplay presents Biswas as a vernacular cosmopolitan.

The screenplay is followed by the Conclusion which brings together my research findings and observations in the critical study, screenwriting research and the screenwriting *per se*, that have grown out through multiple iterations of research, analysis and screenwriting. Thus,

screenwriting practice raises questions that are explored through research where the findings subsequently shape my practice, leaving behind a set of critical reflections about research and writing techniques for use by other screenwriters working in similar circumstances. While reflecting on the questions raised by the debates on Creative Practice Research, I also reflect on my ‘new knowledge’ contribution as well as the limitations of my work and possible pathways for future work. In the section that follows, I outline the critical debates around the role and significance of creative work within the university environment and its relationship with research practices. While making some important observations about creative arts research in the arts in general, I have drawn special attention to the domain of screenwriting.

Creative Practice Research (CPR)

Most studies in CPR indicate attempts to overcome the divide between the traditional practice-centric approach of art institutions and university departments that teach and research history, theory, criticism of an artistic discipline. While the former is concerned with imparting craft skills without engaging substantially with theory or research, the latter studies finished texts without delving into the practical difficulties of creating such texts or understanding the creative/production process. In the field of cinema, Alisa Lebow sees the chasm reflected in the way universities (like her own New York University) keep Film Schools and Film Studies departments in watertight compartments where “practitioners are considered to be less rigorous and less theoretically well-informed than their academic counterparts” (202). Having studied and taught in both Film Schools and Film Studies departments of universities, and having worked professionally in academia as well as industry, I have understood and experienced CPR, like Lebow, as an attempt to build bridges between the two approaches for the sake of mutual enrichment. Jennifer Webb and Donna Lee Brien characterise this conflict as “the ancient [Platonic] quarrel between poetry and philosophy,” rooted in doubts in academia whether “creative writing can deliver in the knowledge domain” (187). Writing about “script development and academic research,” Steven Price thinks, like Lebow or Webb and Brien, that “seeing them [practice and research] as distinct fields ... has contributed towards significant misunderstandings between practitioners and researchers” (319). Though systematic reflections and debates in CPR can be traced to the late twentieth century in other disciplines such as design, architecture, literary fiction and painting (Newbury, Niedderer, Scrivener, Candy and Edmonds, etc.), screenwriting-CPR scholarship is relatively recent and has grown primarily out of the Australian and UK screen-industry contexts.

The rise of interest in screenwriting-CPR that began around 2007-2010 is what Craig Batty refers to as the “screenwriting turn” when screenwriting debates in academia moved out of the practical, manual-mode catering to industry-scenario, to an academic scenario of openness to experimentation (“Screenwriting Studies” 59). Students of screenwriting, he notes, became gradually interested in the possibilities offered by research incubation of practice (60). Price observes that “the term ‘script development’ itself risk[s] the marginalization of intermedial and non-linear iterations,” thus suggesting that screenwriting needs to liberate itself from the idea of serving productional requirements to expanding the practice through its contact with a range of other disciplines (319).

Different scholars have used different terms for this kind of thesis to characterise the ways in which practice can result in research insights or vice versa: Practice-Led Research or PLR (Hazel Smith and Roger T. Dean, etc.), Practice-Based Research or PBR (Linda Candy and Ernest Edmonds, etc.), Creative Practice Research (R. Lyle Skains, Batty, etc.), Reflexive Practice (Graeme Sullivan), Studio-Based Research (James Elkins, etc.). Candy and Edmonds distinguish a PBR project as one where the creative-work is “the basis of the contribution to knowledge” against PLR which “leads to new understandings of practice” (64). They emphasise that “research that makes a broader contribution to knowledge rather than personal research that benefits only the individual, is fundamental to the approach” (64). Batty and Kerrigan, writing in the screenwriting-research context, assess the alternative terms to arrive at CPR as their preferred term “as it signals very clearly that the creative work sits at the centre of the research project, regardless of how it is undertaken/made/developed” (7). I also prefer the term CPR as my thesis aligns closely with Batty and Kerrigan, and what Smith and Dean call “research initiated in practice and carried through practice” but by no means circumscribed by it (130). In other words, in PLR/PBR all reflections are geared towards practice while in CPR, though practice remains central, it allows critical reflection to expand beyond the demands of immediate practice. As Elkins states, “the thesis [can be] art history, intended to inform the art practice [or] the thesis [can be] philosophy, intended to inform the art practice,” among several other possible relationships between the two components (23-24).

CPR’s relationship with the ‘traditional’ thesis seems to be a source of anxiety, confusion, debate and resentment within universities demanding a close examination of its uniqueness. As Batty and McAulay recapitulate, most of the questions relate to why CPR is an important dimension of research, how the term ‘research’ should be understood in the context of creative

work, whether ‘knowledge’ embedded in creative works can be externalised for assessment and how creative and critical components can be fruitfully combined for ‘new knowledge’. If there is any consensus, it is an acknowledgment that even as research tries to interrogate practice, practice too must interrogate theory and this cross-examination can be salutary for both, expanding each other’s conventional boundaries (Elkins 23-26).

In an essay on CPR, Durling concludes that CPR is valid only when practice is used as an interrogative process, “either through being structured as a method for collecting data systematically or as a means to allow structured reflection upon practice” (82). In the introduction to their 2009 anthology, *Practice-led Research, Research-led Practice in the Creative Arts*, editors Smith and Dean explain how creative practice and academic research can be interwoven in an iterative cyclical web:

[R]esearch, needs to be treated, not monolithically, but as an activity which can appear in a variety of guises across the spectrum of practice and research. It can be basic research carried out independent of creative work (though it may be subsequently applied to it); *research conducted in the process of shaping an artwork*; or research which is the documentation, theorisation and contextualisation of an artwork – and the process of making it – by its creator. (3, emphasis mine)

My thesis as CPR thus abides by Smith and Dean’s description as the critical component is indeed ‘research conducted in the process of shaping an artwork.’ There is a distinction that has to be made here and is possibly valid for all other CPR theses: screenplay research that shapes the creative component is embedded in the creative work itself and may not be rendered visible, while the critical research that shapes the screenplay has more visible research outputs. I would argue that ‘new knowledge’ must be acknowledged and audited on both accounts, a point made later by Batty and Baker (2018). In fact, “new knowledge can be [located] in the reflection and not necessarily in the screenplay” (Batty and McAulay 2).

Regarding the appropriate approach to CPR, both Durling and Lebow insist that CPR must follow a path quite similar to the academic PhD in articulating a central research question, setting up methodologies of enquiry, establishing prior sources in the field, collecting data and analysing conclusions by testing the questions, leading to a final dissemination of observations to a larger community to whom this can be seen as an advancement of existing knowledge. Several CPR/screenplay scholars consider this approach reductionist in the eagerness to make CPR conform to the traditional mould rather than “relish the instability created by these messy forms

of research,” as Brad Haseman characterises it (101). Estelle Barrett and Barbara Bolt, strongly supported by Batty and Kerrigan, disagree fundamentally with the contention that research design in CPR must necessarily flow from a central research question. Haseman insists that CPR/PLR be understood as “as an alternative to the qualitative and quantitative paradigms” that need to be approached as “performative research” where “practice-led researchers construct experiential starting points from which practice follows” (100). He thus eschews the constraints of narrow problem-setting and rigid methodological requirements at the outset of a project. Instead, CPR methodology, according to Webb and Brien, has to be based on an understanding of the creative process itself:

Practitioners focus on exploration and accident rather than on hypotheses and pre-negotiated approaches, and typically use an interpretive process, concerned with relatively informal problem-solving, and with intuitive leaps, rules of thumb and educated guesses. Such research is less concerned with interpreting ‘hard’ evidence, and more concerned with exploring an issue or situation.⁵ (77)

In the same vein, Skains insists that the research question must be broad enough to allow “serendipitous discoveries to occur ...[yet] intended to firmly ground the researcher’s long-term memory in knowledge of the relevant domain” (93). CPR thus seeks to understand and document the elusive creative process by observing other artists’ processes and the final texts they created, while probing one’s own process through exegesis.

In this regard, the ASPERA (Australian Screen Production Education and Research Association) Report of 2018 clearly identifies what constitutes screenplay-CPR and what it is not:

The screen work must contain, embody or perform research findings in order to qualify as a research output. It must be doing or offering something new in its own right, which may be based on research that informs the nature of work (content, form, style, etc.), or may be the result of an iterative process of reflection in which reflective insights shape the nature of the work. (2)

The authors are categorically clear that creating a screen-work and then offering an exegesis is not screenplay-CPR because that does not fulfil its fundamental requirement of practice and research nurturing each other through an iterative process or critical analysis ushering screenwriting into new directions. The creative component in this thesis ‘embodies’ and

⁵ Here, ‘evidence’ refers to previous scholarly work based on which subsequent research and arguments are typically made.

‘performs’ the findings of biographical research, offering a new life-narrative in the screenplay format that is informed by research into biopic-screenwriting and the biopic-subject, shaped by successive ‘iterative’ drafts that have developed as responses to feedback and personal reflection. These aspects have been further elaborated in the Conclusion.

Candy and Edmonds emphasise the point that while Creative Writing elucidates and reflects on the process of one’s own writing, CPR relates to practice that is not limited to one’s own benefit but relevant to other practitioners as transferable knowledge (64). Thus, as Ross Gibson points out, “knowing” in creative practice research involves going “consciously and interrogatively into and then out of an experience, knowing it somewhat by immersion and then somewhat by exertion and reflection” (5). It should be amply clear now that my thesis is CPR and not a Creative-Writing project because, though based on a specific screenwriting problem that concerns me, I intend to articulate a set of reflections for other screenwriters as well through ‘immersion’, ‘exertion and reflection’.

In identifying the nature of research-driven screenwriting, Dallas J. Baker observes that “academic scriptwriting is ... more self-reflexive. It is a practice undertaken in the context of a discipline and in ways that mean that the writing is informed more by discipline specific knowledge than by commercial demands or the expectations of wider audiences or readerships (4-5). “As a mode of research,” Batty and Susan Kerrigan note that screenwriting-research may involve identifying the contribution of the screenwriter and using the screenplay (rather than film-text) as the “site for knowledge discovery and dissemination” (79). However, Alex Bordino, after examining several screenplays and screenwriters reaches the conclusion that “sole authorship is an impossible attribution” in the industry context (263). Batty’s earlier suggestion that authorship can be better understood by analysing case studies in which writers reflect on the process of collaboration is somewhat persuasive though it remains suspect due to high levels of subjectivities and vested interests. Nevertheless, I have relied on using published screenwriter interviews as secondary evidence to derive knowledge and insights about specific techniques.

A recurring area of concern in screenplay-CPR discussions is the nature of ‘new knowledge contribution’ that a PhD thesis has to demonstrate on par with the other more conventional PhDs. Webb and Brien had argued about the difficulty of making new knowledge implicit in creative work evident in academic terms, insisting that “poetry [or any creative work] is a knowledge discourse” suggesting that they implicitly articulate ideas and emotions through

complex signifying systems (190). Batty and Kerrigan too argue that the CPR researcher pursues ideas and practices based on personal, philosophical and/or practical research interests, where “screenplays contribute knowledge in their very fabric,” and though exegeses explicate the research, “they do so in conversation with the screenplay itself” (74-75). The key question of CPR here, about how fiction can become a tool of not only research but also of presentation of research findings, has been discussed comprehensively by Batty and Baker. Their essay brings together a large number of studies that the authors and a core group of screenwriting-CPR specialists have carried out over the past four or five years. They explain how fiction as research can impact readers/viewers in ways deeper than a traditional research paper.

In their above-mentioned ‘introduction’ to the special issue of *TEXT*, Batty and Baker published eleven unproduced CPR-screenplays to illustrate how they collectively provide evidence of “an emerging hallmark of screenwriting (as) research” (10). All of them embrace fiction to ‘perform’ research and present findings that show that ‘knowledge’ can be affective: “fictional narratives enable research ideas to be *shown* and *felt*, not merely *told*” (2 italics in original). Their core argument is that there is a richness of discourse in fiction that allows it to create layers of complexity that incorporate research while also engaging readers/viewers in a critical and creative conversation in ways that conventional critical analysis cannot achieve. “The use of fiction within this methodology,” according to Batty and Baker, “offers a way of *thinking through the screenplay*, where narrative components – however imagined – ‘do’ the research” (3 italics in original).

In the emphasis on how we ‘know’ and how that knowledge is communicated, Jeri Kroll mentions three goals of CPR: “The research proceeds by and for the practice ... The research proceeds through practice in order to produce a creative product ... The research proceeds before/during/after practice, aided by ideas generated by practice, in order to produce new knowledge” (9). This is deeply in consonance with my thesis. Here, biopic-research proceeds by and for screenwriting; the research produces a creative product (screenplay) which is a new biography; and the research exists beyond immediate output to offer new knowledge by way of a methodology and a set of reflections for practice.

Several scholars (Kerrigan, Baker, Batty, Macdonald) try to align the emerging discipline with established academic conventions in terms of publication and other measurable criteria. In doing so, Baker insists on the acknowledgement of research-driven (though unproduced)

screenplays on par with traditional academic texts. In three special issues of *TEXT* (2013, 2015, 2018) dedicated to “Scriptwriting as a Research Practice,” Baker et al. published several unproduced screenplays “under the rubric of verifiable research outputs” precisely to make the point that they can be published (1).

While publication-worthiness (if not production-worthiness) is one of the necessary criteria that screenwriting-CPR needs to fulfil in order to garner credibility, Steven Maras thinks that critical discourse must play “a specific role in unpacking cultural knowledges” (101). Maras addresses the prevalent “orthodoxy” in not acknowledging the importance of cultural conventions in storytelling, emphasising that narratives of different cultures are wrongly assessed in accordance with ‘universal’ norms (179). This point, earlier made forcefully in Shohat and Stam, is particularly relevant for Indian cinema (including aspects of my screenplay here) which not only draws from historical and diverse narrative/linguistic traditions but also a theoretically-grounded set of aesthetic norms that diverge from Aristotelian paradigms (13-49).

As a theoretical intervention to reorient screenwriting practice, the question of cultural relativism and the denial of universal principles of storytelling is highlighted in Jerónimo Arellano’s analysis of the transcripts of novelist Gabriel García Márquez’s screenplay workshops (where I was a participant) which emphasise the need to acknowledge and emulate Hollywood storytelling particularly in terms of character-building. Nevertheless, Arellano finds these transcripts to be “counter-manuals of screenwriting” because they illustrate “anti-normative poetics of screenwriting” proposing to subvert Hollywood’s realism while simultaneously emulating it, with techniques largely imported from the tradition of Latin American boom literature (203). This observation draws attention to the Hollywood-centrism inherent in screenwriting manuals which deny cultural relativism. Anubha Yadav, writing about screenwriting practices in popular Hindi cinema in the *Journal of Screenwriting*, cites me where I had emphasised the importance of mythic referencing in Indian cinema not just for structuring screen-stories but more fundamentally, as characterisation methods and for understanding moral conflicts (41). These observations implicitly reiterate Arellano’s call for ‘counter-manuals’ and Maras’ insistence on ‘unpacking cultural knowledges.’ What I offer at the end of this thesis is not a ‘counter-manual’ by any means as I refrain from restrictive, ‘universal’ norms but provide a set of critical reflections for consideration by the practicing writer working in similar circumstances of scant evidence.

If CPR is to be addressed by screenwriting in academic terms, Ian Macdonald insists on putting its emphasis on the pre-textual “screen idea” which is marked by a struggle for control, the place where discourses meet (174). He refers to understanding the development process as the key objective of ‘Screenwriting Studies’ as a discipline. In the academic context, screenplay-development can be understood as a supervisor-aided, feedback-driven development and an internal thought process even as it takes shape as screenplay-text. His insistence that screenwriters stay connected to “received wisdom absorbed and submerged in the writer's subconscious” is important to CPR (23).

Following Macdonald’s “screen idea,” Siri Senje relates the experience of her own doctoral-screenplay by arguing that there are significant aspects of a screenplay’s genealogy prior to the first draft that are based on improvisation methods that are never documented. She finds that not going through the process of several synopses and treatment drafts actually helped her to nurture the emotional core of the idea and made the writing process more efficient and liberating. Senje found, as I did too, that prescriptive methodologies and the step-by-step approach is actually counter-productive to the writing process (283). Senje reiterates and confirms Carmen Sofia Brenes’ point: “a screenwriter is someone who does not know what s/he will find until s/he writes the story and rethinks it” (110). Mattie Sempert et al., in a collaborative essay by four CPR-writing students that sets out to explain how creative writers use research to experiment with and expand the written form, concur with the significant conclusion that methodology per se is the creative tool in CPR and must thus be foregrounded: “[W]hen fully embraced as both a frame and a form, methodology can innovate the very fabric of a work through its stitching together of methods, practice, reflections, and creative *and* critical outcomes.” (219, italics in original)

In another essay that anthologises the experiences of five CPR-screenplay scholars (Lee, Lomdahl, Sawtell, Sculley, Taylor), the contributors reach broadly similar conclusions in their emphasis on methodology, simultaneous immersion/distanciation with/from the material, and an insistence that the screenplay itself be seen “as the production of knowledge or philosophy in action” (Lee et al. 91). Lee’s experience voices my own in terms of adopting an unorthodox, hybrid, mixed-methods approach which is perhaps more conducive to CPR:

I started only with practice-led and then expanded into other methodologies and methods such as research-led, action research, case study analysis and constructivism to enrich my PhD research in a mixed methodology and methods framework. I have found

that this has given me more freedom to explore and investigate both the theoretical and reflexive research and writing the screenplay. (90)

In my thesis, the screenplay's *form* is informed by research into biopic-writing practices while its *content* is informed by historical research through an “iterative cyclical” process of reflection about screenwriting-practices and invention of plot and characters in my own biopic-screenplay (Smith and Dean 19). Both the critical and the creative components bear evidence of a research enquiry through practice-led research and research-led practice though the critical reflection often goes beyond the requirements of immediate practice. The stages within each cycle of activity (idea-generation, investigation, emplotment and redrafting based on feedback) involve many considerations during which I have decided which results/insights are useful or better discarded. The screenplay thus stands as essential to a full understanding of the claims to ‘new knowledge’ in addition to the critical contribution to research and writing methods in case of biopics with limited evidence. This overview of CPR-screenwriting scholarship has served the purpose of raising key concerns in the field that I think my thesis must address. The compelling questions posed by CPR – how screenwriting actually works as a research tool, how knowledge is presented through fiction, the multidisciplinary nature of the project, how research-based knowledge contributes to the process of screenwriting and whether the resources and conclusions derived through my study constitute transferable knowledge – are questions that I have answered in the Conclusion.

Chapter 1

Nature and Function of Fictional Invention in the Biopic

In this chapter, I set out to define two key terms in this thesis, ‘evidence’ and ‘invention’, and delineate the limits of my research enquiry in an otherwise unwieldy field. I highlight the genre’s increasing prominence subsequent to its self-awareness in the early 1990s in American cinema though the fundamental narrative conventions of the biopic-screenplay were shaped during Hollywood’s ‘classical’ period, generally understood as extending from 1920s to the early 1960s. I emphasise the deep-seated Eurocentrism of the genre which has provoked a counter-narrative tradition to which my screenplay subscribes. In expounding the nature and function of fictional invention in biopics by different authors, I draw on relevant insights provided by certain historians with particular emphasis on the work of Robert A. Rosenstone. His work provides the methodological framework in understanding the complex nature of the relation between evidence and fictional invention for both the analytical and scriptwriting components of this thesis. In addition to research methods derived from Rosenstone, I make an appraisal of the works of pioneering biopic scholars such as Thomas Elsaesser, George F. Custen, Denis Bingham and Belén Vidal, who offer film-historical perspectives on fictional invention in biopics with special attention to film-language. I identify Bingham’s research methods as deepening my understanding about invention in the ‘contemporary’ biopic, shaping my analytical approach by examining the screenplay vis-à-vis its narrative sources. Following Dudley Andrew, I understand biopic-screenwriting as adaptation of diverse sources, highlighting it as a method for my screenwriting.

Since this is a Creative Practice thesis, I bring together the insights of professional screenwriters, authors of screenwriting manuals (Syd Field, Robert McKee, Linda Aronson, Ken Dancyger and Jeff Rush) and film-scholars (as mentioned above, among others) who have studied some aspect of the biopic. While screenwriters provide evidence of the development process and manual-writers offer specific insights with their focus on practice, film-scholars provide historical and theoretical perspectives about storytelling strategies used for inventing lives for converting them to a fictional format. By relating these studies to my screenplay here, I try to assimilate knowledge through a review of the biopic’s theory, history and practice, preparing the ground for my own research enquiry in the critical component. While I address some research-and-writing methods in relation to my biopic-screenplay in the context of

discussions here, they have been more specifically elaborated in the fourth chapter which serves as the exegesis.

Evidence and Invention

A key term – evidence – needs to be clarified as it features prominently throughout this thesis and against which the issue of fictional invention is posited. Historians like R. G. Collingwood have argued at length about the complex nature of evidence and, how and when facts can be reliably derived from them: “A source is a text containing a statement or statements about the subject If history means scientific history, for ‘source’ we must read ‘evidence.’ And when we try to define ‘evidence’ in the same spirit in which we defined ‘sources’, we find it very difficult” (278-279). While Collingwood explores the complex epistemological relationship between evidence and knowledge with labyrinthine detail, for the pragmatic purposes of understanding invention in biopics, I would abide by a particularly broad definition of ‘evidence’ proposed by Curthoys and Docker: “... those residues from the past we have inherited in the form of documents, images, memories, stories, rituals, material objects, landscapes, and recorded sounds” (Partner and Foot 202). Thus, we may seek ‘residues’ and ‘traces’ of a real person through archival details: birth/death/family information, significant life events, professional accomplishments, interactions with others, and so on, by exploring both public and private resources. The works they have produced in the public sphere (such as artworks, books, speeches, etc.) or in private (such as letters, diaries, photographs, sound recordings, etc.) provide important evidence of what they thought and felt. Oral testimonies of people who knew the subject personally (often in the form of interviews) or oral public memory also provide different perspectives on the subject, however subjective. Contextual information (of the time and place they lived in) and social discourses around them (in the case of public figures) contribute to the entire body of evidence from which the biographer constructs a life-narrative, often using fictional tools to deepen an understanding of the human being.

When it comes to a writer’s biographical research inquiry, there are two types of sources as evidence: primary and secondary. Primary sources are first-hand accounts and traces left behind by the biographical subject (such as birth, death or baptism records, books, photographs, letters, diaries or artworks by the subject, accounts of close ones, and so on) that reveal direct knowledge about the person. Secondary sources are those that are based on primary sources but provide indirect knowledge based on selection, modifications and interpretations as in biographies, novels, essays, critical works, and so on. For the purposes of this thesis, I would

suggest that since most biopic-screenplays are based on pre-existing narrative sources (as IMDB credits indicate), they can be conceived as a *tertiary* level of narrative construction where it is impossible to decipher whether the inventions we attribute to them relate to primary sources or draw on fictional inventions of secondary sources, appropriating them in the process. My own screenplay is one such invention at the tertiary level. I highlight my borrowings and sources in Chapter 4.

The notion of fictional ‘invention’ stands in contrast to ‘evidence’ in that it is not verifiable but is *probable* nevertheless, in line with the distinction that Aristotle made between ‘history’ and ‘poetry’: “The true difference is that one [history] relates what has happened, the other [poetry] what may happen, what is possible according to the law of probability or necessity” (Butcher 17). Though evidence and invention apparently seem to work at cross-purposes, fictional inventions extend the boundaries of lived experience involving a creative process whereby something new and valuable is formed through a unique combination of elements. Laura Ashe adds that “fiction is a mode of writing in which both author and reader are aware – and know that the other is aware – that the events described cannot be known to have happened” (“Invention of Fiction”).⁶ This qualification differentiates invention from evidence where biographical fiction, in incorporating the two, serves as a useful mode for deepening an understanding of the reality that the character/viewer inhabits. In case of biopics, inventions can be traced through imagined incidents (at times, rooted to established facts), plotting (arrangements of events in the story) and creation of characters (real or imagined) in order to shape a life-narrative. The relationship between evidence and invention is complex, as I have argued in the thesis (following Rosenstone’s ideas) where the two coalesce in ways that the viewer cannot separate one from the other. The main function of these inventions is to create a cohesive, captivating life-story in conformity with the conventions of the genre and thereby give narrative form to isolated biographical facts.

The Rise of the Biopic

When we try to trace the evolution of the biopic, we find that though they have been made since the earliest days of cinema, they were subsumed under other genres. Neither ordinary viewers nor film-scholars thought or mentioned films such as Wise’s *The Sound of Music* (1965) or Curtiz’ *Yankee Doodle Dandy* (1942) as biopics though now they are reclassified as musical-biopics,

⁶ Citations without page-numbers indicate that they are web-based documents and do not need location-markers as per MLA8.

a sub-genre of the biopic (Bingham 31). Altman refers to this phenomenon as “genrification” to understand Hollywood’s response to changing audience interests and the corresponding process of reconstruction of film genres where new ones gradually take shape and others recede into the background (62). Neale too observes that “genres are notoriously flexible constructs; consequently, genre history is a story of evolution and mutation” (91). Based on genre-reclassification of earlier films, Neale informs us that biopic production has remained consistently more than 5% of total industry production since the 1930s (104). Vidal observes that “12 of the 20 Oscars awarded in the Best Actor and Best Actress categories between 2000 and 2009 went to actors playing real-life figures in high-profile films” (2). The biopic is thus “a ubiquitous vehicle for prestige projects ... synonymous with award-worthiness” (Vidal 2). Over the past 25 years, nearly half (45%) of the Best Film and Best Actor Oscars have been awarded to biopics, making it a prestigious vehicle for screenwriters, directors and actors.⁷ Further, from the late-1980s till 2020, at least 20% of all nominations in the Best Screenplay Oscar category have been biopics (www.oscars.org).

In the act of discerning a pattern in the vast body of biopics produced in Hollywood, Custen (whose pioneering work on the biopic has been already mentioned in the Introduction), considers the studio-era biopic its most productive period:

Though the 1950s was the decade with the highest number of biopics – 107 – the genre’s high-water mark, its most creative and powerful moment as a cultural form, came during the very different times of the 1930s with films like *I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang* (1932), *The Great Ziegfeld* (1936), *Juarez* (1939), and *The Life of Emile Zola* (1937). (“Mechanical Life” 130)

Custen studied 291 films produced in Hollywood between 1927 and 1960, after which he thought TV-docudrama replaced biopics. Updating his earlier study (1992) to biopics made between 1961 and 1980 in a 2000 essay, Custen observes:

By 1960, that which had formerly filled us with admiration called up a very different emotion: it embarrassed us. With rare exceptions like *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962) or *Gandhi* (1982), the genre which once grandly proclaimed that we cherish a few select men now appeared to have faded away to a minor form. (“Mechanical Life” 131)

Bingham subsequently characterises the studio-era films as the ‘classical’ biopic marked by a hagiographic and melodramatic tone around the lives of Great Men, always white (Curtiz’s *Night and Day*, 1946; Brown’s *Edison, the Man*, 1940, etc.).

⁷ www.oscar.go.com

Custen acknowledged a significant shift in the form, from giving expression to “producer’s views” to representing the director’s point-of-view “that can influence the shape of a life on film” (*Bio/Pics* 51). Bingham calls the latter, the post-1960 biopic, ‘post-classical’: an auteur-driven form (even when produced by studios) characterised by a “warts-and-all realist” mode that often had an irreverent, parodic approach to the subject, such as Burton’s *Ed Wood*, 1994 or Stone’s *Nixon*, 1995 (18). Bingham observes that “the biopic has evolved and gone through life-cycle changes and continues to do so, from the studio era to the present; these phases have sometimes themselves become subgenres” (9). He thus offers a taxonomy based on the historic phase/period of production though they are overlapping categories; ‘classical’ biopics continued to be made in the ‘post-classical’ period. In the latter period, the Hollywood biopic often undergoes “minority appropriation” by queer/feminist/African-American filmmakers who use “the conventional mythologizing form” for marginalised subjects (such as Furie’s *Lady Sings the Blues*, 1972 or Lee’s *Malcolm X*, 1992) and then “since 2000, the ‘neoclassical’ biopic, which integrates elements of all or most of these,” such as Van Sant’s *Milk*, 2008 or Haynes’ *I’m Not There*, 2007 (18). Bingham’s taxonomy of the biopic – the ‘classical’, the ‘post-classical’ and the ‘neo-classical’ – while being quite useful in conceptualising biopics with different approaches and narrative traits, suggests diversification and a heightened awareness of the conventions of the genre “at the turn of the Century” (Anderson and Lupo 91).

Though the biopic has now gained world-wide popularity, French scholars like Moulin insist on a necessary caution in understanding its manifestation outside America: “The ‘biopic’ properly speaking is a Hollywood invention, steeped in American ideology, and in fact conceived as such. It is primarily the vehicle of the myth of the self-made man, uncritically positing individual accomplishment as a central tenet of its vision of the world, in a Hegelian view of history” (4). Similarly, Möine while highlighting “the historical invisibility of the French biopic,” emphasises that “the Anglo-American term ‘biopic,’ which until recently was almost unknown to French audiences, started to become part of the French vocabulary in 2007” (Brown and Vidal 53). Though the genre continues to serve different social functions in different cultures and contexts, Shohat and Stam have emphatically made the point that the biopic more than any other genre, has surreptitiously coerced a hegemonic Eurocentric world-view on world audiences: “Cinema, itself the product of ‘Western scientific discoveries,’ made palpable to audiences the master-narrative of the ‘progress of Western civilization,’ often through biographical narratives about explorers, inventors, and scientists” (93). In fact, Neale agrees with Custen that “only 4 per

cent [of studio-era biopic-subjects] center on non-white Americans” (*Genre and Hollywood* 54). In this sense, my concerns with constructing a screenplay for creating a counter-narrative of the Eurocentrism of the Hollywood biopic can perhaps be understood as a corrective endeavour which is nevertheless bound inescapably by some of its abiding narrative conventions. Since this thesis grows out of my experience in Indian cinema, I would like to draw specific attention to it.

Contemporary Indian cinema offers cases of counter-narrative biopics that often go against both Hollywood conventions and the more dominant popular Hindi cinema. As Nayar explains, the biopic saw a “resurgence” in India from around the same time as in French cinema (2007) where “the nation figures prominently ... propose[ing], implicitly, a cultural citizenship founded on aspirational models and attitudes The making of a public history around the individual draws attention to the mediated role of not only history ... but also of the celebrities themselves” as in Pandey’s *M.S. Dhoni: The Untold Story* (2016) (604, 610). Swarnavel Eswaran identifies the counter-narrative strain in the way “personas are deconstructed and stereotypical hagiography is challenged” (94). Writer-director Khan’s *Gandhi: My Father* (2007) subversively interrogates the humanity of the father-of-the-nation told from the son’s perspective.

Similarly, Mehta’s *Majhi the Mountain Man* (2015), about a villager who single-handedly digs a tunnel through a huge mountain after his wife’s tragic death when he failed to reach her to the hospital in time, counters the state-driven narrative of progress. Menon shows the possibility of creating counter-narratives of the nation by reconstructing a forgotten *dalit* woman’s life-story by pooling together earlier biopics and different memoirs, to “weave a textured fabric from the uneven warp and weft of her life narratives, cinema, and political history” (116). Recent Indian biopics, as does my screenplay, thus draw attention to ideological revisionism based on, what Bingham calls “undeserving” subjects and “minority appropriation” (146, 227). Even in Hollywood, the Indian-American filmmaker Nair’s *The Queen of Katwe* (2016), written by William Wheeler — based on a 16-year old Ugandan slum-girl’s triumph as an international chess champion — highlights a non-Western, non-elite female subject. Screenwriter Wheeler wrote the script based on interviews with the subject and conceptualised the biopic as “an aspirational story about someone from someplace that is not at all familiar to Western audiences ... telling sports underdog stories ... gently expand[ing] the idea of what a [Eurocentric] ‘Disney film’ could be” (McKittrick). I consider my screenplay as belonging to this (Indian) tradition of the counter-narrative which is also aspirational in the desire to be cosmopolitan in an increasingly globalised world.

Fictional Invention: Historians' View

Prior to Custen's book in 1992, scholarly analysis of biopics was made primarily by historians as part of broader discussions about the historical-film. Their analyses were steadfastly focussed on questions of accuracy, assessing history-on-screen vis-à-vis history-on-paper (i.e. evidence-based verifiable knowledge). These books – Paul Smith in 1976, Karsten Fledelius in 1979, Kenneth R.M. Short in 1981, Marc Ferro in 1988 and Pierre Sorlin in 1980 – offer insights into how screenplays derive their plots, characters and dramatic elements from well-known historical events. While they unambiguously denounce the “howling historical inaccuracies,” some of them indeed offer insightful understandings of history-in-fiction (Smith 64). For example, Smith's comment – “films are primarily a source of their own history” – implies that biopics owe their primary allegiance to filmic conventions (65). As an example, Smith explains that Ford's *Grapes of Wrath* (1940) “does not provide a very complete account of the American depression and the plight of migratory workers” but it does provide us “with a set of important contemporary opinions on these problems” shared between Steinbeck, Ford and his screenwriter, Johnson (66).

Smith thus suggests a nuanced reading of such texts where the screenwriter's inventiveness can only be understood as the result of multiple negotiations between adapted text, director's authorial intervention, productional factors and public opinion. Ferro, while dismissing the worthiness of most historical films, nevertheless made the acute observation that some filmmakers – specifically, Tarkovsky, Syberberg, Lang, Sèmbene, Visconti and “the majority of Polish historical films” – show “an original contribution to the understanding of past phenomena and their relation to the present” (163). While Tarkovsky and Sèmbene's films “not only bear witness but are involved in the struggle,” Syberberg, Visconti or Lang's films “stem both from an analysis independent of any ideological affiliation and at the same time use specifically filmic means of expression” (162). Based discreetly on a few ‘art-house’ films, Ferro is reluctant to make any general observations about film and history but underlines the potential of cinema's ‘original contribution’ to historical discourse through “those filmmakers who offer a global interpretation of history – an interpretation which springs solely from their own analysis and which is no longer merely a reconstruction or a reconstitution” (163). According to him, the historicising aspect of such films grow out of any of four “impulses”: dominant ideologies that express its own vision of the world, those who are opposed to that vision and elaborate a counter-history or counter-analysis, those that grow out of social-historical memory as they survive in oral traditions, and independent interpretations that proceed with their own analysis

(163). Most aspects of fictionalising with which I engage in the critical as well as the creative components, grow out of this contention. These will be discussed later in the context of Rosenstone's work.

To add credence to Ferro's claim, it must be acknowledged now that many of the key issues of the *nouvelle histoire* of the third generation of Annales School in the 1970s (with their emphasis away from Great Men) and subsequent historiographical debates (often called 'postmodern') were intuitively and lucidly elaborated by filmmakers long before the historians discussed them. This is evident in the art-house cinema of 1950s onwards: Kurosawa's *Rashomon* (1950) condenses two different Japanese short stories to subvert the notion of the objective knowability of a past event. The same set of evidence (dagger, ropes, hat, etc.) is used by four narrators to offer four mutually conflicting narratives about the same event where each of the narratives is shaped by vested interests that become apparent to the viewer. Resnais' *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (1959) insists that no amount of evidence (through a contact with artifacts in a Hiroshima-museum) can ever offer an understanding of the past tragedy; the characters seek instead empathetic, imaginative ways of making the past resonant to their lives. Fellini's *Amarcord* (1973) shows popular irreverence towards the pompousness of evidence-based official history in small-town Rimini. It subverts grand versions of the past through sarcasm and parody, opening up the floodgates to innumerable small histories far from the ramparts of Roman History. Thus, screenwriters/filmmakers have often been historically-engaged in the ways they reinvent the past, though their understanding of the relationship between evidence and narrative differs from the historian's.

A general hostility prevailed between historians and filmmakers until Robert A. Rosenstone, in a landmark essay inspired by the works of Hayden White, argued for a paradigm shift in historians' way of thinking about the relationship between evidence and cinematic fiction (both published in the same 1988 issue of the *American Historical Review*). Rosenstone's ideas have played a key role in subsequent biopic scholarship and are crucially important to both sections of my thesis. He initially used the phrase "history on film" despite his fascination with White's coinage of *historiophoty* as the "representation of history and our thought about it in visual images and filmic discourse" (Rosenstone 1181; White 1193). Moulin's derived term *biophoty*, coined specifically for the biopic, shows how White's 'historiophoty' and its implicit critical approach has gained ascendancy after three decades (Moulin). In 2019, the annual conference of the Biography Society set an agenda to explore if "the term 'biopic' could be replaced or completed by that of 'biophoty' [as] proposed by Hayden White" ("Beyond Hollywood Biopics").

Rosenstone's preferred term – "history film" – was coined and defined by Natalie Zemon Davis in 1988, another key historian for the purposes of this thesis (discussed in Chapter 3), as "those [films] having as their central plot documentable events, such as a person's life or a war or revolution, and those with a fictional plot, but with a historical setting intrinsic to the action" (270). Rosenstone insists that history films be read not *against* historical accounts but *alongside* them, thus distinguishing between history-on-paper and history-on-screen but without privileging the former. By turning away from the criteria of historical accuracy and moving increasingly towards the approaches of postmodern history which emphasise the relativity of truth-claims, Rosenstone emphatically claims that some filmmakers are deeply-engaged historians with idiosyncratic "visions of the past" (*History on Film/Film on History* 164). Davis agrees with Rosenstone, referring to "the filmmaker endowed with a historian's eye" ("Any Resemblance" 271).

Rosenstone's embracement of the history film as historical discourse has had several detractors among historians though few have been argumentative in their rejection. Among the very few who have participated in the debate, David Herlihy contests Rosenstone's position about historical fiction in general, not specifically biopics:

Films can create illusions but not easily criticize or destroy them. ... The very clarity of the illusions undermines awareness that all historical knowledge comes to us through filters. ... Historical criticism is not, as Rosenstone implies, just another way of looking at history, no better than any other. ... It is a way of looking not so much at history as at records. Its roots go deep into the humanistic philology. (1187-1188)

Like most other historians, Herlihy is perceptibly wary of the immersive power of cinema in swaying audiences away from the historians' circumspect and conscientious yearning for accuracy. However, he also assumes that filmmakers never engage with the past with a similar seriousness of intention, and that factual details that the historian knows as 'true' will find facile correspondence in fiction without taking into account the ontology of cinema or the screenwriter/director's avowedly subjective interpretation of a past event. This is precisely the historian's position that filmmakers like Stone reject (fn. 6). William Guynn characterises Herlihy's critique as a "conservative tendency" where "the visual only sees skins and surfaces, not what lies beneath them or soars above them" (12-13). Guynn asserts that the essential mission of filmic representations of history is not the impossible imitation of the past down to

the finest detail (reflected in the *mise-en-scène*) which Ferro understood clearly, but the analysis and representation of social relations (14).

As Gallimore comments, this “totalising dismissal of so many historical texts is not just unproductive but counterproductive, and this huge volume of material can reveal a great deal about the historical understanding of filmmakers and the cultural value of historical expression” (4). The importance of Rosenstone’s life-long dedication to the study of the film and history relationship lies in his articulation of its complexity and his rejection of the superior wisdom with which most historians assess films.⁸

Two aspects of Rosenstone’s ideas are crucially important to both components of this thesis: his quasi-psychoanalytical model for understanding the relationship between historical evidence and fiction (for analysing biopics as well as conceptualising characters in my screenplay); and the related notion of ‘true’ vs. ‘false’ invention in the history film. In identifying invention and its function in biopic-screenplays as well as the use of evidence for the writing of my own screenplay, I draw upon Rosenstone’s conceptual model (*Visions of the Past* 13-15; *Revisioning History* 144-151).

Since biopics necessarily involve selection, deletion, modification and interpretation of events in a person’s life, all of which are discreet choices by the screenwriter(s), the process of writing demands a close study of both evidence and screenwriting techniques that help to coalesce fragmented details into a coherent structure. Rosenstone identifies the first of these as *compression*: merging two or more historical characters into one (*Visions* 73-75). Though he himself provides very few examples, this may be illustrated through Lean’s *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962), written by Bolt and two uncredited blacklisted McCarthy-era screenwriters (Caton 100-101). Bingham, who draws on Rosenstone’s ideas to illustrate compression, closely studies the source-texts and numerous biographies on the subject to explain how this process works (5). He observes why and how the screenplay combines real and invented characters, often maintaining the real name but compressing it with traits of other real people:

Lawrence becomes more of a sympathetic figure whose chief flaw is his instinctive malleability. This allows Bolt and Lean to turn the focus, subtly, to the machinations of

⁸ Filmmaker/screenwriter Oliver Stone’s comments: “I think many historians come at filmmakers with an attitude and with hostility. It’s as though history is their territory, and we don’t belong” (Carne and Stone 33).

the British Empire, as embodied mostly in one actual personage, General Allenby, and two invented composites, Dryden and Brighton. (83)

While Colonel Brighton is a fictional composite of all of the British officers who served in the Middle East with T. E. Lawrence, Dryden and Sherif Ali are real people *compressed* with numerous Arab leaders. While this ‘distortion’ led to a long-drawn litigation by Sherif Ali and Dryden’s descendants, it allowed the screenwriters to create a few well-defined characters with traits relevant to the story’s central conflict instead of getting dispersed into too many people (Turner 201-206).

The second of these techniques is *condensation*, where several historical events get conflated into one. Regarding *Lawrence of Arabia*, Bingham concludes that “in the Bolt screenplay events and conditions are pithily *condensed* in scenes dense with biographical subtext” (90). Rosenstone explains that in Eisenstein’s *Battleship Potemkin*, the failed revolution of 1905 is depicted as a success through its ‘condensation’ with the successful revolt of 1917 (“In Praise of the Biopic” 256). It thus reflects the filmmaker’s historicism, not a lack of historical knowledge. As Bingham explains, Lee’s *Malcolm X* (1992) makes the initial flag-burning image a ‘condensation’ of several events in American history represented by the flag: nationalism, racism, segregation and state-promoted violence (175-176). Condensation thus helps to represent a large historical event through relatively short scenes that compact or epitomise it through fictional characters or an image.

Rosenstone’s third category, *displacement*, the shifting of an event from one timeframe to another is at play in Cox’s *Walker* (1987), where screenwriter Wurlitzer makes the protagonist meet the business magnate Vanderbilt along a railway-line several decades before trains came into existence (*Revisioning History* 202-218). This anachronism enables two persons who actually never met each other to engage in a conversation that reveals two kinds of imperialisms that fueled American expansionism. Here, the technique allows the screenwriter to connect ideas that a realist treatment could not have done. Rosenstone provides the example through the technique in Ford’s *Young Mr Lincoln* (1939):

It completely distorts chronology by bringing together events that happened years apart ... [T]he film drastically alters many of the specific events and circumstances of that trial ... embod[y]ing that knowledge into movements and moments that allow the audience to feel as if they are (apparently) witnessing the past. (Francaviglia and Rodnitzky 16-17)

Following Rosenstone, Guynn identifies the historian/filmmaker's interventions "in the anachronistic 'interpenetration of past and present,' dissolves of 'competing voices and images,' Brechtian distancing of the spectator, or the patent artificiality of mise-en-scène" (146).

And finally, *alteration*, is a technique whereby one character expresses the emotions of another. It is deeply at work in Daldry's *The Hours* (2002), David Hare's screenplay based on Michael Cunningham's novel. Here, three women unknown to each other and living in three different time-periods, experience the same depressing emotions and ponder over suicide after reading Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*. While the screenplay *displaces* Woolf's drowning by bringing it forward by sixteen years, the two fictional women *alter*/voice Woolf's emotions. Rosenstone argues that to dismiss these fictional inventions as historically 'inaccurate' would be to ignore the films' "visions of the past." He insists that history "on the screen, must be fictional in order to be true" (*Revisioning History* 70). "Alteration," writes Guynn, "when it operates historically, refers to changes the filmmaker/historian makes to documented historical realities in order to make a larger historical point: lack of fidelity on the literal level leads to discursive truth" (143). Rosenstone thus recognises the historiographic voice in films with "deviant structures, what he calls history as experiment." (Guynn 145).

Among his critics, James Chapman points out that Rosenstone neglects the extent to which a narrative is the outcome of production determinants and political constraints. Rosenstone had made a close study of Eisenstein's *October* (1927) to illustrate that the film "relates to, reflects, comments upon, and/or critiques the already existing body of data, arguments, and debates about the topic at hand" (*History on Film* 39). Chapman cites the example to demonstrate that the history represented there "was hampered by political expediency, ... the film writes out Trotsky from the official history and promotes the cult of Stalin" (Chapman). He thus claims that Rosenstone misses important aspects by ignoring the real nuts-and-bolts of production history. Rosenstone counters Chapman's charge, emphasising that his approach, is to deal with the history portrayed in the film not the history of the film. I place the finished work into the context of the larger discourse of history out of which it emerges, to which it refers, and upon which it comments ... analys[ing] what it tells us rather than how the particular telling came to be. (Rosenstone's letter, qtd. Chapman)

Despite their usefulness, a problematic aspect of Rosenstone's model is that the categories are too broad and loosely-defined, making factual evidence's relationship with fiction analogous to

experiences of waking consciousness that get woven into dreams. They can legitimise any kind of fiction, losing their usefulness as criteria for critical assessment.

Rosenstone thus proposes another set of ideas for a firmer criterion as contrasting narrative approaches to the historical subject: “false invention” vs. “true invention,” where the terms may not be as subjective as they may seem (*Visions* 13). He emphasises the importance of invention (of events, characters, plot): “to accept invention is, of course, to change significantly the way we think about history. ... to accept the notion that the empirical is but one way of thinking about the meaning of the past” (*Visions* 14). ‘Inventions’ may be considered ‘false’ or ‘true’ based on whether they choose to “ignore the findings and assertions and arguments of what we already know” as against ‘invention’ that “engages the historical discourse surrounding the film’s subject” (*Visions* 13). The latter thus involves the invention of something that could well have happened: “it is the invention of a truth” (*Visions* 14). Elsewhere, Rosenstone defines “the serious [true] biofilm” as films in which “the director has either worked closely with a historical consultant and/or adhered faithfully to events as recounted in one or more written biographies, and in doing so has indulged in a minimal amount of invention with regard to characters and events” (“In Praise” 15-16).

In other words, fictional invention may not violate historical truth; it can offer nuances and a holistic vision of the past more than a historical record. A film may indulge in anachronism and playful tone and yet strike a deeper resonance about the past than realist films strictly adhering to evidence. Drawing on this discussion, I would argue that while most characters and plot elements are invented in my screenplay, nothing really is; all inventions (explained in Chapter 4) have grown out of some kind of documented fact or contextual evidence that have come together, on closer inspection, through processes of compression, condensation, displacement and alteration.

Invention in the Biopic: Pioneering Studies

When film scholars as compared to historians analyse biopics, their analysis is less referential to evidence and is more a self-contained enterprise where the themes embodied in the characters, stories, images and mise-en-scène become more important than historical information. As Burgoyne succinctly observes, “the past that concerns the historian – the historical world and the ways it is represented – is not the past that film scholars typically engage” (“Balcony of History” 549). Custen and Bingham have already been mentioned (and

cited) as landmark studies on the biopic. Before them, in a 1986 essay about Warner Brothers' cycle of biopics in 1930s directed by Wilhelm Dieterle, Elsaesser made important observations by way of highlighting the Hollywood producer Darryl F. Zanuck's contribution to the genre and the complex process of screenplay development.⁹ Custen too credits producer Zanuck (who had 79 writing-credits, 65 of them before he joined 20th Century Fox: IMDB, some of them biopics) with shaping the biopic-screenplay, whose tenets are still valid.

While drawing attention to ideological determinism behind fictional inventions, the Cahiers du Cinéma's collective text on Ford's *Young Mr Lincoln* (1939) shows how the film strategically uses pre-existing Lincoln imagery. It demonstrates the element of destiny where the adult Lincoln is imagined to be hidden in his youth. The authors claim that the film silences contextual politics, posing a morality superior to politics where history serves as morality in collusion with capitalist ideology while obscuring that connection (13). The most revealing example of this disguised determinism is the visual invention of the final shot where Lincoln walks away from the camera and visually dissolves into the Lincoln monument, suggesting that fame is a teleological phenomenon.

In fact, Elsaesser finds conflicting interests of studio, director, producer, star, genre expectations, censorship regulations (Hays' Code), earlier studio-films and scrapped projects coming into play in shaping a biopic's fictional form. Elsaesser calls this development process "condensation" (21). He demonstrates how the screenplay rewrites motifs from the studio's previous "cycle," an unproduced Galileo-biopic which shaped their subsequent project, *The Story of Louis Pasteur* (1936) projecting Pasteur as the "Galileo of medicine" (23). It also exchanges moral violence for gratuitous violence (thus bypassing the Hays' Code), absorbs the director's authorial ambitions and reconciles Zanuck's "attempts to be permanently associated with European *Kultur*" (22). Dieterle recalls the writing process: "Under Zanuck we sometimes had to start a picture with only ten pages of script. ... We had to shoot 4-5 pages of script a day and those poor fellows, the writers had to produce so many pages a day from 9-5 whether they had an idea or not" (Flinn 25). This offers an insight into the constraints within which most screenplays are developed in the film industry, whether in Hollywood, India or elsewhere, then or now. And, it is in this context of multiple forces simultaneously coming into play and shaping the screenplay (and the finished film) that fictional inventions can be traced.

⁹ "According to Dieterle, Zanuck was the kind of producer who even without a story, could produce a script" (Elsaesser 24). It suggests that Zanuck often wrote scripts on the set.

Elsaesser observes that two recurring inventions already emerged in the Warner/Dieterle biopics: locating the central conflict as a polar opposition between the Great Man protagonist and the dominant opinion of the time personified through an invented antagonist, and the *diegetic* representation of ‘mediocrity’ through crowds who initially oppose but eventually acknowledge the hero’s greatness through a public demonstration of admiration. In *The Story of Louis Pasteur*, this takes the form of a struggle between ‘pure’ science and vested interests where Pasteur is denied membership of the *Académie Française* which blocks his work in every possible way but finally acknowledges defeat. These inventions are visibly at work even in more contemporary, non-hagiographic biopics such as Spielberg’s *Schindler’s List* (1993), Lee’s *Malcolm X* (1992) or Forman’s *Amadeus* (1984).¹⁰

Custen also attributes to Zanuck two other foundational fictional inventions in his study on biopics, systematically analysing Hollywood conventions from 1927 to 1960, and subsequently till 1980. His emphasis on “rooting interest” in the life of a ‘genius’ was geared towards grounding the ‘extraordinary’ subject on life’s ‘ordinary’ preoccupations: family, childhood, love, hardship, failure, success, old age, death (18-21). Thus, Edison (in *Edison, the Man*) becomes endearing because of his incessant craving for his wife’s apple pie rather than his innumerable inventions, and Marie Curie’s life-story (*Madame Curie*, 1943) centres on her passionate love affairs rather than radioactivity. Zanuck maintained that once this connection was made, it would be easier to unlock a life and extend the viewer’s curiosity to other things. Custen calls this characterisation strategy, “normalizing genius” (121-128).

Custen explains how the normative biopic reconfigures all lives into Hollywood’s conventionalised Three Act Structure for the screenplay. In a cinema-specific Aristotelian paradigm elaborated by Field for practicing screenwriters, this takes the form of Setup–Confrontation–Resolution. Custen broadly identifies this as a pattern of “resistance, the struggle between innovation and tradition, and the importance of the big break” (178). Though Custen makes no mention of Field’s Three Act Structure, it can be derived that this “pattern” *does not* necessarily coincide with the Acts. Similarly, it may be surmised that a life has to be conceptualised along those parameters with a need to invent ‘turning points’ in the ‘first act’ (that sets off the subject on a unique path with a clear goal) and the ‘third act’ (where an event propels

¹⁰ As Vidal observes, filmmakers have often denied their films as biopics as it is a “fated area” (2). Spielberg called *Schindler’s List* “not a biopic but a Lincoln portrait, meaning that it was one painting out of many” (2).

the subject towards his/her destiny). In the act of converting real life into fiction, Custen identifies recurring inventions such as a friend or confidante who functions as a point of comparison and contrast (but is by no means central to the drama) and the focus on a career marked by rise and fall. Most biopic-screenplays, he noted, have *in media res* openings. This technique, Custen believes, serves the dramatic function of giving the subject autonomous agency as a “self-made man” unlike a story told in a linear way starting with early childhood which would attribute greater agency to family and circumstances (150-156). Thereafter, flashbacks and montage scenes help to condense the presentation of a life and bridge unavoidable ellipses, often with a voice-over (necessarily invented) that “endows the life with a pattern” and establishes “the teleology of fame” (185). In my screenplay *Hometowns* too, I intend to have an *in media res* opening as the inciting incident that serves the function of highlighting Biswas’ agency as a self-made man. A rise-and-fall trajectory will follow where Biswas’ close friend (Upen) will become a point of comparison and contrast to the different paths they choose and their corresponding destinies.

While hailing Custen for his pioneering work, Rosenstone critiques him for “ignor[ing] independent films or those shot in the rest of the world” and for “fail[ing] to place biopics into the larger discourse surrounding particular figures” (“In Praise” 11-12). Though based entirely on the Hollywood biopic, Custen’s observations laid the foundation for further exploration by subsequent scholars. Bell’s comprehensive bibliography on the biopic (including TV-docudrama) illustrates increasing academic engagement from the late 1980s and shows how biopic-scholarship has grown exponentially since 1990s, “moving beyond the fact/fiction dichotomy” (212). Only after its acknowledgment as an independent genre in contradistinction to three other kinds of films earlier conjoined with the biopic as “historical film” – the war film, epic and topical film – it became possible to undertake systematic study of biopics in terms of its uniqueness of conventions, evolution, narrative structure, contextual imperatives and most contentiously, its convoluted relationship with evidence in the making of fiction.

Bingham, writing almost two decades after Custen with the hindsight of significant developments since 1990, validates Custen’s observations but locates many of the narrative innovations in the “contemporary” biopic to pre-existing literary experiments. Compared to the sophistication of the literary biography, the biopic in 1990s was clichéd and rudimentary. In some cases, literary biographical techniques of Strachey (1918), Woolf (1928), Stein (1933) impacted films from 1990s onwards through adaptations and other indirect ways. Writing in

2010, Bingham still felt compelled to assert the biopic as an independent genre but called it “a respectable genre with very low repute” because of its pretentious association with ‘high culture’ but hackneyed storytelling conventions, as mentioned earlier: a hagiographic approach, *in media res* opening, a rise-and-fall drama with polarized characters conveying an elevated moral message, a predetermined sense of destiny driving the protagonist to greatness, and so on (3). In fact, screenwriter-director Haynes thought that by 1990s the biopic had become “a formula almost more nakedly so than other film genres because whatever the life, it has to fit into this one package” (Axmaker). Another major screenwriter-director, Schrader, insisted on radical departures: “You have to have an original approach if you try to do a cinematic biography” (Jaehne 13). This suggests a general spirit of non-conformism with the prevalent jaded conventions of the biopic.

This new approach in the “contemporary” biopic that Bingham elaborates through eighteen case studies, is characterised by irreverence towards the subject and a general playfulness in style, owing an undeniable debt to Lytton Strachey, the subversive literary-biographer who introduced and popularised through *The Eminent Victorians* (1918), an irreverent and satirical approach in biography.¹¹ The ‘contemporary’ biopic is also characterised by a frequently Freudian approach of understanding the adult through early childhood experiences (inherited from *Citizen Kane*), interest in unexceptional human beings as subjects, rejection of hagiographic attitudes, interest in short spans of life instead of the earlier cradle-to-grave narratives, dual-biographies and a general self-consciousness about techniques (31-40).

Bingham considers male and female biopics so different in their conventions that he not only considers them separate genres but structures his book on those lines (23). Male biopics are conventionally triumphalist even when subjects are criminals (such as Scorsese’s *The Wolf of Wall Street*, 2013) while female biopics are virtually taxonomies of suffering even when subjects are highly accomplished (such as Fontaine’s *Coco Before Chanel*, 2009). However, he takes stock of feminist revisionist biopics such as writer/director Coppola’s *Marie Antoinette* (2006) which mark a clear rupture from the past: “the female biopic gets the guillotine” (361). Comparing it to three other biopics on the subject, Bingham shows that Coppola takes sides with a specific version, transforming a historical figure traditionally seen as decadent into a hipster ‘teen-queen’: “I just wanted to tell the story from her point-of-view ... It is an interpretation documented, but carried

¹¹ “Strachey satirizes the norm, and never more so than when he writes about a child’s ‘healthy pleasure’ in tearing the arms off dolls, as opposed to his subject’s ‘morbid’ desire to make the doll whole again” (Bingham 215).

by my desire for covering the subject differently” (Covington). By strategically ending the film with her empty, ransacked bedroom and *not* the guillotine, Coppola avoids the conventional melodrama of the female-biopic. In fact, the moment of life in which a biopic ends (not necessarily death), significantly determines the ‘meaning’ of the life, as Bingham demonstrates through this film.

Bingham celebrates the deconstructive biopic as a synthesis of the classical studio-era form, the warts-and-all film, and the investigative film. He finds its acknowledgment of the unknowability of the subject best represented in Haynes’ *I’m Not There* (2007): “the apotheosis of the biopic as it has evolved to date... It is *Citizen Kane* without the newsreel,” suggesting that it does not need to fake authenticity anymore because it is not interested in making truth-claims (382). In the film, multiple facets of the subject (Bob Dylan) are represented by six different characters, one of them a woman: an invention that derives from Woolf’s *Orlando* (1928) where a male character miraculously becomes a woman overnight while being the same person. None of Dylan’s *avatars* physically resemble Dylan: “For Haynes, therefore, Dylan is, or rather, Dylan *means* fictions, masks, and personae each of them, in a grand paradox, genuine. ... Dylan’s coherence is his incoherence.” (379, italics in original)

In his conclusion, Bingham makes explicit his key contention: “This book has been careful to favor the verb ‘dramatize’ over ‘fictionalize’ in explaining how biopics treat lives” (379). He thus implies that most fictional inventions are connected to evidence in such oblique ways that it makes better sense to understand them in terms of their dramatic function and not appraise them for not literally conforming to evidence. Bingham’s increasingly complex understanding of fictional invention (with every case-study further problematising the genre) is a key reference point in the critical component of this thesis as a method of analysis. I use his method of researching the subject’s life in Chapter 3, studying the narrative sources alongside the finished-film-as-screenplay to identify elements of fictional invention and their dramatic function for deepening my understanding of biopic-screenwriting.

Brown and Vidal’s edited anthology, *The Biopic in Contemporary Film Culture* (2014), another landmark in biopic-scholarship, shows a conscious intention of having a more multicultural approach than earlier studies. The works of Custen, Burgoyne, Epstein, Rosenstone are avowedly Hollywood-centric; of Bingham’s eighteen case studies, only one non-Hollywood film appears but that is a documentary. However, it needs to be conceded that biopics outside

the US is a relatively recent phenomenon and, as mentioned earlier, it is an essentially Hollywood genre. Brown and Vidal, while offering different perspectives, argue that the majority of biopics continue to carry “the stigma of backward modes of storytelling” (8). Despite Hollywood’s “formulaic treatment and over-simplicity,” Vidal argues, the biopic possesses “a formal flexibility that can serve radically different aims,” continuously re-inscribing subjects in the shifting space between historical fact, previous representations (“palimpsests”) and contemporary pressures (17). It is the biopic’s inherent ‘flexibility’ to accommodate any contemporary theme or authorial style that Vidal ascribes its continued re-invention in different historical and social contexts since 2000: “memory and history have become central questions in the study of the biopic as an international genre” (23).

Among recent inventions, she mentions the use of animation and computer graphics in live-action films to represent the French singer/subject’s alter-ego in writer-director Sfar’s *Gainsbourg: A Heroic Life* (2010). Digital grafting of the protagonist’s face onto archival images, conceptualised in the screenplay itself, has contributed to what Burgoyne calls “prosthetic memory” for the nation (a term invented by Landsberg): “the way mass cultural technologies of memory enable individuals to experience, as if they were memories, events through which they themselves did not live” (*Film Nation* 105). For example, screenwriter Peter Morgan who wrote Frears’ *The Queen* (2006) claims that the imaginary conversation he had scripted about PM Tony Blair’s ‘un-minuted’ conversations with the Queen, were replicated *in toto* in Blair’s autobiography (Walker). Blair’s own memories were arguably thus replaced by the “prosthetic memory” invented by Morgan. In terms of the social function of such fictional inventions, Vidal observes that biopic-writing “cannot be separated from nation-writing,” a point I made earlier about Indian cinema which my screenplay too endorses by emphasising the need to incorporate counter-narratives in our understanding of the nation’s past (23). This is particularly marked in America where ‘nation-writing’ has been the subject of extensive scholarly inquiry – Robert Burgoyne, William H. Epstein, Barton Palmer – about how Hollywood’s “invented lives” (Epstein’s title) construct narratives of the nation understood as a polyphonic discourse that often run counter to official versions of history.

While in this section I have drawn on the main insights about invention by some of the key book-length studies on the biopic, the section that follows brings together aspects of fictional invention derived from the works of practicing screenwriters and several other scholars. Considering the pragmatic concerns of this thesis, here I assimilate the insights of both biopic-

scholars, screenwriters and authors of screenwriting manuals who have dedicated some attention to the biopic. The discussion encompasses three broad areas: the working methods of screenwriters, aspects related to creation of characters and, aspects of screenplay structure that ultimately create meaning out of ‘past’ lives for ‘present’ audiences.

Aspects of Fictional Invention in Films

The authors discussed till now have highlighted how a biopic-screenwriter imposes a pattern upon events, invents a protagonist by seeking a ‘rooting interest’ (Custen), polarising the subject through an antagonist who is often constructed (Elsaesser), creating composite characters and events, and scrambling the historical timeline (Rosenstone), thus delineating a life-journey marked by a rise-and-fall narrative that often has *in media res* openings followed by flashbacks and montages to explain characters’ motivation (Custen). The plot is cast into a traditional fiction-film structure where the final shape of the screenplay is determined by genre conventions, audience expectations, studio practices and authorial interventions, inventing a chain of causality in the narrative (Bingham, Rosenstone).

In biopics, the rootedness to reality/history is asserted often through title-cards at the beginning and/or at the end, use of archival images and the subject’s direct or indirect presence within the film by way of endorsement. In its contemporary manifestation, it often shows modernist qualities where ‘classical’ tropes are often reversed or foregrounded, with a growing interest in lesser-known individuals and shorter spans of life where the invented starting-point, ‘turning points’, and particularly, end-point of the life-narrative determine the theme. Though the biopic-screenwriter has the license to invent creatively, all such inventions “adhere to the fundamental truth of the actuality” (Bingham 155).

Despite its unique features, Hollywood screenwriting ‘gurus’ such as Syd Field or Robert McKee do not dedicate any specific attention to biopic perhaps because they think it follows ‘universal’ dramatic principles. In fact, McKee offers a simple, succinct guideline: “The biographer must interpret facts *as if they were fiction*, find the meaning of the subject's life, and then cast him as the protagonist of his life’s genre” (84, italics mine). Life-as-fiction will then have to be cast into a prescriptive scheme that assimilates Field’s Three Act Structure (Setup – Confrontation – Resolution) and guided by McKee’s five-part narrative pattern involving ‘inciting incident,’ ‘progressive complications,’ ‘crisis,’ ‘climax’ and ‘resolution’.

Since biopic-writing demands inventing on the basis of evidence, research constitutes an important method of the writing/invention process, but distinctly different from historical research. According to Rosenthal, “You are not just collecting facts but trying to gain a perspective that goes beyond facts” (42). McKee elaborates this further:

Biographical, psychological, physical, political and historical research of the setting and cast is essential but pointless if it does not lead to the creation of events. A story is not an accumulation of information strung into a narrative, but a design of events to carry us to a meaningful climax. (75)

He distinguishes this research method as a three-pronged engagement: “research of memory” (knowledge from personal experience that we can draw upon to understand characters), “research of imagination” (what it would mean to be that person) and “research of fact” (archival research) (72). Nadel, in her study of biography similarly uses the term “creative fact” as of key importance to the form (8). She reflects on what makes a fact ‘creative’: “Characterization and point of view frequently overtake the mere presentation of material as the biographer recognizes that personality and character often subsume chronology and objectivity. The best biographies *re-invent* rather than *re-construct*” (8, emphasis mine). Both McKee and Nadel thus emphasise that creativity does not impair authenticity (truthfulness) in biography, similar to Bingham’s earlier mentioned emphasis on “dramatization” with an implicit rootedness to the investigation and interpretation of evidence.

Thus, historical films can be understood, as Dudley Andrew suggests, as *adaptations* of diverse material: written texts, oral narratives, media representations, novels, all kinds of primary and secondary evidence (96). This means that the scripting of available evidence into a life-narrative is analogous to the process of adaptation of a literary text into cinematic form where characters, incidents and points-of-view can be added, deleted, expanded or condensed. Linda Seger, in her study of adaptation explains “why the true-life story resists film,” emphasising nonetheless that “if you have optioned a true-life story, you must stay within certain parameters” (47, 205). Adaptation of historical source-material is thus remarkably similar to adaptation of literary texts where it is well-established that zealous fidelity has often produced anaemic film-texts while the more critically admired of adaptations are the ones that do not abide by loyalty but maintain a connection only in spirit (Seger, Hutcheon). Gary Bortolotti and Linda Hutcheon refer to this as a “misleadingly evaluative discourse of fidelity” (445). Andrew’s notion of

“adaptation” thus has similarities to Nadel’s “creative facts,” Rosenstone’s “true invention,” Bingham’s “dramatization” and McKee’s “design of events”.

In the act of adapting evidence to a life-narrative, the choice of subject and the articulation of a premise is the most important decision for a screenwriter. Few lives are inherently dramatic and so the writer has to invent a dramatic premise. Screenwriter Peter Shaffer explains his choice of Mozart (*Amadeus*) and the premise for his subject’s inherently contradictory qualities:

I was struck by the contrast between the sublimity of his music and the vulgar buffoonery of his letters. ... [H]is letters read like something written by an eight-year-old. At breakfast he'd be writing this puerile, foul-mouthed stuff to his cousin; by evening, he'd be completing a masterpiece while chatting to his wife. (Burton-Hill)

While Shaffer invented his subject based on a stark contradiction of character, screenwriter-director Paul Schrader chose his subject for *Mishima: A Life in Four Chapters* (1985) for the novelist’s inherently conflicted nature: “It [Mishima] had always struck me as a quintessentially cinematic life and few writers have cinematic lives” (Schrader’s interview with Sobczynski). Schrader possibly means that the historical Mishima was deeply conflicted with the world around him, living and writing novels in ways that heightened that conflict, leading to a spectacular showdown. Schrader’s writing technique takes on a unique form where biographical and literary elements are seamlessly woven together in the portrait:

For the most part, writers live inside their heads and you really have to get into their work in order to really understand them. I decided that we would have to see his fantasy life through the books. He had a series of progressions in his thinking and it was really kind of simple. I just made a cross-hatch by isolating four stages of his life and cross-hatched it with excerpts from three novels with the fourth stage being the mixture of the action and the theater. (Schrader, Sobczynski’s interview)

Since Schrader was bound by the limits of an authorised biography, he invented a technique whereby he found reflections of censored aspects of Mishima’s sexual life in specific scenes of his novels that gave expression to his bisexuality and masochism: “My deal with the widow was that I was not allowed to put anything in the movie that I could not prove” (Sobczynski). Schrader thus uses intertextuality between life and fiction to evolve a highly stylised ‘fictional’ approach that transcends the limitations of realism. He concisely sets the tone in the

opening scene where he shows Mishima alone in his room, slowly dressing up in military uniform, preparing us for an intimate insight behind the public persona just like the emphasis on Jake La Motta getting ready for a fight in Schrader's own biopic-screenplay for Scorsese's *Raging Bull* (1980).

A similar decoding of fiction-of-life into life-as-fiction is at work in Soderbergh's *Kafka* (1991), written by Lem Dobbs, as revealed by the director about his development process. Since all works of Kafka are known to be autobiographical, Dobbs/Soderbergh decided to derive his biography from his works. "For Dobbs and me," Soderbergh says, "the film is an exploration of what the word – and by extension the man – Kafka means to us" (Kaufman 24). Elaborating on the process of script development, Soderbergh clearly indicates that their intention was to invent a new form by moving away from conventional biography: "[T]he first version contained many autobiographical details that I decided to exclude. ... I wanted to stick to the thriller, and, in a way, Kafka was the protagonist only by accident. So, I started cutting things out and went from 140 pages to 110. Most of the scenes that were cut were family scenes" (25).

Dobbs and Soderbergh assemble elements out of several Kafka texts and a large number of film-texts guided by a knowledge of Kafka's well-documented biography though they use fiction to portray 'fact'. As Adams notes, "Soderbergh's composite protagonist recalls specific features of the biographical Kafka: his notorious difficulties with women, his hermetic tendency, his chronic ill-health ... and his ambivalent and often antagonistic relationship with paternal authority" (4). They thus invented the biopic as an intertextual pastiche where the subject is trapped inside his own fiction.

The term 'anti-biopic' has come into critical parlance to refer to this fictional approach that goes *against the grain* of the genre by defying its foundational conventions.¹² Adam Gallimore defines it as "a discursive reversal and undermining of the traditional eulogizing, hagiographic, and totalising impulses in biography forms" (293). In this approach, all biographical evidence is jettisoned in favour of connecting with subjects by inventing them through autobiographical traces in their own fictional works where fiction serves as evidence in which biographies of the inner life are embedded.

¹² In 2010, New York's *Anthology Film Archives* curated a 20-film series titled "Anti-Biopics" (Lim).

Rosenstone illustrates the subjectivity of fictional inventions through three completely different interpretations of the American leftist-writer, Jack Reed, in three different biopics, one of which was based on his own biography of Reed: Beatty's *Reds*, 1981 ("In Praise" 17). While *Reds* covers five years of Reed's life and depicts social worlds and political movements and becomes a love-story, Leduc's *Insurgent Mexico* (1973) is a "coming-of-age story, an extended personal confession" (25). In contrast, Bondarchuk's two-part, *Red Bells* (1982) is a Russian epic where the individual is less important than great events.

Of all the John Reed biofilms, *Reds* is the one that indulges most frequently in such fictive moves as condensation, alteration, and outright invention. With a few minor exceptions, the others are content to take characters and incidents directly from Reed's own books, though none of them questions to what extent those works were the product of the writer's own inventiveness. ("In Praise" 25)

Thus, deriving a dramatic premise, constructing character(s) and a coherent plot from a life reveal the screenwriter(s) interpretative framework.

Similarly, Eli Bartra and John Mraz illustrate how two biopics on the Mexican painter Frida Kahlo, not only have contrasting approaches and themes, their interpretation of Kahlo's life is determined by the screenwriter/directors' own culture. The Mexican screenwriter-director Leduc's *Frida: Naturaleza Viva* (1983) is marked by an absence of dialogue and restrains Kahlo to the wheelchair, as she was incapacitated from an early age. Here, emotional pain is represented through physical pain and her sexuality is limited to expressions of rage over her husband's affairs (451). On the contrary, the Hollywood biopic, Taymor's *Frida* (2002) written by four screenwriters and based on Hayden Herrera's 1983 biography, inverts the lachrymose harping upon Kahlo's pain which the screenplay ironically adapts. As Bartra and Mraz observe,

Kahlo is empowered through her sexual energy making her into a prototypical bourgeois artiste, rather than depicting the courage and commitment of a dying leftist. [T]he artist is seen to be more a product of her own invention [the 'self-made (wo)man'] than a synthesis of Germanic and Mexican cultures. (451-454)

Every biopic thus becomes unique by virtue of its selection and interpretation of evidence, invention of different dramatic elements and attitude to the subject (hagiographic, irreverent or even comical).

An inevitable aspect of character and plot development is dialogue which has to be necessarily invented. In terms of its functionality, Rosenthal cites the example of Lloyd's *The Iron*

Lady (2011) on Margaret Thatcher. Written by Abi Morgan, the composite character of ‘BBC reporter’ is invented who appears throughout the film to reveal complex information about her political life through dialogue (105). The screenwriter also invents a dialogue with her recently-deceased husband Dennis whom Thatcher hallucinates in moments of loneliness:

MARGARET

I love you so much ... but I will never be one of those women, Dennis, who stay silent and pretty on the arm of her husband. Or remote and alone in kitchen, doing the washing up, for that matter.

DENNIS

We’ll get help for that.

He leans forward to kiss again, but she pulls away.

MARGARET

No. One’s life must matter, Dennis. Beyond the cooking, the cleaning, and the children, one’s life must mean more than that. I cannot die washing up at any age.

DENNIS

That’s why I want to marry you, my dear.

(qtd. Rosenthal 106)

This imagined dialogue, according to Rosenthal, not only provides comic relief but also allows the audience “to become privy to Margaret’s private thoughts and hopes” (107). In other words, dialogue is invented to externalise inner conflict.

While dialogue provides a means of revealing the inner life, other screenwriters have used other techniques. Screenwriter Graham Moore reveals that in Tyldum’s *The Imitation Game* (2014) on the mathematician Alan Turing who cracked the Enigma Code (an event that played a crucial role in WWII), he tried to cinematically represent Turing’s thinking process. Moore externalises it visually as we see the Turing Machine (earliest form of the computer) as a metaphor of his thinking: multiple rotating wheels and a complex assembly of objects wired like bundled nerves, shaking and flashing with the movement. Recounting the script-development

process, Moore says, “Our goal was to give you ‘What does Alan Turing feel like?’ What does his story feel like? What’d it feel like to be Alan Turing? Can we create the experience of sort of ‘Alan Turing-ness’ for an audience based on his life?” (Katz).

Interiority is thus often achieved through an invented opposition between the private and public life of the subject. In her study of the screenplay of Larraín’s *Jackie* (2016) written by Noan Oppenheim in collaboration with core crew-members, Carmen Sofía Brenes shows how a narrative form emerged where Jackie Kennedy “embarks on a journey to her inner self and confronts the meaning of her life” (214). Through successive drafts, this was achieved by inventing two intertwining conversations: “level 1 conversation” with a priest that reveals her private torment and “level 2 conversation” with a journalist that reveals her encounter with tragedy, the two ‘conversations’ being linked through public events (217). “*Jackie*’s screenwriter and director have made their personal synthesis of Jacqueline Kennedy’s motivations based on their study of historical sources, which they have turned into the framework that structures the dramatic action” (221). In other words, both the ‘conversations’ are firmly based on evidence but ‘motivations’ are invented and the film structured on a contrast between the outer (public) and inner (private) worlds of the subject.

In fact, in a study on recent political-biopics, Frago and Alfonso observe that biopics demonstrate that *public* leaders extract their courage and empathy from their struggles in the *private* arena (as in Howard’s *Frost/Nixon*, 2008, etc.). This idea is often evoked by inventing a screenplay structure contrasting the ‘inner’ private, ‘true’ self with an ‘outer’ public persona where the ‘inner drama’ inevitably prevails over the latter, offering an intimacy to the viewer and shaping the subject. In *Malcolm X*, for example, “there seems to be a special interest in portraying the leader as someone who is an ordinary human being, facing daily problems very similar to those of the audience” (6). And as Dancyger and Rush demonstrate, this journey can also take the form of a negative character arc, driving the subject towards death and destruction as was *Malcolm X*, where he becomes a victim of the violence that he himself had endorsed (194).

Along similar but more complex lines, screenwriter Aaron Sorkin conceptualised his subject’s life in Boyle’s *Steve Jobs* (2015) based on Walter Isaacson’s biography but using it “only as a starting point,” relying more on “interviews [with] Jobs’ colleagues, competitors and family” (Godfrey). He explains how he reduced Jobs’ entire life into three key days separated by a decade, each one being a landmark event in Apple’s history when it launched a major gadget

(Wood). The screenplay mostly unfolds backstage while large crowds await him outside (a diegetic trope of the classical biopic mentioned by Elsaesser), thus creating a tension between private inner life and public outer life. In this metaphoric backstage, major events are *compressed* into intimate dramatic encounters with ex-girlfriend, business partners and daughter, each of which works as a subplot with individual resolutions. Talking about this process, Sorkin reveals that he did not want to do a biopic in any conventional sense: “I’m a playwright who pretends to be a screenwriter; I’m most comfortable writing in claustrophobic pieces of geography and periods of time” (Wood). This indicates how he invented *theatrical* devices for a biopic, unifying time-place-action, using the stage as metaphor. According to an early note Sorkin sent to the producer, he wrote:

I would write this entire movie in three real-time scenes, and each one would take place backstage before a particular product launch. I would identify five or six conflicts in Steve’s life and have those conflicts play themselves out in these scenes backstage, in places *where they didn’t take place*. (Wood, emphasis added)

These comments clearly suggest how Sorkin’s technique was achieved through “displacement” of events from one place to another, “compression” of events, “alteration” of emotions and “condensation” of different characters (Rosenstone). Sorkin thus understood Jobs’ commitment to his products and his impossibly high (public) standards as a compensation for his own interpersonal (private) flaws.

In his earlier screenplay for Fincher’s *The Social Network* (2010) on Facebook founder Zuckerberg, Sorkin invented a similar yet different structure that Gallimore calls “Rashomon-like,” of contradictory perspectives on the same subject where we remain uncertain about what actually happened (290). Many scholars (Custen, Bingham, Vidal, Epstein, etc.) have thus pointed to the influence of *Citizen Kane* in the contemporary biopic in terms of its multi-perspectival narrative, its Freudian approach, its acknowledgment of the unknowability of the subject, and so on. Sorkin says he had to somehow invent a rise-and-fall narrative to develop a character-arc because Zuckerberg’s career only had a continuous ‘rise’ with no ‘fall’ (289). Sorkin thus invents his character as a loner and the screenplay charts his relationship difficulties with his (invented) girlfriend ‘Erica’ and real business partners Saverin and Winklevosses by condensing, displacing and altering evidence from diverse sources. He contrasts Zuckerberg’s real-world relationship-failure with Erica with his stupendous virtual-world success by ironically creating a relationship-platform (Facebook) through which he finally gets a date with the real-world Erica.

The invented nature of the character-arc in the screenplay is apparent from Zuckerberg's contestation of facts.¹³

The subject's character-arc is at times organically connected with the arc of other characters. Aronson, in her study of different effective screenwriting strategies in contemporary cinema, suggests that "life-stories are often best served by one of the parallel narrative forms because these conceal episodic progression and permit time jumps, as well as stories running in past and present" (157). She suggests a "tandem narrative" with "double journeys" that follow two characters travelling towards or apart from each other, or in parallel, and thus demand two separate action lines (176). Some screenplays indeed invent such double journeys, one entirely fictional (in the present) and the other biographical (in the past) as in my own screenplay here. Aronson also introduces the notion of a "fractured tandem" where storylines are "equally important tandem narratives but fractures them, jumping between time frames" (176). She illustrates this with *The Hours*, which sets out *in media res* with Virginia Woolf's suicide (the climax) and then uses flashback and non-linearity to boost suspense and "insert connection, meaning and closure into story material that does not possess it by virtue of the chronological progression" (xvii). This "fractured narrative" is thus used to not only tell Woolf's biopic but also to link her to two entirely fictional women across time (384). While each of the three "parallel narratives" condense/compress to become a-woman's-life-in-a-day (as in Sorkin's *Steve Jobs*), the two fictional storylines end in anti-climax *unlike* Woolf's climactic suicide (380). The resolution through the use of voice-over of Woolf's suicide-note is a reminder of the continued validity of Custen's observations about the tropes of biopic-storytelling. As Brenes observes with *Jackie*, inventiveness in screenplay may be located in the "logical concatenation" between historical and fictional facts, between real and invented characters (214).

Some screenwriters choose to foreground their inventions and sources (evidence) in the screenplay-text itself rather than disguise them with techniques of transparency so that viewers develop awareness of the invention and its functionality. Rosenstone shows that though deeply rooted in evidence, in *Walker* (a satirical biopic about William Walker, the American filibuster who made himself the President of Nicaragua in the 1850s), the screenwriter/filmmaker chose to make it into a "black farce" replete with blatant anachronistic absurdities to warn us against naïve expectations of verisimilitude (*Revisioning History* 207). They remind viewers that, "the questions

¹³ "Contrary to the film's plot he was not single at the time and had been dating his now-wife, Priscilla Chan" (Batty and Johnson).

we take to the past always arise from our current concerns; that, in fact, it is impossible for us to see the world of Walker, or any historical realm, without images of automobiles, helicopters and computer terminals in our minds” (211). If anachronism is a technique for displaying self-awareness, the “tandem narrative” (Aronson) is another, with intertwining storylines in the past and present (as in my screenplay).

With similar intentions of foregrounding invention, Epstein shows how screenwriter/directors Berman and Pulcini, deconstruct the myth of a comic-book writer (Harvey Pekar) in *American Splendor* (2003) with pastiche and parody, drawing attention to the film’s own construction. Pekar “participates in the deconstruction of his life ... [highlighting] a film about painful life experiences and the impossibility of representing those experiences” (20). Here ‘tandem narrative’ works within the frame, not as two different storylines; Pekar interacts on-screen with the actor representing him in a film about his own life that he has transcribed into graphic novels titled ‘American Splendor.’ Berg-Ramirez classifies the film as a “metanarrative plot, narration about the problem of movie narration” with dual-protagonists that find “an entertaining way to depict their creative maelstrom” with non-classical answers to the classical question of how to tell a story most effectively (52, 54).



Pekar (foreground left) and the actor (background) in *American Splendor*: “Here’s me, or the guy playin’ me, though he don’t look nothin’ like me.” (IMSDB, p.15)

In the act of fictionalising subjects, Roland Barthes’ notion of the “palimpsest” highlights how some biographies adapt primary and secondary sources but are often retellings of earlier narrations about other subjects which are then carefully erased (*Responsibility of Forms* 141-147). They involve, as Williams notes, “scraping off and writing on top of the old, innovating, modifying past texts and allowing readers [viewers] to play the game” (178). Both Custen and Elsaesser had already observed this phenomenon in the studio-era biopic where, as mentioned

earlier, Pasteur was recast as the ‘Galileo of medicine’ or scenes written for scrapped biopic-projects were used for newer ones as in *The Story of Louis Pasteur*. Inglis, in a study of musical biopics observes how the life of a subject actually mirrors ‘the lives of others’: “[T]hey are presented as fictional, yet are *frankly, and knowingly*, based on the life stories of their respective stars. Bette Midler’s characterization of the rise and fall of female rock singer Mary Rose Foster was clearly based upon the life and career of Janis Joplin” (81, emphasis mine).

The notion of the palimpsest is crucially important in the understanding of recent Indian biopics where several fragments (historical, fictionalised history, mythical and oral narratives) are often grafted within a screenplay in inventing a subject with a presentist framework. As Manimugdha Sharma and Ashley D’Mello point out, Bhansali’s *Padmaavat* (2018) about a 14th century Hindu-Rajput queen who (supposedly) self-immolated herself when faced with the prospect of marrying a Muslim invader, is a work of fiction disguised as history. As historian Safvi mentions, the film is presentist in that it gives expression to the prevalent militant Hindutva ideology where the savage Muslim ruler is portrayed as evil, devouring the morally superior Hindu woman (PTI). While doubting the subject’s historicity, Sharma asserts its legitimacy as the adaptation of a 16th century fictional-poem titled *Padmavat* by Sufi poet Malik Muhammad Jayasi. A closer look, however, reveals a labyrinthine network of ‘source-texts’: a story about a story about a story (and so on), each text erasing the signs of its borrowing. There are indications in Jayasi’s 16th century text that it is the recasting of the myth of Helen of Troy into 14th century Rajput history. As Ruby Blondell explains, the story has been reworked successively by Homer, Virgil, Aristophanes till Marlowe in the 16th century from which Jayasi may have found inspiration and subsequently, Bhansali and his co-screenwriters imbibed the story from folk retellings five centuries later (165-188). The cultural loop goes even deeper as the etymology of Helen’s name suggests Sanskrit origins (Skutsch 188).

Thus the works cited here indicate that the relationship between historical evidence and fictional narrative in the biopic is a convoluted one. However, it is a particularly flexible form continuously re-inscribed in the shifting space between historical fact, previous representations and contemporary pressures. As several scholars have indicated (Elsaesser, Custen, Bingham, Vidal), the screenwriter’s agency in invention lies at the confluence of so many production factors and pre-existing narratives that the question of authorship becomes particularly elusive. Even Bordino, who sets out to claim authorship for screenwriters in produced screenplays (unlike my screenplay here which is an unproduced ‘spec-script’) reaches the conclusion that

even when a singular screenwriter/director is credited, it is impossible to determine authorship (ascribing specific inventions to specific individuals) unless the insiders of the development process reveal them. He locates the screenwriter's "authorial autonomy [as] a balancing act of both selfishness and subservience to the production process as a collaborative effort that is beyond one's individual control" (263). Other scholars, such as screenwriter Kohn take this further (reminiscent of Dieterle's "poor fellows") characterising screenplay-writing in the industry context as "a polyvocal textual practice that becomes an egoless excessive big bang of intermingling texts and writers" (506). Thus, irrespective of whether a screenplay is 'original', adapted or commissioned, for the purposes of this thesis, determining authorship of specific screenwriters has a lower priority than identifying the nature and function of fictional invention in the finished film (irrespective of authorship) while drawing insights from the development process.

Conclusion

Though an awareness about the genre was late to arrive, the biopic has been retrospectively historicised by historians and film-scholars, identifying its narrative evolution and defining features of its storytelling. While it has often been "cavalier in its handling of historical fact," as Vidal acknowledges, different aspects of fictional invention discussed in this chapter indicate inventive ways in which past lives have been given dramatic shape in accordance with the exigencies of film language and different commercial imperatives (Brown and Vidal 1). This reveals how screenwriters creatively negotiate disparate demands by intertwining real life-events with invented elements in terms of plot, character, incidents, seeking innovative story-structures that make real-life stories look similar to imagined fiction while drawing on its appeal to actuality. The understanding of creative processes and the legitimacy of such films have been a bone of contention among scholars of different persuasions. Rosenstone offers a conceptual model to assess these inventions as 'true' or 'false' based on whether or not they reinvent lives through an engagement with evidence and social-historical debates. He thus makes an important distinction between historical accuracy in biopic-fiction and authenticity, a persistent "anxiet[y] in the making of historical film" (Lees 200). Rosenstone demonstrates how a film can be factually 'inaccurate' but still strike a deep resonance with viewers.

Film scholars like Custen or Bingham who have closely examined different aspects of the genre, are less concerned with whether particular life representations are 'accurate' but more intent on identifying factors and considerations that shape them and specific inventions that

enable viewers to derive meaning out of these lives. Like Rosenstone, Bingham too concludes that fiction brings real lives closer to ‘truth,’ i.e. perceptions of authenticity in its depiction (379). Most screenwriters, manual-writers and film scholars mentioned in this discussion seem to reiterate the point that though historical research is necessary and enriches the screenplay with rich composite characters and dramatic situations, a strict adherence to accuracy either in terms of factual details or *mise-en-scène* cannot guarantee authenticity while a non-realist or even ludic approach can offer nuances and a holistic vision of the past in a way more palpable than a historical record.

A consensus thus seems to emerge that films that poignantly evoke the past by creating a coherent, credible, immersive (i.e. ‘authentic’) fictional world, can transcend questions of historical evidence and accuracy. Here, while discussing the major debates around fictional invention in biopics, I have foregrounded my research methods that align closely with the approaches of Rosenstone and Bingham and how some of their insights throw light on my own screenplay. I have identified different aspects of fictional invention and the dramatic functions they serve, whether in the classical-biopic shaped during the Hollywood-studio period or its subsequent evolution into contemporary manifestations with a proclivity towards re-invention of a life rather than mere dramatic reconstruction. Despite the Eurocentrism inherent to the genre, I identify counter-narrative traditions of re-historicising and re-inventing to which my screenplay belongs. Notwithstanding a plethora of critical/historical material on different aspects of fictional invention in the biopic, no attention has been dedicated to what a screenwriter does to create a life-story with very limited biographical evidence. It is a lacuna that subsequent chapters here set out to explore, seeking answers that may facilitate my own screenwriting.

Chapter 2

Vernacular Cosmopolitanism and the Postcolonial Predicament

This chapter grows out of the imperative to interpret the biographical subject as a cosmopolitan of the 19th century whose roots may be traced to his non-Western, non-elitist indigenous upbringing. In order to position the subject in the backdrop of larger, ongoing social debates, I underline a growing discomfort with the postcolonial position and a contemporary need to overcome its trappings in order to find alternative positions more conducive to living in an increasingly global world. Often understood as the cultural ideal endorsed by globalisation, I critique cosmopolitanism for its inherent Eurocentrism while drawing attention to non-Western, non-elitist manifestations of cosmopolitanism. The oxymoronic term “vernacular cosmopolitanism” is elaborated here as a presentist (i.e. where the past is used as a commentary on the present) interpretative framework relevant to my telling of Suresh Biswas’ life-story where I imagine him as a proto-cosmopolitan of the 19th century. In remembering Biswas from the present moment in Indian history, I situate his ‘cosmopolitanism’ in counterpoint to the contemporary context of ‘saffronisation’ – politicisation of Hindu religiosity into bellicose nationalist fervor – which is also elaborated here. Since ‘vernacular cosmopolitanism’ does not find any significant manifestation in cinema and has had little reference in film-related discussions, I draw on some literary examples and the evidence of similar indigenous cosmopolitan sensibilities embedded in postcolonial cinemas in different cultures. The purpose of this chapter is to explain how and why I arrive at “vernacular cosmopolitanism” through a critique of postcolonial theory and cosmopolitanism, choosing only the relevant aspects of these theories without any intention of making an exhaustive overview of these vast topics. Since the purpose of these discussions is to inform the screenplay with an interpretative framework for situating Biswas in the present, I indicate the ways in which the ideas have been incorporated through fictional devices.

Vernacular Cosmopolitanism

Postcolonial theory is a conceptual scaffolding for understanding the socio-cultural legacy of decolonisation in Africa, Asia and Latin America, whose beginning is usually traced to the publication of Edward Said’s post-structuralist work, *Orientalism* in 1979. Several Indian scholars, however, such as Leela Gandhi or Pramod K. Nayar, have located the beginnings of postcolonial thinking not in Said but in the works of leaders/thinkers of anti-colonial

movements: Mahatma Gandhi, Frantz Fanon and Aimé Césaire (the latter two from Martinique). For the purposes of this discussion, though, Said's discourse analysis of Western scholarship on the Arab and the Middle East, is the key point of departure. Said's critique has been extended to other regions of the 'Orient' including India. He deconstructs Western texts about the East to show how they intended to serve two main purposes. Firstly, all such knowledge enabled the construction of the European imagination with ideas about the 'West' through an opposition with a homogenised 'Orient'. Secondly, all such knowledge about the Orient generated a desire to *possess* it: "The Orient needed first to be known, then invaded and possessed, then re-created by scholars ..." (92). It was thus closely aligned with power, facilitating and justifying European colonial expansion and American imperialism. As Said explains:

Neither imperialism nor colonialism is a simple act of accumulation and acquisition. Both are supported and perhaps even impelled by impressive ideological formations which include notions that certain territories and people *require* and beseech domination, as well as forms of knowledge affiliated with that domination. (*Culture and Imperialism* 8, italics in original)

Said thus understands colonialism/imperialism as an epistemological and cultural attitude that works in tandem with the habit of hegemonising and dominating the Orient.

In other words, Said demonstrates how Orientalism was based on "a rigid binary opposition" to establish distinctive modes of thinking between "inorganic" (Semitic-Oriental) versus "organic" (Indo-European) language systems, "weakness" of the Orient versus "strength" of the West, "we are this, they are that", "passive" East versus "active" West, "political" foreign policy versus Oriental "prophetic" policy, and so on (45, 143, 237). Said locates the major Orientalist period as between 1815-1914, a period "when European direct colonial dominion expanded from 35% of the earth's surface to about 85% of it" (41). Orientalism reduces Oriental cultures to homogenised "immutable cultural essences," inferior but romantic, which are then used by Europe/ 'West' to define itself in positive/hierarchical terms by making the 'Orient' its cultural and political 'Other' (*Orientalism* 65-67). These formulations, Said notes, were often internalised by ruling elites in the Oriental world, thus reinforcing the binary mode of thinking of oneself in the negative: the non-West. As Nayar observes, it is Said's understanding of Orientalism *as* colonialism that made a deep impact in early postcolonial studies (*Postcolonialism* 20).

However, several postcolonial scholars like Richard Fox or Partha Chatterjee have drawn attention to the problematic aspects of Said's articulation since the colonial Indian 'subject' has often chosen opposing characterisations to their own benefit. Fox observes that the Gandhian cultural resistance "depended upon an Orientalist image of India as inherently spiritual, consensual, and corporate," thus contrasting a 'materialist West' with a 'spiritual India' as a utopian alternative to Europe (151). Chatterjee similarly argues that by celebrating the affirmative Orientalist stereotypes to assert authentic cultural identity, the Indian nationalist movement willingly reinforced Orientalism's moral binaries, such as 'spiritual' India versus 'materialist' West (*Nationalist Thought* 27). Leela Gandhi observes along similar lines,

Sometimes, in its obdurate determination that Orientalism silenced opposition, Said, ironically, silences opposition. So also he defeats the logic of his own intellectual egalitarianism by producing and confirming a reversed stereotype: the racist Westerner. After *Orientalism*, it becomes our task ... to refuse the pleasures of an Occidental stereotype (79).

Further, Aijaz Ahmad, an Indian Marxist scholar, argues that *Orientalism* reproduces the liberal humanist tradition that it seeks to undermine in its selection of Western canonised texts that are critiqued for their Orientalism, as this upholds the idea that Western culture is represented in its entirety through those very texts (159-165). Ahmad observes that in tracing Orientalist thinking to ancient Greece it remains uncertain in Said's work whether Orientalism is a product of colonialism or whether colonialism is a product of Orientalism (167-170). Thus, over a period of time, postcolonial scholars have joined forces to critique one of the fundamental premises of cultural essentialism on which postcolonialism rests.

In having to choose between binary terms, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak articulates the notion of "strategic essentialism" in order to overcome the trappings of postcolonial constructions of identity by adopting a political 'strategy' (an artifice designed to outwit the enemy) of using 'essentialism' (the Platonic idea that there is a core meaning to things that define them) discreetly. She acknowledges the usefulness of essentialist formulations for social groups or nations at certain moments of liberation struggle: "I think we have to choose again strategically, not universal discourse but essentialist discourse. ... In fact, I must say that I am an essentialist from time to time. I think it's absolutely on target ... to stand against the discourses of essentialism but strategically, we cannot" ("Criticism, Feminism" 183-184). Spivak thus acknowledges the paradox of essentialising certain ideas while simultaneously battling with the Orientalist notion of essentialism and binary opposites in an affirmative search for a *subaltern*

(non-elite) consciousness: “You cannot simply assert, ‘I will be an anti-essentialist’ and make that stick, for you cannot not be an essentialist to some degree. The critique of essentialism is predicated upon essentialism” (*Spivak Reader* 167). As the translator of Jacques Derrida’s *Of Grammatology* (1974), Spivak finds a close affinity between Derrida’s ‘deconstruction’ and the postcolonial project both of which seek ways of subverting the binary mode of thinking while still trapped inside it. She highlights this by stating that “persistently to critique a structure that one cannot not (wish to) inhabit is the deconstructive stance” (*Outside in the Teaching Machine* 284, her parenthesis). Though I do not discuss deconstruction in the thesis, the screenplay ‘performs’ deconstruction in some scenes by revealing biographical sources, casting doubts on them as well as decoding myth-making while simultaneously, reveling in them. Thus I ‘strategically’ use *essentialising* ‘affirmative stereotypes’ in the screenplay in a refusal to be cast into a binary opposition of resistance and reversal.

Spivak is also one of the key members of The Subaltern Studies Group, formed around the early 1980s, and spearheaded by Indian historians like Ranajit Guha, Dipesh Chakrabarty and others, who set out to write alternative narratives of Indian history ‘from below’ where historical events are viewed from the perspective of the disenfranchised, the poor, the marginal and broadly speaking, the non-elite. Their key term, *subaltern*, first used by Guha and then adopted by others, was borrowed from the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci who coined it to refer to peasants not integrated into the industrial/capitalist system. Guha redefined ‘subaltern’ as “the demographic difference between the total Indian population and all those whom we have described as the ‘elite’” (8). The term ‘subaltern’ has thus been broadened to refer to the oppressed subject, or any ‘non-elite’ person or group of inferior rank on the basis of race, class, gender, religion, sexual orientation or ethnicity. In a key 1988 essay titled ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’, Spivak concluded in the negative, complicating the relationship between the ‘knowing’ investigator and ‘(un)knowing’ subject of subaltern histories (308). “Can we touch the consciousness of the people” asks Spivak, “even as we investigate their politics?” (285). In her subsequent work in tracing the “historical silencing of the subaltern”, Spivak maintains a careful distinction between *representation* (‘speaking for’, as in politics, which she calls *vertreten*) as against *re-representation* (‘giving expression’ through fiction, which she calls *darstellen*) or subject-predication (*Critique of Postcolonial Reason* 257). Firstly, in re-presenting subalterns who cannot represent themselves, the intellectual/artist’s claims to transparency must be subverted to “insist that the colonized subaltern subject is irretrievably heterogeneous” (270). This means that no fictional re-presentation of the subject (Biswas’ in this case) can be definitive; there will always be contested

versions and thus it calls for an acute self-awareness built into the re-presentation. Secondly, Spivak revises her position in “not laying the blame for the muting on the colonial authorities” but “to acknowledge our complicity in the muting” (309).¹⁴

Thus, the screenplay here demands a self-conscious approach as a work of fiction and as an investigator (through the screenplay’s fictional narrator) I try to reclaim a subaltern voice that offers an alternative narrative ‘from below’ through my/screenwriter’s avowedly subjective intervention. Biswas is understood and portrayed as a subaltern whether in India or in England until he crosses the domain of colonialism though at times, he is *not* a subaltern as seen by his village friends who crack satirical jokes at him. These ambiguous aspects have been explained in the exegesis.

Though postcolonial theory started gathering force from the mid-1980s, several scholars (Nandy, Appiah, Chakrabarty, Spivak, L. Gandhi, etc.) expressed concerns about how it was being appropriated by Western academia to assert a claim to its own openness to other cultures through what Shohat and Stam call “token multiculturalism” (358). Leela Gandhi, in her introduction to a scholarly account of postcolonial theory emphatically writes, “In my reading of this field, there is little doubt that in its current mood postcolonial theory principally addresses the needs of the Western academy. ... [It] enables non-Western critics located in the West to present their cultural inheritance as knowledge” (ix). It is thus ironical that postcolonial thinking is valued only to be quickly pigeonholed into a discursive otherness that only serves existing power structures in the West. Appiah complains of,

being treated as an ‘otherness machine’ and of being heartily sick of it. Perhaps the predicament of the postcolonial intellectual is simply that as intellectuals — a category instituted in black Africa by colonialism — we are, indeed, always at the risk of becoming otherness machines, with the manufacture of alterity as our principal role. Our only distinction in the world of texts [i.e., in the Western study of culture], to which we are latecomers is that we can mediate it to our fellows [in the Western Academy]. (*Ethics of Identity* 356)

Spivak, too, voices a strikingly similar concern: “Certain members of the Indian elite are of course native informants for first-world intellectuals interested in the voice of the Other” (*Critique of Postcolonial Reason* 270). Postcolonialism thus finds itself doubly-trapped; firstly, it

¹⁴ The forgetting of Biswas, however, cannot be ascribed to colonial ‘muting’. He got silenced in history simply due to the lack of adequate evidence, his physical absence in India and the difficulty of verifying his claims.

serves no purpose other than to offer itself for Western consummation (appropriation), and secondly, it is trapped in a play of binaries where one can define oneself only in negative terms.

Consequently, the postcolonial subject languishes in “a world historicised through the single category of colonialism, reducing the contingent and random diversity of cultural encounters and non-encounters within that past into a tired binary relationship of coercion and retaliation” (L. Gandhi 171). Carol Breckenridge and van der Veer refer to a “postcolonial predicament” where the distinction between “West and the Rest” is no longer sustainable, and linkages and dilemmas in the contemporary world “make it increasingly impossible to draw a sharp line between the ex-metropoles and ex-colonies” (2-3). Different scholars and fiction-writers have drawn attention to these inadequacies of postcolonial theory to articulate contemporary transnational experiences where factors other than colonialism have a far more determining effect. Novelist Amitav Ghosh says, “‘Postcolonial’ is essentially a term that describes you as a negative,” as if India set out to be “a successor state to a colony” instead of “trying to create its own reality” (“Postcolonial” 105). Similar quandaries have been voiced by academics like Benjamin Zachariah who say that “some versions of postcolonial history run the risk of creating pure victims” (381). Ashis Nandy similarly points out that postcolonialism is the attempt to establish “the innocence of the colonised” (ix). Bishnupriya Ghosh has alleged that postcolonialism, where “only artifacts that contain whiff of colonial contamination are subject to avid scrutiny,” is unable to address questions of identity in an increasingly globalised world (“Postcolonial Bazaar”).¹⁵ The ‘post’ of postcolonialism thus becomes a prefix of the West’s own narrative, as Appiah writes, where other cultures share with it only a chronological relationship (“Post in Postmodernism” 353). The notion of vernacular cosmopolitanism, as I intend to show here, grows out of this robust self-critique.

Sociologist Nandy declares succinctly: “India is not non-West, it is India” (73). Nandy thus insists on a conceptual framework of affirmation that can circumvent the circuitous route of double-negatives in asserting cultural identity. Colonialism, observes Nandy, “tried to supplant the Indian consciousness to erect an Indian self-image which, in its opposition to the West, would remain in essence a Western construction” (72). He thus set out to identify the psychological structures and cultural forces which have historically supported or resisted the culture of colonialism in India. The nuances of these strategies of support and resistance suggest a desire to upset the categorical binaries in colonial thinking such as that of gender (hyper-

¹⁵ Web-based document with no location-marker.

masculine coloniser versus effeminate colonised subject), or adherence to reason (rational coloniser versus irrational, infantile Indian subject) by pointing to the endurance of precolonial ideas and practices that negated dualities.¹⁶ Nandy explains how ambiguities and aesthetic play of meanings were often used in popular culture (such as the minstrel's song) as a critique of rationality that aspired to create a universalising discourse of domination. Philosophical relativism, through its ambiguities often in the form of mysticism, became a radical critique of rationality with the intention to disrupt binaries of logic and emotion (60-62). This is also where Nandy locates Gandhi's intransigent refusal to engage with modernity as a strategy of silence as resistance, refusing to choose between values presented as opposites (62-65).

There is thus a compulsion to find resistive practices to devouring universalities at the level of the autochthonous, the 'vernacular' (literally, the first language we learn before we start to think). The term is here used in a metaphoric sense to refer to aspects of a culture that are rooted to local history and relatively unimpacted by either foreign influences or the educated elite. Contrasted against 'elite' culture, the use of the term in cultural studies is limited but it has been widely used in the sphere of architecture to refer to a diverse range of building styles of a region that use local materials and design: "It is not one specific style, so it cannot be distilled into a series of easy-to-digest patterns, materials, or elements ... Vernacular buildings are considered part of a regional culture" (Gruen 697). The vernacular's specificity and rootedness thus stand in sharp contrast to 'cosmopolitanism', the cultural analogue to globalisation which is characterised by global flows of capital, people, goods, ideas, media messages and cultural influences. The notion of "vernacular cosmopolitanism," purposely oxymoronic, is an assertive idea that challenges the terms of normative debate by subverting the binary discourse of cosmopolitanism versus nationalism/communitarianism. While the vernacular is bent on preserving *différance* (Derrida), it is usually understood to work against cosmopolitanism which is intent on eliminating it.¹⁷

Most discussions on cosmopolitanism take as their starting point the "Socratically inspired [Stoic] Cynic Diogenes in the fourth century BCE" who, when asked where he came from, insisted that he was a citizen-of-the-world (*kosmopolitês*) (Kleingeld and Brown). However,

¹⁶ Nandy mentions the notion of *ardha-narishwar*: worship of male Shiva and his wife Parvati represented in the same body as half-male and half-female, the non-contradiction of opposites (54). I have used similar ideas in my screenplay through a devotional song: "He who is Krishna, is also Radha. She who is Radha is also Krishna."

¹⁷ *Différance* implies a cultural *difference* which is also a *deferral* of meaning. Derrida (1978) writes: "The economy of this writing is a regulated relationship between that which exceeds and the exceeded totality: the *différance* of the absolute excess" (75).

Diogenes' denial of any obligation or sense of responsibility towards his native Sinope, is considered a *negative* claim, a denial of the *polis* or nation as the primary site of rights and loyalty. In search of a more *positive* approach, we turn to two key essays of Immanuel Kant: "Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View" (1784), and "Perpetual Peace" (1795). In the latter essay, Kant argues in favour of a 'league of nations' marked by hospitality towards strangers, the right to sojourn, and of striving for peace rather than war and violence. States must thus organise themselves internally according to 'republican' principles:

The people of the earth have ... entered in varying degrees into a universal community, and it has developed to the point where a violation of laws in one part of the world is felt everywhere. The idea of a cosmopolitan law is therefore not fantastic and overstrained; it is a necessary complement to the unwritten code of political and international law, transforming into a universal law of humanity. (82)

Kant thus introduces the notion of 'cosmopolitan law' based on eight propositions where both states and individuals have rights, and where every individual, as a 'citizen of the earth' have these rights rather than as citizens of particular states. Kant suggests that whenever we wonder what would be the best thing to do in any situation, we must identify a universal principle on which to act: a "maxim" (105-107). We then need to consider if we would be happy to see if everyone acts on that maxim. Kant's cosmopolitanism is about *universalising* the maxim. As Nussbaum shows, Kant's view stands in opposition to Nietzsche's (and his followers) who "have felt dissatisfaction with a politics based on reason and principle" and instead advocate "one based less on reason and more on communal solidarity, less on principle and more on affiliation" (28).

Anthony Pagden refers to 'Kant and the Stoics' as a supra-national ideology of living together in the modern world with all our manifest differences. He locates cosmopolitanism as a firmly Western inheritance that grows out of Kant and the Stoics, with a "vision of a community of 'the wise' whose views must in the end triumph ... In the modern world it is equally hard to see, at least in the immediate future, that those views can be anything other than the reflection of the values of western liberal democracies" (Pagden 19). While acknowledging the importance of engaging in the debate about cosmopolitanism, its Eurocentric terms are disturbing.

By "unthinking Eurocentrism" one may highlight the self-serving prejudices inherent in the Western discourse, countering it with a multiplicity of alternative ideas and practices of cosmopolitanism that unhinge it from its monopolistic hegemony (Shohat and Stam 13-46).

They highlight “the debilitating effects of the Eurocentric legacy,” examining how it “bifurcates the world into the ‘West and the Rest’ and organises everyday language into binaristic hierarchies implicitly flattering to Europe thus consolidating its sense of self and glorifying its own cultural anthropophagy” (1-3). Sociologist G. K. Bhambra highlights the Eurocentrism implicit in Western articulations of cosmopolitanism to the extent that “‘being cosmopolitan’ (as a practice) is associated with being *in* the West and cosmopolitanism (as an idea) is seen as being *of* the West” (176, Bhambra’s italics). To counter Pagden’s observations, it is indeed hard *not* to see that such notions of cosmopolitanism are not just elitist, they are Eurocentric and implicitly white as if people outside Europe had nowhere ever engaged with the world beyond the local or lived alongside strangers.

Bhambra considers Pagden’s claims a “parochial,” un-cosmopolitan “reading” of cosmopolitanism. “[T]here is a refusal,” he says, “to acknowledge that there have been cosmopolitan practices and the development of cosmopolitan ideas in other parts of the world outside of European contact” (177). Bhambra argues that the postcolonial world with its coerced history of cultural hybridity and “postcolonial scholarship, with its critique of Eurocentrism in particular, provides more adequate resources for making sense of our contemporary world” (176). Postcolonial thinkers, thus, intervene in the exclusively European discourse on cosmopolitanism, drawing attention to ‘vernacular cosmopolitanism’ in order to disrupt that discourse for fostering a more inclusive understanding of the past for the sake of a collective future towards which cosmopolitanism is geared.

Similar to Pagden, Beck bases his argument on a vision of cosmopolitanism as the invocation of an essentially European (Kantian) idea. Beck, understands cosmopolitanism as a journey into the future from the “first age of modernity” which is “in its origins, a European phenomenon,” that subsequently brought into being a multiplicity of modernities based on cultural-historical differences (81). Reconstituted into global “multicultural” societies, Beck calls upon cosmopolitanism as the “second age of modernity” to coalesce disparate modernities (81). However, Beck (condescendingly) suggests that the West should be selectively open to voices in non-Western countries (89). Bhambra observes that “it is not that forms of universalism are peculiar to Europe, but that Europe seems to have real difficulties with the universalism it espouses,” suggesting that the only way to combat such deep-rooted Eurocentrism is by promoting a “provincialized” cosmopolitanism (179).

Once we manage to unhinge cosmopolitanism from its Kantian moorings, a whole range of alternative possibilities seem to open up and cosmopolitanism becomes a new way of looking at the “global past” (title of Davis and Ghosh). Bhabra’s desire to “provincialize” cosmopolitanism clearly alludes to Dipesh Chakrabarty’s project of “provincializing Europe,” an attempt to ‘unthink’ European history as a case study where particular ideas have grown out of specific social-historical contexts which have then been universalised. Chakrabarty’s critique of Eurocentrism is based on the attempt to relativise Europe which relativises all other cultures but not itself. He deploys two kinds of history in the two sections of the book: “analytical histories” that identify general principles of change and “affective narratives of human belonging” where minority histories and subaltern pasts can be excavated. Perhaps, one effective way of relativising the Eurocentric discourse is by providing ‘provincial’ ‘analytical histories’ of cosmopolitanism by excavating our subaltern pasts through ‘affective narratives of human belonging’ as the screenplay here sets out to do.

Rahul Rao demonstrates how a nuanced, liminal position between cosmopolitanism and nationalism can be articulated, through the fictional protagonists of two novels published in the same year (1916): James Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and the Bengali writer, Rabindranath Tagore’s *Ghare Baire* (The Home and the World). Both writers mocked communitarianism, both expressed a similar refusal of imperialism and authoritarian nationalism through the choices that their protagonists made as well as their destinies within the novels, advocating “cosmopolitan sensibilities in the high noon of nationalism” (173). In a series of lectures, Tagore repudiated nationalism as “a cruel epidemic of evil that is sweeping over the human world of the present age, and eating into its moral vitality” (*Nationalism* 42).

These are thus nuanced versions of cosmopolitanism that are rooted to the local but reject extreme forms of nationalism, resistive to larger forces yet committed to a broader sense of humanity. It is Tagore’s assimilation of Sanskrit texts, readings of Indian history, immersion in world literatures and extensive overseas travel as much to the East as to the West that evoke themes of universalism and supra-national humanity. His poetry/novels speak of a *vernacular* cosmopolitan sensibility in that their origins are autochthonous.¹⁸ While Tagore represents an *elite* version of vernacular cosmopolitanism, I would argue that Biswas represents a non-elite version (incidentally, both were born in the same year, a hundred miles away from each other).

¹⁸ In my book on Tagore in Spanish, I have analysed Tagore’s interactions with South American and European intellectuals (Einstein, Yeats, Ocampo, Eisenstein, etc.), his impact on them and their impact on him (*Redescubriendo a Tagore*, Sahitya Akademi and Spanish Embassy in India, 2012).

The notion of “vernacular cosmopolitanism” has been gathering force among postcolonial writers and scholars working in different disciplines (literature, sociology and anthropology) as a mode of resistance to Western-elitist cosmopolitanism, the hegemonising discourse of globalisation that threatens to silence all cultural and historical differences. Shohat and Stam, somewhat idealistically, suggest “polycentric multiculturalism” – that centres are everywhere and circumferences nowhere – as an antidote to Eurocentric cosmopolitanism (46-49). In his criticism of elite-centred, self-satisfied streak of cosmopolitanism, Appiah, altogether rejects ‘multiculturalism’: “Not multiculturalism, another shape shifter, which so often designates the disease it purports to cure” (*Cosmopolitanism* xi). This grows out of his observation (cited earlier) that the multicultural practice has not empowered the ones it was meant for; rather, it benefitted the Western academy that complemented itself with open-mindedness by pigeonholing people from diverse cultures into assigned slots without being threatened by the intellectual challenge they posed, as asserted by Indian scholars and the African Appiah mentioned earlier. In a provocatively-titled book, *Can Non-Europeans Think?*, Iranian scholar Hamid Dabashi asks,

Are they ‘South Asian thinkers’ or ‘thinkers,’ in the way these European thinkers are? Why is it that a Mozart sneeze is ‘music’ ... but the most sophisticated Indian music ragas are the subject of ‘ethnomusicology’? Is that ‘ethnos’ not also applicable to the philosophical thinking that Indian philosophers practice – so much so that their thinking is more the subject of Western European and North American anthropological fieldwork and investigation? (75)

Dabashi draws from his inside knowledge of various intellectual traditions of the non-West to argue for ways of thinking deemed “illegitimate” by the “parochial” but powerful gatekeepers of intellectual life in the West (164, 93). He thus calls for a much needed corrective to the view that multicultural diversity reigns in the Western Academy or that the debates of the West have been enriched or impacted by postcolonial thinkers.

Unlike multiculturalism, cosmopolitanism is an optimistic attitude towards the world with the hope of participation for mutual enrichment, and so it is a matter of *individual* agency, an “ethics in a world of strangers” (Appiah’s subtitle). With this specific intention in mind, Pollock et al. in 2000 brought together diverse perspectives by the major proponents of the idea, later published as a book (as Breckenridge et al.) in 2002. The collective introductory text by some of the distinguished postcolonial scholars (Bhabha, Pollock, Chakrabarty, Breckenridge), define

cosmopolitanism as “our need to ground our sense of mutuality in conditions of mutability, and to learn to live tenaciously in terrains of historic and cultural transition” (4). In 1996, Bhabha had coined the term “vernacular cosmopolitanism” as the intimation of a possibility: “What is the sign of ‘humanness’ in the category of the transnational ‘cosmopolitan’? Where does the subject of global inquiry or injury stand or speak from? To what does it bear relation; from where does it claim responsibility?” (“Unsatisfied” 206). In the collective volume (2000), they emphasise vernacular cosmopolitan *practices* in place of ideas, locating individuals as world-citizens through whose actions it can be exemplified. Vernacular cosmopolitanism persuades us to abandon the binary mode and acknowledge the coexistence of the local/parochial/rooted/culture-specific/demotic, and the transnational/ transcendental/ universal/modernist/elitist.

Prina Werbner too contests the idea that “cosmopolitanism is necessarily Western, secular-liberal and elitist,” characterising it as “a discursive strategy that disguises and depoliticises relations of dominance” (“De-Orientalising” 276-277). If we can identify “the way ethical ideas and concepts are formulated in local, vernacular terms, our depiction of the people we study as ‘cosmopolitan’ may escape the accusation of an imposed attribute implying the superiority and dominance of the West over a so-called cosmopolitan Other” (279). Werbner seeks to reconsider our understanding of the past through a shift in perspective:

[C]osmopolitanism as an ethical outlook enables us to escape from the straightjacket of globalisation as a market-driven expansionary force, while nevertheless retaining a focus on ideas and values that spread beyond national boundaries or little communities, recognising the qualities of tolerance and open-mindedness that people beyond the West foster in their own terms. (292)

Thus, boundary-crossing, demotic migrations may be compared to the globe-trotting travel, sophisticated cultural knowledge and moral world-view of deracinated intellectuals (278). In this sense, the earliest cosmopolitans of the world may not have been only Western elites but also non-Western subalterns: slaves, migrant indentured workers, trafficked women, *lascars* (Indian sailors on British ships), and so on.

Alfredo González-Ruibal, arguing from the discipline of archeology, observes that “there are basically two kinds of cosmopolitans: the powerful and the disempowered, those who have chosen to live with others in different countries, and those who have been forced to do so (such as labour migrants and refugees)” (113). Arguing along the line of González-Ruibal’s *disempowered cosmopolitans*, Pollock et al. assemble evidence of a plethora of such practices at the level of the

‘vernacular’ that owe little or nothing to Western enlightenment (586). Breckenridge et al. demonstrate how radically we can rewrite the history of cosmopolitanism and how dramatically we can redraw its map once we are prepared to think outside the box of European cultural history. For example, at the level of elite culture, Pollock demonstrates how a non-Christian, Sanskritic literary cosmopolitanism extended across South Asia for nearly five centuries where both cosmopolitanism and vernacularism were civilising, “without making either their particularity ineluctable or their universalism compulsory” (48). This shows that a non-Western culture can also appeal to many people beyond its own domain. The editors refer to this as “export cosmopolitanism” while referring to architectural styles of pre-war Shanghai that Ackbar Abbas illustrates — where people built houses in diverse styles bringing the whole world onto their city streets — as “import cosmopolitanism” (587). We may similarly consider the example of the university established by Tagore, *Vishwabharati* (literally where the World meets India), as inspired not by Kantian ideas but ancient Upanishadic ideals, providing another example of ‘import cosmopolitanism’ that grew out of vernacular knowledge/wisdom (Bhattacharjee). James Hoesterey reminds us of a Muslim “prophetic cosmopolitanism informed by, and offered as an alternative to, global discourses about psychology and self, citizen and believer” (38).

Examples of non-elite, non-Western cosmopolitan practices are illustrated through the popular tradition of the Bengali *adda*: impromptu conversations between close friends (Dipesh Chakrabarty 82-110). *Adda* practices allowed world literatures to be imbricated in the emergence of Indian modernity through ‘import cosmopolitanism’. Refugees, diasporic populations, migrants and exiles may seem to better represent the spirit of non-elite cosmopolitanism because tolerance and openness to others constitute the necessary eclecticism of survival. Ayona Datta finds many such extraordinary stories of “cosmopolitan neighbourliness” in Delhi’s slums, where “particular forms of openness to difference are produced within neighbourhood spaces” transcending barriers of religion, caste, gender and language, and “through such interactions, difference is constructed as a normalised aspect of everyday life” (748). Similarly, Werbner notes that “anthropologists contributing to the growing oeuvre on cosmopolitanism have focused on cosmopolitan practice, often by people living in the out-of-the-way places where we do our research”, i.e. among non-elites and often in the non-West (276).

Another anthropologist, Rosa María Perez, points to “past occurrences that, though they were not necessarily called cosmopolitan, were cosmopolitan in essence” (5). She observes that Indian popular cinema is inherently an example of vernacular cosmopolitanism because the

Indian tradition of the musical (with its origins in 19th century Parsi theatre) predates the Hollywood musical while subsequently incorporating elements of the latter apart from Urdu poetry, Victorian melodrama, Indian epics and folk theatre. Thus, “the Indian musical grew independently out of its own cultural roots” while weaving “a cosmopolitan intra-social and intra-communal web into the contemporary world landscape” (33).

Appiah, an African philosopher, relates tales of travelers from Africa and the Middle East who became unselfconsciously cosmopolitan. For example, he mentions an 1880 text which documents the life of Haji Abdu El-Yezdi, a native of the desert-city of Yazd in central Persia who had,

a knack of language learning, ...a store of desultory various readings; scraps of Chinese and old Egyptian; of Hebrew and Syriac; of Sanskrit and Prakrit; of Slav, especially Lithuanian; of Latin and Greek, including Romaic; of Berber, the Nubian dialect, and of Zend and Akkadin, besides Persian, his mother-tongue, and Arabic, the classic of the schools. Nor was he ignorant of ‘the _ologies’ and the triumphs of modern scientific discovery. (qtd. *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* 3)

Appiah thus delineates the non-elite, non-Western (Yezdi) who becomes a cosmopolitan in the 19th century that had little to do with Europe or Western knowledge systems. In his version of a rooted vernacular cosmopolitan, “some values are, and should be, universal, just as there are lots of values that are, and must be, local” (xix).

At the level of the individual imagined through fiction, T. Bhattacharya mentions instances from literary fiction, providing numerous examples of literary protagonists where characters from a remote village travel to the metropolis never to return (5). They live alongside strangers with “mutuality in conditions of mutability” where secularism, in the context of India, has been a stand-in for cosmopolitanism (Breckenridge et al. 4). Examples abound in Indian cinema, from Ray’s *The Apu Trilogy* (1955-59) to several contemporary films of screenwriter Kashyap, *Satya* (1998) onwards, where the village-boy aspires to blend into secular metropolitan life.

Unlike Western societies like France where secularism entails disavowing all religious alliances, in India secularism has a significantly different meaning, implying unprejudiced acceptance of all people irrespective of religious affiliation, a distinction Kaushik Basu and Sanjay

Subramanian have observed (25-41). In a nation riotous in linguistic, cultural and religious pluralities, cosmopolitanism in its secularist meaning is widely prevalent in Indian cinema.

It is in the contemporary Indian literature (rather than cinema) that we can find a greater engagement with these concerns. Nayar identifies a “postcolonial cosmopolitan” sensibility in Indian-English novels which depict Indians drifting across the world and making unforeseen cultural connections with strangers in a cosmopolitan context (163-190). The characters of the Bengali novelist Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhyay (1894-1950) often travel from small remote villages to faraway cities of the world, returning home enlightened as a citizen-of-the-world. One of his most popular novels, *Chander Pahar* (Mountain of the Moon, 1937) can be understood as a case of vernacular cosmopolitanism. The protagonist, young Shankar, is a wide-eyed village boy passionate about geography, who sets out to follow the footsteps of explorers Marco Polo and Livingstone. Opportunity comes in the form of a clerical job in the Ugandan Railway when he sets out on a journey in the Richtersveld Mountain where he meets fellow adventurers Alvarez and Attilio Gatti in search of yellow diamond caves. On the way back, Shankar loses his way in the Kalahari Desert and recovers in Rhodesia. As he sets sail back home to Bengal, he writes:

Goodbye my friend Alvarez... you belong to that class of people for whom the vast firmament is the roof of their house, the whole earth is their strolling field. ... Goodbye Attilio Gatti, you ... have taught me the profound truth of that ancient Chinese saying: ‘Instead of resting still like an inert roof-tile and living a peaceful domestic life, it is far better to be a rolling stone and break into pieces’. (197-198, translation mine)

The ‘vernacular’ village boy thus expands his mind to become a cosmopolitan through supra-national comradeship, not to the West but to Africa.

Werbner however, reminds us that “cosmopolitanism is not necessarily about travel at all but about certain ethical dispositions that may be defined as ‘cosmopolitan’” (“De-Orientalising...” 278). Bengali cinema and literature are replete with such stay-at-home characters who, merely through their responsiveness to the vast world outside, become vernacular cosmopolitans. In Ray’s *Sonar Kella* (Golden Fortress, 1974), Feluda (later referenced in Chapter 4 as the razor-sharp, erudite detective who once alluded to Suresh Biswas) goes to visit his elderly uncle (Sidhu) who confines himself to his small study-room. Feluda soon manages to solve his case thanks to the breadth of Sidhu Uncle’s scholarship:

FELUDA

Thank heavens, you didn't become a detective. Or we would be jobless.

SIDHU UNCLE

I could have perhaps done many things in life. And many people would have been jobless. That's why I didn't do anything at all. Just opened up all the windows of my mind so that bright light and fresh air can keep it alive at all times.¹⁹

Thus Sidhu Uncle's cosmopolitanism does not involve any physical travel but his intellectual openness to the world marks an 'ethical disposition'.

Similarly, in Ghosh's *Shadow Lines* (1988), a novel about the borders between peoples and nations, Tridib is "a loafer and a wastrel" (as the unnamed narrator's moralist grandmother calls him) who nevertheless has such a cartographic imagination, spending his days with maps, that he can describe any street of London with graphic detail without ever having being there (4). He is contrasted with his own cousin, the chic Ila, daughter of diplomat parents, who is a globetrotter but has little interest in the world. Ila, who has been everywhere, so to say, has never *been* anywhere (mentally) while Tridib, who has never been anywhere outside India, has actually *been* everywhere. Vernacular cosmopolitanism thus suggests an attitude of interest and curiosity about the world rather than merely living across countries and cultures.

Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* (2008), first part of his Ibis Trilogy, takes this further by focusing on what González-Ruibal calls 'disempowered cosmopolitans' (113). Set in the backdrop of the 19th century British opium trade in India, he reclaims subaltern lives that are totally undocumented, as already mentioned in the Introduction (Boehmer and Mondal 31). Ghosh talks of the contemporary imperatives of reconstructing transnational *lascar* lives despite the lack of evidence which is very similar to my intention of reclaiming Biswas' life:

The lives of the lascars should be of more interest today than before because they were the first Asians and Africans to participate freely and in substantial numbers in a globalised workspace. They were among the first to travel extensively; the first to participate in industrial processes of work; the first to create settlements in Europe; the

¹⁹ Transcribed from the screen.

first to adapt to clock-bound rhythms of work-time; and they were the first to be familiar with emergent new technologies. (“Of Fanas and Forecastles” 59)

Though Ghosh reconstructs the lives of large groups such as *lascars* through the use of a vast amount of contextual historical research by finding (and speculating) networks and connections, it resembles my own project though I construct the life of a single individual who has left traces behind, however limited.

While techniques of research have been dealt in Chapter 3 through Ghosh’s conversation with Davis about researching undocumented lives, here I want to draw attention to the ‘vernacular cosmopolitan’ aspect of his work:

I invite you to just look at the crew lists of any of the ships that was sailing in the Indian Ocean in the 18th and 19th century. The Sydney Harbour Masters’ website actually lists ships taking English immigrants from England to Australia [where] the captain and a couple of officers would actually be English or Australian. The 60 crewmen would be *lascars* from India, Malaysia, East Africa, China, Filipinos and they were all working on the same ship with a medley of tongues being spoken. (“Between the Lines” 03:45 – 04:28)

Some scholars (Jha, Luo) have drawn attention to Ghosh’s complex use of language and the trope of the globetrotting sailor, though ‘disempowered’, to convey the theme of vernacular cosmopolitanism. Jha, for example, demonstrates “how the local and culture specific vernacular language co-exist with the trans-local, trans-national way of using the language” (1). Ghosh uses both linguistic and political hybridity by inscribing in English “the language that is spoken in the second quarter of the nineteenth-century in the north-eastern part of India, different varieties of Pidgin languages used by the sailors of different races in the Indian Ocean, Bay of Bengal, and their costal region” (2). The Ibis ship thus becomes a new kind of society floating through the ocean where a unique identity emerges; through the intermingling of languages, there is an intermingling of races and cultures, between the officers and subaltern *lascars*. Even the characters have hybrid backgrounds and connect in unforeseeable ways:

As Ah Fatt tells Neel the story of his Indian father working in China, the connection between Canton and Calcutta becomes a “shared imagining” between the two men, and “despite their chains and bindings, there was a tenderness in their attitudes that seemed scarcely conceivable in a couple of criminal transportees.” (Jha 6, quotes refer to the novel text)

Luo, while making the same points about the use of language, also draws attention to the presence of other ‘vernacular cosmopolitan’ characters in Ghosh’s earlier novels (to which I can add his latest novel, *Gun Island*, 2019) demonstrating that “languages can both unite and divide, betray and empower, and that they can serve as a means for survival, tactics for resistance, and agency for transformation” (390). It is this dislocation, survival and resistance that Derrida, in his essay on cosmopolitanism, calls “cities of refuges ... those ‘without a State,’ the *Heimatlosen*, of the stateless and homeless, and of deported and ‘displaced persons’” (9). Ghosh’s Ibis ship is one such metaphoric place full of Derrida’s ‘stateless and homeless’ cosmopolitans and González-Ruibal’s ‘disempowered cosmopolitans’.

The problem of multilingualism and its different registers have also been a key concern for me (as for most stories dealing with cosmopolitan themes). I discuss in Chapter 4 about how I dealt with it. Stories of global displacement and the imperatives of developing hybrid sensibilities for living in multicultural societies have found little expression in Indian cinema perhaps because films are targeted at domestic markets (unlike Indian-English novels) where thematic concerns and protagonists are rarely, if ever, transnational. This may be also due to production constraints of filming across international locations, a restriction that the novel does not have. Since the screenplay in this thesis is free of production conditions, it has the possibility of moving across time and space, imagining a life-narrative of the 19th century through contested ideas in the present. Here, I counterpoint the biographical subject’s cosmopolitanism growing out of indigenous experience with its ideological adversary in the present, an increasingly conspicuous socio-political development in contemporary Indian society over the past two decades: a jingoistic brand of Hindu nationalism, often called *saffronisation*, saffron being the colour associated with Hindu spirituality that features as the upper band of the Indian flag.

Saffronisation

Political commentators and social analysts are quick to point out that the phenomenon of saffronisation in India is part of a larger, pervasive global development characterised by the rise of right-wing populism that runs counter to the process of globalisation, creating rifts and polarisations along racial, ethnic and religious lines, as Clifford Bob explains (1-15). Already in 1996, Samuel Huntington had argued that in the post-Cold War period, since the age of ideology came to an end, the world was destined to be characterised by cultural conflict. In other words, the primary axis of conflict in the future would be along cultural lines, ushering in a period of

“clash of civilizations” (Huntington’s title). Among its many critics, Indian economist/philosopher Amartya Sen argued:

The practice of democracy that has won out in the modern West is largely a result of a consensus that has emerged since the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution, and particularly in the last century or so. To read in this [consensus] a historical commitment of the West – over the millennia – to democracy, and then to contrast it with non-Western traditions (treating each as monolithic) would be a great mistake. (16)

Sen thus points to Huntington’s reductionist understanding of both Western and Eastern societies. However, the post-Cold War period has been synonymous with globalisation in terms of the free flow of capital, labour, goods, ideas and cultural influences across national borders. It has had its detractors on both the left and the right spectrum of world politics.

Right-wing exponents of anti-globalism do not argue in favour of an alternative globalisation but suggest nationalism and particularism as cures for the problems caused by the dominant form of globalisation. In his study of the global-right in world politics, Bob concludes that, “the right has entered global politics in force and with sophistication – despite, in many cases, fearing, opposing, and detesting internationalism. ...Recent years have seen the rise of groups broadly antagonistic to transnational politics” (192). While extremist politics have deeply divided many countries across the world over the past few years, India has seen an unprecedented social polarisation.

In a multicultural, multi-lingual, multi-religious nation constitutionally based on the premise of secularism, saffronisation of the Indian body politic is fundamentally rooted to the notion of *Hindutva* (Hinduness) which was first used by Damodar Savarkar in 1923 in the backdrop of India’s independence struggle. Savarkar made a strategic distinction between those who followed Indian “dharmic” religions (Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, Jainism) as against the inhabitants of the land who were followers of “foreign religions”: Islam, Christianity, Zoroastranism, Judaism (19-20). The *Hindu Mahasabha* (lit. Grand Assembly of Hindus), a political party, was founded in 1915 in belligerent response to the creation of the *All-India Muslim League* in 1906 as its communal counterpart. As Christophe Jaffrelot, a scholar of South-Asian history, explains: “Savarkar established an equation between Hindutva and the triptych: Hindu, Hindi, Hindustan [land of Hindus]. Hindu nationalism appears for the first time as resulting from the superimposition of a religion, a culture, a language, and a sacred territory – the perfect recipe of ethnic nationalism” (45). The idea of Indian culture was thus made identical with

Hindu culture, declaring hostility and exclusion of all individuals and social groups that were antithetical to the project of constructing a 'pure' Hindu nation. In a book on Hindutva ideologue M. S. Golwalkar, Jyotirmaya Sharma points out that Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh or RSS (lit. National Volunteer Organisation), formed in 1925, is the progenitor and leader of a large number of organisations that are collectively referred as the *Sangh Parivar*, the family of RSS (xi). According to Sharma, Golwalkar believed that "the Hindus and only the Hindus can save the nation; he ask[ed] the Sangh never to give up its insistence on the nation being a *Hindu Rashtra* [Hindu Nation] (61). The actual founder of RSS was Keshav Baliram Hedgewar, who had been inspired by a meeting with Savarkar in the mid-1920s, and as Jaffrelot observes, "This organization was intended not only to propagate the Hindutva ideology but also to infuse new physical strength into the majority community" (46).

In tracing the organised public violence professed by the Hindu right-wing parties, Jayant Lele refers to "dramatic changes that have occurred in the climate of political legitimacy since the 60s" (1520). The Shiv Sena, whose intention since the 1960s was to procure employment for lesser-educated Marathi-speaking indigenous inhabitants of Bombay, became increasingly militant with the influx of migration from other parts of India 'stealing' their jobs. Social anger of the economically disadvantaged classes was orchestrated towards specific linguistic and particularly, religious groups (Muslims) as public (Hindu) enemies. Gradually, notes Lele, "electoral alliances and successes at the polls gave legitimacy to the Sena when it transformed itself into a political party" (1522). In its early years, one of the key ideologues, S P Mukherjee understood Hinduism as a nationality rather than a community, as Grahams points out, choosing the term "Bharatiya" (Indian) instead of "Hindu" to name the party (350-352). Founded in 1980, the dominant political organization, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), closely associated with Shiv Sena and other parties that advocate Hindutva, has held an overwhelming majority in the Indian Parliament since 2014.

Many historians (Thapar, Patnaik, Sarkar, etc.) have characterised the ideology of the BJP as "Hindu fascism", identifying the ingredients of fascism present in Hindutva. Writing about the pervasive "saffronisation of education" that manifested itself in the rewriting of all school textbooks in accordance with the Hindutva version of Indian history, Hiren Gohain referred to the "treacherous and frivolous response to a grave cultural crisis, a kind of response that is typical of Fascism" (4597). Prabhat Patnaik locates this process in the construction of a unified homogeneous majority under the concept of "Hindus", a sense of grievance against past injustice

(Islamophobia), a sense of cultural superiority (cultural nationalism), an interpretation of history according to this grievance and superiority, a rejection of rational arguments against this interpretation and a majoritarian politics based on race and masculinity (75-77).

However, there are academics like Chetan Bhatt and Parita Mukta, who categorically reject the epithet 'fascist' to refer to the BJP and have instead called it "revolutionary conservatism", arguing that its nationalism is culture-based, not race-based (435-438). Vincent Kundukulam defends the saffronisation of textbooks as an "effort to bring the moral values of Indian culture in education" where the re-writing of history is decolonisation and is "nothing but correcting the colonial distortions and fabrications". Swapan Dasgupta, in defending "the political beliefs of the Indian Right", concludes that Hinduism's historical "inclusiveness" to all races and cultures is actually its "structural weakness ... since Hindu Dharma was non-conflicting and non-combative in nature [and so] it lacked the aggression needed to face the aggressive Semitic faiths ..." (399).

The political ascendancy of the BJP and its attack on 'leftist' historians culminated in the pulping of Wendy Doniger's widely acknowledged classic on 'alternative Hinduism' by her own publisher, Penguin, under pressure from a Hindu-rightist litigant, leading to an outcry by major Indian writers, artists and intellectuals (Burke). An unsigned editorial in *Times of India* condemned Penguin's act as indicative of "the growing power of bullying self-appointed censors" displaying "a Victorian hangover with a Taliban temperament" (Feb 13, 2014). Soon thereafter, India experienced a spontaneous outburst by writers, filmmakers and artists that is perhaps unprecedented anywhere in the world. In protest against the state's apathy to the growing climate of intolerance and attacks on writers and historians, a large number of national-award winners returned their awards to the state (Yadav and Sharma).

Jaffrelot expresses the opinion that saffronisation of India's public life has been accomplished through Hindu nationalism's "thick layers of ideological and institutional entrenchment, cultivated over many decades" by Hindutva cadres across the country (Anderson and Jaffrelot 469). He summarises developments in Indian society with consternation:

A large number of Indians – in each community – are turning their backs to multiculturalism and are embracing ethno-religious nationalism. ... 'Secularism' has acquired a bad name – its proponents are readily branded as 'anti-national' or 'sickular'. 'Hindutva' has been defined as a 'way of life' by the judiciary. Islam is not seen as easily

as before as part of the historical, cultural fabric of India in spite of a rich legacy harking back to dozens of Sufi saints. The national heroes are changing: Nehru (and even Gandhi) are not referred to in the new history textbooks as much as before. Savarkar is the great man, whose portrait has been hung in [the] Parliament... (480)

PM Narendra Modi's landslide electoral victory in 2019 (alluded in the screenplay) and subsequent developments in Indian politics have only confirmed Jaffrelot's apprehensions.

Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter has been to explain the concept of 'vernacular cosmopolitanism' which I use as an interpretative framework for my biographical subject. I initially develop the concept based on postcolonialism's own critique of its debates being thrust into polar oppositions of West versus non-West which has problems of negative self-definitions, cultural/historical homogenisation and a tendency to see all realities through the colonial lens. I then proceed to critique the insulated Western discourse of cosmopolitanism which is Eurocentric and is unaware of the richness of other histories and cultures. Based on these, vernacular cosmopolitan, a position within postcolonialism, is identified as an existing practice of embracing the world's diversity. If vernacular cosmopolitanism is a way of integrating ourselves into the world, the contemporary phenomenon of saffronisation starkly contradicts it, advocating segregating ourselves within "narrow domestic walls" based on highly restrictive, religion-based descriptors of national identity (Tagore's poem).

Even in late 19th century Bengal, the initial setting of my screenplay, intellectuals like Tagore steered clear of such simple-minded populism in the heyday of the independence movement, cautioning against the dark, violent forces lurking behind nationalism. The screenplay in this thesis engages with the 'global past' by reconstructing an 'affective narrative' of a minority 'subaltern' by 'unthinking' British colonialist narratives. The biographical subject, Suresh Biswas, offers a demotic example of boundary-crossing that blurs conventional colonialist binaries through globe-trotting travel and sophisticated cultural knowledge that can now be understood as an autochthonous, non-Western cosmopolitanism. I thus use vernacular cosmopolitanism in terms of ideas derived from the Upanishads and secular practices of everyday life, ascribing them primarily to Biswas' uncle who transmits the pre-colonial knowledge to him. It is significant that Biswas' cosmopolitan sensibilities unselfconsciously developed during the high noon of nationalism in India, allows me to derive a theme out of his life that is resonant in contemporary India. The 'present' of my biopic-screenplay unfolds during the 2019 landslide victory of the

BJP, whereby I make intertextual references to saffronisation in contrast to the fictional screenwriter's intentions, in order to position Biswas' 19th century cosmopolitanism as a counter-narrative to present-day extremist Hindu nationalism.

Chapter 3

Invention & Research in Biopics with Scant Evidence

While Chapter 1 made an overview of the nature and function of fictional invention in biopics (in general) and their convoluted relationship with biographical evidence, this chapter concentrates on screenwriting practices in the specific scenario where evidence is very limited. I had observed how screenplays make inventions of plot and character by navigating between pre-existing evidence and larger historical events while seeking ways of making a real life (or an aspect of it) relevant to its audience. Here, I explore possible answers to the key question of my practice: what research and writing methods do screenwriters use when confronted with limited evidence on the subject? Though my intention is to draw observations for my own practice, this chapter opens up to a broader reflection on the topic beyond the immediate demands of my practice, offering a conceptualisation in the form of a taxonomy for biopics that pose a particularly challenging situation to screenwriters. I explain my criteria for selection of films and then proceed to explain a set of four different but overlapping narrative approaches, some of which I use in my own screenplay. I then undertake four case studies and draw on published interviews with screenwriters and collaborators as evidence of the development process for an understanding of research methods and screenwriting techniques. Based on these case studies, I derive research and screenwriting methods that can be useful to other screenwriters as well.

A Proposed Taxonomy for Biopics

From the outset, my intention was to identify biopics that were written with scant evidence based on an examination of the screenwriters' sources. For that purpose, I started with a longlist of around 150 (theatrical) biopics that I found referenced in scholarly literature: Custen, Bingham, Brown and Vidal, Rosenstone, Epstein, Landy and other biopic-scholars. This list was very Hollywood-centric with the exception of some South Korean, Russian, French and Italian films referred in Brown and Vidal's anthology which makes the critical discourse relatively more multicultural (10-20). The claim that the biopic is primarily a Hollywood genre as stated in the Introduction is still valid. For a better representation of the non-Hollywood tradition of the

biopic in tune with the theme of my research, I added some Indian and Latin American films based on my own experience as a film academic.²⁰

While watching each one of the longlisted films, I cross-checked the film's writing credits and source-texts with the availability of biographical material on the subject (both primary and secondary) through internet resources and physical libraries. This allowed me to identify the biopics which were based on subjects on whom there is very limited biographical evidence. None of these films provide the viewer with any cinematic clue about the dearth of evidence or mention it in the title-cards so common in biopics. I have tried to understand how gaps in life-information are dealt with by screenwriters and how these films investigate the subject and then construct narratives that incorporate life-information in such ways that it becomes difficult, thereafter, to separate evidence from invention. For an understanding of these narratives, I have drawn on Rosenstone's concepts of *compression*, *condensation*, *displacement* and *alteration* and the notion of *true* or *false invention*, as explained in Chapter 1.

I derive my observations by gathering evidence from published interviews with screenwriters, directors and other collaborators in the script development process in search of information about their research methods and use of primary and secondary sources. The nature and function of fictional inventions and their relationship with evidence can only be assessed through such an inquiry. Through this process of examining the biopic's narrative form vis-à-vis available evidence, I was able to isolate around ten biopics where critically acclaimed screenplays were written despite sparse biographical material. These form the basis of my proposed taxonomy, in which I look closely at four biopics to derive certain observations directly relevant to my practice. This is a reliable sample-size in statistical terms because the population-size (total number of biopics in this category) is also quite small.

Bingham's classification of biopics in terms of 'classical', 'post-classical', 'postmodern' and 'contemporary' (discussed in Chapter 1) is inadequate for the screenwriter struggling to overcome the problem of scant evidence because his/her problems are very specific and demand a conceptual scheme more suited to its conditions. In the process of collating the films that are

²⁰ In the context of CPR paradigms, Ings emphasises the need of "connecting investigation with the researcher's personal experience" (675). In that strain, I assert my personal discretion in including films ignored by Western scholars. I had edited an anthology titled *The New Latin American Cinema: Readings from Within* (Celluloid Chapter, 1998) that still remains a recommended text in several Indian universities and also a book on *India's Audiovisual Market* (German Film Exporters' Union, 2004). Further, I studied in Latin America's leading film school and have held academic positions in major film institutes in India and abroad.

relevant for my purposes, I also came across a small group of films that have an unusual approach to evidence. Though they are based on subjects which are well-documented, the screenwriter/filmmaker, disenchanted with the biopic's hackneyed narrative conventions, decided to jettison biographical details in favour of circuitous ways of capturing the subject's consciousness, exploring cinematic language, often by drawing on narrative innovations in literature. I have included some of these films in this study as they indicate innovative storytelling approaches which may be used by screenwriters with limited evidence.

As Charles Ramírez Berg observes in his taxonomy of alternative plots in recent films of all genres, "classification helps us understand the nature and degree of narrative innovation that is occurring" (5). David Bordwell too underlines the meaningfulness of such an exercise, as "narrational patterning is a major part of the process by which we grasp films as more or less coherent wholes" (49). Though my taxonomy has been conceptualised from the practicing screenwriter's point-of-view, I have also sought correspondence with narratological studies that are generally conceived from the viewer's point-of-view. Among well-known taxonomies of filmic narration for all films (not restricted to the screenwriting perspective), Bordwell (*Narration*) proposes a four-part narrative taxonomy based on the "film's systematic use of cinematic devices" in their deployment of *fabula* (story), *syuzhet* (plot, i.e. how the story is organised) and cinematic style (50). These are: *classical Hollywood narration* (marked by a goal-oriented protagonist and strong causality), *art film narration* (loose causality, narrative gaps and ambiguity), *historical materialist narration* (ideologically-driven films) and *parametric narration* (style-driven) (156-310). Berg bases his taxonomy of 12 types of plot on *syuzhet* alone, focusing on how "an alternative narrative diverges significantly but not totally from classical Hollywood narration," identifying each 'type' with its unique narrative features (10).

Edward Branigan, in his study of how we comprehend filmic narratives, identifies eight levels of narration and argues that there are five different types of *agents* at work (types of shots ranging from the objective to the deeply subjective) in the process of narration: *historical authors* (filmmaker/screenwriter's voice in this case), *implied authors* (narrator within the diegetic space), *narrators* (who speak from within the fictional world), *characters* (those within the fictional world) and *focalizers* (involving "a character neither speaking nor acting but rather actually experiencing something through seeing or hearing it") (101). While Berg and Bordwell offer typologies of narration that depend also on considerations of mise-en-scène (which are not, strictly speaking, the concerns of screenwriting), Branigan's categories have limited utility for my purposes here.

However, I have outlined the correspondence of his scheme of narration with narration in my screenplay in the exegesis.

Here, I have identified four overlapping narrative approaches and my own screenplay, as I will explain later, is a combination of two (or perhaps three) of these patterns. I elaborate here a broader range of approaches than the concerns of my practice for a more comprehensive answer to the research question that I have set out to explore in the critical component. Since the latter two approaches will be dealt with at length in the case studies, the first two approaches are treated with greater detail here.

The Biopic of Interiority (BoI):

Examples: Tarkovsky's *Andrei Rublev* (1966), written by Tarkovsky and Konchalovsky
 Madden's *Shakespeare in Love* (1998), written by Stoppard and Norman
 Soderbergh's *Kafka* (1991), written by Soderbergh and Dobbs
 Haynes' *I'm Not There* (2007), written by Haynes and Moverman
 Schrader's *Mishima: A Life in Four Chapters* (1985), written by Schrader
 Altman's *Secret Honor* (1984), written by Freed and Stone based on their play

BoI are those that trace the inner life or consciousness of a biopic subject where an artist/writer's *oeuvre* often provides the 'body' of evidence rather than biographical details even if they are available (as in the case of Kafka or Dylan). Since artists spend the more intense moments of their lives inwardly, it is surmised that their works offer better clues (evidence) to the life-of-the-mind than external factual details. Even for well-documented personalities and non-artists, factual evidence may not throw light on the inner life of memories, yearnings and confusions that these biopics set out to explore (as President Nixon's confrontation with guilt in a solitary room in *Secret Honor*).

Kathryn Millard insists that artist-biopics must indeed trace the journey inward and aspire for complex narrative forms that are able to deal with the multivariate worlds that a person inhabits (231). In advocating not being enslaved to chronology, Millard thinks that there are films that reveal the inner evolution of individuals and, in the process, seek a different balance between agency and circumstances. Tony Barta sees in these "meditative" films the "signs of the transition to a postmodern consciousness in history practice after a century of film"

(2). Hermione Lee similarly suggests an “emphatic inwardness that would intuitively unlock the key to the subject’s inner self” (79). The BoI mode is similar to what Bordwell calls “subjective/objective ambiguity,” pointing out how there are moments in Howard’s *A Beautiful Mind* (2001) on the mathematician Nash, when the screenwriter “manipulates subjective states within the canonical four-part structure” through reflections and refractions on panes of glass (82, 86). Berg in his taxonomy, calls this the “subjective plot” which “attempt[s] to depict the character’s point-of-view visually ... by portraying interior states ... to present the disorienting process of switching back and forth from external to internal worlds” (45). Similarly, Branigan characterises BoI as a balance of “external focalization” which represents a character’s visual and aural awareness of narrative events and “internal focalization” that represents a character’s private and subjective experiences: dreams, memories, hallucinations (100-103).

For instance, *Andrei Rublev* is about a 14th-15th century Russian icon-painter about whom almost nothing is known except the evidence of two surviving mural paintings. In an interview before the shooting, Tarkovsky outlined his guiding principle for script development in the face of paucity of evidence: “There are virtually no documents about his existence, we only know a couple of his works, and one of them, ‘The Trinity’... gave me the idea for the film. What fascinates me is the process of the artistic maturity of the painter” (Gianvito 5, 9).

The timeline of the film extends from 1400 to 1423 from the time Rublev is 40 years old till he reaches the ‘mature’ age of 63. The eight episodes on this timeline are preceded by a prologue and an epilogue that are undated and perhaps lie outside chronological time, taking on a transcendental quality. As Nariman Skakov comments, “[Here] space transforms the linearity of time into a maze” (44). Unlike the fundamental rule of Hollywood screenwriting, Rublev is not the *active* agent who drives the story forward through willful action but a *passive* observer to whom things merely happen, gradually transforming him from within, through a process that Branigan calls “focalization” (101-103). In order to externalise Rublev’s inner life, Tarkovsky opens up the story to larger questions about the function of art and the role of artist in society in allegorical form. The different characters in the eight episodes come to represent different aspects of this theme (artist-art-society) relationship. Rublev is like the centre of a circle and all the other *invented* characters are on the circumference, throwing light towards him through their responses and their fate within the story. Thus, each character represents some aspect of Rublev’s inner-conflict through which he ‘grows’. The screenplay thus overcomes the problem of scant evidence by constructing a speculative story about potential antecedents for a designated

consequent (*The Trinity*). We may thus conclude that *Andrei Rublev* creates an allegorical narrative form through a broad cultural dialogue with Rublev's art in the context of Russian history. Bordwell characterises it as "boundary situations where personal experience meets wider human existential concerns" (*Narration* 208). In accordance with Rosenstone's conceptual paradigm, all the processes of historical narration are simultaneously at work: *compression* of both real and invented characters, *condensation* of historical and invented events, *displacement* of events from one timeline to another, and *alteration* (transference of emotions from other characters to Rublev).

Shakespeare in Love similarly constructs the bard's little-known life through a different technique, by making a pastiche of Shakespearean plots and motifs. The film invents a love affair for Shakespeare as he writes *Romeo and Juliet*, combining plot elements from multiple plays, blending tragic and comic elements, and ends with him finding inspiration for *The Twelfth Night* when the Queen tells 'Will' to write something "a little more cheerful next time." Between these two plays, Shakespeare actually wrote ten other plays which are silenced through ellipsis: *condensed/ altered/ compressed/ displaced*. The film invents a prototype Shakespearean plot in lieu of an account of Shakespeare's life, using his hallmark gender-crossings, masquerades, rivalries, mistaken identities, royal family intrigue, court battle, backstage politics, and a doomed love-story. Thus, Shakespeare, Kafka, Dylan or Mishima's recurring thematic concerns and techniques form the evidence for inventing and narrating the lives of their minds.

The Biopic of Fragmented Narrative (BFN)

Examples: Straub and Huillet's *Chronicle of Anna Magdalena Bach* (1968), written by them
 Girard's *Thirty-Two Short Films About Glenn Gould* (1993), written by Girard and McKeller
 Schnabel's *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly* (2007), written by Harwood, based on Bauby's book

Scant and fragmentary information on a subject can lead to a narrative where causality has to be invented to join the fragments. Instead of creating cohesion through fictional interventions, BFN seeks organising principles that can hold together disparate and fragmentary information and create a framework where the fragmented subject does not claim a false cohesiveness. *Andrei Rublev* too has a strong element of the BFN aesthetic; it is unwilling to create causal connections between its ten fragments. Millard suggests that instead of being driven

by a central dramatic conflict, if biopics can become replete with “repetitions, gaps, silences, absences, patterns revealed over long periods of time,” they may not progress steadily but unfold unevenly, often taking on an episodic, fragmentary quality (234).

BFN does not impose causality between the fragments and is therefore necessarily episodic. In non-linear narratives, viewers can retrospectively lay out the film in their minds in a linear order as in screenwriter Guillermo Arriaga’s “network narrative” structure in *Amores Perros*, 2000 (Poulaki 379). In BFN, there is probably a temporal and spatial disorientation. After a while, viewers stop expecting connections. The dots may be joined according to viewer subjectivity where the ‘fragments’ are a series of reflections on the central subject. Though they appear loosely structured, they are actually taut, linked by thematic connections and the emotional moods of the scenes. Bordwell characterises this narrative approach as “highbrow drama and art cinema,” part of a “rough spectrum of puzzle movies” without a protagonist with a clear-cut goal (*Way Hollywood* 91, 80). Most BFNs are considered *avant garde* films.

The only source of biographical evidence on Bach is his obituary (‘nekrolog’) published in 1754, apart from a few letters written around 1730 (Spitta 124). The script of Straub and Huillet’s biopic on Bach chooses the narrative point of view of his second wife, Anna Magdalena Bach (1701-1760). The film is presented in chronological order of some of Bach’s major compositions, the fragments linked by an adaptation of a fictional journal: *The Little Chronicle of Magdalena Bach* written by Esther Meynell in 1925 (Byg 257). Very little of Bach’s life, apart from his compositions, is enacted but the film uses a fictional document to join the fragments. The film oscillates between the documentary mode at the level of the visual, and the fictional mode at the level of narration. It also wavers between rigorous historical accuracy (in the linear ordering of Bach’s compositions) which denies narrative continuity and an embracement of the imaginary which provides coherence to life, between sublime aesthetic experience and the constrictions of living. Rosenstone calls it “an innovative or experimental” biography which “presents a life in the form of a fragmented or a chronological drama rather than a traditional linear story” (“In Praise” 15).

This biopic is structured according to musical principles. Like an oratorio, *Chronicle* is a story set to music by an orchestra, choir and soloists, with the singers as static objects, involving no dramatic enactment. The screenplay maintains a Brechtian distance from its audience/viewer, constantly reminding them of the illusion and the constructed nature of the ‘chronicle’. Bach’s

life is depicted as a string of compositions; his music thus becomes the protagonist of his biography. It is also characterised by minimalism, “aiming at complete authenticity,” stripping the film of all non-factual details (Rubinoff 12). This approach is aesthetically rigorous in its refusal to engage in “false invention” (Rosenstone) though its interpretive impulses are implicit in the way it organises the fragments.

Thirty-Two Short Films About Glenn Gould is about the legendary Canadian musician of the 20th century, best known for his rendition of Bach’s *Goldberg Variations* (BWV988), a harpsichord composition with 30 variations on a central theme, preceded by an *aria* and succeeded by an *aria da capo*. The screenwriters structured Gould’s biopic like a series of 32 musical fragments that trace his life (Bingham 128). It is thus structured on the principle of *variation* in music with ‘Gould’ as its central theme and the different fragments are different melodic lines that collectively create a harmony to construct the subject. The fragments are separated by stretches of silent dark screen that vary between five and nine seconds, offering meditative pauses to the viewer to reflect, assimilate and connect the fragments dealing with recurrent themes of solitude, creativity and the nature of performance. “Gould is in the black between the films,” said Girard in an interview. “There you can find the ghost picture of Gould, much more than inside the film” (qtd. Bingham 128). While acknowledging BFN as the most creatively challenging of the four approaches elaborated here, it is inevitably episodic, testing the viewer’s attention at all times and thus has limited appeal.

***The Biopic of Presentist Fiction* (BPF)**

Examples: Eisenstein’s *Ivan the Terrible* (I: 1944, II: 1958), written by Eisenstein
 Chahine’s *Destiny* (1997), written by Chahine and Khaled
 Gowarikar’s *Jodhaa Akbar* (2008), written by Ali and Gowarikar
 Vigne’s *The Return of Martin Guerre* (1982), written by Carrière and Davis
 Wajda’s *Danton* (1983), written by Carrière based on Przybyszewska’s play
 Jarman’s *Caravaggio* (1986), written by Jarman and Jackson
 Coppola’s *Marie Antoinette* (2006), written by Coppola
 Mehra’s *Rang de Basanti* (2006), written by Joshi, D’Silva, Pandey
 Cox’s *Walker* (1987), written by Wurlitzer

BPF is the most common form of historical fiction and biopic. Presentism is a “method of projecting our ideas into the past” (Fischer 315). The historian considers this approach a “fallacy” based on “the mistaken idea that the proper way to do history is to prune away the dead branches of the past, and to preserve the green buds and twigs that have grown into the dark forest of our contemporary world” (Fischer 136). However, for historical fiction, presentism is a prevalent method for connecting the past with the present. In fact, it can be argued that all historical fiction is necessarily presentist as it is determined by the dramatic choices, inclusions, exclusions and circumstances of its own production. Even in the BFN on Bach, Straub and Huillet were actually talking about their own time, “yet another film about the unresolved German past” (Byg 53).

In analysing presentism in historical fiction, Chandra L Power maintains an important distinction between “writerly presentism” and “readerly presentism”; the former implies “imposition of modern values, beliefs, or awarenesses onto a past era” while the latter refers to “imposition of a reader’s modern values, beliefs, or awarenesses” on pre-existing texts (425). ‘Writerly presentism’ thus relates to how a writer deals with a past for present audiences while ‘readerly presentism’ refers to how texts of the past are assessed/interpreted based on contemporary values and attitudes. While presentist historical fiction (writerly/readerly) imposes the present onto the past, Brown maintains that it “cannot be made to conform to today’s more enlightened point of view concerning women or minorities. ... Characters have to act in accordance with the values and beliefs of their times” (518). A S MacLeod too thinks that contemporary attitudes of political correctness lead to a problematic kind of presentism where “protagonists experience their own societies as though they were time-travelers, noting racism, sexism, religious bigotry, and outmoded belief as outsiders, not as people of and in their cultures” (31).

BPFs often make the past a metaphor or an allegory of the present by joining missing fragments of a historical narrative with a strong imperative in the present, providing a cohesive narrative that can adapt itself to any sub-genre (musical, gangster, etc.). This connection between the past and the present is rarely made explicit within a film; it is *implicit*, evoked and suggested in ways whereby audiences can hopefully understand the past as present. *Ivan the Terrible* was far less about the 16th century Russian tyrant than Soviet Union under Stalin’s authoritarian rule (Neuberger). Similarly, the Egyptian *Destiny* on the 12th century Arab philosopher Ibn Rashed/Averroes, the liberal thinker’s tragic exile can be seen as an indictment of contemporary

radical Islam's repression of voices of reason, palpable to Arabic audiences of the 1990s. *Jodhaa Akbar* (discussed later) did not declare itself as a Hindu-Muslim love story but the presentism was apparent to Indian audiences.

In some films, screenwriters signal their presentist interventions in representing the past through deliberate anachronisms that are meant to be jarring to viewers. Thus, the presence of helicopters in a 19th century biopic as in *Walker*, or electric bulbs in a 16th century Baroque painter's biopic in *Caravaggio* warn us against expectations of verisimilitude. Rosenstone observed that the anachronisms of *Walker* make the fiction presentist, to remind viewers that "the questions we take to the past always arise from our current concerns" with American imperialism in Central America (*Revisioning* 207). Jarman plays with the *lack* of evidence about the painter's life, narratively framing the film through the complex love affair between Caravaggio and two male models. The 'lack' of evidence allows the screenwriter to invent a cohesive homosexual love-story which talks of the difficulties of being homosexual in contemporary society while being also grounded in evidence since art scholars have made inferences of homosexuality for a better understanding of Caravaggio (Kimmelman).

As explained in Chapter 1, screenwriters approach historical subjects in idiosyncratic ways. While a certain degree of presentism is inevitable in all historical fiction, the screenwriter strives to gather every available evidence to understand and imagine the subject in his/her specific circumstances without resorting to 'readerly presentism' by simply imposing present values on the past. However, the screenwriter as narrator consciously gives a 'meaning' to that life (theme) that makes it relevant to a certain aspect of the present. Thus, the screenwriter often walks a fine line by undertaking research about the past in search of evidence while fictional invention ('writerly presentism') allows evocation of the past as present. In the screenplay here, this technique is made explicit by maintaining two different storylines, one in the past and the other in the present.

***The Biopic as a Group Portrait* (BGP):**

Examples: Frears' *Victoria and Abdul* (2017), Hall's script based on Basu's book
Krokidas' *Kill Your Darlings* (2013), written by Bunn and Krokidas
Cronenberg's *A Dangerous Method* (2011), Hampton's script based on Kerr's book
Sorin's *A King and His Movie* (1986), written by Goldenberg and Sorin

Kaufman's *Henry & June* (1990), written by Kaufman based on Nin's diaries
 Daldry's *The Hours* (2002), Hare's script based on Cunningham's novel

The idea of collective portrait is a technique derived from literary biography, made popular by Lytton Strachey's *Eminent Victorians* (1918) where he brought together the lives of three men and one woman of Victorian London and dealt with them with irreverence and wit rather than uncritical adulation. Caine informs us that group biography has been a pervasive literary development since the 1970s where families, siblings and social/cultural groups have been linked with wider historical processes which highlight the importance of social interaction in the development of ideas (61). In biopics, it has often been used by way of connecting two or more people together as in a group portrait. Through the process of *tethering* (a connecting technique discussed in the next section), it becomes possible to augment a sparsely-documented life through connection to other well-documented personalities. This corresponds to what Berg calls the "polyphonic or ensemble plot [with] multiple protagonists, single location ... characterised by the interaction of several voices each of whom has an individual goal" (14-16). As example of BGP with four protagonists (which Berg calls the maximum permissible number) is *Kill Your Darlings* (18). The story of four key Beat Generation poets in their youthful days is united by a common place (New York City) and centre around the death of a common friend. Screenwriter Morgan identifies the advantages of this technique as "a departure from the traditional monolithic single-life towards a dual structure that also eschews the 'cradle-to-grave' approach, zoom[ing] in, instead, on a central moment of conflict in the historical protagonists' lives" (Novak & Hubert).

Berg creates another plot-type of BGP called "parallel plot, with multiple protagonists in different times and/or spaces" which is achieved "by simply applying novelistic techniques to film" (18, 56). Bordwell calls it "the parallel structure that throws differences into relief" (94). *The Hours* (also Berg's preferred example), starts off as Virginia Woolf's biopic (with her suicide in 1941) but soon intercuts between parallel storylines of two other women in 1951 and 2001 who also experience depression while reading Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* (1925). Thus two invented 'ordinary' women across time are connected to an extra-ordinary woman of the past 'throwing differences into relief' (Bordwell), to make the point that despite the different ages they live in, women undergo similar harrowing experiences. BGP, I would argue, is a technique of deliberately disguising a biopic as a non-biopic as it diverts attention away from a singular life.

While the four narrative approaches demonstrate the ingenious methods through which screenwriters overcome the problem of scant evidence, they overlap in case of most films. The specific approach of a film used is determined by the screenwriter's temperament and the nature of the subject itself. For the purposes of my thesis, I intend to identify the research and writing techniques that enable such approaches. I thus undertake four case studies that allow me to analyse the specific techniques that I have deployed for my own writing.

Case Studies

The Return of Martin Guerre (France)

Jodhaa Akbar (India)

Victoria & Abdul (Britain)

La Película del Rey / A King and His Movie (Argentina)

The Return of Martin Guerre

Though little is known about the historical Martin Guerre, his tale is part of French folklore, dramatised on multiple occasions through retellings that encompass historical novels, radio-dramas, musicals and operas, scholarly books and even a latter-day Hollywood remake. Martin Guerre is a French peasant who leaves home in 1548, leaving behind his wife Bertrande de Rols and a child. Nine years later, he returns home and is welcomed with warmth by the whole family. Martin lives with Bertrande for three years until some vagabonds identify him as one Arnaud du Tilh, not Martin Guerre. His uncle takes him to court over property issues and during the trial another 'Martin Guerre' appears to testify that he is the real one. Bertrande recognises her true husband and Arnaud is sentenced to death as an impostor. During his confession, Arnaud reveals that he learned the details of Martin's life when they were friends during the war and decided to impersonate him due to their physical resemblance.

It is a haunting story about identity-theft, about the deceptions of men and the manoeuvrings of women. Made in the backdrop of debates about French national identity at a time when the country was overwhelmed by an influx of migrants from culturally remote nations, director Vigne described his film as "a modern story that took place in the 16th century."²¹ The biopic is thus a BPF that also becomes a dual portrait (BGP) as explained later. Though the story in bare outline has been enacted several times in different forms, when the director and screenwriter set out to develop the script, they found very little biographical

²¹ *Cahiers du Cinema*, no. 232, 1982, p. 23.

evidence on this French peasant of the 16th century. They studied several books on Early Modern France, one of which was written by Natalie Zemon Davis. They soon invited Davis to help them develop the screenplay as the *conseiller historique* (“Interview” 55). *The Return of Martin Guerre* thus merits special attention here as an unusual collaboration where a major historian helped a renowned screenwriter to conceptualise historical characters and identify/invent motivation (“Interview” 56). Davis’ popular historical account of the case became an independent book, eponymously titled, released simultaneously with the film in 1983.

For understanding unknown aspects of peasant life in 16th century France and the motivations of people undocumented in archives, Davis used two primary source-texts for the life-story: *Arrest Memorable* (1561) by Jean de Coras, one of the judges at the Toulouse parliament and *Histoire Admirable* (1561) by Guillaume Le Sueur, one of the lawyers involved in the case. The introduction to Davis’ book (*Martin Guerre*) provides us with valuable insight about the historian’s imaginative methodology in the telling of a life-story with inadequate evidence:

I would give this arresting tale its first full-scale historical treatment, using every scrap of paper left me by the past. ... I felt I had my own historical laboratory, generating not proofs, but historical possibilities. ... Writing for actors rather than readers raised new questions about the motivations of people in the sixteenth century ... At the same time, the film was departing from the historical record, and I found this troubling ... Where was there room in this beautiful and compelling cinematographic recreation of a village for the uncertainties, the ‘perhapses,’ the ‘may-have-beens,’ to which the historian has recourse when the evidence is inadequate or perplexing? ... The film thus posed the problem of invention to the historian as surely as it was posed to the wife of Martin Guerre. ... Jean-Claude Carrière and Daniel Vigne gave me new ways to think about the connections between the ‘general trends’ of historians and the living experience of the people. (viii-x)

She thus voices the inner-conflict of a professional historian involved in creating a fictionalised narrative through research.

Davis/Carrière developed an understanding of Martin’s wife Bertrande through *microhistorical research* (searching for a historical individual’s traces left behind across social institutions) by seeking evidence from proverbs of the time, lyric poems, social ideas implicit in popular comedies of the time, in addition to local church records and family histories. There were no written records such as memoirs, diaries or letters except those written by educated and

professional men like the Judge and the Lawyer. However, Davis found portraits of women in unhappy marriages through other court documents of the time (Rosenstone's *alteration*) and connections between economic well-being and terms of endearment, notarial documents, registers of parliamentary sentences and finally, her own "invention, but held tightly in check by the voices of the past" (5). She says, "I accepted a Bertrande that wasn't the historical Bertrande, but I tried to make her as historical as possible, that is, a believable sixteenth-century woman" ("Interview" 58).

Despite Davis' emphasis on *primary* sources, the film gives writing credits to a *secondary* source, Janet Lewis' historical novel, *The Wife of Martin Guerre* (1941), a fictional exploration of Bertrande's experience. Though Lewis used the same primary sources (court documents) to build her narrative, she makes the wife's moral problem her central concern in trying to understand how an impostor could take on her husband's position. Throughout the novel, Bertrande wonders how the rude and unkind Martin has been transformed into a kind and loving husband after the war. Her confusion becomes a moral dilemma when the real Martin arrives and she has to choose between them. She chooses the truth and as a consequence, the false Martin is sentenced to death while the real Martin rejects her:

Dry your tears, Madame. They cannot, and they ought not, move my pity. The example of my sisters and my uncle can be no excuse for you, Madame, who knew me better than any living soul. The error into which you plunged could only have been caused by wilful blindness. You, and you only, Madame, are answerable for the dishonour which has befallen me. (107)

While borrowing from Lewis the shift in point-of-view to Bertrande, Davis/Carrière *do not* show the real Martin as rejecting her. In the film, unlike in the novel, Bertrande is morally exonerated, pardoned by the judges for becoming an innocent victim of the Devil.

Davis' research and knowledge of "the living experience of people" provided the screenwriter with accurate historical details such as the wedding scene where family members serenade the newly-married couple by beating cooking utensils ("Interview" 50). Davis says that she sent Carrière "suggestions for a possible structure to the scenario, and for individual scenes and especially ... character portraits of all the principal people. I was always deeply interested in what motivated the characters" ("Interview" 55). Carrière visualised scenes and interpreted the motivations of characters thus leading to a change in the story's point-of-view from a male position (of the Judge and Lawyer) to a female perspective (Bertrande), facilitated by Lewis'

fictional invention. Though she appears as a *passive* character to whom things merely happen, Bertrande strategically *acts* through her silent complicity. Guerre's 'return' becomes Bertrande's story, unlike earlier historical narratives about this event. Davis/Carrière's Bertrande is one who plays her double role with panache, based on an astute calculation of the impersonator's ability to benefit her socially, sexually and economically. Davis, avowedly, achieves this through a process of "omission rather than falsification" of historical details ("Interview" 57). Carrière wrote the script in such close collaboration with Davis that it is difficult to discern to whom the inventions in the screenplay can be attributed.

Davis characterises her invention based on research *and* conjecture in the face of scant evidence as a "thought experiment," borrowing a term from scientific research and philosophical inquiry (*Martin Guerre* 38). Brown and Fehige explain that 'thought experiments' are,

basically devices of the imagination ... employed for various purposes ... Some applications are more controversial than others. Few would object to thought experiments that serve to illustrate ... the importance of understanding in contrast to explanation, the role of intuition in human cognition, and the relationship between fiction and truth. [They involve] appropriation of imagined scenarios to investigate reality. ("Thought Experiments")

Davis' approach consisted in imagining what the historical Bertrande, left alone with a child, would do in such circumstances, reminding us of Rosenstone's notion of 'true invention'. It entailed asking a set of hypothetical questions and exploring their validity through an imagined scenario with the intention of eliciting an intuitive or reasoned response about the way things were. Invention is thus about asking 'what if' questions but informed by circumstantial evidence in search of a "possible scenario" among several other possibilities (*Martin Guerre* 39).

In escaping conviction and reuniting with her long-lost husband, the film avoids the pitfall of the "tragic female biopic" (where the woman is always the victim despite her accomplishments) while also telling a *subaltern* feminist narrative, based ironically, on patriarchal court documents (Bingham 23-25). This method is precisely what Indian Subaltern History scholars have called "reading against the grain" (Guha and Chakravorty 25). With the shift in narrative point-of-view, the story traditionally told as Martin Guerre's biography becomes a biopic on Bertrande, a peasant-woman about whom there is hardly any historical evidence. In the process, she is "refashioned" into a proto-feminist of the 16th century (Finlay 553). It is the

attribution of excessive agency and motivation to Bertrande as a complex, manipulating woman that Finlay has found too ‘presentist’.

Jodhaa Akbar

Unlike *Martin Guerre*, *Jodhaa Akbar* is not a case of a narrative point-of-view emerging out of historical research. Also a combination of BPF and BGP, the film is not interested in excavating evidence but imposing a predetermined idea/theme on the historical subject, making the narration blatantly presentist in its ‘writerly’ message of a harmonious Hindu-Muslim relationship in the face of bitter public discord between these communities (Osuri; Mubarki; Merivirta).

Jodhaa Akbar revolves around the 16th century Muslim emperor Akbar’s cross-religious romance with a Hindu Rajput princess ‘Jodhaa Bai’ who, while acceding to Akbar’s proposal of marriage as a strategy of conquest, postpones the consummation of love until Akbar consents to her demand of allowing her to continue her Hindu practices within Islamic premises. The ‘romance’ is thus moulded by contemporary imperatives. It was invoked in the context of a politically volatile atmosphere of inter-religious hostility in India. In the screenplay, the past is imagined as a utopian present (Mubaraki 262).

The fundamental historical basis of this biopic is put into question by most historians and scholars (Osuri 70). Based on a few extant historical documents (court chronicles), historians cannot find any conclusive proof of any queen of Akbar by the name of ‘Jodhaa’. Since Akbar married several Rajput women as a strategy of conquest, the unique identity of ‘Jodhaa’ is uncertain. The lack of evidence, in this case, may have provided *carte blanche* to the screenwriter for a utopian, presentist fictionalisation of the past as a secular ideal in a multi-religious country. Against the backdrop of dark forces of communalism that had overwhelmed the country with the Gujarat pogrom of 2002, the Hindu-Muslim love-story took on a didactic tone of social harmony (Lokhande 101).

The film delves into the undocumented private realm of a historic figure which can be neither proved nor disproved. Though it met with a “storm of opposition” from staunch Hindu audiences, the filmmaker revealed his presentist intentions: “When I chose the subject, what I thought was important is the theme of how these two different cultures, Muslim and Hindu,

came together. I knew that this would also have a contemporary resonance today as it is the need of the hour” (Bhushan 16).

Here too, as in *Martin Guerre*, the film pivots around the well-documented Akbar but the narrative point-of-view reorients it to become a biopic on ‘Jodhaa’ whose existence itself is uncertain. For fictional purposes, it is possible to imagine Jodhaa as a *compression* (Rosenstone) or composite of Akbar’s multiple Hindu wives. In order to maintain a Hindu-Muslim love-story focus, the film strategically *silences* a whole lot of other discourses: “omissions rather than falsifications” which sharpen the story’s narrative viewpoint (“Interview” 57). Even if Jodhaa was actually Akbar’s third wife, the previous two wives are never mentioned; there were innumerable other wives in his *harem* – Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Buddhists, Jains – who are erased/silenced. Akbar’s brutalities and battles are never mentioned, the legendary geniuses of his court (*Navaratna*/ the Nine Jewels) are conspicuous by their absence. Akbar’s polygamy is reduced to monogamy and the corresponding multi-religious plurality of his secularism is reduced to the simplistic duality of Hindu-Muslim relationship (Merivirta 472). Jodhaa’s agency is *invented* by asserting her terms of non-conversion into Islam as a precondition to the consummation of marriage.

The period story is then framed by a voice-of-god narrator in the present which seeks to masquerade fictional invention *as* history:

NARRATOR (VO)

Their love story is not part of folklore. Nor is their love ever discussed. Perhaps, it is because history never gave them any importance. But, the truth is that Jodhaa and Akbar, together, silently, made history.²²

It is the Muslim emperor who has to surmount impossible odds to acquiesce to every demand of his Hindu wife, suggesting a disturbing Hindu majoritarian interpretative framework facilitated by telling the story from Jodhaa’s viewpoint, an observation shared by several Indian scholars (Khan, Merivirta, Mubarki, Osuri).

Victoria & Abdul

Victoria & Abdul is an exemplary case of BGP that provides another instance of the attempt at reclaiming a subaltern character from oblivion. The film is about Queen Victoria’s

²² Transcribed from the screen.

intimate friendship with a minor Indian clerk in her service and based on a book by Shrabani Basu (2010). Intrigued by this unusual and extremely unlikely relationship, Basu set out to write the story of Abdul Karim but could not find anybody who knew anything about him. A British-Indian writer, she had herself not heard about him earlier until she serendipitously chanced upon an unknown Indian-Muslim man's portrait in the Queen's palace:

I had gone to Osborne in the centenary of Queen Victoria's death in 2001 to see the restored Durbar Room whilst researching Queen Victoria's love for curry... He [Abdul] had looked out at me from his portrait that hangs in the Indian corridor at Osborne House. [Later] I could find nobody in Agra that knew anything about him. (21, 22)

She only knew that Abdul was an Indian-Muslim Assistant Clerk at the Agra Central Jail in the late 19th century who later played a key role at the heart of the empire by finding a way into Queen Victoria's heart. The records of the unusual relationship were erased when Edward VII, her son, succeeded Victoria after her death in 1901. All communications between them were confiscated and burnt, all references to him were removed from her diaries and Abdul was ignominiously sent back to India.

Basu (2017 ed.) recounts how she published the first edition of the account of the Queen's friendship with her servant Abdul in 2010 based on entries in her Hindustani journals and related documents at the Royal Archives but could not find traces of Abdul's account: "I had not been able to contact any of Abdul Karim's descendants. The trail had gone cold" (9). She constructed the forgotten story of Abdul Karim by studying the records at the Royal Archives in Windsor and Osborne Castles to portray Abdul's deep influence over the Queen at a time when independence movements in India were growing in force and she was emotionally vulnerable following the deaths of her husband and then her lover, John Brown, the topic of a previous biopic on Queen Victoria (*Mrs Brown*, 1997) also featuring Judi Dench as the Queen (19-20). Basu buttressed her reconstructed tale of the forgotten man by drawing on multiple perspectives: the diaries of the Queen's Private Secretary, the Queen's daily notes and sketches, letters exchanged with British-Indian officials, diaries of numerous foreign visitors, Royal physician's diaries, as well as Brown and Victoria's biographers. Historical research thus yielded a lot of evidence around a subject who was otherwise publicly unknown, by 'reading against the grain' of official royal narratives. The screenplay of *Victoria & Abdul* uses a satirical tone ("Based on real events — mostly") to redeem the life of someone wilfully excised from public records by the Royal Household embarrassed by the Queen's intimacy with a 'lowly' Indian servant.

It's utter lunacy.

LADY CHURCHILL

I say he's the 'brown' John Brown.²³

It was thus by *tethering* the poorly documented Abdul Karim to records about Queen Victoria's life that Basu could complete her first account.

Subsequently, the first edition of the book was lucky to reach the family's descendants in Pakistan leading to the discovery of Karim's diary which was smuggled out of India during Partition (1947). This led to the second edition (2011) on which the biopic is based: "Over a hundred years after it was written and lost, it has been a privilege to update this edition with Karim's diary" (10). While the first edition demonstrates how a joint-group portrait approach can enable the story of a forgotten person, the second edition shows how such an approach can open up new archival resources to garner more evidence. Screenwriter Hall effectively puts together Basu's material with his own presentist use of a corrective anti-Islamophobic theme in times of widespread Islamophobia: Basu said in a radio-interview: "Ali Fazal, the star who plays Abdul Karim, is Muslim. He says the Islamophobia in this story is familiar. ... It kind of resonates with what's happening today. It's not very different. The costumes have changed, but I think it fits in many ways" (Bates).

When Basu had chanced upon Karim's diaries in Karachi after the first edition, it opened up a new perspective to the whole story. The victim's version surprised her: "The diaries make no mention of the unpleasantness he suffered in court, almost as if he wanted to cauterise those details" (10). This realisation — the victim who did not see himself as a victim — allowed screenwriter Hall to assert his unique viewpoint (distinct from Basu's) by assimilating multiple perspectives.

They look at the carpet beneath them.

ABDUL

Very tight knots. This is the sign of a very nice carpet.
The skill of a great carpet is to bring all the different
threads together and we weave something we can stand on.

²³ Screenplay, p. 44 (Focus Features, 2017).

QUEEN VICTORIA

You seem to know an awful lot about it.

ABDUL

My family were carpet makers. Life is like the carpet. We weave in and out to make a pattern.

QUEEN VICTORIA

How very true. That is a very beautiful image.

ABDUL

It is a very beautiful carpet. Look at this – here is a bird of freedom caught forever in the design. (p.27)

Hall thus interprets the story as being about the British Empire's failed *cosmopolitanism* whose possibility ("bird of freedom") is better perceived by the subaltern Abdul's *vernacular* knowledge rather than the Royal Household blinded by racism.

La Película del Rey

While the above three biopics construct their subject through specific and distinctive methods (through microhistorical research, presentism and tethering, respectively), *La Película del Rey/ The King & His Movie* offers a case where the construction of the subject itself, based on inadequate evidence, becomes an organic part of the storytelling. It is also an exemplary case of BPF that is particularly relevant to me for its use of a frame-story that runs in tandem with the subject's fate. The biographical subject is Orélie-Antoine de Tounens, an obscure 19th century French lawyer and adventurer who in 1860, declared himself King of the Araucanía and Patagonia region in Chile through a decree, with the support of local Mapuche Indian chiefs. When de Tounens declared war against Chilean authorities, he was captured and deported to France where he was formally declared 'insane'. The filmmaker's attempt to make a biopic on Orélie-Antoine de Tounens goes hand-in-hand with the filmmaker's difficulties in making the biopic until he himself becomes insane, resembling his own biopic-subject. The film thus exemplifies the dramatic function of a 'frame-story' discussed in the next section as a screenwriting technique.

The co-screenwriter/filmmaker Carlos Sorín reveals in an interview that the film had been in development for a very long time when the story-idea was abandoned among other

projects and subsequently the screenplay was redeveloped with Jorge Goldenberg (Pagés). Sorín had worked as editor on Goldenberg's unfinished earlier film *La Nueva Francesa* in 1972 on the same subject where the filmmaker used de Tounens to talk about Fascism in the Argentina of his time. Having witnessed the immense difficulty involved in making that film and yet remaining unfinished, Sorín thought of the film-idea again around 1984 and started developing the screenplay along with Goldenberg with a frame-story that paralleled their own journey (Martin).

Distinguishing their approach to the film-within-film structure in Truffaut's *La Nuit Américaine* (1973), the screenwriter elaborates:

This is about madness. To be precise, the story that the film sets out to tell and the desire to make that film share several common points. King Orélie Antoine's ... enterprise was in a true sense crazy, beautiful and inordinate, but mad. A modern-day Argentine director's intention to film in Patagonia with seventy people moving across an inhospitable terrain has an element of challenge that can only be described as a kind of madness. That's what our film is: the story of a film director who, in developing a different profession [an ex-ad filmmaker], in fact establishes a parallel with his character [an ex-lawyer]. Both are intuitive and both must confront harsh realities. (Pagés, my translation from Spanish)

Comparing his venture to Herzog's *Fitzcarraldo* (1982), Sorín talks about the "fragile borderline between reality and fiction" that he decided to re-inscribe into fiction (Tirri). In the Herzog film, the protagonist sets out for an impossible dream of setting up an opera house in the middle of the Amazon jungle and battles unimaginable, difficult circumstances that drive him to insanity. In Sorín's film, in the film-within-film, de Tounens sets out on an impossible dream of becoming the king of Patagonia without any state or military support and undertakes several long journeys from France to the southern cone of South America, after reading a book on the region. The filmmaker's misadventures begin with filming in Patagonia where the producer 'disappears' at the start of shooting but David Vass (the 'filmmaker') still decides to proceed with meagre personal resources. The 'star-cast' abandons the crew due to a crisis in foreign exchange, leaving him with no other option than to carry out an audition with local hippies. He casts the madam of a brothel as an 'authentic prostitute' raised in the immediate vicinity of the port, along with the local chief, a construction worker, and so on. As they run out of food supplies and a storm rages in the cold desert, everyone abandons the 'filmmaker' who, still passionate about his film but driven to a state of delirium, completes it by donning the role of the 'King' himself and

using mannequins in place of human actors. In an interview before the film's shooting, Sorin revealed that the film's coproduction financing with France was well-secured and so the film's ramshackle stagings and the filmmaker's madness were entirely invented at the level of the frame-story in the screenplay (Pagés).

Research Methods, Screenwriting Techniques

Based on the four biopic case studies, here I derive different aspects of research and invention of screenwriting techniques that are directly relevant for the purposes of my screenplay. In the first part, I discuss research methods that precede or are concurrent with screenwriting and in the second, I discuss screenwriting techniques that make use of the evidence (directly or indirectly related to the subject) which the screenwriter integrates within the narrative in inventive ways. As I explain these methods and techniques, I try to point out why they are important for my creative component and how I have used them.

The Davis/Carrière screenplay demonstrates how microhistorical research methods can persuasively, if indirectly 'trace' a little-known subaltern subject. Evidence unearthed from broader testimonies of history allows new readings of the subject based on new information and insights. Davis (1983, 1987, 1988) is a distinguished practitioner of the *microhistorical* method of research that emerged in Italy in the 1970s and 1980s and is also associated with Ginzburg (1982, 2005), Grendi, Levi, among others. Since any individual, however insignificant, inevitably leaves traces of life through his/her interaction with social institutions such as church, tax authorities, birth registers, notarial contracts, and court cases, even a little-known life can be traced through archival research. Ginzburg identifies the microhistorical approach as an attempt at "seeking answers to large questions in small places" (26). Appuhn explains how this methodology "allow[s] historians to rediscover the lived experience of individuals, with the aim of revealing how those individuals interacted not only with one another, but also with the broader economic, demographic, and social structures" ("Microhistory").

Ginzburg highlights the creative possibilities inherent in such an approach to reconstructing lost and little-known histories of individuals, seeking an understanding of a time and society through the life of an individual (*What is Microhistory?* 3:55-4:43). These approaches and concerns are directly relevant to my interests as I incorporate in the screenplay results of archival research and use a wide range of documents (newspapers, testimonies of the subject's

contemporaries, circus-history, social history, and so on) to approximate Biswas' life. It may be argued that accounts of 'small' individuals work as correctives to official public narratives, deepening our understanding of the past. The case of my biographical subject can be imagined as a case of, what microhistorians refer as "‘exceptional typical’ which actually postulates a double bind between the micro and macro levels" (Peltonen 359). 'Exceptional typical/normal' means that individuals unearthed by this method may be 'exceptional' in some ways but "while such statistically insignificant behavior is not representative of the majority of people, it may well be that it is representative of some smaller group whose existence remains hidden to standard data collection techniques" (Appuhn). In Chapter 4, I discuss how the notion of 'exceptional normal' applies to the case of Biswas.

Unlike *Martin Guerre* where evidence found through research on the subject was conjectural, in case of *Victoria & Abdul*, a project that started with scant evidence yielded abundant evidence on Abdul through research and by the time screenwriter Hall started his work, his task was limited to 'dramatising' the biographical material (evidence) by inventing the characters and plot situations. Basu's research method was *not* microhistorical and though the evidence from Abdul's diary allowed her to understand the subaltern subject's viewpoint, most of the information were derived by reading royal texts and biographies 'against the grain' as I too do with Biswas' mentor's autobiography (explained later).

In case of *Martin Guerre*, however, we have evidence of a different kind of working method between the researcher and the screenwriter:

I was sending Jean-Claude letters and he and Daniel were drawing up a first version of the script, based on their own ideas and whatever they wanted to use from my material. ... It was so interesting to see how Jean-Claude would transform complicated historical interpretations that I'd give into apt dialogue. I liked his sense of economy, his stress on the importance of the telling detail. ("Interview" 56-57).

Davis' account indicates the nature of the screenwriter's incorporation of historical information into fictional invention.

Screenwriters rarely undertake research in pursuit of additional primary sources, as the testimonies of development demonstrate. They work with available primary sources, secondary sources such as biographies or pre-existing plays/novels, collating existing material on the subject before they set out to write. I have worked similarly through a close study of all sources

(with different degrees of reliability as evidence) and a wide range of contextual materials. Screenwriters primarily concern themselves with inventing dramatic elements in terms of plot, character, conflict and motivation and seek out historical details according to the needs of a scene, not the kind of systematic approach that a historical researcher would undertake. While assimilating evidence selectively within invention, the screenwriter's main imperative is to make a life-story function coherently as an engaging fiction with an awareness of genre conventions, as my review of screenwriting manuals has indicated.

In terms of screenwriting techniques, *Victoria & Abdul* indicates the use of *tethering* which illuminates a subaltern subject through records of a well-documented figure and the biopic becomes a dual/group portrait (BGP). The word 'tether' has both an analogue meaning (to fasten a rope with something fixed) and a digital meaning: enabling a device's connectivity in a non-wifi environment by connecting it with a connected neighbouring device. Both the metaphors are valid though the digital meaning is more apt as it links it to new formations of meaning. Since the biopic implicitly has a unique capacity to link private with public history, one of the strategies for developing engaging stories around little-known subjects is to search for such possibilities of tethering them. Two or more lives can thus be connected on the basis of some commonality of place, theme, interest or relationship along literary, artistic, religious, ethnic and other similar lines. By pooling information across lives, it is possible to illustrate wider social patterns through individual lives. In my screenplay, I gather information about Biswas' life by tethering him with his mentors in the animal-training world, Jamrach and Hagenbeck, very well-known people of their time, of which the latter wrote a highly informative autobiography where I 'read against the grain' in search of a life the subaltern Biswas may have lived. Hagenbeck's book has numerous photos of Indian performers and several loving mentions of the elephant 'Bosco' that Biswas had trained but there is no mention of the trainer.

Jodhaa Akbar exemplifies a case of a conscious *presentist* retelling of a life though the narrative makes no explicit reference to the present. It is the love story plot that accomplishes this task through its recurring emphasis on its Hindu-Muslim aspect at the cost of ignoring Akbar's multireligious discourse and many other aspects of his life and times. It is thus a case of "writerly presentism" (how a screenwriter deals with the past) rather than "readerly presentism" (how viewers interpret a past text) as explained in Chapter 1 (Power 425). In this case, the past/historical text is not available to the viewer for interpretation and so their 'reading' is imposed on them by the screenwriter's 'writing'. Screenwriters often choose historical subjects

with the intention of commenting about their own time, despite the gaping lacunae in evidence. As the Indian historian Romila Thapar states, “Every generation redefines the past based on what it needs, suggesting the liability of heritage to change” (15:09- 15:33). As a technique, presentism thus offers itself as a device that allows the screenwriter to connect with contemporary audiences. In Chapter 4, I have explained my specific position with regard to BPF in my drafting of *Hometowns*. The presentism is reinforced explicitly through the interventions of the ‘screenwriter’ Shravani who constructs his life from fragmentary evidence.

While some screenplays make the past implicitly relevant to the present, others develop what Aronson calls, a ‘tandem narrative’ with two story-lines, as does *The King & His Movie*, where the connections between the past and the present are made explicit. The filmmaker’s journey runs parallel (‘in tandem’) as an intertwined narrative with the biopic narrative. This may be called a ‘frame-story’ technique suggesting a narrative that holds a story within that story and is necessarily presentist in character, as I have done in my screenplay through the character of Shravani.

Though biopics use frame-stories with different intentions and functionalities, in most cases frame-stories have their own closure and resolution. They are connected with and are impacted by incidents in the biopic while the two stories also resonate with thematic commonalities. A common way of using a frame-story in biopics is that of an ‘interviewer’ interviewing the subject *ex post-facto*, as in Larraín’s *Jackie* (2016). The subject often initially offers resistance to the interview but eventually unveils the past which is cinematically revealed through long flashbacks. This allows the ‘interviewer’ to interject, make connections and ask questions at key moments, often redirecting the narrative. In *The Hours* (a BGP), Woolf’s biopic in the past is itself the frame-story, extending to parallel storylines of two other invented women across time who are *tethered* to her. This can perhaps be conceptualised by what Rosenstone calls *alteration* and *invention*: “‘Alteration’ changes documentable historical fact by relocating or restructuring incidents or events (altering time, place, participants) while ‘Inventions’ freely create characters and incidents” (*Visions* 206). Frame-stories can allow a writer to assess and maintain critical distance from truth-claims in a biographical account and thus set up a fictional discourse with fiction itself providing a biopic with a deconstructive impulse, as in my practice.

Though frame-story narratives in biopic are generally associated with films that are self-conscious in tone, it is a narrative convention that has been widely used in the Indian storytelling tradition with the intention of imparting moral values. Michael Witzel traces the frame-story in the Indian narrative tradition to the second millennium BCE, providing another instance of ‘vernacular cosmopolitanism’ at the level of storytelling itself (380-399). I have discussed my own use of frame-story narrative in terms of intentions and functionality in Chapter 4.

Hometowns is a BPF (as I interpret him as a cosmopolitan as we understand it today) while also using the tethering aspect of BGP. It also uses one of the writing techniques usually associated with BOI: mythic framing. In *Martin Guerre*, there is an element of myth in terms of the ‘return of the prodigal son’ reminding us of Odysseus’ skill in disguising himself, or the homecoming of Odysseus where Bertrande, like Penelope, awaits him (Rabel 394-395). In *Andrei Rublev*, Tarkovsky locates Rublev in a web of myth, legend and folklore, visually evoking Michelangelo’s *Pietà* in one scene. Tarkovsky himself said, “underlying the concept of Andrei Rublyov’s character is the schema of a return to the beginning” (89). In Indian cinema, such mythic framing is common where a character’s association with a mythic figure is invoked *not* to elevate the person but to tap the emotional register of common public memory to convert a historical person’s life into a universal story. In *Hometowns*, when Biswas is tormented by the desire to seek new adventures and decides to abandon his wife and child, I try to evoke a moment in Buddha’s life (which is part of popular Indian memory) when he had abandoned his sleeping wife and child in pursuit of *nirvana*. Biswas’ pursuit of self-fulfilment stands in ironic contrast to that of Buddha as his interests are entirely self-centred. I also use the myth of the ‘divine lovers’ Radha/Krishna as well as the myth of St George and the Dragon as it has different meanings in different cultural contexts that Biswas inhabits.

Conclusion

By isolating a set of accomplished biopics whose screenplays were also based on limited biographical evidence and by gathering evidence about the writing and research of a selection of them, I have conceptualised four distinct but overlapping narrative approaches as a possible taxonomy for these biopics. The writer may choose an emphasis on the inner life, (which is generally understood to be unknowable, unless the subject has kept a diary, written letters or has been interviewed about his/her subjective states) or embrace the lack of evidence into a fragmentary narrative style. One can create a presentist interpretation, or craft a group portrait or to tell stories in same or different time-frames with the subject at the centre. As in all research,

the answers are shaped by the questions we ask about the subject. Through four case studies, I have identified the research methods and screenwriting techniques that are instructive for my own writing. Approaching the past through a character makes the screenwriter's relationship to history substantially different from that of the historian. Though the writer approaches historical documents with a narrow focus driven by the specific requirements of plot and character, an immersion in the past often shifts one's perspective and can bring about a change in the narrative point-of-view that changes the story itself. Unlike the historian, the screenwriter needs to connect to large audiences by making the story in the distant past relevant to contemporary audiences, making presentism an unavoidable aspect of almost all biopics. Fictional inventions often grow out of research and evidence through creative processes of compression and condensation. Tethering a little-known subject with a well-documented personality (or environment) allows stories about subaltern subjects to be told despite the dearth of evidence. Similarly, I also conclude that frame-stories set in the present can help to narrate a subject in the past through a discursive tone that highlight the relevance of the past to the present. In the chapter that follows, I elaborate all biographical evidence on the subject, the social-historical contexts and my dramatic choices and inventions based on primary and secondary sources to emphasise my double allegiance to evidence and invention in search of the historical subject.

Chapter 4

The Biographical Subject: Evidence and Invention in *Hometowns*

And there are so many stories to tell, too many, such an excess of intertwined lives events miracles places rumors, so dense a commingling of the improbable and the mundane! I have been a swallower of lives; and to know me, just the one of me, you'll have to swallow the lot as well.

Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, p.4

Since the writing of a biopic-screenplay is at the centre of this thesis, the biographical subject is at the core of my concerns. The previous three chapters approximated the subject and the task of writing in different ways. In the first chapter, I highlighted the complex nature of the relation between evidence and fictional invention in the biopic and how screenwriters use certain inventions for specific narrative purposes; in the second chapter I explained how the concept of vernacular cosmopolitanism emerges through a critique of postcolonialism and cosmopolitanism and serves as the interpretative framework through which I try to position the subject to a contemporary Indian audience, and in the third chapter, I explored specific research and screenwriting tools that can be effective for the purposes of gathering all information and articulating them in the biopic format. This chapter connects the critical component with the creative component (screenplay) by focusing on the biographical subject itself and explaining my dramatic choices alongside a close scrutiny of all primary and secondary sources on Suresh Biswas. I collate all the reliable and unreliable biographical evidence so that my decisions in terms of plot and character(s) can be understood vis-à-vis evidence. Some of the inventions make sense only through their social-political-cultural contexts in India, England and Brazil, and an awareness of how Biswas is remembered in public culture. I outline my dramatic choices, aspects of the script drafting process and fictional inventions in terms of their function and use of evidence and contextual research in order to stake a claim on what Rosenstone calls 'true invention'. I also explain how the narrative structure relates to the normative structures discussed by screenwriting manuals.

Biographical Sources

The key primary source on Suresh Biswas' life is six extant letters written by him (in Bengali) to his uncle between 1887 and 1897. They were all sent from Brazil. There is a seventh letter addressed to his father (dated 1894) whose authorship I would contest in terms of authenticity (Appendix A). Since these letters appeared as transcripts (not photographic images of the physical copies) in two biographies – in English translation, by Hem Chunder Dutt (1899, henceforth HCD) and in Bengali, by Upendra Krishna Bandopadhyay (1900, henceforth UKB) – they may be considered primary sources with a degree of hesitation as there are indications of ellipses and errors of transcription. Both HCD and UKB were journalists while HCD was also a publisher and wrote adventure stories for children.²⁴ The English biography, *Lieut. Suresh Biswas: His Life and Adventures* (1899) has been reprinted (HCD 2018) by Jadavpur University Press (Calcutta) with two new essays: a reprint of a 2016 essay by Maria-Barrera Agarwal and an earlier unpublished essay by Amit Bhattacharyya that provides information in terms of the socio-political contexts in which Biswas lived.

Since HCD's English translation of the letters appeared a few months before UKB's (original) Bengali version, it has given rise to a misleading and unsubstantiated claim by Bhattacharyya: "*it appears* that all the letters were written in English ... and had later been rendered into Bengali" (2018 ed. 35, italics added). It is very difficult to imagine that a Bengali man from a middle class family in the 19th century would write to his home in a Bengal village in English, particularly when the letters were meant to be read out to different family members, especially his (illiterate) mother to whom he was particularly attached (HCD 188).²⁵ However, there are some legitimate grounds to surmise that the letters may have been written in English and then translated because they appear in high (Sanskritic) Bengali. Biswas lived far away without any kind of contact with the Bengali language for several decades and so maintaining such a high standard of Bengali is perplexing. It is also true that he did not have a strong formal education in the vernacular as he rarely attended school and UKB, while supposedly translating the letters could have used elevated language to glorify Biswas. We do not have the physical, handwritten letters or scanned copies to reach a definitive conclusion in this regard and, as I have explained in my textual analysis of the letters (Appendix: "The Letters"), they contain

²⁴ "Dutt authored a number of titles, in prose and verse, including detective and mystery series" (MBA 74).

²⁵ The six extant letters are only the last lot of letters that Biswas wrote to his uncle. I have provided proof in the Appendix that he wrote many letters since he left India and these were emotionally addressed to his mother and his uncle. Several letters were lost in transit.

several errors of transcription. Since I am convinced that the letters could only have been written in Bengali, I would argue that Biswas may have had a strong informal education from his uncle in the vernacular. It is well-known that early childhood vernacular education is deeply ensconced in the inner recesses of the mind which may survive despite many years of being unused, though he did keep the language alive in his mind through regular letters to his uncle. Besides, Biswas was a polyglot who claimed to speak fluently at least seven languages and so possessed a particularly felicitous relationship with languages. These clarifications and speculations are important to the writing of the screenplay because I have derived important aspects of Biswas' character and emotional state based on his use of the Bengali language through an analysis of the letters. The information contained in them are highly consistent with records of public events and subsequent archival findings (Smallman, Barreto, Barman, Barrera-Agarwal).

Another probable reason behind the misleading comment (about the letters being written in English) can be understood through the *Vernacular Press Act of 1878* when the British government sternly prohibited “the vernacular press from expressing criticism of British policies” (U Dasgupta 222). Since English-language newspapers remained outside this Act, *Amrita Bazar Patrika* (*ABP*) – which was a weekly Bengali newspaper in 1868 and would publish Biswas' letters from 1894 – immediately changed over to English in 1878 (CSSS). So, Biswas' letters had to be translated into English for its publication in *ABP*. It may be argued that there was nothing ‘seditious’ in the letters that would have demanded its publication in English. In the first place, everything published in the weekly newspaper was not ‘seditious’. Secondly, the context in which the letters were published could indeed be considered somewhat seditious. As explained further ahead in this chapter, *ABP* had published news about the Brazilian Naval Revolts in 1894 as part of its coverage of anti-imperialist struggles worldwide and soon thereafter, in July 1894, announced the sensational news that a Bengali man was participating in it. A keen public interest in his letters developed after this. The English version may have been made also to draw British (and all-India) attention to the existence of virile Bengali men in a context where they were otherwise disgraced for their lack of a martial tradition.

The biographies are remarkably similar in content; both have elaborate introductions that have little to do with Biswas' life (their purpose is to rebut negative stereotypes created by British about Bengalis) and this is crucial in understanding the context in which they were published and the reasons they became popular. They manifest excessive regionalist pride bordering on jingoism. As Chowdhury-Sengupta explains, the biographies used Suresh Biswas to make the

point that Bengalis (not ‘Indians’ in general) can indeed be admirably brave and adventurous, not feeble and effeminate as the British had maligned them (282-301). Rosselli further comments: “‘A low-lying people in a low-lying land’ – So ran a favourite British sneer at Bengalis about the turn of the century; to which a high official added: ‘with the intellect of a Greek and the grit of a rabbit’. Bengalis were ‘effete’: that was the stereotype all through the period of British rule” (121).

The biographers’ fervent defenses are an indication of the abysmally low self-esteem to which Indians had been subjugated. As Indira Choudhury-Sengupta suggests, HCD had written in English possibly with the intention of making British readers aware of a martial figure among Bengalis, to create “an oppositional identity through the persona of Suresh Biswas” (“Colonialism” 255). It is not clear whether it was at all addressed to non-Bengali Indian readers or if Biswas’ story ever travelled outside Bengal. It is very unlikely that it did because all the writers who have mentioned Biswas in some context are either Bengalis (including the 2018 reprint) or contemporary European scholars. Biswas was thus possibly never invoked or remembered as an all-India figure where Bengalis constitute roughly 5% of the total population. This is an important aspect of my biographical rendition. Though the screenplay is rooted to the Bengali cultural ethos, I have imagined him as an ‘Indian’ (no longer a matter of parochial Bengali interest) by making the project commissioned in Mumbai, the multicultural centre of India’s film industry where the ‘screenwriter’ imagines Biswas as a cosmopolitan.

Both the biographies were based on Biswas’ uncle, Kailashchandra’s oral accounts, as well as the letters which the uncle showed to both the authors. Since the biographers had the same sources (the letters and Uncle’s remembrances), they are almost identical in content and the only difference between HCD and UKB is in the difference in their story-telling. HCD, a well-known writer of adventure stories, cast Biswas’ life in the format of his adventure stories.²⁶ He claims to have consulted Biswas’ younger brother (Manmothonath) too but it is not clear what unique information his younger brother provided since he was only around 10 years old when Suresh left home never to return. Since many letters were lost by the time when these biographies were written, the contents of the missing letters, however romanticised, were possibly incorporated in the oral accounts apart from the uncle’s memories of Suresh’s childhood shenanigans. Yet, HCD’s ‘Preface’ indicates a biographer’s frustration with scant evidence:

²⁶ HCD’s earlier publications included *Child’s History of India*, *Indian Monte Cristo*, etc.

Considering the fact that ever since leaving the land of his birth, Suresh has been very reticent in his letters to his relatives about himself and his doings in the countries he has visited, the materials before us for anything like a full and connected story of his eventful life have not been of a satisfactory nature at all. (2)

This confirms that he did write many letters ‘since leaving the land of his birth’ which were lost at the time of the biographies as UKB clearly acknowledges in his conclusion (200). I have invented his uncle’s letters in two scenes (Sc 100 and Sc 114) in order to create reference points of what was happening in India while Biswas was living in Brazil and to underline the different destinies of Biswas and his friend (Upen). Though I have not set out to imagine Biswas’ lost letters, some of his voice-over texts are not from the letters but invented for reasons of dramatic coherence (Sc 45, 73, 91, 101 and 116).

The Bengali biography’s title itself uses several revealing adjectives: *Lieut. Suresh Biswas: an illustrated, superhuman, eventful, extremely-amazing life-story*. In fact, UKB uses ornate, antiquated language to invoke Biswas, similar to the hagiographic language used in mythological tales told in Bengali popular literature of the time, with long and ceremonial eulogies (*gourchandrika*) that contain no biographical detail. Once again, this overt invocation of Biswas’ ‘greatness’ was deemed necessary due to the absence of any martial tradition in Bengal and a long tradition of defeat in the battlefield by invading armies, Muslim and British (Rosselli 122). HCD goes to the extent of inventing a racial defense: “historians tell us” that after “hardy Aryans” settled down in “the mild and enervating climate of Bengal while they grew in spiritual worth, they lost in physique and martial spirit” (48-49). He thus acknowledges the physical weakness of Bengali men but diverts attention away towards ‘spiritual’ superiority as a compensation, suggesting that the purported weakness is actually a strength. This is particularly highlighted in UKB through Biswas’ physical frailty: “If one saw Suresh one could not make him out to be a strong man. His frame was frail and his body far from being muscular. But perhaps his muscles were made of iron” (144). Thus his outward physical weakness was superseded by his ‘inner’ strength.

HCD narrates Biswas’ life-story in 29 short chapters while UKB divides it into 38 briefer ones. Both narratives start with the “glorious history” of the Nadia district in Bengal where Biswas’ native village (Nathpur) is located. It is a major site of pilgrimage for the Vaishnava sect of Hinduism, the followers of Krishna (HCD 53, UKB 9). In the screenplay, I invent scenes of Biswas’ father’s immersion in the Vaishnava faith based on the information that Girishchandra was an ardent devotee. This also helps to plant the seeds of hostility towards Suresh following

his conversion to Christianity. Both the biographies end with their subject still alive and working in the Brazilian Army, followed by the letters. Both HCD and UKB contain the same errors as well. Their geographical coordinates for Biswas' native village (Nathpur in Nadia district of Bengal, 120 km north-east of Calcutta) contain errors that have been continued in the HCD (2018) reprint. Both mention Nathpur as beside the *Ichchamati* river instead of the *Mathabhabanga*, the former running 80 km to its south; they mention Nathpur to be 30 km to the west of Krishnanagar town while it is in its east, as I have personally verified through a trip to Biswas' ancestral house and as the Google Map location proves (Fig. 4.1). It is thus evident that none of the biographers had visited Biswas' village and by the time they spoke to Kailashchandra (1898-1899), the family had moved to Calcutta.

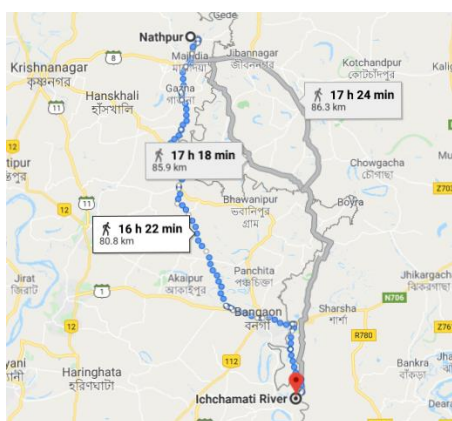


Fig 4.1: The Google Map image shows that Biswas' natal village Nathpur lies to the east of Krishnanagar and Ichchamati River lies 80km to its south.

Written in the tone of hero-worship, HCD casts Biswas' childhood and adolescence in tune with the mythic stories of Krishna and Arjun in the *Mahabharata* (performing almost miraculous deeds) and compares him to the leader of a boy-gang like the 17th century Maratha warrior, Shivaji (66-67). There are descriptions of the young Suresh's numerous encounters with wild animals such as jungle cats, jackals, and dangerous snakes, culminating in an encounter with a wild boar when he fights the boar with his bare hands to save three British hunters who owned local indigo factories.²⁷

Both the biographies involve so much invention involving imagined conversations, Biswas' dreams, personal interactions with gangsters, multiple women in London and circus members, emotional responses to his encounters with people as well as authorial moralising

²⁷ The Indigo Revolt of 1858 was a non-violent peasant movement that happened in Nadia against the oppression of British indigo (dye) factory owners. A British Inquiry Commission report acknowledged that "not a chest of indigo reached England without being stained with human blood" (*The Calcutta Review*, 01 Jan. 1861, p. 291).

(more prominent in UKB) that it would be more appropriate to call them biographical novels. In UKB's version, there are strong elements of male fantasy and vicarious pleasure but moral condemnation of the women Suresh met in London. Women in different countries seem to be always chasing Biswas and falling madly in love with him while he maintains a high moral distance. In Rangoon, he is claimed to have saved a young woman from a fire who would later not let him go (113-117). Later, he had to leave London simply because there were too many women making claims on him (148-149). HCD is no less inventive in this regard. Biswas' private moments with his future Brazilian wife (whose name does not appear) are elaborately described: "How her bosom would heave under the tight-fitting frock of a nurse's uniform, how her cheeks would glow and how her eyes would open wide and get more lustrous as she listened to his tales of adventures and achievement" (169). In the section titled 'Dramatic Choices', I have explained how and why I have imagined some of these female characters with an awareness of Biswas' misogyny as the letters reveal.

The biographers offer no citational or circumstantial evidence apart from two photographs sent by Biswas and the letters. I have tried to be prudent in extracting life-information from them, the criteria of reliability being consistence across the two versions and coherence with social history of the time in India, England or Brazil. These have been laid out later ahead in this chapter. Frustrated with the lack of evidence, Anirban Ghosh, a circus-historian of Bengal, comments about both the Biswas-biographies that "citational authenticity is ... non-existent" (32).

It is difficult, however, to assess whether the inventions were made by the uncle at the time of narrating them to the biographer(s) or were made by the biographers themselves. I attribute the commonalities in the two versions to Uncle's version. As I have explained, there is ample proof in the letters that Biswas had maintained epistolary contact with his Uncle ever since he left India and yet, at the time of narrating his life to the biographers, all the six letters pertained only to his Brazil years. So I presume that what the Uncle told biographers was based on his memory of the lost letters: partly reliable and partly romanticised. Though uncertain about their truth-value, I have made selective use of *some* of these biographical details but rely heavily on those particular details which have been substantiated with subsequent archival or circumstantial evidence. In 1899/1900, the biographers possibly had no means of verifying any information from England, Brazil or elsewhere, unlike in recent years when internet resources have opened up new databases and avenues of access. Though the six letters constitute key

primary evidence, it would be naïve to assume that personal letters are objective accounts in any way.

The letters which have survived are as follows (UKB 200-218, HCD 184-198):

Letter 1 (L1): Santa Cruz, 8th February, 1887 (26 years)

Letter 2 (L2): Rio de Janeiro, 5th January, 1889 (28 years)

Letter 3 (L3): Rio de Janeiro, 12th May, 1893 (32 years)

Letter 4 (L4): Rio de Janeiro, 10th January, 1894 (33 years)

Letter 5 (L5): Rio de Janeiro, 3rd September, 1894 (33 years)

Letter 6 (L6): Rio de Janeiro, 12th April, 1897 (36 years)

There is another letter — L7 (UKB 197-199; HCD 184-185) — that was supposedly sent to Biswas' father by a Brazilian friend and admirer ('Punando Limos') posted in Rio Janeiro, dated 12 March, 1894. This letter was probably ghost-written by Biswas himself and precisely for that reason, the most revealing. There is a clear indication that Biswas had written many more letters and was at work on an autobiography (L1) that was almost complete (L6) at the time of his death.

All the claims that Biswas made in his letters remained unverified for more than 110 years after his death in 1905 and so there was always a doubt whether his claims were real. There has been a resurgence of interest since the novelist Amitav Ghosh sent off a tweet about Suresh Biswas' Wikipedia page. When I came across it in February 2016, I picked up an exchange in Ghosh's tweet-thread where Maria Helena Barrera-Agarwal, an Ecuadorian lawyer and scholar, mentioned a paper that she was about to publish in May 2016 that was the outcome of following Suresh Biswas' footsteps in physical and online archives across several continents over several years in search of document trails: newspaper reports, circus publicity, church records, maritime records and Brazilian Army archives. In this paper (henceforth MBA), she states, "The popularity of Suresh Biswas' story was proportional to the total lack of inquiry about his life. It was assumed that little or no data had survived from his time abroad" (72).

MBA has rectified some of the earlier factual errors with convincing documents by providing evidence excavated from above-mentioned archives in English, Bengali, Spanish, German and Portuguese. These have been listed in the next section. MBA imagines that the way Bengal responded to the real-life story of Suresh Biswas was symptomatic of the society's deeply-felt need for a hero whose "glory reflects not only his virtues, but also and, more importantly,

the hopes and the expectations of the people who elevate him or her to that position” (56). She thus locates Biswas’ importance during the independence struggle in the context of Bengal’s increasing humiliation and exploitation under British rule and an urgent collective need to find a martial hero to rebel against colonial state policy “that denied Bengalis the possibility of opting for a military career” (57). However, when I recreate Biswas’ life, these are far from my concerns. I highlight his importance as a 19th century cosmopolitan.

MBA highlights the context in which Biswas’ unusual story originally became available to Bengali readers. *Amrita Bazar Patrika* (*ABP*), the weekly newspaper mentioned earlier in this chapter, which played a pioneering role during the independence movement, published news of anti-imperialist struggles worldwide in its nationalist impulse. In that vein of republishing news that appeared in a wide range of European media, it reported about the ongoing Brazilian Naval Revolts during 1893-1894 (58). Then, on July 8, 1894, through a note published in *ABP*, it informed its readers that a Bengali man was fighting in the Brazilian armed forces: “the Bengalee Lieutenant serving in Brazil, and an account of whose brave deeds was, the other day published in these columns, is not dead” (qtd. MBA 59). This suggests that there was an earlier news item which MBA has not been able to trace. In fact, *ABP* finally closed down in 1991 before its archives could be digitised (Banerjee). It was partially scanned in 2009 (CSSS) but the restored pages do not contain the crucial news. As MBA mentions, the initial publicity about Biswas was made at his uncle Kailashchandra’s initiative since the biographies would not be published till five years later. Following the *ABP* trail, MBA also found a testimony of one of Biswas’ friends, Upendranath Chatterjee, who in 1896 wrote about their friendship, providing crucial information about Biswas’ conversion to Christianity and departure for Western shores (60). MBA ascribes “the possible cause of the decision [as] linked to misunderstandings between Suresh and his father” (60). In ‘Dramatic Choices’, I have explained how and why I have invented Upen’s character to serve the purposes of telling Biswas’ story.

Following extensive archival work, MBA fully validates most claims made by Biswas in the letters, even suggesting that he may have understated his achievements. Details mentioned in the biographies such as his love affairs remain unverifiable. However, she found an important interview with his widow that was conducted in 1951 by an Indian diplomat, forty-six years after Biswas’ death, that provides us with a different perspective in that it was narrated by a woman, someone from another culture who knew him closely. MBA has also found several newspaper reports and circus flyers through which we can now trace his trajectory across the world of circus

and animal-training in Europe and South America, particularly by identifying his two distinguished mentors, whose names were wrongly mentioned by the biographers. This has opened up new connections and possibilities as the two mentors are very well documented and though they do not mention him, there are mention of animals (particularly an elephant) which throw light on Biswas. indirectly.

It now seems that the Brazil years are the relatively better-documented period of Biswas' life and it is also clear that he reached the position of Captain in the Army, not Lieutenant or Colonel as the biographers claimed. Barrera Agarwal's research has also dispelled several myths about him in popular memory (discussed later). All this means that though I had scant, unverified evidence on Biswas' life at the start of my thesis, through the period of my research, there have been significant developments. My own research into his life has also revealed historic shipping records and a lot of contextual information about the times he lived in. With MBA's findings, we have several concrete dates, locations and new evidence that confirm that Biswas was indeed a historical figure. Her research findings form the evidentiary base of my screenplay apart from the details that I have extracted from the letters and biographies and buttressed with my own inquiry into the times and places he lived and the people with whom he may have worked.

Apart from finding a shipping record (App.: Illus. 4.1) that provides the evidential basis for a dramatic turning point in the screenplay, my own research has comprised of visiting Biswas' native place and tracing his family-home in Calcutta (App.: Illus 4.10), studying a broad range of contextual documents and histories: auto/biographies of circus performers and animal trainers (Day, Hickman, Hagenbeck, Manning-Saunders, Slout, Nickitta, Coxe, Cremonesi, Croft-Cooke, Tait, Ringling Bros.), social histories of Bengal (Dasgupta, Sastri, Bhattacharya, Tagore, Chatterjee, Banerjee, Sen, etc.), the underground world of Victorian London (Dickens, Timbs, Barrere, Smith, Yule et al.), and 19th century Brazilian social/military history (Smallman, Barreto, Barman) apart from reading a plethora of old newspapers, *Punch* cartoons and photographs published in auction catalogues and image archives (Punch). Information and insights contained in these texts do not necessarily provide 'evidence' as secondary sources but help to develop a better understanding of the social-historical contexts in which Biswas experienced his life. They often form the basis for inventions of character and plot by associating them with evidence about other people and shared contexts.



Fig. 4.2: Suresh Biswas and his wife Maria Augusta. He had sent these photos with L4.

Biographical Facts

If we collate all the biographical sources and verify their coherence with documented public events, we may arrive at the following chronicle of reliable information with references to corresponding sources:

- Biswas was born in 1861 at Nathpur, Nadia, Bengal. (App-B, Illus. 4.9)
- His father was Girishchandra; uncle was Kailashchandra; he had a younger brother called Manmothnath and also had younger sisters of whom nothing is known. (UKB/ HCD/ MBA)
- His father and uncle both worked as Company clerks in Calcutta. (HCD 58, UKB 18)
- Father was a devout Vaishnava who died in 1899. (UKB 20-22, BA 74, ABP).
- His mother's details remain unknown except that she couldn't read and died in early 1887. (L1)
- Biswas did not know his date-of-birth (L3/L6), mentioned it as 1860 (App-B: 4.10).
- In 1876 or 1877, he converted to Protestant Christianity under the influence of Rev J P Ashton. (MBA 60, ABP 22 Jul. 1896, 5, UKB 74-78, HCD 102).
- Soon thereafter (unspecified), "he went to England with a European gentleman taking the appointment of a steward in a ship" (Chatterjee, cited in BA 60). UKB (82-84) and HCD insist that he went to Rangoon as Assistant Steward on a British India Steam

Navigation Company steamer with a “deck-ticket” (128). Ghosh insists that he went to London as stowaway (50).²⁸

- Biswas performed at the World's Fair at the Royal Agricultural Hall, Islington, 1881-82 under the Fair Manager, John O'Connor: “... a clever Hindoo tamer performs at intervals” (*The Standard*, 1881, MBA 60, App-B 4.12); “... Suresh-Biswas, ... the daring young Hindoo, master of the king of beasts, is loudly applauded for his display of temerity.” (*The Era*, 1881, MBA 61, App-B 4.11); *Islington Circus flyer* (App-B: 4.13)
- Biswas works with Charles Jamrach, leading animal trainer in London. Dates unavailable. UKB calls him ‘Jamback,’ “worked there for two years” (155); HCD (158); App-B: 4.14. [Jamrach was a well-known figure who pulled out a child from the jaws of a tiger that had slipped out of its cage and strayed into London’s streets (Macaulay 377-380). This is now commemorated in black-stone at the site in East London (App-B: 4.14)].
- Later (two years perhaps), Biswas joins Carl Hagenbeck in Hamburg, owner of a huge menagerie, as ‘chief tamer’: HCD (159), UKB (157). Both refer to Hagenbeck as Gajenbach. In his autobiography, Hagenbeck does not mention Biswas but refers to his “marvelously apt pupil,” an elephant: “I baptised him ‘Bosco’ and under this name he afterwards became famous in the circus world” (158). Bosco is clearly associated with Suresh Biswas as his trainer (UKB 158, MBA 62, HCD 159). Circus poster (App-B: 4.15)
- Bosco is purchased by a South American circus company, “an American menagerie owner, who possessed a circus in Buenos Ayres” (Hagenbeck 158). This is mentioned as Carlo Brothers Circus (UKB 158, HCD 159). MBA identifies it as *Compañía Ecuestre y Maravillas Zoológicas de los Hermanos Carlo* (63). The performance of Suresh “Hisrvash” and Bosco are mentioned in a Buenos Aires newspaper on 15 March, 1885; Biswas gets rave reviews in the press for his performance (MBA 63-64).
- Suresh Biswas’ name features on the poster, dated 28 Aug. 1885, RJ, Brazil (App-B: 4.15, MBA 66). Newspaper reports attest to his success: “the applauses at his feats had ‘flooded till overflowing’.” He is compared to Samson; Emperor Dom Pedro II and the royal family visit his show on 25 Sep. 1885 (MBA 64-67).
- Biswas’ future wife, María Augusta Fernandes visits the circus and instantly falls in love with him, as revealed through her interview with an Indian diplomat in 1951 (MBA 77).
- At the end of the circus tour in Nov. 1885, Biswas returns to Hamburg; then takes a ship to Rio de Janeiro on 6 April, 1886. Refers to himself as “Künstler” (Artist). Travels on

²⁸ Considering their hagiographic tone, it is unlikely that HCD/UKB/Upen Chatterjee would acknowledge that Biswas did something clandestine.

zwischendecke: a cheap lower-deck ticket (App-B: 4.10). Arrives RJ on 2 May (MBA 67, 77). [In German, *künstler* is a generic term used to refer to performing artists, musicians and visual artists.]²⁹

- Feb, 1887: “I am now in the Cavalry... no longer a mere soldier but a Cabo de Esquadra” (L1).
- 1889 to 1905: Works with the military corps, PMDF: Federal District Military Police (MBA 68). [Dom Pedro II’s monarchy ends and the First Republic is established on 15 Nov. 1889 (Barman 360)].
- 1889 (May): Resigns from PMDF, petitions for reinstatement in Jan. 1890, reinstated few months later as First Sergeant. MBA thinks that Biswas participated in the First Naval Revolt of 1891 but I have doubts: “We are confronted with rebellion in Rio Grande do Sul. I was very keen to go there but till now, we have not received any orders” (69, L3).
- 1892 (Jan): Applies for Brazilian citizenship (MBA 69).
- 1893 (May): “I was promoted to Brigadier position ...” (L3, MBA 69). Leads a battalion in Battle of Niterói during the Naval Revolt on 6 Sep. 1893 (L5). [Events confirmed by Barreto (368). Becomes Junior Lieutenant in 1894 (L5).]
- 1894: “I worked for three years in the Cavalry, then five years in the Infantry” (L5). Thus, 1887-1890: Cavalry; 1890-1894: Infantry. Had “disappeared” for 8 days following an attack: “I encountered a very well-dressed woman who asked me where the dead persons have been kept. I enthusiastically showed her that place. All of a sudden, two naval soldiers pounced on me with their daggers.” Collapses on a stone-slab (L4). Sends two photographs. Suffers from rheumatism from 1893 till 1897 (L4).
- 1899 (Feb): Promoted to the rank of Lieutenant. (MBA 70)
- 1905 (June 26): Promoted to Capitão (Captain). (MBA 70)
- 1905 (Sep 22): Dies in RJ, cremated in São João Baptista Cemetery. Exact circumstances unknown. Survived by his wife María Augusta Biswas and their six children. Wife and children receive government pension. (MBA 70)
- 1909: News of Biswas’ death reaches India. (*ABP*, 21 May 1909)
- 1934: *A Noite* interviews Maria Augusta. Only three children are still alive. (MBA 73)
- 1951: An Indian diplomat meets the octogenarian widow through *A Noite*. She “still remembered her husband fondly” but this interview propagated the falsity that Biswas hailed from an Indian royal family (MBA 73).

²⁹ https://www.gesetze-im-internet.de/ksvg/_2.html Accessed 11 Nov. 2018.

Based on the content of the letters, it can also be reliably *deduced* that he felt a strong emotional bond with his mother and, to some extent, his uncle (L1). Biswas makes no mention of his younger brother whom HCD mentions as his key source. His father's life-long hostility to his Christian conversion tormented him and Suresh, unsuccessfully, tried to reconcile (L3, L7). He felt no desire to return to India after his mother's death (L1). An emotional connection with his wife and children is not evident anywhere. He felt lonely and unfulfilled despite his accomplishments, harbouring desires of abandoning his family in search of new experiences (L1, L2). He claimed to speak seven languages fluently (L1).

Biswas was ambivalent about women and his relationship with them: "My first intention [for joining the Army] was to test the integrity of women ... I have rejected women out of disgust" (L2), though he bragged about his success with several women (L6). Both the biographers represented Biswas' experience and attitudes through their depiction of drunken women in London's East End: "True, he pitied the woman, who, devoured by her ungovernable passions could so far forget herself as to take leave of her womanly pride and solicit the love of a man who himself was cold and indifferent" (HCD 148). It is evident here how the biographer posits Biswas' moral superiority in contrast to the women who 'solicit' his 'love'. Biswas' attitude to women may have been transferred by Uncle who narrated Biswas' experiences based on the memory of the lost letters where certain comments may have informed his narration. In their narration of the ambush (L4), both the biographers represented the "well-dressed woman" as the one who led him to the planned assault. I have borrowed this element (invented by the uncle/biographers) as it is coherent with Biswas' version and provides motivation for his misogyny (a *tertiary* level of discourse based on primary and secondary sources, as explained in Chapter 1). Aspects of these borrowings have been discussed later. Though I have created a composite character for the Victorian prostitute, I portray her not as the one who seduces Suresh as the biographers did. Instead, I show how he abused her despite the warmth she offered.

Biswas was also a believer in 'animal magnetism' that was a part of mainstream medicine at that time (L7). In the Brazilian Army, he felt discriminated against for being a foreigner (L5). He was quick in learning emergency surgical skills but felt resentment towards the doctors' attitudes (L2). He yearned for recognition back home and imagined himself as a scholar adept in both sciences and philosophy (L1). Towards the end of his life, he experienced a spiritual turn

towards Hindu mysticism (L6). His conversion to Christianity was merely a matter of convenience; his emotional reference points were Hindu (L1, L6). By 1897, he had several young admirers in Calcutta who wrote letters to him (L6).

In addition to some of the confirmed facts mentioned above, I have also used some *unverified* details mentioned in both the biographies for the purposes of my fiction because they seem likely events and offer dramatic possibilities. Though there are several apocryphal accounts of Biswas as an adolescent who had fought a tiger with his bare hands (in cartoons and oral memory, as elaborated later), this is not substantiated by any verifiable evidence. Both the biographies refer to his encounter with a wild boar while some British hunters were on a pig-sticking adventure when the fourteen-year old displayed exemplary courage (UKB 39-43, HCD 76-78). This incident may have been later *condensed* with his expertise with tigers to create the popular myth. I use this incident in my screenplay but cast serious doubts on its veracity. Interestingly, the 2018 reprint of HCD, though an academic publication, has the cartoon (i.e. the mythic Biswas) on its cover even when a photograph of the historical Biswas was available, suggesting a keenness, perhaps, to perpetuate the myth (Fig. 4.3).

Among the other unverified elements that I have borrowed, are Biswas' father's beatings after his conversion – “Girish chastise[d] him with the rod” (HCD 100) – and ostracisation from family (UKB 74-75). I use the information that “he would pick his way into the Sailors' Home” (HCD 126). His employment at Calcutta's Spence's Hotel is used to understand the factors that fuelled his imagination about faraway lands (HCD 104). I also use the information that just prior to his departure for London, “he paid a clandestine visit to the house ... and his mother gave him a sum of money” to create a scene not only for its emotional value but also a set-up/pay-off device (HCD 125). I have used information about his refuge at the London Mission School in Calcutta, his skills in wrestling, his brief but intense love affair with the 18-year old German trapeze performer in the circus who was a runaway, his temporary job as newspaper vendor in London, his disgust at the condition of the East End slums, and relationship with a prostitute. All the factual details and apocryphal accounts have been assimilated within the fictional framework of the screenplay using methods of *compression*, *condensation*, *alteration* and *displacement*. For example, his encounter with gangsters in Rangoon has been *displaced* to London.

From the accounts of his biographers, Suresh had come into close proximity with some local British indigo factory owners. The bedrock of the Indigo Revolt was a village only 40 km

away from Biswas' village. Though the hunter is a minor character, I create a composite of hunter and indigo planter (*compressing* three hunters into one) allowing me a logical connection to explain how Suresh finds a passage out of village life to Calcutta. Thus, due to the ways in which I discreetly draw on pre-existing Biswas-narratives to write my own biopic, it can be called a "palimpsestic narrative" (Custen; Vidal). However, unlike Roland Barthes' "perverse palimpsests" which refers to erasures that are part of the layering/writing process, I do not erase my borrowings but acknowledge them within the text (*Responsibility* 165).

Biswas in Public Culture

The letters of Biswas published in *ABP* (sporadically between 1894 and 1909) generated a lot of excitement in the context of the burgeoning nationalist, anti-colonial movement in Bengal. Restricted only to Bengal (about 5% of India's total population), his name was a source of pride despite the lack of his physical presence and absence of evidence. Circus-historian Ghosh informs us that "his stories circulated within Bengali texts from late 19th century/early 20th century to school books in post-colonial Bengal of India, construct[ing] Colonel Suresh Biswas as an iconic figure who subverted colonial stereotyping of the Bengali community through his physical acts of prowess" (11-12). By 1940, his life-story was included in school textbooks in Bengal: *Rapid Reader for Schools* as Chowdhury-Sengupta informs ("Colonialism" 257).³⁰ Biswas was also mentioned as an inspiration by a major militant leader of the independence movement, Subhas Chandra Bose, who had heard of Biswas from one of his friends (MBA 79). A. Gupta mentions that Biswas' photo was often hung in gymnasiums as an inspiration (1687).

Distortions of Biswas' life-story also became commonplace. Some Bengalis growing up in the 1970s remember him as a popular Bengali comic-strip hero in Chowdhury's *Bangodesher Rango* (Facets of Bengal, 1970) who had subdued a tiger with his bare hands. Most of the historical details in Chowdhury's comic-strip are factually incorrect but nevertheless had captivated many young Bengali minds (Fig 4.3). It tells the story of a jaguar which presumably kills several hunting dogs in a Brazilian jungle but is found hiding in a tree and then shot by 'Fernando,' brother of 'Punando Limos' (L7). The latter is then attacked by a tiger who had actually killed the dogs and scared the leopard. Biswas controls him with his whip, explaining that it had escaped from the visiting circus: "We are both from Bengal" (Fig. 4.3).

³⁰ The book [Bhattacharya, Upendranath. *Banger Bir Santan* (Brave Sons of Bengal), 1940] ran into 16 editions in 5 years (Chowdhury-Sengupta 257).

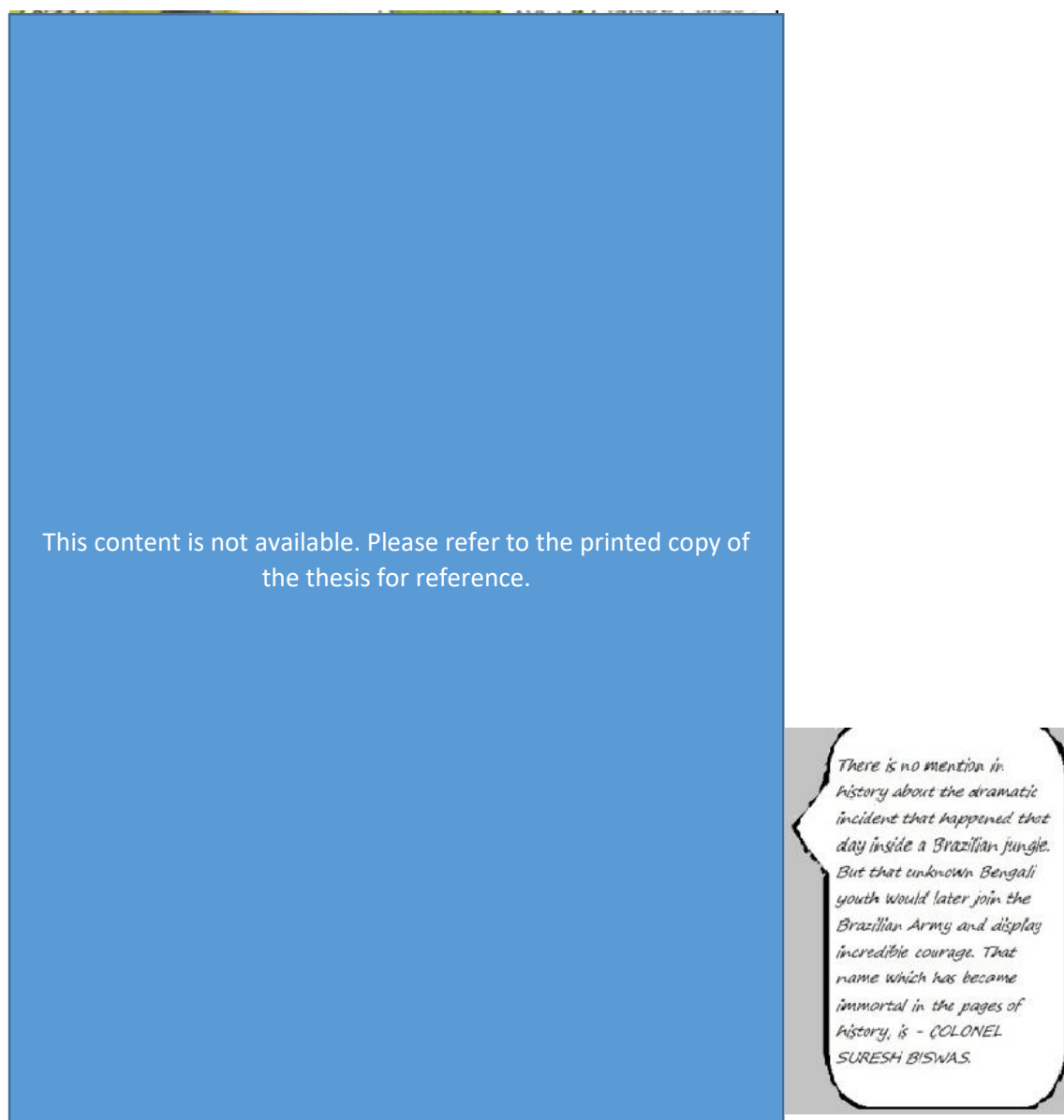


Fig. 4.3: Last page of the 8-page comic strip on Suresh Biswas (*Bangodesher Rango*) by Mayukh Chowdhury, with my English translation of the concluding text-box.

A more nuanced remembrance of Suresh Biswas is a passing reference to him in one of the detective novels of Ray who, apart from being a filmmaker, was also a popular writer of detective fiction in Bengali. In his novel – *Chinnamastar Abbishap* (1977, trans. ‘Curse of the Goddess’ 1978) – ace detective, razor-sharp, erudite Feluda unravels a mystery by detecting in the criminal’s behaviour pattern, a desire to emulate the life of his idol:

‘Do you mean Suresh Biswas?’ Feluda asked. Lalmohan Babu too had recognised the name. His eyes gleamed.

‘Yes, yes,’ he said. ‘Colonel Suresh Biswas. He died in Brazil.’ (38)

Later in the novel, the villain who is – significantly – a circus ringmaster, confesses about his *modus operandi* when he is finally cornered. He concedes that he was so inspired by the life of Biswas that he wanted to emulate his journeys.

Another Bengali writer called Banophul wrote a story titled “Biswas Moshai” (1965) with just a fleeting reference where Manmothonath regrets being the undeserving younger brother of Suresh Biswas. In Gupta’s 2009 novel, the plot revolves around a Bengali Maoist rebel in the 1970s named Kamal who escapes to Brazil with a job to run away from the police. He is inspired by his childhood idol, Suresh Biswas. There he has a Brazilian girlfriend with whom he wants to live an idyllic existence of passionate longing with Biswas’ life as his guiding principle in search of universal humanism:

Kamal smiled, ‘This rebellion is against the values of the present-day world... We shall reject our world as Suresh rejected his. His sadness is touching me beyond a hundred years... In this rebellion, there is no difference between the East and the West – the whole world is one’. (205)

Here too, cosmopolitanism is evoked as a theme derived from Biswas’ life.

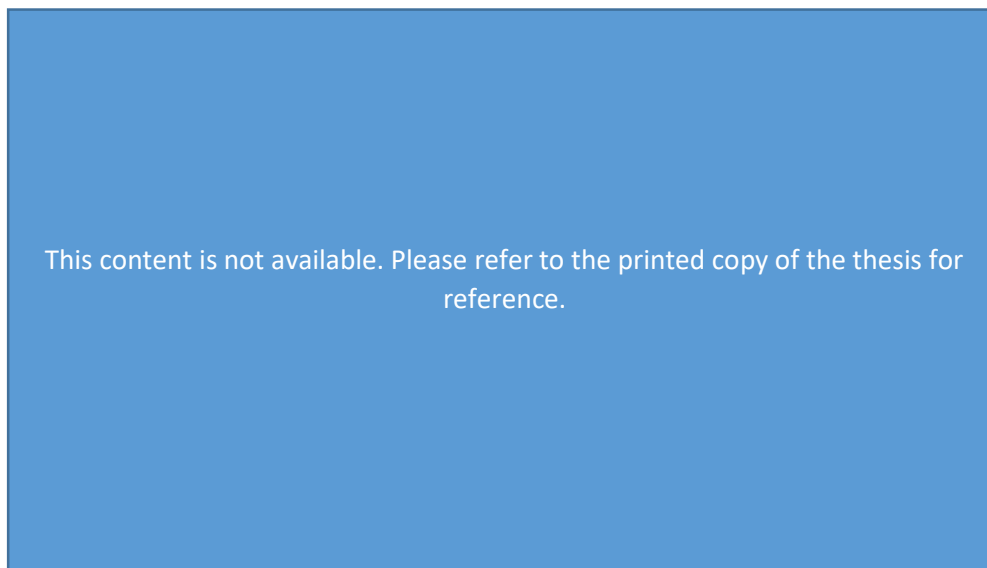


Fig. 4.4: Covers of Saibal Gupta (2009) and 2018 reprint of the 1899 biography.

In a recent biographical novel in Bengali (transl. *Tiger Woman*, 2019) Sirsho Bandopadhyay tells the story of the real-life female tiger trainer, Sushila, in the backdrop of the independence struggle in 1920s Bengal. To emphasise her skill and achievement, Sushila is imagined to have surpassed *even* Suresh Biswas: “The brave Bengali animal tamer, Suresh Chandra Biswas, had pulled off daring feats with ferocious wild beasts in circuses abroad, reflected Priyanath. ... But Sushila’s act here was unparalleled in India, perhaps in the entire

world” (204-205). In the novel, “the circus becomes a metaphor for a frustrated social revolution” (viii).

Some scholars — Rosselli, Chowdhury-Sengupta, Sen, A. Ghosh, A. Chatterjee — have made references to Suresh Biswas in the context of 19th century travelogues, India’s circus history and gender stereotypes in British India but all these references acknowledge the difficulty of elaborating on him in the face of gaping lacunae in his life-story. Chowdhury-Sengupta observes: “Biswas became immensely popular during the Swadeshi movement of 1905 [The reason why people] drew inspiration from him, was his physical capability despite his slight frame” (283, 301). In her book on Bengali travel accounts, Sen regrets that Biswas did not write his autobiography: “Without either a home or a destination, this could grow into *an altogether different vision of cosmopolitanism*. However, this merely remained a possibility, for Suresh Biswas never wrote his story” (210, italics mine). Her comment is particularly significant for this thesis and reinforces my interpretative framework for constructing Biswas’ life.

In 2011, there was a feature on Suresh Biswas in *The Telegraph* (Calcutta) bemoaning the fact that Bengal had failed to commemorate his 150th birth anniversary (A. Gupta). The same newspaper published an updated story on Biswas in Nov. 2018 (P. Sen). In Calcutta, he is commemorated through a street called *Col. Suresh Biswas Road* which is now close to a major hub of the city (Fig. 4.5).

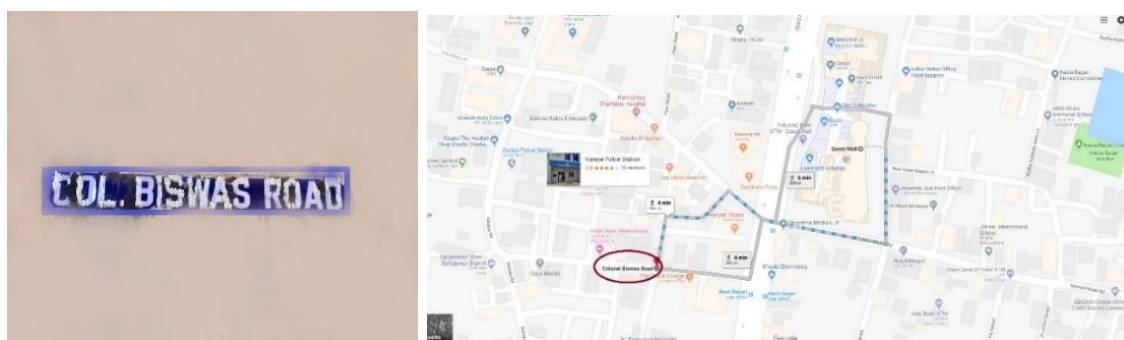


Fig. 4.5: (L): Col. Biswas Road in Calcutta – Photograph mine; (R) Google Map location of the street

Biswas finally seems to have gone beyond a Bengali curiosity to being hailed as an international folk hero. The London-based Bloomsbury Publications has published a profusely illustrated children’s book in 2019 where not only does Biswas feature prominently among “epic tales of triumph and adventure” on par with global icons such as Yuri Gagarin, Captain Cook,

Ibn Battuta and Jeanne d’Arc, his image appears on the title page itself (Cheshire and Burke 92-93). The writers too regret the lack of adequate information about his life (93).

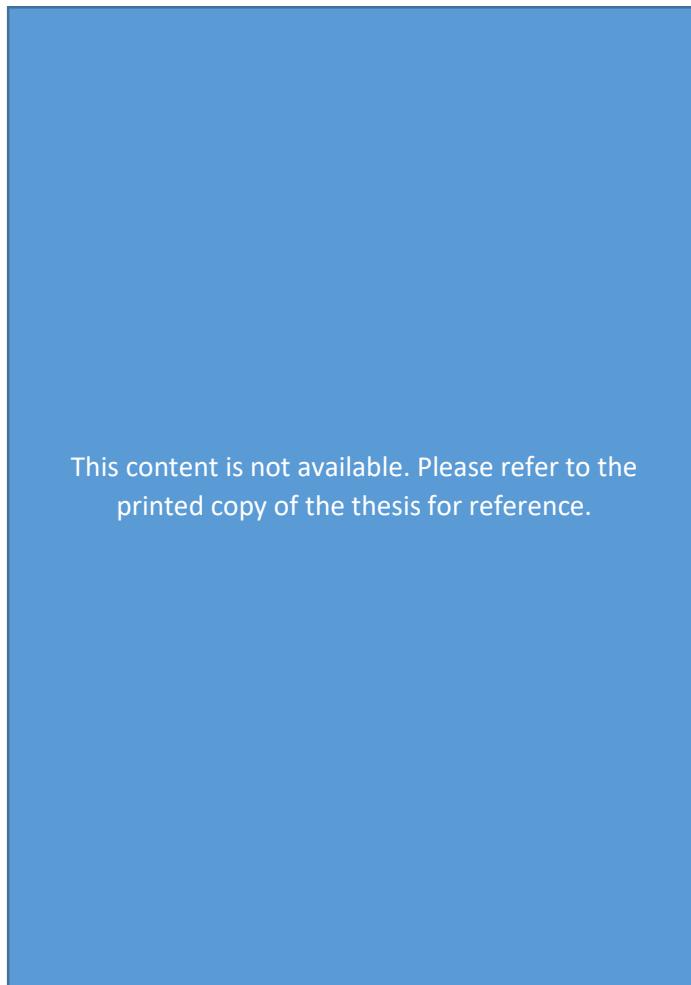


Fig 4.6: Cheshire and Burke’s 2019 publication (title page, Biswas pages)

The Social Context of Biswas

I have already mentioned how Biswas was invoked in the nationalist discourse at a time when Bengalis were desperately seeking to *invent* a martial tradition for themselves in the face of a scathing attack in 1830 by Thomas Macaulay (British Secretary to the Board of Control in India) on Bengali men’s masculinity. Macaulay condemned them as “feeble even to effeminacy and one for whom, courage, independence, veracity are qualities to which his constitution and his situation are equally unfavourable” (qtd. Chowdhury-Sengupta 254). The discourse of colonialism thus became deeply intertwined with sexuality (masculinity or the lack of it). Writing about the colonial circus in Bengal, Ghosh highlights Biswas’ political significance, observing that “his tales speak of a distancing from the subjugated position his countrymen were in. He sought to tackle his colonial masters through the creation of a new history for himself by

subverting the stereotypes of effeminacy” (11). For an appraisal of this sudden gendered dimension of colonialism and the social mores that restricted or propelled Biswas, it is necessary to have a few background notes on Biswas’ social-historical context that allow me to explain why I have positioned him in certain ways.

Macaulay’s comments had imposed a set of gender-based moral binaries that did not exist in pre-colonial Indian culture in terms of what masculinity and femininity stood for. Thrust into a politically-oriented polarised sexual paradigm where the coloniser represented true masculinity, Bengali men were now not only emasculated but degraded as neither male nor female: a ‘pathology’. As sociologist Nandy explains:

[T]hree concepts...became central to colonial India: *purusatva* (the essence of masculinity), *naritva* (the essence of femininity) and *klibatva* (the essence of hermaphroditism). The polarity defined by the antonymous *purusatva* and *naritva* was gradually supplanted, in the colonial culture of politics, by the antonyms of *purusatva* and *klibatva*; femininity-in-masculinity was now perceived as the final negation of a man's political identity, a pathology more dangerous than femininity itself. (7-8, italics in original)

Invoking Biswas was thus part of a larger social call to stake a claim to masculinity where the colonised subject ‘saves’ a British hunter, subordinates a tiger (even if it was within the metaphoric circus arena), or triumphs over a white-skinned wrestler.

In fact, the tiger became the British symbol of hyper-masculinity which was reinforced through large-scale brutal killing of Bengal tigers as a demonstration of superiority. The brutality was legitimised as a benevolent act of the ‘powerful’ colonialist protecting ‘weak’ natives from the wild forces of nature (Fig. 4.7). Later, the rhetoric of muscle-building as part of nation-building (as Priyanath Bose, the fictionalised real-life figure does in *Tiger Woman*) would increasingly lose its relevance as Gandhi’s influence became more powerful. His *swadeshi* movement espoused a different kind of rhetoric which laid emphasis on inner strength, subordinating muscular force, insisting on the assertion of the feminine and moral superiority rather than physical strength (Niranjana et al. 106). The Gandhian approach (of refusing to choose between binaries thrust upon us by the British, *purusatva* vs. *klibatva*, for example) may have been a factor for the gradual decline of interest in Biswas.

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Fig. 4.7: (L) A British hunting expedition/*shikar* with family, in 1887; (M) Pride in displaying hunted tigers in a Bengal forest (s/d); (R) Victorian nude photography using tiger-skins, 1861

More than the killing, *taming* the tiger became the predominant trope of the British colonialist enterprise in the second-half of the 19th century. The tiger featured prominently as the

symbol of India itself. It justified Britain's self-appointed, civilisational mission: "the white man's burden" (Kipling). Amato shows that the taming, selling and display of tamed wild animals became an integral part of British consumer culture with a strong political subtext:

Britons used animals as animate possessions and mass commodities between 1820 and 1914, a time of social upheaval and imperial expansion. Pet keeping, zoo visiting, and taxidermic decoration became mass phenomena in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, during which Britons explored the human/animal boundary, tested socially acceptable behaviours, and participated in consumer culture. (5)



Fig. 4.8: Fig. 4.6: (L) A Punch cartoon in 1861 ('India' in red inset). From *Punch, or the London Charivari*, January 2, 1858.

(R): A hyper-masculinised Queen Victoria's response post-1857 (Indian Mutiny). *Retribution* (1858) by Edward Armitage, 1817-1896. Source: victorianweb.org

Supermarkets like *Harrod's* had an entire 'pet' section dedicated to 'exotic' wild animals from the most remote parts of the world where "customers could purchase almost any creature they wanted."³¹ In the screenplay, I show aspects of this world where Biswas is on par with wild animals from the furthest corners of the globe: collected, tamed, 'civilised' and exhibited. I try to imagine Jamrach's menagerie almost as a metaphor of colonialism itself where Biswas plays the role of a Kiplingesque *Gungadin*. The screenplay depicts this aspect of commodification of animals through a fashionable upper-class British woman shopping for a lioness and looking for the pet's mating partner.

³¹ "Harrods pet department to shut after nearly 100 years." *The Telegraph*, 10 Jan. 2014.

The obsession with taming animals extended to Victorian prostitution and circus, worlds that Suresh Biswas inhabited. I draw on this imagery for the early circus scenes. Women were often dressed up as horses for men to ‘ride’ (Fig. 4.9).

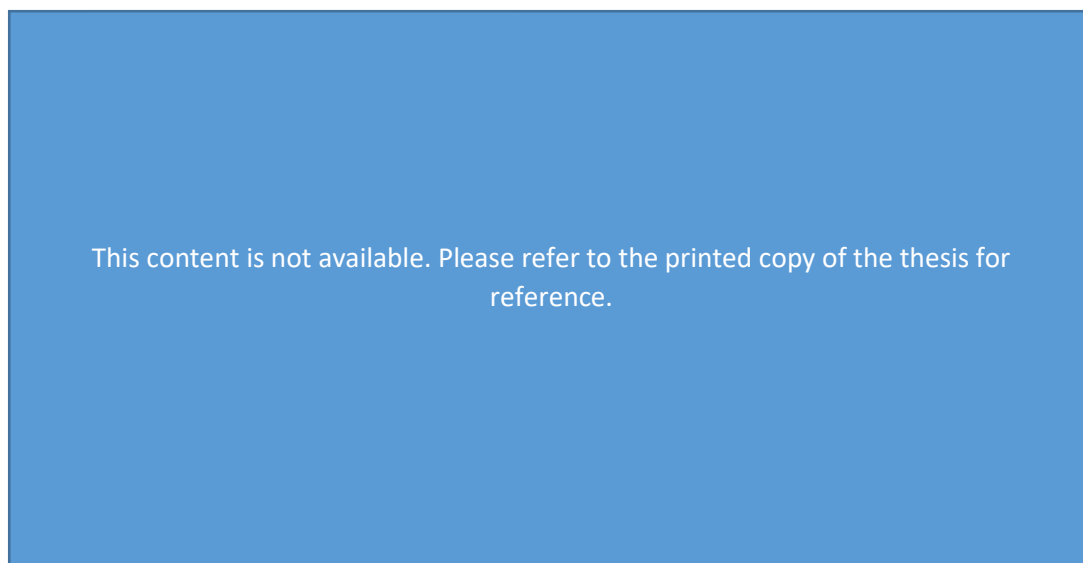


Fig. 4.9: Women dressed-up as horses: (L) Punch cartoon (1880); (R) Photograph of a circus announcer, 1850 [Source: ebay auction item, photographic print, ‘Ponygirl, 1850’]

The golden years of Orientalism coincide with the period of my biopic as I trace the colonial subject from 1877 to his death in 1905 (Said 41). I thus use various aspects of Orientalism in the circus and animal-trade world of Europe, all of which are tropes of colonial domination. I show Biswas as having little agency in terms of how he is dressed up, put in a cage and his cultural otherness exhibited to a Western public without any conscious awareness on his part that he is trapped in a colonial project.

The notion of taming led to the collection and exhibition of ‘exotic’ human beings as an integral part of the “Victorian freak-show” (Bogdan). In John O’Connor’s circus, an ‘exotic Hindoo’ identity is imposed on Biswas through an incoherent juxtaposition of costumes (Appendix B: 4.13). By 1880s, all the major circuses incorporated a major attraction called ‘ethnographic shows’ as portrayed in Gracey’s *The Greatest Showman* (2017). Biswas’ mentor/employer, Carl Hagenbeck with whom he worked in the mid-1880s, was the leading importer of human exhibits (MBA 63, Hagenbeck 32-34). These shows, surreptitiously, allowed the construction of colonialism’s ‘Other’ in visual and material form that implicitly justified British intervention to bring the Orient within the fold of ‘civilisation’. In a recent study of circus posters, Stambler and Posey underline their imagery:

The inclusion of some circus imagery, combined with unrelated religious, cultural and ceremonial components, resulted in a mass-produced image.... Beginning in the mid-1870s, he [Hagenbeck] imported humans to complement his animals, which soon became his own attractions. (44)

It is these associations and access to a larger public history that prompted me to *tether* Biswas with Jamrach and Hagenbeck, imagining him as simultaneously trapped and liberated in a way somewhat similar to the biopic of the black French circus-comedian in Zem's *Monsieur Chocolat*, (2016) alluded to in the screenplay, where the black man (or Biswas) willingly participates in racial/Orientalist stereotyping to earn a livelihood.

I have read Hagenbeck (and Jamrach to a lesser extent) 'against the grain' as none of them have mentioned Biswas. In his autobiography, Hagenbeck, the 'master', usurps the credit for training his "excellent pupil" Bosco the elephant, silencing and erasing the traces of the 'slave' as it were, as in master-slave narratives (158). However, there are several photographs of unknown Indian performers (men and women), trainers and 'human exhibits' in his autobiography as well as in circus posters (Fig. 4.10). These confirm not only the likelihood of Biswas' presence but also provides a wealth of information about the training methods he went through under Hagenbeck and the ambience in which he lived 'under Western eyes' where the Indian subalterns were on par with caged animals. Similarly, though Jamrach did not write an autobiography, there are several reliable newspaper articles of the time, memoirs and fictional accounts of his menagerie. There are multiple references to a Bengal tiger that slipped out into the streets of London, Jamrach's use of harsh methods to subdue animals and yet the magical world that he had created (Birch).

When Biswas abandons the world of circus and goes to Brazil to start a new life, I imagine that he carries deep scars on his body as reminders of his past. I draw upon some experiences of Mabel Stark, a celebrated American tiger-trainer of the early 20th century, who had "a dozen scars" on her body as a result of mauling over the years (Hough 243). In one of the courtship scenes, Suresh's future wife runs her caressing hand over his numerous wounds. Thus, in inventing Biswas' character, I adhere to real facts but also use methods of *alteration* and *condensation* to make him a composite character through the experiences of analogous lion/tiger-trainers through information derived from multiple sources (cited earlier).

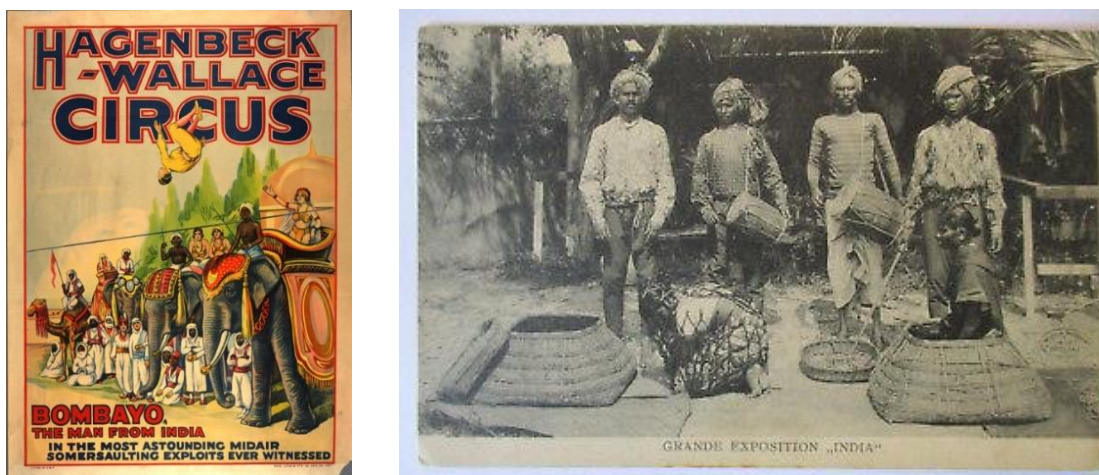


Fig. 4.10: ‘Oriental’ poster and Hagenbeck’s ‘India’ - ‘Woman in a basket’ as postcard (Hagenbeck 196)

Biswas had to overcome major social barriers even before he could leave Indian shores. There was a widespread social taboo that existed all over India at that time on travelling overseas, eerily evoked as *kaala paani* (black waters), which was often penalised with purification rituals to revive social status/caste (Sen 23). The Bengali word for ‘travel’ is *bhraman*, derived from the Sanskrit root-verb, *bhram*, which means to commit an error. Biswas certainly did not belong to a culture that extolled a roving, adventurous spirit. Rather, such impulses were culturally proscribed. As Sen argues, “a traveller has never been a very popular figure in the Hindu canonical tradition” (1). In contrast, “in Western imaginative articulation, travel [has been] persistently viewed as exciting and liberating ... self-awareness as an Odyssean enterprise” (1). The *Upanishads* did insist on exploration with the refrain – *charaiveti, charaiveti* (Keep moving, keep moving on), which I use emphatically in the screenplay as vernacular wisdom – but that exploration is resolutely inward-looking, not an exhortation to outward travel.³² Biswas thus overcame not just extraordinary social/family hurdles but psychological and moral ones too which may have subsequently endeared him to a younger generation seeking ways of rebelling against Hindu orthodoxy.

In this iconoclastic sense of mustering an almost unprecedented impulse to chart the “untravelling world” (Tennyson’s words, alluded to in the screenplay), I am inclined to think of Biswas as an expression of the 19th century Bengal Renaissance which unleashed extraordinary creative energies and anti-traditional attitudes among Bengali youth. The movement encompassed wide-ranging social reform, cultural revival and political awareness stimulated by

³² Sanskrit. *Aitareya Upanishad* (7.15), 6th century BCE approximately.

exposure to British education. It saw the rise of a large number of extraordinary minds in literature, arts and sciences (Dasgupta). Since Calcutta was the capital of British India (till 1911), the earliest impact of Western education was experienced in Bengal and it became the bedrock of India's subsequent independence movement with socio-cultural reform gradually spreading to the rest of India. It is considered to have grown out of the *Brahmo Samaj*, a monotheistic and eclectic religious order founded by Raja Rammohun Roy (1772-1833) in 1828 that questioned existing orthodoxies in relation to women, marriage, the caste system and Hindu religious practice (Sarkar).

The major figures of the Renaissance were as rooted to the Indian intellectual tradition tracing its roots to the *Upanishads* as to the Western intellectual canons, indicating a “vernacular cosmopolitanism”. “Anxious to be cosmopolitan,” writes Ian Buruma, “they were still steeped in their own past” (“Last Bengali”). In a major testimony of the movement, Sivanath Sastri writes:

Unlike in the West, it [the Renaissance] was very much a Hindu upper caste urban phenomenon ... The notion of individual rights, so unfamiliar to duty-oriented Hindu India, challenged many well-established practices and assumptions; it produced a series of crises, familial, social and eventually political. (iii-v)

That the Bengal Renaissance was restricted to the cultural elite without large-scale mass-support is an observation that has been made by several historians (Dasgupta, De, Chakrabarty). Though not belonging to the cultural elite, I have imagined Biswas as spending his formative years in Calcutta in the heyday of the Renaissance through a reference to the rebel-poet Michael Madhusudan Dutt (1824-1873) who had also converted to Christianity and had been similarly ostracised by his father (Murshid 46-50). It is tempting to imagine Biswas' non-conformist and adventurous character as a product of the changing times. Suresh Biswas' journey from his rural home to the metropolis “by his individual merit” represents the village-boy's “epistemic pilgrimage from the village to the city” so common in 19th and early 20th century Bengali literature (T. Bhattacharya 5). It thus speaks for an entire generation's rejection of tradition-bound orthodoxies of village life in its yearning for colonial modernity.

For the period Biswas was in England, around 1878 and 1883, the social context of animal trade and the taming of wild animals as part of the project of colonialism have already been elaborated. Inventions featuring the circus and the underside of Victorian London depend heavily on contextual research through a study of newspapers (www.newspapers.com; www.ancestry.com), auto/biographies, accounts of circus historians (mentioned earlier),

Victorian literature (mainly Dickens), Punch cartoons, Victorian photographs and BBC documentaries on the topic. A newspaper item mentioned a ‘Hindoo lion-tamer’ who was mauled in front of the public (App: Illus 4.4). This formed the basis of Biswas’ Lancashire mauling scene (Sc. 87).

Biswas’ Brazil years (1889-1905) are relatively well-documented. Unfolding in the backdrop of turbulent political developments, I could draw on a substantial amount of contextual, scholarly material in Portuguese and English (Smallman; Barreto; Barman). These historical events include the abolition of slavery in 1888, dismantling of the Portuguese monarchy in 1889, establishment of the first Republican government in November 1889, two military-dictatorships (Fonseca and Peixoto), two Naval Revolts (1891, 1893) and several military movements that continued to rattle the country beyond the time of his death. In the act of defending a country against rebel attacks, there was a constant battle with death similar to the daily encounter with wild animals, a parallelism I have tried to evoke.

I have drawn upon Barrera-Agarwal’s microhistorical research and combined them with my inventions based on 19th century historical contexts. Though the screenplay is a fictional construction and not history, I draw upon the notion of ‘exceptional normal’ in microhistorical research through which the ‘exceptional’ subject is understood as also ‘normal’ in terms of being ‘representative of some smaller group’ who remain undocumented in history. Biswas is certainly ‘exceptional’ in terms of the unique itinerary of his life and his cosmopolitanism despite his non-elite subaltern status. But, he is also ‘normal’ in that vast amounts of Indian populations actually moved to remote parts of the West in the 19th century: “more than 1.5 million Indians had been shipped to colonies in the Caribbean, Africa, Asia, and Oceania” (Naujoks “Emigration, Immigration”). While many of these were indentured labourers, there were also a large number of Indians who worked and travelled around the world in British ships as *lascars* but there is hardly any ‘written trace of these movements’ as mentioned by Ghosh (Introduction).

Lascars joined British ships at “the rate of 10,000 to 12,000 every year throughout the late 19th century” (Behal and Linden 114). Also, “at the beginning of World War I, there were 51,616 Indian *lascars* working on British ships, the majority of whom were of Bengali descent” (Ansari 37). These indicate the existence of a vast, undocumented *subaltern* population, many of whom may have had similar cosmopolitan experiences but their life-traces cannot be found.

Biswas thus represents a ‘statistically significant’ normality, fulfilling the microhistorical criteria of the ‘exceptional normal’.

In reconstructing the lives of such historical subjects with little or no evidence, microhistorian Davis suggests making creative use of “gaps” in the archive: “make the silences work when you have a gap ... think well why it is there, why in a place where you would expect somebody to be talked about ... he doesn’t say anything” (Davis and Ghosh 15:58 – 16:25). Several of my inventions are attempts to make the ‘silences’ work. The notion of ‘exceptional normal’ (through Biswas) allows me/ ‘screenwriter’ to stake a corrective claim to the macro-narrative of cosmopolitanism as a matter of exclusive, Western elitist privilege.

Dramatic Choices: Evidence and Invention

Here I discuss different aspects of the screenplay to highlight the ‘creative’ process through which I have conceptualised the *characters*, the *theme* of cosmopolitanism and its vernacular aspects, the decisions in relation to *narrative structure*, the use of *myth* and *multilingualism*:

Characters

Based on the evidence available on his life and contextual histories, I have conceived Suresh Biswas’ character as impulsive. He is also an opportunist who would do anything to live life his way. Through his adolescent years spent on the road as a boy ostracised from his family and growing among sailors-in-transit, I imagine him as a hard-boiled man-of-the-street. If I choose to show Suresh travelling in a ship as a stowaway (as Ghosh insists), it is intended to highlight his daring spirit and subaltern status within the ship otherwise peopled, implicitly, by elites travelling overseas. Being a converted Christian mingling with white tourists, his jealous Hindu friends chase his horse-carriage with mocking phrases (invented on the lines of 19th century Bengali satirical proverbs) while inside the hotel, he is treated as a servant and yet not so much among the international sailors, however white, who implant in him a love of faraway lands and take him out “knob-knockin’ in the nautchery” (Yule and Burnell 524). Thus I suggest that subalternity is a shifting notion. Suresh’s impulsive but stoic character stands in sharp contrast to that of his conformist and orthodox father, a Company clerk and devout Vaishnava, who wants his son to be a servile clerk to the British, like him. The father’s hostility towards the wayward boy is evident from the earliest scene where I show the contrast between his

subservience as a Krishna-devotee and clerk, and his authoritarianism which reaches a climax with Suresh's conversion and ostracisation. The father's orthodoxy, characteristic of 19th century paternal authority, stands as an *antagonistic* force against the son's desire for breaking free.

Though I position the characters of Uncle and Mother in opposition to the Father as the reverse of patriarchal authority, they are strongly based on evidence. They offer love and affection in different ways while Father is continuously impatient with him.³³ While Mother offers resistance to Father; her unconditional love remains undented by Suresh's scandalous conversion, expressed through the giving away of her golden bangle as support. Though Suresh's mother was not literate, I show her as imparting sophisticated vernacular knowledge through her liberal approach to religion. In her altar, gods of multiple faiths co-exist unlike Father's dogmatic practice of his Krishna faith. I have invented this based on the memory of my own grandmother's altar. Thus personal memory can become a reference point for imagining characters. The Uncle not only provides Suresh with cultural anchorage and open-mindedness, the former's liberal Hinduism stands in sharp contrast to Father's orthodox version of Hinduism.

By foregrounding Suresh's loyalty to his liberal Uncle and *not* his orthodox Father (strongly based on evidence of the letters), I highlight the presentism of the script by evoking similarly divergent approaches in the understanding of Hinduism that has divided contemporary India. Within the screenplay, Shravani's admiration of Biswas' cosmopolitanism and the Producer's nationalist rhetoric mirror a similar polarity. Shravani Banerjee is the protagonist of the frame-story, a screenwriter and academic working on the margins of the commercial film industry in Mumbai who has somewhat similar origins as Biswas (she bears the same 'SB' initials; she is also a Bengali from a remote village who now lives in the metropolis and is struggling with a difficult relationship with her partner, the latter carrying some of the dislikeable aspects of Biswas). Shravani has been unsuccessfully going around in the film industry with her spec-script, hoping it to be produced on her terms but is instead offered the screenwriting assignment. Initially reluctant, her student and collaborator, Kavita, encourages her to think of it as her entry into the world of big-budget, mainstream filmmaking and so Shravani tries hard to conform to the demands of popular cinema and its conventions. Though she eventually develops certain emotional connections with Biswas and admires him, she refuses to make him a conventional

³³ Suresh was the eldest child and in Indian families, the elder son is expected to be responsible as he would have to eventually take charge of the family. A father could be indulgent towards a younger child but not the eldest son.

‘hero’ as she sees him as flawed. As she becomes increasingly consumed by the project, Shravani’s screenplay increasingly becomes a political project in the context of the ideological polarisation in contemporary India.

Among other characters, I have imagined Father Ashton as a composite character in whom I have compressed the enlightened (yet patronizing) aspects of missionaries like William Carey (1761-1834). Some of Ashton’s dialogues are shadows of Carey’s writings (Bishi 136). I have invented Biswas’ real-life friend Upen (who wrote a letter about him in *ABP*) as a “subplot character” as Truby calls it, who “like the ally and the opponent, provides another opportunity to define the hero through comparison and advance the plot” (248). Though they are united by their common love for reformism, Upen and Suresh grow in opposite directions. Upen dies in the nationalist struggle, taking up arms for a nationalist cause while Suresh becomes a global citizen and seeks self-fulfillment. Suresh leaves Bengal during a period of incipient nationalism when the British were admired (late 1870s). Over the years of his absence in India (1878-1905), the tide turns and the response to British rule becomes increasingly violent. I show this transformation in India through Uncle’s invented letters to Biswas. Upen who initially thinks of the British as bearing the promise of liberating India from Hindu orthodoxy through secular education, later makes a mysterious trip to Japan for arms training and becomes a part of the revolutionary strain of Bengali nationalism, based on evidence of youthful terrorists of the time (Mishra 246-248).

Upen and Suresh’s admiration for the rebel-poet Madhusudan Dutt allows me to make a ‘network and connection’ in order to claim Biswas as a product of the Renaissance spirit (Ghosh). Biswas was probably aware of the uproar over Dutt’s conversion (as Dutt died four years prior to his own conversion) and so may have been inspired by his cosmopolitanism, European travels, lifestyle and his early poetry in English that gave expression to a yearning for faraway places. Suresh died in Brazil in 1905, the year of the Partition of Bengal that set off the convulsions of Hindu-Muslim polarisation that resonate with India’s contemporary political scenario. I use the gloomy atmosphere to connect Brazil and India (then and now). In my version, just before his death, as Suresh is contemplating abandoning home, he receives a letter from his uncle informing him that Upen has been tortured to death in British custody. His invented death happens in 1905, to connect the end of their divergent lives with the end of undivided Bengal.

Biswas' two mentors mentioned earlier, Jamrach and Hagenbeck, are contrasting characters based on historical evidence. Jamrach is known to have used violent means such as a crowbar to subordinate wild animals (App. 4.6C; Macaulay 377). Hagenbeck, on the contrary, believed in subordinating them through affection which he elaborated in his autobiography (111, 147, App. 4.7). These are also two contrasting facets of Biswas: "I am a gangster to the gangster, a gentleman to the gentleman" (L3). He gets mauled by a lion but also develops an emotional bond with an elephant (documented through posters). I imagine him leaving the world of circus and preparing himself for a new beginning as he sets out for Brazil to start a new life by declaring himself 'Künstler'.

I see Biswas as a conflicted man, which is revealed through his complicated relationships with women. As demonstrated earlier, he was a misogynist but adored his mother ("My earnest desire was to beautify her with a crown of diamonds": L1). His mother tries to shield him from his father's violence and is unmoved by his conversion. Among the other women, Suresh was contemptuous of those whom he met in London's slums, mostly prostitutes (according to biographers), and though he bragged about sexual relationships with multiple women, he despised them (L6). Laura is a *compression* and *alteration* of all the prostitutes he may have met and their relationship represent his attitudes towards them (evidenced through Victorian photo-archives and newspapers). I have tried to bring out the ambiguous attitude of adoration, romance and misogyny through the different women characters. In my interpretation, there is equal measure of tenderness and violence in him. Laura also allows me to bring out the poverty and violence of the world in which they lived. She nurtures and protects him but Biswas' brutal treatment of her is meant to portray the contempt that is so evident in the letters.

Elena, fourteen, a runaway to the circus, evokes teenage romantic love when Suresh was eighteen. I depict the tension of interracial teenage romance, prohibited even within the circus where other kinds of transgressions were tolerated (Cremonesi 177; Croft-Cooke 76). According to biographers, she was whisked away to Germany soon thereafter (HCD 157). Since there is no proof of her existence, I have borrowed her (among several other supposed love-affairs of Biswas) but deviated from the biographers' accounts and invented her death in the act of performing with the intention of *condensing* the pervasive phenomena of fatal circus accidents (Manning-Saunders 223; Hickman 113). This raises the stakes for Suresh every time he enters the cage/stage. The screenplay's omnipresent antagonistic force is thus the possibility of death at any

moment, either in the circus or the battlefield. Elena's accidental death can partly explain his overwhelming sense of unfulfillment (L1).

His wife, María-Augusta, pursues him when she was eighteen and he was twenty-four, as documented through her late-life interview (MBA 30). Some of her fanciful dialogues are taken from the interview itself with the intention of capturing her historical voice. I show her dressed in a green gown with a yellow *abanico*/hand-fan as a *condensation* of the green/yellow colours of the Brazilian flag just released. I cannot see any commitment to domesticity in Suresh's letters; instead, he writes about being lonely and wanting to abandon home in search of new adventures. Though he actually did not leave her, in my retelling, he does so.

In terms of characterisation, I have drawn upon Spivak's notion of "strategic essentialism" (discussed in Chapter 2) which implies that the subaltern subject is not one who can be rebellious. I deny the temptation of depicting Biswas as a militant and instead use essentialising stereotypes *strategically* that Biswas uses to benefit himself. Thus, Biswas as a 19th century subaltern, unaware of participating in the Orientalising process, willingly participates in exoticising himself for the West or exhibiting himself on par with wild animals. He is also unable to 'speak' as it were, and has to dutifully obey his white masters (Jamrach, Hagenbeck, O'Connor) where conformism becomes a strategy of survival in an alien society. Historically, it is impossible to think of Biswas as anti-colonial and all evidence points against such a portrayal. My/Shravani's characters are thus not necessarily the reversal of colonial stereotypes as a binary expectation would anticipate. The 'screenwriter' Shravani lives in the 21st century and derives the theme of cosmopolitanism out of Biswas' life that he himself was possibly not aware of. She narrates his life according to her perspective but imagines Biswas and others as they would have behaved in their time and place.

Theme

Aspects of cosmopolitanism (in terms of cultural crossovers) are present from the outset through 'native' Suresh's relationship with white 'colonial' indigo planters/hunters. The rebellious, 'converted' and ostracised poet Madhusudan Dutt, set up as Biswas/Upen's idol, is a vernacular cosmopolitan as expressed in his yearning for faraway places: "There let me live and there let me die"; his line ironically foreshadows Suresh's own destiny. The European travellers at Spence's Hotel (where Suresh works as bell-boy) constantly talk of faraway places, of arrivals and

departures, with images of clocks with multiple time-zones just as the sailors in Calcutta stimulate his urge to travel. The multi-religious chants in the ship and the several languages that are spoken reinforce the theme. Most importantly, cosmopolitanism is depicted through Biswas' constant drift across nations, cultures and languages, his success in both the circus and the army, and the act of willfully defending another nation at the eventual cost of his own life due to the injuries he received.

The multiple nationalities of the members of the circus are strongly emphasised as also the animals that are sourced from remote corners of the planet, both in Jamrach's and Hagenbeck's menageries (Croft-Cooke; Hickman; Day). In fact, Biswas' first employer, O'Connor's company, was called *The Great Cosmopolitan Circus*. Suresh's inter-racial romance with a German girl, the international shipping hub of the Hamburg port, departure schedules at ports and airports suggesting global networks and connections, and the migration of trees from India to Brazil emphasise the central theme. The vernacular aspects of cosmopolitanism can be located in Suresh's uncle's teachings and his mother's unselfconscious liberalism (multi-religious altar). The knowledge can be traced as received wisdom through Uncle's Upanishadic teachings and a map of the world that he gives Suresh as a parting gift in a remote village. Two Sanskrit phrases stand out and are repeated: *charaiveti charaiveti* ('never stop moving') and *vasudhaiva kutumbakam* ('the world is a family'). In a moment of success at the end of a show, Suresh talks back to his Uncle: "You were right. The world is indeed a family." The combat wrestling scene is also a case of vernacular knowledge: an age-old indigenous Indian sport with vernacular techniques, distinct from western wrestling techniques. Suresh learns it in Calcutta and then applies it to outwit a white, muscular wrestler. Father Ashton, who teaches him about British Romantic poetry, also plays a role in imbibing cosmopolitanism (through Tennyson). Suresh's cosmopolitanism is thus learnt at home but not simply from pre-colonial knowledge (a defiance of the East/West binary) before he steps out into the world.

Narrative Structure:

It may help to comprehend the screenplay's narrative in terms of Branigan's "hierarchy of narrations" in its use of narrators as discussed earlier (100). Here, the 'historical author' is me (the actual screenwriter), the 'implied author' is Shrivani, the fictional screenwriter who has been commissioned by a production company to develop a biopic-screenplay on Biswas, the 'narrator' is often Suresh Biswas who, through his voice-over tells the story of his life, and the 'characters'

are Biswas and other imagined figures in the diegetic space of the biopic through whom the story is told. However, there are also ‘characters’ at the level of the ‘implied author’ including Shravani and other invented figures through whom I tell Shravani’s story. While Shravani, her associate/student Kavita, and the people she interacts with, all inhabit the present 21st century, Biswas and the ones he interacts with, live according to the values of the 19th century. Following Branigan, I try to achieve ‘focalization’ (external/internal) through Shravani’s awareness of Biswas’ life-events and her/Biswas’ inward moments, respectively. Biswas’ inwardness is created by his voice-overs, some of which have been invented by drawing on others’ experiences. For example, Sc. 45, where he says that some people saw mermaids lying on rocks as they sailed through the Mediterranean Sea, is drawn from documented travel accounts of Bengalis who narrated their experiences (Sen).

Though *Hometowns* is a BPF, I agree with MacLeod in not making historical characters into ‘time-travellers’. As already mentioned, I do not think the historical Biswas had any awareness of either the colonialist or cosmopolitan framework through which the narrator tells his story. And so, the diegetic space of his life-narrative must be immersive (for the viewer) based on my own understanding of his time. However, as Power points out, “the real problem of presentism becomes confused with the inevitability of writing from a modern, cultural vantage point” (435). That is my/Shravani’s position, caught between jingoistic nationalism and an aspirational cosmopolitanism. Biswas’ life is written from ‘a modern cultural vantage point’ of vernacular cosmopolitanism (‘inventing’ it) in order to emphasise that non-Western, non-elite people have also been cosmopolitan in their own ways. Power points out that “minority experiences and perspectives are at the heart of the debates over presentism as regards an inclusive or pluralistic past” (429). As in most BPFs, the ‘writerly presentism’ (vernacular cosmopolitanism) is in the form of a suggestion.

I use the frame-story of a screenwriter researching and shaping the screenplay to convey that the screenplay represents my search for Suresh Biswas. This is not a straightforward biopic. The narrating eye/I and the observing eye/I are separate but intersecting identities that maintain critical distance with evidence. The frame-story provides information, expresses doubts, reveals my sources, deconstructs popular folklore (such as the tiger-myth), highlights the problem of biopic-construction and screenwriting issues in the film-industry context while also contrasting Biswas’ cosmopolitanism with the parochialism of current Indian politics. The latter as a pervasive social phenomenon is referenced through television news (as the story unfolds during

the 2019 elections when Modi wins a landslide victory), as well as from the appeals to nationalism and heroism by the producer and the star, and the final image of Shravani getting trapped inside a saffron brigade march. While the Producer (Mr Mehra) wants to use the rhetoric of Biswas' muscle power as an ultra-nationalist macho symbol of Hindu supremacy vis-à-vis 'Modi's 56-inch chest' (ideologically distinct from HCD/UKB's use of Biswas' *valour* to refute British allegations of effeminacy), Shravani rejects the producer's diktat by harping on Biswas's cosmopolitanism. The frame-story device additionally allows me to bring disparate material in the making of the biopic — documentary footage, photos, staged interviews, archival material, and speculative fiction — offering multiple points of view and commentary. This dramatic choice also allows me to acknowledge that my understanding of the past (of Bengal, Victorian England or Brazil) is not based on direct experience but is mediated and filtered through books and images produced by others, often through fiction.

Shravani's personal character arc moves in tandem with that of her biographical subject even as she struggles with the difficulties of her own emotional life and is reluctant in undertaking the assignment that demands a strong male-oriented heroic, hagiographic screenplay. Instead of writing a nationalist biopic, she ends up working at cross-purposes as she gets increasingly drawn to Biswas' interest in other cultures, his human frailties and his sense of unfulfillment. The incident of Suresh 'walking away' from family after getting beaten by his father — traumatised but stoic — provides the screenplay with its first turning point, spiralling Suresh into the wide world of the unknown metropolis of Calcutta where he has to find his own feet. This is where Suresh's journey starts, not from the point he leaves India for British shores because it is in Calcutta where he has his early cosmopolitan experiences. When Shravani comes across Suresh's letter about the loneliness at the core of his life, she finds an emotional connection with him; in the screenplay, Suresh's voice-over becomes Shravani's voice-over, after which she decides to delve wholeheartedly in reconstructing his life. As Suresh leaves the world of circus and decides to go to Brazil to start a new life in a different country, instead of returning to India, it marks the screenplay's second turning point, paralleling a similar turnaround in Shravani's life. Going through a mid-life crisis in the middle of the ruthlessly commercial machinery of filmmaking, she revives herself through the act of writing the screenplay in close contact with an intelligent younger woman, Kavita Mascarenhas, who questions and bonds with her but also becomes restless with her meanderings and long investigative pauses. The Shravani-Kavita axis also serves as the discursive strand of the biopic. Even as Suresh Biswas abandons home in search of self-fulfillment, perhaps delusional, Shravani too sets out on a new journey as

her screenplay falls apart. Through her personal failure I suggest that the ambience of contemporary Indian politics is hostile to Biswas' life-story told from a liberal, cosmopolitan viewpoint.

Despite its theoretical underpinnings elaborated here, *Hometowns* resembles the 'classical' biopic's tendency to cover a large part of one's life and does not intend to create a counter-mainstream cinema by any means. However, the screenplay also goes against the classical format in terms of reflexivity (reflected through Shravani's self-consciousness and intertextual references to evidence, other biopics, etc.). Shravani is a documentary filmmaker (hence her interest in evidence), 'screenwriter' and academic working on the margins of the commercial film industry of Mumbai. As explained earlier, Shravani struggles hard to conform to the demands of popular cinema but fails as they are in conflict with her deeper convictions. As the putative author, I consciously move away from the strain of the earlier anti-popular Indian Parallel Cinema that alienated its own audiences by turning against narrative conventions of mainstream cinema. Like Shravani/me, it epitomises the struggle of Indian filmmakers to accommodate themselves within the mainstream industry though not at the cost of personal dignity.

Mythic framing

Suresh's eventual abandonment of home is somewhat over-determined, rooted in the Sanskrit/Hindu concept of the last stage of life – *vanaprastham* – a retreat from life itself (literally, departure for the forest) in search of self-realisation. This serves multiple purposes for me: to highlight his restlessness and selfishness in search of an elusive ideal. It also emphasises his character arc: the 'wild child' of nature returns to nature, older and experienced but not necessarily wiser. The aerial roots of a tree dangle over his head even as he ponders, itself a migrant from India to Brazil. His abandonment of family is represented as an *alteration* of a key moment in Buddha's life (that exists in Indian public memory) when he leaves his sleeping wife and child in search of an uncertain *nirvana*. The use of a myth here does *not* elevate the character (as in the Western tradition) but deepens an understanding of the human by bringing the mythic and the real within the same frame (as in the Indian tradition). In a more playful way, I use the myth of St George-and-the-Dragon several times with different purposes. While in Christianity it is a metaphor of fighting with Death (which Suresh did on a daily basis), in the Victorian slums where he lived, it referred to a sexual position (woman-on-top); St George is also the patron-

saint of Rio de Janeiro. Thus María-Augusta evokes the Christian myth to express her admiration. A circus-reviewer had in fact referred to Suresh as “modern-day Samson” (MBA 30).

Approach to Language

Spoken language has been an important consideration for me in crafting the script since Biswas spoke seven languages. Multilinguality in the screenplay allows me to depict the polyglot frenzy of that multilingual world through which Biswas navigates though there has been a temptation to convert diverse languages to a common linguistic register, as in international coproductions (e.g. Scott’s *1492: Conquest of Paradise*, 1992, a biopic on Columbus). In seeking this aspect of (multi)cultural authenticity, I have chosen to make the screenplay unfold in seven languages in tune with the overarching theme of cosmopolitanism: English, Bengali, Hindi, Portuguese, Spanish, German, some Sanskrit verses and Afro-Brazilian Yoruba greetings, apart from multiple registers of English (Indian/Victorian) and Bengali (written/epistolary and spoken). In earlier drafts, I had written the dialogues in seven languages but intelligibility and readability became major problems and since all dialogue had to be provided with translations, the screenplay page-count went out of hand. I considered Arriaga/Iñárritu’s *Babel* (2006) which unfolds in six languages where the screenplay has all dialogues in English with a mention of the spoken language in parenthesis. Similar to Cuarón’s *Roma* (2018), I maintain italics in the screenplay wherever a non-English language is spoken with a mention of the language. I have also invented plot-situations where the spoken language could be English though Hindi was more likely, as in present-day Mumbai scenes. Naficy highlights these concerns in the context of “accented cinema”:

Multilinguality is a characteristic of the accented mode, which is driven by the many languages of the filmmakers and their crew, the stories they portray and the situated audiences whom they address. Multilinguality makes intelligibility more complex, contributing to the accent. Importantly, in these films language is almost never taken for granted. (49-50)³⁴

At times, I have deliberately used grammatically incorrect language to express Suresh’s struggle with these languages acquired as an adult.

³⁴ For Naficy, “accented cinema” refers to films by postcolonial, Third World, and other displaced individuals in the West.

In some ways, my own process of research and writing in shaping the screenplay is reflected through Shravani though her context is the commercial machinery of Mumbai's film industry while mine is academic. It developed through three major drafts guided by supervisory feedback where each draft marked a progress/reworking in terms of experimenting with plot, characters, narrative structure and revelation of theme. Over a long period, I conducted research on Biswas and the historical periods I had to deal with, with special emphasis on visual documents to facilitate the imagination. Gradually, as I started conceptualising the scenes after laying out Biswas' life and times in chronological order, I felt the need of a different kind of research that was shaped by plot and character demands so that I could visualise what I was writing about (such as specific circus numbers or the interior of a late 19th century Sailors' Home in Calcutta). The need for a frame-story became evident at the time of writing the first draft due to my discursive concerns about biopic-construction but the theme of vernacular cosmopolitanism grew in a circuitous way. Its academic reference can be found in my Full Proposal but I had almost forgotten it until it came back to strike me with its aptness in the second draft. The use of saffronisation as a counter-point to the main narrative was an idea that appeared late in the third draft. So also, the character of Upen appeared as a contrast to Suresh from the second draft onwards. In the first two drafts, the narrative went back and forth in time even as the two parallel storylines intertwined but in the final draft, I found that the linear pattern was more effective where the past and present moved in tandem.

Conclusion

In this exegesis of the biopic-screenplay on Suresh Biswas, I bring together all available biographical information, verified and unverified, real and invented, about the subject. I scrutinise all details available on him and assess the reliability of biographical facts based on their consistence with information from other reliable sources. The initially scant evidence was significantly facilitated midway through this project by Maria Barrera-Agarwal's archival investigation, without which all the claims would have remained unverified. I have highlighted the contextual histories and unverified elements that I have picked out from the biographies for fictional purposes. This reveals that even when we embark on a biographical project with scant evidence, subsequent historical research by oneself or others can help to carve out a substantial body of evidence, however incomplete, for a firmer biographical construction. I provide an account of the dramatic choices I have made in the screenplay and what function they fulfil. Fictional invention is inevitable as one has to conform to the conventions of a genre but such

inventions, I have insisted, must be rooted to evidence and allied social debates. By assimilating all evidence, seeking dramatic elements from different aspects of Biswas' social-historical contexts, connecting (tethering) him to two widely-known personalities of the time and introducing a frame-story narrative focussed on screenwriting issues, I have tried to invent a version of his life and reflect on the craft involved in putting it all together. The narrative is shaped to reinforce Biswas as a 19th century cosmopolitan who was neither Western nor had a privileged background but was a subaltern whose openness to the world grew out of vernacular experiences.

The Creative Component

HOMETOWNS

The Screenplay

HOMETOWNS
A biopic on Suresh Biswas

by
Indranil Chakravarty

an Original Screenplay
Final Draft (30 March 2020)

Indranil Chakravarty

Victoria University of
Wellington
Wellington 6021
New Zealand

All dialogues not in English have been italicised. The specific language spoken in a particular scene has been indicated within the scene. Only song-lyrics and some Sanskrit phrases appear in the spoken language, accompanied by English translations.

INT. FILM PRODUCTION OFFICE, MUMBAI - DAY (PRESENT DAY) 1

A large office space with a lot of buzz. Young people are all around, working intensely or chatting. A fancy glass cabin on one side with a long table. Upbeat office decor is dominated by colourful posters of recent Hindi films.

Opposite the cabin, there is a large TV screen where 'Republic' news channel plays on mute. Election results pour in. Coloured pie-diagrams with shades of orange dominate the screen. Images of politicians Narendra Modi and Amit Shah hog the limelight.

Standing close to the cabin, is a woman in her mid-forties, dressed in an elegant white cotton sari, a big red *bindi*. She wears glasses and has an embroidered bag hanging from her shoulder. This is SHRAVANI BANERJEE. In her ethnic outfit, she is an oddity in the corporate ambience.

She tries hard to look away from the TV screen. Makes occasional glances nevertheless. Some employees are keenly watching the TV instead of their computer monitors.

A tall man, stout, around 50 years, walks with swagger towards the glass-cabin, talking animatedly on the phone, greeting people on his way. This is MR MEHRA, the Producer, flashing a thin gold chain and a steel bangle below his sports blazer. He certainly looks like a confident and important guy out here. Inside the glass-cabin there is a young woman and two other men in business suits.

SHRAVANI realigns her sari as she sees MR MEHRA approaching. She looks nervous. He sees her waiting near the cabin and smiles.

MR MEHRA
Shravani, right?

SHRAVANI
(nodding)
Glad to meet you, Mr Mehra!

He readily extends his hands. Graciously opens the door for her, still talking on the phone, mostly listening. She is ushered into a plush conference room.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

2.

MR MEHRA

Please, please come in.
Sorry I'm a bit late. Too
much going on! It's crazy.

A bronze Ganpati statue and incense sticks stand on one side while rose petals float in a brass water-pot below. There are TWO EXECUTIVES in business suits and a bright-looking young woman seated at a distance.

MR MEHRA

Please give me a minute.

He keeps texting. SHRAVANI looks around in discomfort when her eyes run into the bright eyes of the young woman, about 25 years old. This is KAVITA MASCARENHAS, wears jeans and a T-shirt. She comes over and hugs her warmly as if she knows her. Shravani returns the embrace but looks confused.

KAVITA

I was so looking forward to
meeting you!

SHRAVANI

You are ...?

KAVITA

Kavita. Kavita Mascarenhas. You
taught us at Sofia's School of
Communication, remember?

SHRAVANI acknowledges but struggles to remember her. She is pleasantly surprised. Looks closely at KAVITA's stylish kohl-outlined eyes.

The TV screen can be seen through the conference room. Now two people are standing below the screen who are closely watching the ongoing election results.

SHRAVANI

Mascarenhas, you said? From Goa?

KAVITA nods.

SHRAVANI

(still absorbing it)
So, you were at Sofia's?

KAVITA acknowledges smilingly.

KAVITA

Are you still in Bombay or
moved back to Calcutta?

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

3.

SHRAVANI

Actually, I am from a place in
the south of Bengal. Near the
Sunderbans. 200 km from Calcutta.

KAVITA

Sunderbans! Oh, *The Hungry Tide*!
I just finished reading it.
(rolls her eyes)

KAVITA puts her hand on her chest, emotionally.

SHRAVANI

Amazing, isn't it?

SHRAVANI smiles lovingly. Embraces her again.

Surprised by the hugging, MR MEHRA turns to them.

MR MEHRA

You know each other?

KAVITA

She was my teacher at Sofia's.
She. Is. Amazing. I can never
forget her classes.

MR MEHRA

Wow! That's something!

SHRAVANI looks pepped up with the praise. They settle down
in their chairs around the conference table.

The TWO EXECUTIVES in business suits who were going
through their laptops, stand up to greet SHRAVANI as they
are introduced.

MR MEHRA

That is Pradeep, this is Ankur.
Kavita is in charge of
development of new projects.

EXECUTIVE 1

Glad to meet you Shravani! It's a
real pleasure.

EXECUTIVE 2

Same here.

They shake hands and then settle down.

MR MEHRA

You may know we just had two
back-to-back releases. Both doing
pretty well at the box-office.

MR MEHRA's phone rings.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

4.

MR MEHRA

Sorry! My phone is like Indigo Airlines' customer service number.

He fiddles with his phone, allowing the executives to continue the discussion.

SHRAVANI

So, how are the new releases doing?

EXECUTIVE 1

We recovered investment even before the film went to the shooting floors. Thanks to our stars.

SHRAVANI

How's that possible?

EXECUTIVE 2

Distribution advances. Now, we can't stop investors. So we want to diversify our slate, our portfolio, with strong story-driven star vehicles.

EXECUTIVE 1 nods. Now MR MEHRA closes his phone and joins the talk.

MR MEHRA

OK, guys. Here is Shravani Banerjee. Well-known documentary filmmaker and screenwriter. And as we have just come to know now (turning to Kavita), a very successful teacher. Shravani has an interesting story to pitch. Written on spec.

She takes out a dog-eared screenplay from her bag and puts it on the table as all of them look at her.

The Executives slowly lean back like judges. One of them hits a button on the intercom on the table.

EXECUTIVE 1

Coffee for 5. Water? (looking at Shravani who nods).

MR MEHRA

Let me tell you one thing Shravani. Money is never an issue. Never. People will say otherwise. (Digs deeper into himself) Take it from me. It's

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

5.

MR MEHRA (cont'd)
all about finding the right
project. The industry revolves
around stars but the truth is,
Script is King!

Suddenly there is a collective cheer in the whole office.
Many people have assembled in front of the TV screen
outside. They all step out of the cabin.

All eyes are around the TV which is now playing loudly.
Onscreen, there are saffron flags everywhere.

MALE TV REPORTER
(on screen)
The BJP and its Prime Ministerial
candidate, Mr Narendra Modi, has
won by a landslide, with 353
seats in the Parliament, an
unprecedented 65% majority. BJP's
main opposition, the National
Congress, has now been reduced to
a minor party even in the
Opposition ...

There are loud cheers in the office, mostly by young boys
and girls. Even the TEA-BOY, with a tray full of empty
cups, rejoices with the rest of the crowd.

MR MEHRA is very excited. SHRAVANI and KAVITA huddle
together in shock in one corner. He takes out a 2000 rupee
note from his wallet. Taps the TEA-BOY on his shoulder.

MR MEHRA
Get sweets for the entire office.

The boy nods, leaving in a hurry.

MR MEHRA
(to Shravani)
It took this country 72 years to
find a leader like Modi. Look at
that 56-inch chest!

The festive mood carries on as SHRAVANI and KAVITA return
to the silence of the cabin. From that isolated space,
they look at the celebrations outside. Soon, MR MEHRA and
the executives enter. She gets ready to tell her story.
Sips water.

INT. SHRAVANI'S HOUSE - NIGHT

2

SHRAVANI opens the door to her flat, exhausted. It is
elegantly decorated with ethnic Indian handicrafts.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

6.

A man in his mid-forties with French-cut beard and wearing shorts, is sweating heavily while walking on the in-house treadmill. A bottle of McDowell's whiskey lies on the table. This is KARAN, Shravani's partner.

He doesn't stop. Glances at the door.

Shravani throws in her bag on the sofa.

SHRAVANI

Hi! How are things?

KARAN

Stocks are down all day.

She shows little interest. Walks to the adjoining kitchen space and makes herself a cup of green tea.

KARAN

I buy shares in a rising stock,
and next thing, it goes down.

SHRAVANI

What's new about that?

KARAN

Now with Modi, stocks will shoot
up. Oh! How was your pitching?

SHRAVANI

Usual stuff. 'We love your story
but who are the stars? Do you
have a revenue model? We will get
back to you.'

He gets down from the treadmill and dries himself with a towel.

KARAN

Actually, you know, they have a
point. It's business dammit. Why
the hell should anybody invest in
your dream project? Ask your dad.

She is shocked by his apathy. Falls back on the sofa. Gets up, confiscates the whiskey-bottle and shoves it inside the fridge.

KARAN

Get out of your teenage idealism!
Try an' make some money. Look at
all our friends. Everybody's
making so much.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

7.

SHRAVANI

Listen (raises her voice). A screenwriter does not go around with a business plan and distribution model. That's what producers are there for.

KARAN

That's why your scripts don't get made!

Karan continues on the treadmill, smiling mockingly.

KARAN

Writer! My foot! A writer without a business plan is like ... like whiskey without alcohol.

He giggles to himself. Shravani turns away.

SHRAVANI

Why don't you get a real job?

KARAN

Leave me to myself, ok? I'm fine.

SHRAVANI

Oh yes. Why should I carry the burden of running the house because you get kicked out of every job?

Walks away and slams the door behind her.

INT. SHRAVANI'S HOUSE - NIGHT

3

SHRAVANI stands at the balcony in her apartment in the 10th floor of a building.

Down below is the city, teeming with lights, pulsating with life: endless line of cars, glittering advertising billboards, trains passing by and rows of highrises.

She is pensive.

Her mobile rings. It says, 'Kavita'.

INT. CONFERENCE ROOM, PRODUCTION OFFICE, MUMBAI - NIGHT 4

It is evening. Hardly any people in the office and most lights are out. SHRAVANI and KAVITA are back again, on the same side of the conference table.

(CONTINUED)

KAVITA

So nice to see you again.

SHRAVANI

Sorry I'm late. There is this huge Shiv Sena ruckus outside that created a traffic jam. Bloody thugs!

KAVITA

Tell me about it! (Hesitates, uncomfortable) See, right now, the company cannot ... They do think it's a beautiful, story. A woman's search for roots across two continents. Rarely do we come across a script like that! But they think it's a big-budget film. So we first need to get a major star on board to make it viable.

SHRAVANI rubs her left eye as if something is wrong with it.

KAVITA

I called you for something else.

SHRAVANI

(looking at her watch) I need to go...

She grabs her bag, as if to leave. KAVITA suddenly holds her arm. SHRAVANI notices her firm grip. Her fingers are subtly nail-polished. Settles down again.

KAVITA

(sincerely)

Your film will happen, you know! It is just that the time is not right.

SHRAVANI

Right time? (exhales)

KAVITA

(shuffling through some papers) This is a writing assignment. There is this big male star. He wants to make a biopic he suggested Mr Mehra to develop. We are trying to get the screenplay written but it must be really fast. If the star likes the script, we have a real film on our hands. And then, (suggestively) you never know what may happen.

(CONTINUED)

Shravani remains unexpressive. Kavita's cell-phone keeps ringing but she keeps rejecting the calls.

KAVITA

I am still your student! I want to work with you and learn something. There are days when I feel like quitting it all and going back to studies.

SHRAVANI melts. KAVITA gets a call again. Looks at it and speeds up the conversation.

SHRAVANI

Anyway, whose biopic?

KAVITA

A Bengali guy. That's also why I thought of you. Someone called Suresh Biswas.

She shrugs. Doesn't ring any bell.

KAVITA

Nobody we talked to, seems to know. Not even Bengalis.

SHRAVANI

So how did your 'male star' come to know about him?

KAVITA

Ran into some wiki-page and got excited. A guy, originally from a remote village in Bengal. Like you.

SHRAVANI

Like me? (surprised)OK.
From a 'remote' Bengal village.

KAVITA

This is around the mid-19th century. He became something like, the Colonel of the Brazilian Army. And a tiger-tamer, I think.

SHRAVANI looks bored and disinterested.

SHRAVANI

What have I got to do with a tiger-tamer?

KAVITA gestures with her fingers suggesting there's a lot of money in it. There is a playful exchange of glances between them.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

10.

SHRAVANI's eyes brighten up. KAVITA nods.

They simultaneously start looking for 'Suresh Biswas' on their mobiles. Both get into the wikipedia page, linger over it.

[INSERT]

A series of Bengali cartoons about a guy in a forest with a tiger. There is also a white-skinned man in the picture whose arm bleeds while the brown man controls the tiger with a whip. [INSERT ENDS]

INT. PUBLIC LIBRARY - DAY (FEW DAYS LATER)

5

A large reading room. There are some reading corners with table-lamps.

SHRAVANI has been waiting in the sitting area for a long time. Looks at her watch. Goes to the librarian's desk.

The LIBRARIAN is a man with high-powered glasses, in late fifties. On one side he has his computer. SHRAVANI tries to get the LIBRARIAN's attention.

SHRAVANI

Excuse me, this book that I ordered...

She shows the receipt of the pink requisition slip. The LIBRARIAN looks at it, then looks closely at the computer screen.

LIBRARIAN

Madam, this book is in the Old Books section. It takes time to access it.

She is about to turn away when a clerk hands over a book to the LIBRARIAN. He looks at the inside cover. Inspects the page with book-issue details. Smiles to himself, looks up at her.

LIBRARIAN (CONTD)

Last time this book was issued was in 1978. More than 40 years ago! This cannot be borrowed. It's very old. (opens it and sees the date) 1899! Photocopying not allowed. You have to read it here only.

SHRAVANI sighs. Sits down in a silent corner and opens up a dog-eared copy of the book that shows the title:

[INSERT]

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

11.

Lieut. Suresh Biswas: His Life and Adventures/ H. C. Dutt

[INSERT ENDS]

She sits in a corner, under a table-lamp. Puts on her reading glasses.

INT. BISWAS' ROOM IN RJ - NIGHT (1894)

6

SURESH BISWAS, 33, is writing a letter under a kerosene lamp, seated at a study-table while his wife and two-year old son sleep in the background.

He has receding hairline, much of which has turned white. He has deep-set eyes and a long moustache.

There is a bust of Buddha which rests prominently on one side of his writing desk. On the wall hangs a framed picture of the Brazilian version of São Jorge (St George and the Dragon).

He writes with a wooden pen, frequently dipping into a black inkwell. Writes in English:

Rio de Janeiro, January 10, 1894

He moves to Bengali script.

The VO-texts are spoken in Bengali but they appear onscreen in English subtitles.

SURESH (VO)

Dear Uncle, Many people insist that I write an autobiography. It would take a long time to write. Several young men from Calcutta write to me. They all want to join the Brazilian Army.

He stops and attends a wound in his leg.

An anguished voice continues as we see the details from close: a bottle of Lister's carbolic acid, the Buddha statue, São Jorge, the sleeping faces of his wife and child.

SURESH (VO) (CONTD)

Is my dear mother well, after all these years I have been away from home?

We hear again the rustling sound of pen on paper.

SURESH (VO) (CONTD)

I have been bedridden for almost a year now.

Now we see him writing the 'From' address on the envelope:

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

12.

Suresh Biswas

In the 'To' section, he writes:

Kailash Nath Biswas

Village: Nathpur

District: Nadia, Bengal

British India

Sounds of a *Vaishnav* devotional song starts over his writing.

EXT. VILLAGE IN BENGAL - DAY (1876)

7

There is lush greenery all around and a wide river flows in the distance. The village is a cluster of mud-huts and a few concrete houses, with their roofs covered with red tiles, some with straw.

A group of 7-8 men, all dressed in saffron-coloured robes and some of them with flower garlands around their necks, their foreheads smeared with U-shaped sandal-paste marks, are singing and dancing while they walk along the unpaved road.

They are all in a state of ardent devotion, dancing with their arms raised. Two of them are playing double-sided *mridanga* drums while two others clank cymbals bound by threads.

The lead *keertana* SINGER is singing a line in Bengali followed by a chorus.

SINGER

(song starts)

*Jaar mukhe hari katha nai/taar
kachche tumi jeo naa/Jaar mukh
dekhi bhule jaabe hari/taar
mukhopaane cheo naa.*

**(SUPER) Stay away from those who
do not voice Krishna's
joys/ Look away from a face
that does not evoke His grace
(song ends)**

The chorus and drums reach an ecstatic crescendo.

EXT. FOREST IN BENGAL - DAY (1876)

8

Abrupt silence. We are in the middle of a lush forest. A BOY, barefoot, around fourteen, is seen from behind, dwarfed by the gigantic trees.

He steps on to a muddy marshland surrounded by thick greenery. Only his legs are seen. His physique is slight.

With a stick, he separates the thick foliage obstructing his way. The wind blows through the forest but in the middle of the serenity, a long cobra snake is seen passing through the nearby branches of a tree. The blue water of a river glitters in the distance.

The boy's foot is bleeding but he continues walking as if nothing has happened until he stands in front of a tree where he sees a huge beehive.

He impulsively plunges a small knife into the beehive and starts collecting the honey that oozes out of it, licking it with his bare hands. Thousands of bees start buzzing around him and he struggles to save himself from them.

Suddenly he hears a gunshot from behind and immediately drops to the ground. Birds gather from all the trees and encircle in the sky above.

His eyes are intense and full of wonderment; his hair is ruffled, his face has mud stains; he wears a white *dhoti* but is bare-bodied. This is BOY SURESH. He quickly turns around at something in the distance.

INT. FAMILY HOUSE IN NADIA - DAY (CONTINUOUS)

9

The Vaishnav procession is now seen through the window of a house.

A thin, middle-aged man dressed in white *dhoti* with a saffron silk shawl around him stands before the altar of a romantic statue of the divine lovers, Radha and blue-skinned Krishna, offering yellow and orange marigold flowers. This is GIRISH CHANDRA BISWAS, Suresh's FATHER.

The chorus is heard off-screen while GIRISH sings the song along with them. This is accompanied with female ululation (by unseen women inside the houses) and ecstatic drumbeats accompanied by cymbals outside.

FATHER
(in Bengali)
*Din gelo michcha kaaje/ratri gelo
nidre/Na bhojinu
radha-krishner/charano-brinde*

(SUPER) *Day wasted on drivels/*

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

FATHER (cont'd)
*Night wasted in slumber/No time
to bewail/at Krishna's altar*

He gently throws two marigolds at Krishna's altar and continues singing with the passing chorus, marking a U-shaped line of sandalwood paste on his own forehead.

A woman, SURESH'S MOTHER, dressed in a cotton sari covering her head, stands at the doorstep holding water in a brass glass.

Dialogues in Bengali.

MOTHER
*It's already 8. You're getting
late.*

He ignores her advice. He continues his rituals, ringing the hand-bell and serenading the idol.

As MOTHER walks away and enters the adjoining room where an younger man, UNCLE KAILASHNATH BISWAS is half-way through his meal, and is seated on the floor arrangement with food served in brass utensils.

She pauses for a few seconds in front of her altar and offers her brief prayer to the gods, murmuring something.

Her altar is a mixture of idols of all faiths - Shiva, Jesus, Buddha, Jain, Virgin Mary, Durga, Kali. There is also a green cloth of Islam. On her wrist, she wears two thin gold bangles and a white one.

GIRISH walks into the room, now dressed for office in a well-ironed *dhoti* and a striped full-sleeved shirt. MOTHER serves rice to both of them with a hand-fan in the other hand, driving away both the flies and the heat.

FATHER
(calls out
loudly) *Suresh!*

MOTHER
The boy is not at home.

FATHER
*Where does he go this early in
the morning?*

MOTHER
Stayed out last night.

FATHER
What? And you didn't tell me?
(turning to his brother)
You knew this?

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

15.

UNCLE nods. He is suprised and gets angry.

FATHER

*This boy will die some day soon.
Either of snake bite or... When
does he go to school? Loitering
around all the time! Rascal.
Vagabond!*

He pushes aside the rice plate and gets up.

EXT. FOREST IN BENGAL - DAY (1876) CONTINUOUS

10

BOY SURESH sees a white ENGLISH HUNTER sitting on a wooden platform on top of an elephant, dressed in formal hunting attire with high leather boots. Indian MAHOUT (elephant-keeper) sits on top.

A Royal Bengal tiger cub has come to the riverside to drink water. It turns around and inspects for a few moments and then goes back to drinking water.

The boy immediately hides himself behind the tree while the Englishman gets ready for the next shot, leading the elephant a little closer to the target.

Sitting on a low branch, the boy sees the man cocking his Enfield rifle and targeting the tiger again. This time too he misses the target.

The bullet hits the water and creates a huge splash. The tiger turns around and starts charging towards the Englishman.

The elephant trumpets loudly and turns around, throwing the leaning Englishman off its back. He slides on the ground, desperately trying to hold on to the elephant. Having fallen from a height, the man cannot get up. He remains transfixed on the ground. The gun drops from his hand even as the tiger keeps charging towards him.

The elephant and its MAHOUT have disappeared in the bushes, leaving the hunter alone.

The boy emerges from behind the tree and runs towards the English hunter. The tiger sees the boy, hesitates for a few seconds and then charges towards him.

As it roars and makes a gigantic leap, the screen turns dark, enveloped by the tiger's body.

INT. PUBLIC LIBRARY - NIGHT

11

Someone taps SHRAVANI on the shoulder.

She reacts with a jerk.

LIBRARIAN

It's 8pm. We are closing.

SHRAVANI

Sorry!

She looks at her watch. Surprised.

INT. FAMILY HOUSE IN NADIA - NIGHT (1876)

12

BOY SURESH stands in front of his angry FATHER. He rests against a bamboo pillar in the verandah of the house with his hands behind him. He looks guilty with his head lowered and remains silent.

His MOTHER and UNCLE are behind him, with a proud but concerned look unlike the father.

He slaps SURESH. Dialogues are in Bengali.

FATHER

*You are alive only because of my
prayers to Lord Krishna.*

UNCLE

*Are you not scared of your life,
Suresh?*

SURESH remains quiet and unperturbed by the entire situation.

FATHER

*He is possessed. Possessed by
evil spirits! Only a tantric
priest can get rid of such
devils.*

His mother tries to calm the situation.

MOTHER

(asking her husband)

*How many years have you worked
with the Company? Did an
Englishman ever invite you to his
bungalow for dinner?*

FATHER gets further annoyed by MOTHER's insinuation.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

17.

FATHER

What for? To lick the boots of those savage indigo planters? That man should have been eaten by the tiger. Instead, your boy saved his life at the risk of his own. In return, he invites the boy to dinner. Shoo! Barbarians. Now he has lost his caste too, eating beef.

SURESH shakes his head.

UNCLE

Just think what could have happened! Lucky that you are alive.

Mother hugs him, taking him inside the house to save him from FATHER's wrath.

The wild sound of a boar is heard on the soundtrack.

INT. SHRAVANI'S HOUSE - NIGHT

13

[INSERT] A boar is being chased by a group of men on horses. [INSERT ENDS]

SHRAVANI pauses the video of a black-and-white film she is watching in a dark room. Picks up the DVD cover which screams the film's title and star.

[INSERT] Gregory Peck in

The Lives of a Bengal Lancer.

"An exotic Hollywood Adventure film from 1935" [INSERT ENDS]

SHRAVANI starts the film again.

[INSERT OF DVD] Two Englishmen, dressed as hunters, are on horses. By 'mistake' they shoot down an Indian. He falls down from his horse and dies. The hunters corner another Indian with a spear. White-men-on-horses run fiercely.

Indian men in turbans are chased down and they fall on the wayside like animals. [INSERT HALTS]

SHRAVANI presses the fast-forward button.

[INSERT FROM DVD CONTD]

Two white-men-on-horses pause, talk heartily.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

18.

ACTOR 1

You know this is India. And you
don't know who they are and you
might ...

ACTOR 2

It may not be as funny as it
sounds.

They start charging after a boar whom they continue to
pierce with a spear. The boar runs with the spear stuck
inside its body and the men chase it.

ACTOR 1

A wounded pig is a dangerous
animal.

The wounded pig turns around and attacks one of them and
escapes while ACTOR 1 finds himself in the mud, ambushed
by the boar.

[INSERT ENDS]

SHRAVANI switches off the film and leans back, disgusted
but thoughtful. Browses on her tab.

[INSERT] Rows and rows of dead tigers are seen at the feet
of proud British hunters who pose in front of them.

[INSERT ENDS]

EXT. FOREST IN BENGAL - DAY (1876)

14

This is a variation of Scene 10 (imagined by SHRAVANI) but
in black and white and from the ENGLISH HUNTER'S
point-of-view unlike earlier where it was the BOY'S
point-of-view.

The hunter of Sc 10 replaces the hunters in *Lives of a
Bengal Lancer*. He is now riding a horse instead of an
elephant.

He has reached a clearing in the jungle. Seems lost as he
looks around in all directions. Suddenly, he is astounded
by what he sees.

A tiger has come to drink water in the river.

ENGLISH HUNTER (POV) miscues his shot, his hands tremble.
He falls off the horse even as the tiger charges towards
him. There is no accompanying *mahout* in this version.

The same sequence of events are played out.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

19.

ENGLISH HUNTER witnesses SURESH jumping in and fighting the tiger with only a knife in his hand. He rolls on the grass with the tiger, slightly going past the moment where the first scene had ended.

After a while, the tiger (actually a cub), is seen walking away as SURESH stands up, his thigh bleeding with the tiger's bite. The ENGLISH HUNTER too gets up. There is incredulity in his eyes.

FADE OUT

INT. SCHOLAR 1'S HOUSE - DAY

15

SHRAVANI is more focussed, talking to SCHOLAR 1, a middle-aged man. The room is full of books. He thinks hard if the name strikes any bell. He asks her more questions than she does.

SCHOLAR 1

Suresh Biswas? Which year was he born?

SHRAVANI

(offscreen)

1861.

SCHOLAR 1

So. Same year as Tagore. So, he was born in the middle of the Bengal Renaissance. A great moment in our history. Was he from a cultured Brahmo family like the figures of the Renaissance?

SHRAVANI

(offscreen)

Not at all. Orthodox Vaishnav family. Krishna devotees. In a village in Nadia. Biswas. Lower-middle class.

SCHOLAR 1

Father was what? Farmer?

SHRAVANI

A clerk of the British East India Company.

SCHOLAR 1

So, the father worked in Calcutta but the family lived in the village. Quite common at that time.

SHRAVANI looks disappointed. Picks up her bag.

INT. SHRAVANI'S HOUSE - DAY

16

KARAN and SHRAVANI are having morning tea in the balcony.

KARAN
(cynically)
A boy fighting a tiger? Give me a
break! Remember, I went to Alaska
and hugged a polar bear?

SHRAVANI is pensive, doesn't reply to KARAN who turns over the pages of the newspaper featuring images of Modi.

KARAN (CONT'D)
(without taking his eyes
away from the paper)
You are getting paid, I know.
After a long time. That too in a
mainstream Bollywood film. Good
for you. But you can't just make
up things and say 'based on a
true story' (mockingly).

SHRAVANI
Even if it was a rumour, it is
something. That's how people
remembered him.

KARAN
What if the guy was a fraud?

SHRAVANI snatches the newspaper and her tea and goes inside.

INT. SCHOLAR 2'S HOUSE. DAY

17

An elderly man, SCHOLAR 2, in high-powered glasses. Looks intellectual.

He too is surrounded by books.

Shakes his head.

INT. COFFEE SHOP - DAY

18

SHRAVANI meets SCHOLAR 3 at a popular coffee shop. She is an old woman with white hair but looks energetic.

There are several young boys and girls in the coffee shop. In the background, there is a TV screen that is playing on mute, a film on Bob Dylan, Todd Haynes' *I'm Not There*.

SCHOLAR 3 doesn't recognise the name initially. Faintly remembers something.

(CONTINUED)

SCHOLAR 3

Bra..zil? Colonel Suresh Biswas?
There was a street in Calcutta by
that name. Close to (gestures to
her right) where they built this
new ... Quest Mall. Wonder if it
is still there! Something ...
tiger

SHRAVANI

(offscreen)

Is it possible for a 14-year old
to fight a tiger?

SCHOLAR 3

With a gun, why not? The British
did it all the time.

SHRAVANI

(offscreen)

No, no. Just fighting with his
bare hands. Maybe a knife.

SCHOLAR 3

(laughing)

Maybe it was a tiger cub. Even
then. If it was a Royal Bengal
tiger, god bless you.

SHRAVANI

(offscreen)

Could it have just run away?

SCHOLAR 3

Tell your story to an Englishman
of the time and he would tell you
- Bengali men are sissies
(*emphatically*). Maybe he mistook
a wild boar for a tiger! (*Laughs
mockingly*) The Nadia area is
where the Indigo Revolt happened.
So there may have been many
British indigo factory-owners.
Those guys loved boar-hunting on
weekends.

SHRAVANI does not want the conversation to drift.

Meanwhile, one of the young men in the background take the
remote and change the TV channel. It moves to a news
channel with demonstrations of people with placards
demanding Ram's birthplace to be returned to Hindus.

SHRAVANI

If there is no evidence that
Suresh fought a tiger, why did he
appear in popular cartoons as the

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

SHRAVANI (cont'd)
man who killed a tiger with his
bare hands? That myth continues
to this day.

She takes out a book out of her bag and shows her the
cover of the 1899 reprint of his biography in 2019.
SCHOLAR 3 looks at them, turns the pages and murmurs as if
thinking aloud.

SCHOLAR 3
Popular culture, public memory...
these are strange things. They do
not really need evidence. Many
things can come together to make
it a captivating story and that's
what stays in people's minds.
Maybe he actually fought a boar.
Then, he was also a tiger-tamer,
wasn't he? These two things come
together where the boar gets
replaced by the tiger.

SHRAVANI
Easy peasy. Boars are ugly.
Tigers on the other hand...

SCHOLAR 3
(recites emotionally)
Tyger Tyger burning
bright/ In the forests of
the night/ What immortal
hand or eye/ Dare frame thy
fearful symmetry?

SHRAVANI
(joins in)
Did He who made the Lamb make
thee?

There is a moment of joyful connection.

SCHOLAR 3
(sipping coffee)
If you ask me... I don't know
about Suresh Biswas ... but,
following Blake, it's easy to see
how the aesthetic beauty of the
tiger combines with its primal
ferocity. That is how the British
imagined 'India'. The men might
be sissies but the country was
like a tiger. Beautiful but
ferocious.

SHRAVANI instantly remembers something. Takes out her tab,
and quickly goes to some Punch cartoons she had saved.
Shows them to SCHOLAR 3 who looks at them closely.

(CONTINUED)

In all the cartoons, 'India' is written on the body of the tiger.

[INSERT] A hyper-masculine Queen Victoria plunges a dagger deep into the mouth of the tiger. [INSERT ENDS]

SCHOLAR 3

If Biswas could be imagined to kill a tiger, it could boost the low Bengali self-esteem.

SHRAVANI

How?

SCHOLAR 3

He would no longer be a Bengali sissy. The metaphor turned on its head. The British hunter is now the sissy, saved by a Bengali boy.

SHRAVANI now has an understanding smile.

INT. OFFICE BALCONY - DAY

19

KAVITA leads SHRAVANI out of the hustle of the office atmosphere, coffee-mugs in hand, on to a narrow balcony space which is private and overlooks the city down below.

SHRAVANI

Amazing, one hears so many languages in your office!

KAVITA

Mini-India. You can hear at least ten languages any moment.

Suddenly, the balcony opens up to a refreshing space. They look out in silence. Beyond the rows of skyscrapers, there is the sea. Their hair flutter in the wind.

KAVITA

So, all you can really count on are the six letters Biswas wrote to his uncle, right?

SHRAVANI

The six that have survived. Over the years, he must have written many more.

KAVITA

Reading others' letters is such a ... (searching) an intimate thing. I used to sneak peek into my sister's love letters.

(CONTINUED)

They share a naughty laugh.

KAVITA (CONTD)

I think I know more about her
from her love letters than from
real life.

SHRAVANI

(teasingly)

Which is the 'real' life?
(wondering) What does a letter
reveal?

KAVITA

Hmm hmm! How much?

SHRAVANI

Your generation, Kavita, never
write letters. That's why you
would not know. Yearning ...
longing ... Waiting for months
for a reply to arrive?

There are a few moments of silence; KAVITA smiles. Then
SHRAVANI turns around to her affectionately.

SHRAVANI

(smiling)

We, the last generation that
wrote love letters, know this...
Every letter lit up a part of
you. Not the whole 'you'. It all
depended who you were writing
to.

KAVITA gets restless with the drifting conversation.

KAVITA

OK, OK, before you get more
emotional, listen. We need to get
this done quickly. So, what else
did you find?

SHRAVANI

There is an English biography and
a Bengali one, published at the
same time in 1899. Both are full
of fluff and jingoistic stuff. No
evidence of any kind.

KAVITA

You mean we have to take him on
his word? There is ...

SHRAVANI

Nothing. That's what Indian
historians complain all the time.

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

SHRAVANI (cont'd)
Life is *maya*, you know, illusion!
So why document it?

KAVITA
But these biographers were there,
no? (pauses) Benefit... of doubt?

SHRAVANI
To this extent? It's the Uncle's
romanticised version of Suresh
Biswas' childhood. Anecdotes of
him as a child.

KAVITA
How can we know what really
happened?

SHRAVANI
After a point it just doesn't
matter really.

KAVITA
What matters?

SHRAVANI
How and why we want to remember
him.

KAVITA
That is?

SHRAVANI
I don't know. Not yet. Ask your
secret star, no? He is the guy
who wants to make this film.

KAVITA
Ha, ha, if I had access! I think
he wants it to be an adventure
film.

SHRAVANI
(thoughtfully)
There's the rub. He has his
reasons and I have mine. We are
perhaps talking of two different
stories. If the 'how' and 'why'
are different, the stories will
be different.

KAVITA ponders.

KAVITA
You mean, things will blow up? He
sees it as macho
adventure.(mockingly)

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

26.

SHRAVANI nods, with concern.

SHRAVANI

You have to get a macho writer then... (pensive) Lets assume, the facts are reliable. How does one write or shoot a film like this? 19th century Bengal village, Imperial Calcutta, Rangoon, Victorian England, 19th century Germany, Brazil, Argentina... what else, Timbuktu!

KAVITA acknowledges.

KAVITA

And seven languages, good Lord!

Both look seriously concerned.

INT. PUBLIC LIBRARY - EVENING

20

SHRAVANI is reading intently. Now the Bengali biography is in front of her. Plenty of handwritten notes.

She is in a different dress from the earlier scene; sits in a different part of the library. She lifts her head and looks out of the window.

INT. FAMILY HOUSE IN NADIA - NIGHT (1876)

21

SURESH, 15, is being taught by his UNCLE by the side of a kerosene lamp that casts long shadows on the wall. He sits on a bamboo mat on the ground, face to face with him in the verandah. Listens to him attentively.

UNCLE

(recites in Sanskrit)
In one of our Upanishads, it says: "Charanbai madhu vindati charantsvadu mudambaram..."

SURESH

OK, OK, in Bengali, please.

Uncle lovingly caresses his hair. In Bengali:

UNCLE

"Honey bees collect honey by moving around. Birds always keep moving to enjoy the taste of fruits. The sun shines by virtue of constant motion. Therefore, one should always be moving. Keep

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

27.

UNCLE (cont'd)
*moving, keep moving on. Even the
 Buddha used to conclude sermons
 with the Hindu mantra:
 Charaiveti, Charaiveti. Keep
 moving, keep moving on.*

SURESH
 (repeats in Sanskrit)
Charaiveti, Charaiveti.

MOTHER now comes and sits beside them.

UNCLE
*The world, the universe, are all
 based on motion. We too must
 follow that principle and keep
 moving till our final breath.*

SURESH reaches out and opens a paper-map of the world,
 stretching it out. He passes his hand over it.

EXT. FOREST IN BENGAL - DAY (1876)

22

It is early morning and it is raining heavily with
 occasional lightning.

From a distance, we see a jungle path through the lush
 green forest and a small hut in one corner.

A man's silhouette is seen (Suresh's FATHER) who is
 dragging a boy (SURESH) through the path in the rain.

INT. FAMILY HOUSE IN NADIA - NIGHT (1876)

23

MOTHER's caressing hands pass through Suresh's forehead.
 He is running high fever, writhing in pain. He is laid
 out on a mattress on the floor.

His MOTHER holds him closely, puts straps of wet cloth on
 his forehead. His body heaves with convulsions. He moans
 in pain. UNCLE has his arms across the boy.

Dialogues in Bengali.

SURESH
Oh maa, maa...

MOTHER
 (to Uncle)
*I tried to stop his father from
 taking him to the tantric. But he
 was adamant. Someone told him
 that the tantric priest can use
 blackmagic to bring the boy under
 control.*

(CONTINUED)

UNCLE

*They can also kill! They make
strange concoctions in the name
of divine knowledge. God knows
what the tantric forced down
Suri's throat.*

MOTHER

*And his father! Sitting in
Calcutta. If he could now see
what he has done to my boy!*

UNCLE helps him to get up when he collapses in the verandah on the way and vomits.

MOTHER cries, helplessly and knocks her own head at the multi-god altar.

EXT. BISWAS' HOUSE - DAY (1876, FEW DAYS LATER)

24

A crowd of village boys, girls and elderly people has gathered around the courtyard.

GIRISHCHANDRA stands at the centre of the courtyard with a cane in hand. He is wearing a saffron robe and a garland of beads, suggesting that he was in the middle of some religious ritual. He looks furious, panting.

SURESH stands in front of him, his head held down in shame. His shirt is already torn and reveals a Christian cross hanging from his neck.

His FATHER goes around him, beating him with the cane. Though there are many people, there is pin-drop silence.

No one attempts to intervene except UNCLE and MOTHER but to no avail. Even they are half-hearted in their protest.

Dialogues in Bengali.

FATHER

*Bloody beast! Shameless animal.
You have become Christian! I will
not allow any Christian to enter
this Vaishnav abode.*

SURESH stands firm while his father keeps on thrashing him.

MOTHER

How could you do this? (crying)

FATHER

*I will not tolerate this any
more. Go, wherever you want to
go. Go and eat beef with those*

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

29.

FATHER (cont'd)
*barbarians. I took him to a
tantric hoping it will make him
sensible. Change his vagabond
ways.*

He keeps on shouting in-between the lashings. Even UNCLE is very annoyed with him.

UNCLE
*Who gave you this idea?
Converting to Christianity? What
disgrace for the Biswas family!
(pointing to the people who have
gathered)*

SURESH doesn't react to any of the beating. He is expressionless. MOTHER has now given up. She is choked; goes to one corner and collapses on the floor, crying helplessly.

FATHER
*I do not want to see his face any
more. Let him go wherever he
wants.*

UNCLE
*Now I see. That English hunter
put Jesus Christ inside your
head, right? Your father, every
day, after work, cleans himself
in the Ganges to wash away the
sin of working with the British.
Beef-eating Christians. And
you?*

His FATHER stops beating him only when he is exhausted.

He tears the cross off his son's neck. Throws it on the ground. He returns to his room. The stick too lies on the ground. SURESH withstands it all without any reaction.

He stands in his torn shirt looking firmly at the ground. There are red marks of the beatings on his back. He picks up the necklace and puts it in his pocket. Starts walking away.

All the people gathered there, including his UNCLE and MOTHER watch helplessly.

SURESH walks away, resolutely, with long strides.

DISSOLVE

INT. SHRAVANI'S HOUSE - NIGHT

25

SURESH's agonised voice-over is heard as we see him walking away in the earlier scene, slowly merging into an image of SHRAVANI working in the light of a table lamp in an otherwise dark room. She is seen from behind.

SURESH's VO, after a point, becomes SHRAVANI's own voice.

The white soft-board in front of her desk is blank.

SURESH
(VO, in Bengali)
*I left home without a single
penny in my pocket. I am alone in
this world and will remain
forever so.*

There is a pause.

SHRAVANI
(anguished too)
*True companionship and true love
are not to be found in this
world.*

Pauses. Lingers over the text. Repeats.

SHRAVANI (CONTD)
*That is why philosophers insist,
if you want to find happiness in
this world, you must create a
world of your own.*

Music enters at this moment.

SHRAVANI gets up and stands near the window. There is only darkness outside. Suresh's voice comes back.

SURESH (VO)
*I have constructed my own world.
And there I will meet her one
day. The one who truly loved me.
My mother.*

Dressed in a cotton sari, we see her only from behind. Her long hair, let loose, flutters in the wind.

She turns around, takes out a b/w photocopy of SURESH BISWAS and pins it on the white board.

She lingers on the photo as we move closer to his face and intense eyes. SURESH's face is seen in the pupil of SHRAVANI's eyes.

EXT. OUTSIDE PUBLIC LIBRARY - DAY

26

SHRAVANI dials a number and starts walking. It is KAVITA on the other side.

KAVITA
(overheard on phone)
I was just thinking about you.

SHRAVANI
Really? How are you doing?

KAVITA
(overheard on phone)
Deadlines and deadlines. Any
headway?

She sits down on a bench nearby. Lights of tall buildings in the city loom in the background.

SHRAVANI
Looks like there was a time in
Bengal when he had become a hero
to many people. And then his
memory faded out.

KAVITA
(on phone)
Only in Bengal? Right? But to
make it an all-India film, we
have to take him beyond a Bengali
obsession. Bengalis are what, 5%
to 10% of the Indian population?

SHRAVANI sits up straight, forehead wrinkled. She did not consider this problem till now.

SHRAVANI
No idea... but, ya, ya, you're
right. (anxiously) It is
impossible to put together a life
from so few fragments. The
letters from Brazil cover a
ten-year period. The rest is
hearsay.

KAVITA
(on phone)
You need to come over to pitch
the script idea?

SHRAVANI
So soon? Listen, I don't know
what to pitch. (listens, alarmed)
No! Don't tell me! Board meeting!

She puts the phone down. An ambulance passes by, with its emergency signal and flashing red light.

INT. PRODUCTION OFFICE, MUMBAI - DAY

27

It is the same conference room as before. MR MEHRA, and the two EXECUTIVES are on one side of the table. SHRAVANI is trying to hide her nervousness behind her smile and little courtesies. KAVITA is seated opposite her along beside MR MEHRA.

The pitching is presumably just over. Expecting reactions. Awkward moment. SHRAVANI looks with apprehension. Silence. KAVITA and the executives look at MR MEHRA who is checking messages, avoiding eye-contact. He soon puts it down.

MR MEHRA

Looks like we have a good story in our hands. Lots of action, lots of events. You seem to be working hard.

EXECUTIVE 1

Lots of special effects!

MR MEHRA

There are certain practical considerations though.

EXECUTIVE 2

Yes, sir. It's a very big-budget production. Too many locations across the globe.

MR MEHRA

We cannot have a film with so many languages. How many?

SHRAVANI

Seven. Biswas spoke many languages. It is an important part of the story.

The EXECUTIVES are now getting more vocal.

EXECUTIVE 2

Madam, we cannot find a distributor for a film with so many subtitles. We must convert everything into Hindi.

SHRAVANI

How can foreign characters speak Hindi?

EXECUTIVE 1

Personally, I would like to see more of his love affairs. And some song situations. At least you can plant a narrator who will

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

EXECUTIVE 1 (cont'd)
summarise the foreign language
parts into Hindi.

MR MEHRA
What we are trying to tell you,
Shravani, is that, we need to
find logistical, pragmatic
solutions. A, location issues. B,
language issues. We make our
films in Hindi. English language
films don't sell in this country.
You saw *La Vie en Rose*? If a
French biopic can happen in
English and become a hit, why
can't this be in Hindi? And C,
star-image. Let's say, we can do
the circus scenes and some
foreign scenes in the studio. But
I want to ask you a more basic
question.

There is an awkward pause while he sips the coffee.

MR MEHRA
Why should we be interested in
Suresh Biswas? Forget the star.
These bloody stars, Bollywood,
Hollywood, they are all crazy
about doing biopics. Look at
Leonardo diCaprio! How many ...

KAVITA
More than 10 biopics. Already.

MR MEHRA
But why should we be interested?

KAVITA
Maybe, we can think in terms of a
broader appeal.

EXECUTIVE 1
Exactly. Nationalism is hot right
now. I want to feel proud as an
Indian at the end of the film.
That an Indian did all this.

EXECUTIVE 2
Something like *Rang de Basanti*.
Young people should come out of
the hall singing the national
anthem.

SHRAVANI
Listen, listen, listen, guys.
Biswas was not a nationalist.

(CONTINUED)

MR MEHRA
(confused)
What do you mean?

SHRAVANI
He was an adventurer. A cosmopolitan in the 19th century when few Indians travelled that far. That too, being from a poor, unprivileged village background.

MR MEHRA
What you are saying is a matter of elite-appeal. Not mass-appeal.

SHRAVANI
Sir, that's exactly what I am saying. The masses may be happy to see an ordinary guy travelling across the world. Not an upper-class privileged guy.

MR MEHRA
OK. I get you. You mean like Mr Modi vs. Rahul Gandhi, the prince? The masses idolise Modi precisely because he was a tea-seller in a small railway station and now holds the Prime Minister's office!

SHRAVANI is uneasy; looks away. MR MEHRA senses it.

MR MEHRA
Ok, think over it. Let's meet in three weeks' time and see where we are. I have to update the star and reserve his dates. For anything you need, just ask Kavita.

SHRAVANI
I want to travel to Calcutta. To his village perhaps.

MR MEHRA
(jokingly)
You Bengalis just look for some excuse to go to Calcutta. Anyway, I think we have got a cracking film on our hands!

They all laugh and shake hands.

EXT. MODERN STEAMER ALONG THE GANGES, CALCUTTA - DAY 28

Several small, almost primitive boats are plying through the heaving waves. In the middle of the river, a white modern-day steamer is drifting along.

Shravani stands on the deck, wearing sunglasses, and looks at the passing landscapes of cities, villages, temples and industrial towns that pass by, DISSOLVING into each other.

Soon, we see modern Calcutta, with the looming Howrah bridge across it. There is a huge Gothic Cathedral by the riverside.

EXT. VILLAGE BENGAL, RIVERSIDE - DAY (1876) 29

SURESH jumps into a long boat waiting by the riverside. He wears the torn shirt. The boat has a small circular shed made of bamboo. The boatman is calling out for passengers.

BOATMAN
(in Bengali)
*Kolkata, Kolkata, four pennies.
Come quickly. The tide is coming.*

The boat glides through the vast river with about 4/5 other men and two women whose faces are covered with sari. There are two rowing boatmen at two ends. SURESH sits at the edge. He carries nothing with him. Stares into the distance.

As the boat moves into the wide river, the two boatmen start singing a mournful melody while rowing:

(Song in Bengali)
*Amae bhashaili re/ Amae dubaili
re/ Akul dariyai bujhi kul nai
re/ kul nai kinara nai naiko
doriyar paari/tumi shabdhanete
chalaiyo majhi/ amar bhanga tori
re ...
[(SUPER) You set me afloat/
You drown me in the deep/
Adrift mid-river, no shore to
see/ No shore in sight, no
river-bank/ Boatman dear, row
with care/This battered
boat.] (Song ends)*

Some ships are seen in the distance.

The boat floats perilously close to the water-level but SURESH is undeterred.

He glides his hand along the heaving waters when he sees the same Gothic Cathedral looming in the distance that SHRAVANI saw.

INT. CHURCH, CALCUTTA - DAY (1876)

30

Beside the river stands St Paul's Cathedral, a magnificent, Gothic Anglican Protestant church with just a crucifix at the altar and surrounded by coloured glass paintings on arch-shaped windows.

The church is empty except a very kind-looking priest in white robes. This is FR ASHTON, a white man. SURESH kneels down to touch his feet according to Hindu custom but he stops him, holding his hands.

FR ASHTON

No, no. We do not do that here.

FR ASHTON walks SURESH through the aisle, reading a reference letter while the 15-year old boy is overwhelmed by the grandeur of the Church.

FR ASHTON

You saved the life of an Englishman, my son. India needs brave boys like you. What can I do for you?

SURESH

No home.

FR ASHTON

I see.

SURESH

Father took me to tantric. Almost died.

FR ASHTON

The Hindoo is still walking amidst the thick darkness of a long, long night. Un-cheered by the twinkling of a single star. Bengal needs Jesus. Desperately.

SURESH listens attentively. ASHTON walks up to a cupboard, picks up a few books and gives them to SURESH.

FR ASHTON

These are for you.

The first is a Bengali *Bible*.

SURESH

Bible! In Bengali?

FR ASHTON

The Lord's Word must be heard in one's own tongue. So, Father William Carey taught himself

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

37.

FR ASHTON (cont'd)
Sanskrit and Bengali, and brought
His Word into your language.

SURESH sits down on one of the wooden benches with the books. He starts looking at the other ones. They are travel books with colour illustrations in them.

FR ASHTON
They are for you.

SURESH takes the books like a hungry child. He forgets to say, 'thank you'.

FR ASHTON
This one, is about the
Antarctica. It lies to the south
of New Zealand on one side, and
Argentina on the other. ... And
this one, about the Aurea
Borealis, the mysterious
night-lights of the North Pole.

SURESH turns the crisp pages of the books with excitement as FR ASHTON looks at him with satisfaction.

ASHTON leads him to a small library adjacent to the main hall of the church. It is surrounded by books in shelves with glass-covers and a few tables and chairs.

FR ASHTON
The Bible says, 'By knowledge the
rooms are filled with precious
and pleasant riches. A wise man
is full of strength.'

He takes him to a shelf which features collections of English poets where the names of Blake, Byron, Keats and Wordsworth are seen. He takes out a volume of Tennyson.

FR ASHTON
Lord Alfred Tennyson. The Poet
Laureate of Great Britain now.
(passionately) 'To strive, to
seek, to find, and not to yield.'
Words of gold, Suresh.

SURESH's eyes brighten up in excitement. He opens the picture books and turns its pages.

There are images of faraway lands - Scottish Highlands, English countryside, German cities, London, 'Peoples of the World'.

Romantic Western music rises on the soundtrack.

FADE OUT

INT. SCHOLAR 3'S HOUSE - NIGHT

31

SHRAVANI is seated in a sofa, sipping red wine under a warm light, listening attentively to SCHOLAR 3 who is also drinking. The latter's book on 19th century Bengali elite and popular culture lies on the centre-table.

They have been talking for some time if the half-empty bottle and plates of fish cutlets are anything to go by.

SCHOLAR 3

Some Hindu boys, they converted
out of a love for Western
literature as with the great
Bengali poet Michael Madhusudan
Dutt.

SHRAVANI

Not for Suresh. Definitely not!

SCHOLAR 3

More often, it was just
adolescent rebellion. Again, as
with Michael Madhusudan. Against
the Hindu orthodoxy of the
fathers.

SHRAVANI

And the mothers?

SCHOLAR 3

With mothers, they were always in
touch. At times, secretly...

SHRAVANI

Secretly?

SCHOLAR 3

For mothers, love was beyond
Hinduism, Christianity,
Conversion. For fathers, no.
Remember, Michael Madhusudan's
father ordered his son's poetry
to be bound in pure gold even
after kicking him out of the
house?

SHRAVANI nods. Remembers. Suddenly there is a lump in her throat. There is a moment of silence between them. She puts down the wine glass and picks up her mobile.

SHRAVANI

Men, I tell you! They will break
but will not bend.

SCHOLAR 3 smiles. Recalls the phrase in original Sanskrit.

(CONTINUED)

SCHOLAR 3

*Shushka kashthani murkhashcha/
vidyante na namanticha.* The
ill-educated are like dry
wood. Will break but will not
bend.

SHRAVANI finds the web-page.

[INSERT] Michael Madhusudan Dutt's wiki page shows his
image, date of birth and date. [INSERT ENDS]

SHRAVANI

Suresh was 12 when Michael died.

SCHOLAR 3

Imagine! Here was a youth icon.
Rebel. Poet. Initially wrote only
in English. Rejected Bengali.
Steeped in Sanskrit, Latin,
Greek, Hebrew, Persian. Lived for
a while in London, Versailles.
Married a French woman!

SHRAVANI

Michael was from a very rich
family though later ostracised.
Not Suresh. Had to earn his own
bread from the time he was 15. He
was just an average villager who
came to Calcutta.

SCHOLAR 3

Second City of the Empire after
London!

EXT. RIVERSIDE, CALCUTTA - DAY (1876)

32

SURESH is with a friend called UPEN, slightly older. A
bright-looking boy of 18, dressed in a *dhoti* and an over
sized long-sleeved striped shirt folded at the end. His
hair is parted in the middle.

SURESH, still donning back-brushed hair, carries a book
under his shoulder. Walks along the road by the riverside
while a Hansom horse-carriage passes by.

Dialogues in Bengali.

SURESH

*Fr Ashton let me stay in the
guard's room. And, if you attend
Mass, you get food.*

(CONTINUED)

From the opposite direction comes a hand-pulled rickshaw displaying a big cardboard poster of *Wilson's Great World Circus*. A man is seen sitting behind the poster and announcing through a papier-mache megaphone in Bengali.

ANNOUNCER

*Great World Circus. Come one.
Come all. Special seating
arrangement for women. (repeats)*

UPEN

*(looking at the circus
announcer)
Have you ever been to one?*

SURESH

*Upen, nothing happens in Nathpur.
In that small village. Except the
singing and dancing of Krishna
devotees.*

They both laugh mockingly.

SURESH and UPEN squat on the grass by the river Ganges. In the distance, a ship is anchored at the harbour. Small fishing boats pass by in the distance.

In the background, there is a pit where some men in loincloth practice wrestling in the *kusti* style. A thin boy fights with a muscular guy while another bare-bodied man with oil all over him, gets massaged by a man who wears a folded *lungi* and stands on his back.

UPEN lies on the grass while SURESH sits up, curious. He watches the wrestling match from a distance, with amusement.

They notice a huge white ship in the distance. Steam billows out of its chimney.

SURESH

*That ship is so beautiful. Guess
where it's going?*

UPEN

London. Where else?

SURESH

*You have no idea, how far they
go. China, Japan, Europe,
America.*

As they talk, a British woman walks past, dressed in her Sunday finery, in elaborate gown and hat, accompanied by two dark Indian maids in *sari* who carry her umbrella, etc.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

41.

A palanquin also passes by, carried by four bare-bodied dark men making a rhythmic incantation. Through the window, a woman can be seen inside.

In the river, Brahmins perform their rituals and prayers, half-immersed in the water and looking up at the sun while children keep diving joyfully from a high point.

SURESH

*You tell me. How's Presidency
College going?*

UPEN

*Bengal has woken up at last.
Thanks to British education! Or
those stupid Brahmin priests
would still hold sway.*

SURESH nods.

UPEN

*Let's go to Michael Madhusudan's
grave one day.*

SURESH

*Why should a genius like him live
such a miserable life?*

They are silent for a few moments and just lie beside each other in the grass as people pass by.

UPEN

*Maybe, Fr Ashton can get you a
job. Christian churches have so
many connections.*

SURESH

(sighing)

*The life I am living is not the
life that wants to live in me.*

He is still looking at the ship as it moves away.

INT. SPENCE'S HOTEL, CALCUTTA - DAY (1877)

33

SURESH is 16. He breathes heavily, carrying two heavy leather suitcases on his head and a smaller one in his hand along a staircase. The board in the background announces it as "Spence's Hotel". He is in western attire, the hotel uniform.

There are multiple similar-looking clocks on the wall, all ticking away with names of different cities: Canton, London, Istanbul, New York, Paris, Cairo, Hong Kong.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

42.

Puts down the luggage. He is the only coloured person in a lobby full of Europeans. TRAVELLER 1 turns around and pays SURESH some coins for his service.

As he leaves, SURESH overhears two British men talking, one excitedly acting out his experience and the other listening keenly. SURESH listens with big-eyed wonder.

TRAVELLER 2
...the python and I looked at
each other. I could feel the
power pulsing through his coils
like a fire hose under pressure.
...

SURESH, who overhears indiscreetly with open-eyed wonder, is curtly gestured to get out of the way.

A YOUNG COUPLE about to check out, gestures to him.

TRAVELLER 3
Hey boy. To the carriage please.

SURESH obeys orders but continues to overhear the conversation between two men. There are three leather trunks with labels on them. He puts all three on his head.

TRAVELLER 2
By the time we get to London, it
will be Christmas...

TRAVELLER 3
(passing by)
My niece came here to find a
suitable match.

SURESH is distracted by the atmosphere. He keeps turning around. The smaller bag on top of his head falls off on the ground.

INT. SHRAVANI'S HOUSE - DAY

34

SHRAVANI plucks out a Bengali book from a bookshelf, *Hutum Penchar Naksha* (The Barn-Owl's Secret Capers, a 19th century satire).

Starts browsing it.

EXT. OUTSIDE SPENCE'S HOTEL, CALCUTTA - DAY (CONTD. 1877)
35

SURESH is sitting at the back of a phaeton horse-carriage, guarding the luggage, and facing the retreating end of the street. The British YOUNG COUPLE is inside.

(CONTINUED)

Three Bengali boys of his age run after the carriage, teasing him and his outfit in satiric rhymed verse, while he tries hard to look away.

BOY 1
(rhyming in Bengali)
*Bilat theke elo gora/ mathar upor
kurti pora/padobhare kape
dhara...*

[SUPER] From England comes the
native White/In plumed hat and
tunic bright/The earth trembles
as he walks...[ENDS]

BOY 2
*Pantaloon pore, phaeton chorche/
Suresh ebar shaheb hochche*

[SUPER] Wearing pantaloons, riding
phaeton/ Suresh is now a white
man! [ENDS]

SURESH, embarrassed, gestures, threatening to beat them up.

BOY 3
(rhyming in Bengali)
*Vaishnab aaj, Krishtan
kaal/ Jaate uthlo ingrejer
dalaal.*

[SUPER] Vaishnav yesterday,
Christian today/ Lower caste imp
is now British pimp. [ENDS]

The boys keep on chasing the carriage.

After a while they give up the chase as the horse-carriage goes ahead of them.

EXT. OUTSIDE CHURCH, CALCUTTA - DAY (1877)

36

SURESH returns from work, exhausted. Still in hotel uniform. Outside the church, he is stunned by what he sees.

His UNCLE is standing outside the church, a bag hanging from his shoulder. As their eyes meet, both start running towards each other in joy and embrace ardently. Dialogues in Bengali.

SURESH
*How are you here? How have you
been? How is my mom?*

(CONTINUED)

UNCLE

How long can I live without seeing you? Your mother is worried. We do not know how you are managing all on your own.

SURESH

How's she?

He takes out from a bag several fruits and rotis and fried fishes wrapped in a banana leaf and gives them to him.

UNCLE

She sent all this. She cries a lot for you. The way you went away. She wants you to return. Suri, I came to Calcutta for that.

SURESH

Tell her I am fine here. I work in the biggest hotel. Meet people from all parts of the world. I want to see the world.

UNCLE notices his firmness and happiness. Doesn't insist any further.

UNCLE

*(murmurs in Sanskrit)
Vasudhaiva Kutumbakkam.*

SURESH

What?

UNCLE

The world is one family. (after a pause) In Sanskrit, Vasudhaiva Kutumbakkam... Our family may have lost you. May you find your own. A bigger one.

They hug each other warmly.

EXT. BANK OF THE GANGES, CALCUTTA - DAY (PRESENT DAY) 37

SHRAVANI is taking a leisurely walk through the riverfront.

There are many young couples hanging around and several old boats with solar panels soliciting tourists for a ride.

Close to her, beside the river, she sees two bare-bodied boys practicing wrestling (*kusti*).

As she watches, the image DISSOLVES TO

EXT. BANK OF THE GANGES, CALCUTTA - DAY (1877)

38

SURESH is wrestling. His bare body glistens with oil, entangled with that of another man, a big WRESTLER, around 23. Both wear loin-cloths, performing *kusti*.

They are seen in the backdrop of the Ganges. An INSTRUCTOR guides them. They are performing in a small clay-pit whose circular edges are marked by a small crowd of people who have gathered to see them.

SURESH is precariously balanced, with the older WRESTLER dominating him. However, he puts up a bold fight.

The INSTRUCTOR guides him (in Bengali).

INSTRUCTOR

*This is Indian style. Throw your
shoulder... Strangle him with
your elbows... Entangle neck with
your arms...*

SURESH follows as instructed and finally grounds his formidable opponent. Breathes heavily while enjoying the applause of only some small boys.

SURESH helps his wrestling rival to get up. He hugs him; they run to the edge of the bank, and from a height, dive into the river together.

EXT. BANK OF THE GANGES, CALCUTTA - DAY (PRESENT) CONTD.
39

SHRAVANI stands at a distance from the wrestlers.

Sees the same instructor of the past with the two men.

INSTRUCTOR

*Drag, drag his hips towards the
ground. This way you can defeat
any Western wrestler. They do not
know our techniques.*

She takes out a notepad and writes notes.

EXT. OLD CEMETERY, CALCUTTA - DAY (1877)

40

SURESH walks along with UPEN through a Christian cemetery. On both sides lie ornate tombs of the British. They walk holding each other's shoulder, speaking in Bengali.

UPEN

*Coming all the way from England,
to die in Calcutta!*

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

46.

SURESH

*Maybe, they did not want to be
anchored to their birth-place.
They wanted to go out and see the
world.*

UPEN

*Some, maybe. Most came here on
the call of duty. Or to make a
quick buck.*

They walk in silence through the cemetery of Victorian
tombs until they suddenly find themselves standing in
front of Michael Madhusudan Dutt's grave.

The epitaph is written in Bengali. Michael's name is
written below his marble bust.

UPEN recites, emotionally.

UPEN

*Where man in all his truest glory
lives/And nature's face is
exquisitely sweet*

SURESH continues.

SURESH

*For those fair climes I heave
impatient sigh/There let me live
and there let me die.*

He repeats to himself the last line.

SURESH

*There let me live. There let me
die.*

FADE OUT

INT. SAILORS' HOME, CALCUTTA - DAY (1878)

41

[INSERT] An old photograph of the Sailors' Home. It gets
covered with smoke.

[INSERT ENDS]

When the smoke clears, a blue ceramic tile in the doorway
reveals: "Sailors' Home".

SURESH, 17 years, is among a group of FOUR SAILORS, all
stoutly-built, sitting across a table playing cards.

There are four single wrought-iron beds in the room with
crumpled white bedsheets and a table where three of
them are playing cards, smoking and drinking.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

47.

SAILOR 4, is a serious man. He lies in bed, contemplating.

SURESH is warmly ensconced among them, particularly close to SAILOR 1. They talk in accents and smoke. The sound of ships at the harbour are heard at regular intervals.

SAILOR 1 has tattoos all over: swallows on both sides of the chest, pairs of dice, etc. SURESH looks at them with big-eyed wonder. He is persuading SAILOR 1 to take him onboard.

SURESH

I know how to cook. Ready to do anything you say.

SAILOR 1 does not respond. While playing cards, offers him a joint. SURESH takes it and puffs on it, heaving out a cloud of smoke. He starts coughing.

SAILOR 1

Easy, boy! Easy! Pure Patna opium.

SAILOR 2

The very best! I am carrying a shipload of that opium back to London. Laudanum, they now call it there.

SAILOR 1

When is she headed?

SAILOR 2

Me schooner? Leavin' 'morrow.

SURESH now goes and sits beside SAILOR 2, dragging his stool. He looks at his strange tatoos, that of a chicken and a pig.

SAILOR 2

This saves me. Terrible storm last week. Boatswain settin' up rigger fell from top mast. Drownded.

SURESH

London? Give me any work in ship. Anything!

SAILOR 2 too ignores his entreaty.

SAILOR 1 gets up, widely spreading his legs, balancing himself as if he is still on ship. He nudges SURESH.

SAILOR 1

Wanna come? Knob-knockin' in the nautchery?

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

48.

SURESH's eyes are closing under the spell of opium. He struggles to understand what it means.

SAILOR 4, an older man, lying in bed alone, suddenly talks loud as if to dissipate the transgressions around him.

SAILOR 4

"They that go down to the ships,
that do business in the great
waters, those see the works of
the Lord and his wonders in the
Deep." Psalms 107, my boy. Verse
23.

SAILOR 3, with a Hula girl tattoo, gestures SURESH to follow him to the corridor. Others do not notice it. SURESH, puzzled, follows him until they find a private corner.

SAILOR 3

(in a low voice, secretly)
Two of my guys contracted malaria
on land. I need help in the
engine room to load coal. It's a
cargo ship. You can stay in the
fo'c'sle with the lascars. The
Captain is Norwegian. For him,
all brown guys look the same.

SURESH cannot believe this. He instantly jumps out of the opium-induced semi-wakefulness, frantically clearing the smoke with his hands.

SURESH

You will take me to London?

SAILOR 3

Only under this condition. No pay
but free passage with food. I'm
deck officer. They call it First
Mate. If Captain finds out ...

SURESH cannot believe his luck. He hugs the sailor, trembling with joy.

SAILOR 3

She leaves in two days! HMS
Lancaster. Travel as stowaway.
Never come on deck. If Captain
catches you, he will throw you
offboard into the sea. You must
hide at all times. Hide in the
cargo, in the engine room, hide
in the foc's'cle. When she gets
close to the London port, jump
ship and swim to shore.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

49.

SURESH is undeterred, dazed between the charms of opium, debauchery, the Lord's Word and the promise of crossing the seas.

SURESH

OK, OK. Don't worry.

EXT. OUTSIDE BISWAS' VILLAGE HOUSE - NIGHT (1878)

42

It is a full-moon night. SURESH sneaks into the family house through the backyard. One can hear the sound of howling jackals.

He tiptoes near the window where he sees his MOTHER nursing his sister on her lap near a kerosene lamp. There is no one else in the room. He calls out to her in a loud whisper (in Bengali).

SURESH

Mom!

MOTHER reacts as if she has seen a ghost. She is shocked, almost screams in fear but controls herself by putting the edge of her sari on her mouth. She lays down the child on the mattress on the floor and runs inside.

Soon, his UNCLE comes out in the dark.

SURESH

I am going away.

UNCLE

You already went away. Two years ago!

SURESH

Leaving the country. In a ship. To London.

UNCLE

What? London? Across the dark waters? Have you become lascar?

SURESH

Lascar no. Not a seaman. What caste will I lose by crossing the seas? I have no caste. I am a Christian.

UNCLE

Suresh, you are mad! Careful, your father is here.

UNCLE goes inside while SURESH sees through the window that his MOTHER is talking to his UNCLE in anxiety and wiping her tears with the edge of her sari.

(CONTINUED)

They do something secretly - open a cupboard, check around to see if his father is coming. SURESH doesn't understand what's going on. MOTHER is pulling her own hand.

FATHER's Vaishnav chant can be heard, coming from the next room.

After some time, UNCLE stealthily comes out in the dark and gives him something wrapped in a soft, saffron cloth.

He opens it; finds it wrapped in another cloth and then, wrapped inside layers of paper is his mother's golden bangle.

UNCLE

*Your Mother sent this. 20 grams
of gold. She took off her wedding
bangle. Don't let any goldsmith
cheat you for its worth.*

SURESH turns around to leave. UNCLE calls back. He takes out a rolled paper wrapped in the English-language version of *Amrita Bazaar Patrika*. The date shows clearly as 1878. He opens it curiously.

It is a map of the world that he was seen touching in an earlier scene.

SURESH lingers over it, with emotion. UNCLE points out their place on earth.

UNCLE

*We are here (pointing to Calcutta
on the map). And here is London.
You will go like this (pointing
the sea-route with his finger).
Around Africa. Oh no, no. Now
there is the Suez Canal here. A
short-cut to Europe. You always
loved this map.*

He touches his UNCLE's feet respectfully. In turn, he embraces him.

UNCLE

*Wherever you are, write me
letters.*

SURESH nods. UNCLE quickly walks inside the house.

SURESH sees his MOTHER through the window. She now stands in front of the window, tightly holding the grill as if she is behind bars. Looks at her son.

SURESH holds the bangle between his palms like a prayer and raises it to her.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

51.

She tries hard to hold back her tears. The child on the floor starts crying inconsolably.

His FATHER appears in the doorway and looks around.

SURESH slips into the darkness. We hear again the howl of the jackals.

Over the prolonged darkness, a horn is heard.

EXT. BHAU DAJI LAD MUSEUM, MUMBAI - DAY

43

The horn of a modern-day double-decker bus is heard from a distance.

SHRAVANI relaxes on the grass. It is a quiet corner in the city. In the background, the Museum's exterior has a distinctly Victorian architecture.

Among visitors passing by, there are more Europeans and Japanese tourists than Indians, giving it an international feel.

Her phone rings. It's 'KARAN'. She doesn't take the call. Looks disturbed.

She is reading a Bengali book, the Bengali biography (with Biswas' photo) lying on the grass. There is a notebook where she has scribbled notes.

At the edge of the museum grounds, there are a row of huge trees. The chirping of birds increases as it is evening time.

EXT. ONBOARD SHIP - NIGHT (1878)

44

SURESH hides in the anchor chain-locker area of the forecastle where all the reserve chains are stored. It is damp and dark except a hanging light that creaks at the slightest movement of the ship.

The ship's name is displayed on its side: BSN - British Steam Navigation.

From that dark space, Suresh hears the huge uproar onboard as the ship leaves harbour with the upsurge of high-tide, accompanied by a long horn. The rupture of the anchor from the shore throws him to one side.

He hears ecstatic sounds that become a blend of Sanskrit, Arabic and Latin prayers accompanied by the blowing of conch-shells and drums.

(in Arabic)

*Subhana-alladhi sakh-khara la-na
hadha wa ma kunna la-hu muqrinin.*

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

*Wa inna ila rabbi-na la
munqalibun.*

(in Sanskrit)

*Om Triyambakam Yajamahe Sugandhim
Pushtivardhanam Urvarukmiva
Bandhanat Mrityurmukshiya
Mamritat*

(in Latin)

*Sancte Michael Archangele,
defende nos in proello, contra
nequitiam, et insidias diaboli
esto praesidium ...*

The light swings in wide arcs. Its pendulum-like movement ominously multiplies his own shadow on the walls.

Through a tiny opening, SURESH sees the phosphorescent foam left behind by the ship. It looks like a river of fire.

EXT. ONBOARD SHIP - NIGHT (1878) FEW DAYS LATER

45

SURESH is swinging in a hammock, trying hard to sleep and turning around as the roar of the ocean can be heard.

There are five more men sleeping in their hammocks in that cramped space.

He opens UNCLE's map to see his trajectory.

SURESH (VO)

(in Bengali)

*Against the voice of experience
and reason, I set out for the
unknown. We left Calcutta, moved
into the Bay of Bengal, into the
Indian Ocean. Our first stop was
Madras. Then, Ceylon.*

As he swings in his hammock in the darkness of the underdeck, he hears a faint but lilting Buddhist chant in Sanskrit when he says, Ceylon.

CHORUS (O.S.)

*Buddham Sharanam Gachchami/
Dhammam Sharanam Gachchami/
Sangham Sharanam Gachchami*

SURESH (VO) (CONTD)

*When we crossed the Suez Canal
and entered into the
Mediterranean Sea, the Indian
students said they had seen
mermaids.*

INT. BHAI DAJI LAD MUSEUM, MUMBAI - DAY

46

SHRAVANI walks through the corridor of the Museum, with a colourful array of Victorian bric-à-brac which is nevertheless, an identifiable Indian pastiche with Islamic and Zoroastrian interiors.

Queen Victoria's imposing black marble statue is at the centre of it all. She stops in front of it.

Different details draw her attention. She turns up and looks at the ceiling. Sees an envelope lying open in one of the exhibits. Becomes inquisitive and goes closer.

INT. BISWAS' ROOM IN RJ - NIGHT (1894)

47

SURESH's letter is lying on the table. We only see a hand, writing in Bengali script.

SURESH (VO)

(in Bengali)

*Since the age of 14, no one ever
did anything for me. I have been
a gangster to a gangster, a
gentleman to a gentleman, a
soldier to a soldier, a scholar
to a scholar.*

His wife and child are sleeping deeply.

INT. SHRAVANI'S HOUSE - NIGHT

48

SHRAVANI is tossing around in bed. KARAN is sleeping beside her but away, distant and fast asleep.

She keeps staring at the ceiling. The streetlight comes through the window and partially lights up the room.

She gets up in her night dress, somewhat sleep-walking. Goes to the other room, her study, and switches on the study lamp. Her hair ruffled, she sits in front of her desk. The white pin-board in front of her is empty.

She scribbles on a notepad and puts up two notes on the pin-board and stares at them:

SURESH BISWAS (1861-1905); and

BENGAL VILLAGE -> CALCUTTA->
LONDON

We see her from behind. Her hair covers the notes and we see an empty white board around her head.

EXT. STREET IN LONDON - DAY (1878)

49

It is a chilly morning in London. SURESH is slightly older, a 17-year old boy, selling newspapers in the streets. In the distance there is another boy of his age, BOZEN, who is also vending newspapers.

SURESH wears a shabby coat over a sweater and an equally shabby trouser and a yellow hat. He has a heap of newspapers wrapped around him with a yellow leather strap belt: *The Daily Mirror*, *The Times*, *Daily Telegraph* and *The Illustrated Police News*.

The year shows as 1878 in one of the papers. However, the sound track is silent. He walks around trying to sell. Several English men and women pass by but no one buys anything.

SURESH (VO)

(in Bengali)

*You all used to call me a wayward
vagabond. The fact is, I love
that word. This wandering life is
sacred to me, my only truth.
Otherwise, I remain alone in this
world.*

The sounds of London are now heard.

He takes out the *Illustrated Police News* and reads out the paper theatrically in a heavy Indian accent. He waves at passersby, slightly lifting his hat at them, displaying a *Punch* cartoon that shows a man with a dagger in a dark background.

SURESH

(reading)

Ghastly murder in London's East
End! Dreadful mutilation of a
woman.

Takes out another newspaper and reads from it. He goes near an old woman and reads aloud, drawing her attention.

SURESH (CONT'D)

The woman's body was completely
ripped open and her entrails were
wrapped round the woman's neck
...

Alarmed, several people flock to buy his newspapers as horse-carriages pass by. He is excited to see just a few papers left while the other boy's stack of papers have not sold as much.

He, BOZEN, is a 18-year old British boy with curly ruffled hair and innocent eyes; he wears a cap. Looks at him in bewilderment.

EXT. PRODUCTION OFFICE, MUMBAI - DAY

50

KAVITA calls SHRAVANI from her office, in the middle of the hustle. Several people walk around her.

KAVITA

Hi Shravani, how are things going?

SHRAVANI

(overheard)

OK. Not so good. I am stuck in London.

KAVITA

What do you mean?

SHRAVANI

I don't know how to imagine a scene that unfolds in a 19th century Victorian slum! So I am browsing these photographs online...

KAVITA

What about Dickens? Can that help in some way?

SHRAVANI

More than Dickens' novels. There is a book he wrote when he was 20 years old. *Sketches by Boz*. Amazing wealth of details.

Someone comes to KAVITA and demands her attention. She has to cut the line.

KAVITA

Listen, Sorry. I will call you later. OK? Stay cool!

EXT. LONDON EAST-END SLUMS - NIGHT (1878)

51

SLOW FADE IN. Cobble-stoned street at night. There is hardly anyone in the streets. It is a poor neighbourhood as is evident in the narrow lane, street garbage and run-down buildings.

By the side of a street-lamp, the young SURESH walks alone.

SHRAVANI (O.S.)

17-year old Suresh is accosted by two gangsters in London's East-End.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

56.

The gangsters wear worn-out leather jackets and round felt hats.

SHRAVANI (O.S.)(CONT'D)

Long shadows are cast on the
walls in film noir style.

The characters cast high-contrast shadows. One holds SURESH back putting a knife at his chin while the other drains off his pocket.

KAVITA (O.S.)

And the gangster says...

GANGSTER 1

Let's see what our dear blackie's
got... 9 shillings, 7 pence.

They assault him, take away all his money. As they walk away with his money, SURESH pounces on them with the same knife he used before. They hold him down and slit his nose. He bleeds.

GANGSTER 2

Nigger get nosey.

Suddenly, TWO POLICEMEN appear in blue uniform with a long line of buttons, a belt over the shirt and helmets with the royal coat of arms on them. They carry hand-lanterns in the dimly-lit street.

GANGSTER 1

(shouts out to his mate)

Backslang it!

The two gangsters disappear into the darkness as the POLICEMEN with lanterns pass by, ignoring the bleeding SURESH by the roadside. He c crawls to the dark passage of a building.

A YOUNG WOMAN stands leaning against the wall at the entrance and on seeing SURESH walking down the dark passage, she goes out and shouts at the guy who is nowhere to be seen in the dark.

WOMAN

Hey Bill! Maffickin' bully.

KAVITA (O.S.)

(in whispers)

'Maffickin' bully'! (laughs) Where
the hell did you get that from?

SHRAVANI (O.S.)

(also whispering)

Dictionary of Victorian Slang.
London's East End meets
Polanski's 'Chinatown'.

The YOUNG WOMAN is seen approaching SURESH in the dark.

INT. SURESH'S ROOM, LONDON EAST-END - NIGHT (A BIT LATER)
52

The same YOUNG WOMAN walks through a long, dark corridor and knocks on a door. Enters the dingy room where SURESH is sitting on his bed. He is bleeding, trying to cover his nose. She carries a medical bottle with red liquid in it and attends SURESH's wounds.

She is LAURA, a woman in her early twenties, dressed in a tight-fitting laced bodice and two layers of long skirts, one a chemise.

She looks around the room. The decor has a sleazy ambience with erotic scribblings on the walls, an adult Cupid framed on the damp wall and broken furniture.

LAURA
(looking around)
'Tis a shoebox. It all comes o'
bein' poor.

She carefully wipes away his blood and applies the red medicine to his nose. Looks concerned.

The silence between them is filled with verbal fights over money between a man and a woman next door though the actual conversation cannot be figured out.

A furniture is knocked down and then the noises suddenly stop.

LAURA
(referring to the people
next-door)
Half-rats!

SURESH looks at her with confused silence.

LAURA
Laura. Church-bell... Look how
Bill batty-fanged you!

KAVITA (VO)
Church-bell?

SHRAVANI (VO)
A woman who talks too much.

KAVITA (VO)

(laughs) Real
Victoriana.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

58.

Still ruffled, SURESH allows himself to be treated by her. She tries her best to paste a tape on his nose but it keeps falling off. They laugh.

She hugs him by way of appreciation.

EXT. LONDON'S EAST-END - DAY (1878)

53

SURESH and BOZEN, are walking back after selling the newspapers. Today none of them have managed to sell many papers. Both have leather straps around them.

BOZEN has curly, ruffled hair and coarse clothes. He wears a vest-coat but without a hat. SURESH is counting his shillings.

BOZEN

Not much dough, chuckaboo!

Laughs. SURESH's expression shows disgust at the ambiance.

BOZEN (CONTD)

Welcome to Ole' Nichol- darkes' London. 'Tis a warkus.

SURESH

Warkus? Oh, work-house?

BOZEN

Warkus... roomin' house... coffee shop... whate'er you call it. 'Tis the rookeries, Suresh. Lots o' kettledrums (he cups his chest to suggest breasts).

(INSERT) CU of SHRAVANI's hand (with her white bangle) opens Grose's *Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue*. (INSERT ENDS)

SURESH and BOZEN go past a brick-layered arch of a building with crumbling walls and peeling paint.

(INSERT) A montage of B&W still photographs of Victorian slums. (INSERT ENDS)

Outside the building, a child carries a heavy load and small fishes are left to dry on a wooden tray standing between two wine barrels.

On a bench against the wall, two people are seated: a shabbily dressed woman with a head-scarf who feeds a baby and an old man in equally shabby clothes, who holds a metallic beer mug, smoking a pipe pompously.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

59.

(Turns to colour) SURESH passes through the dark corridor of the earlier scene and sees a kind-looking man coming out with a big knife in his hands. His apron is stained with blood.

Through an open door, he sees a woman pushing an automatic Singer sewing machine with a false wooden leg, a child sitting on the carpet and cutting leather pieces.

SURESH turns into a right corridor and sees women in laced underdress, leaning against the wall, cigarette in hand, and giving inviting looks.

He turns his key and opens the door to his room.

INT. SHRAVANI'S HOUSE - NIGHT

54

Archival images of old London are seen on a laptop screen. SHRAVANI is watching a documentary about the underbelly of London in the 1880s.

We watch her watching the video as in a 'reaction-video'. A pile of books are on her table that deal with circus, Brazil or Victorian England.

We see an actual BBC documentary with historical photographs alternating with staged scenes of policemen gathered around Victorian gaslights and prostitutes walking the streets.

[INSERT] Excerpts from the documentary.

FILM NARRATOR (VO)

The East End of London came to be the focus of all our social anxieties. When women went out into the streets, they carried guns and knives. Gin was very cheap and drunkenness was so common that there could be fights any time of the day. There were 80,000 prostitutes in the streets of London...

[INSERT ENDS]

While the video is playing in the background, we see her gazing into one of the photos she has collected, that of a nude seated on tiger-skin.

INT. LAURA'S ROOM, LONDON - NIGHT (1878)

55

A framed photographic portrait hangs on the wall showing LAURA nude, posing on tiger skin.

It is a tidier room than SURESH's. The walls are covered with flowery wall-paper which is damp and coming off at different places.

On the other wall near the bed, there is a portrait of Saint George and the Dragon. The bed has a high back-rest on both sides. By its side there is a chest of drawers and an ornate dressing table, above which there is a big circular mirror with a laced border which frames her. A bottle of gin lies by the bedside.

LAURA sees SURESH looking at her photo portrait.

LAURA

10 hours as a dressmakers'
needlewoman for 3 shilling a
month. M' wages hardly get me
food. For the res' I am obligated
to go to the streets. Or pose for
artists.

On the table, there are some cards on which something is printed. SURESH picks them up and browses them in-between gulping gin straight from the bottle.

SURESH

What are these?

LAURA

Escort cards. Guys give these to
gals.

SURESH

(reads haltingly)

Dear Miss, I'm just your size and
complexion/ I'm going in your
direction/ So, if you have no
objection/ I'd like to be your
protection.

LAURA

(reads another)

See this. Your coral lips were
made to kiss/ I stoutly will
maintain/ And dare you say my
lovely miss/ That aught was made
in vain.

She laughs heartily but SURESH is nervous, not sure he got it.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

61.

SURESH

Many cards?

LAURA nods, smiling.

She turns around making herself available, suggesting SURESH to disentangle the strings at the back of her corset.

He walks towards the circular mirror-frame, visibly nervous; messes up the strings. She does it herself. Then she starts rolling off her stockings and makes herself available for kissing. She gradually takes off layer by layer of her dress and puts them on the side of the bed.

LAURA

Like basket-makin'?

She weaves her fingers with his to suggest the meaning of 'basket-making'.

SURESH is nervous. Makes him lie down in the bed; acts playfully, getting on top of him.

LAURA

Easee dis way. Sain' George an'
d' dragon! I'm Sain', you are
dragon monster.

She talks and laughs while making love. Not SURESH.

LAURA

Dragon rears up from d' lake to
tower over d' sain'. Sain'
...tames d' wild dragon. Slayz
dragon an' rescues princess.

SURESH gradually peaks and she embraces him.

His face sweats. Their bare bodies are entangled. She wants to hold on to him but he tears away and leaves. LAURA lies in bed alone, disappointed.

EXT. STREET IN LONDON - DAY (1878)

56

SURESH is selling newspapers as usual in front of a Victorian building - King's Cross Station. It's slow.

It is a cold morning and there are very few people in the streets. He is wearing three layers of coats.

Looking around, SURESH's attention is drawn towards a boy who is a walking advert, hanging big framed photos across his neck - one at the front and the other behind. It says, *Pears Soap - The White Man's Burden*.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

62.

When he turns around, SURESH sees it has the image of a black kid in a bathtub who becomes white after being washed with Pears soap.

SURESH smiles. Picks up a newspaper randomly and starts to read aloud from it by way of selling as he sees a gentleman walking by. He tries a fake British accent.

SURESH
(aloud)
Wombcats from Australia.
Chimpanzees and giraffes from
Kenya. Royal Bengal tigers from
India. Polar bears from the
Arctic. Penguins from the
Antartic. All on sale at the
Harrod's Supermarket.

The gentleman passes by without buying. Suddenly, SURESH sees something in the paper and sits down on a nearby bench. He reads it to himself.

SURESH
Height of folly! It would be
unwise for any visitors to Kent
to leave without calling at the
John O'Connor's 'Cosmopolitan
Circus'.

It has images of a circus tent, horses, zebras, acrobats and trapeze dancers.

INT. SURESH'S ROOM IN LONDON EAST END - NIGHT (1879) 57

SURESH, 18, is packing his bags.

It comprises of a medium-sized cardboard suitcase which has been dented on top but manages to close with steel clips. We see him collecting and putting together all his belongings. They comprise of two pairs of trousers, a few shirts and a coat. He also keeps in the box the pen-knife he had in India, and takes special care in hiding his mother's golden bangle among his clothes. Someone knocks.

It is LAURA. She is surprised to see his room cleared up.

LAURA
What you up to?

SURESH
Going away.

LAURA
Where?

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

63.

SURESH
To see Kent.

LAURA
See Kent? Why?

He doesn't reply.

LAURA
What about me?

She stands leaning against the door.

He starts kissing her. She resists. Wants to talk. He insists. He lifts the two layers of her skirt and becomes sexually aggressive. He finishes himself while she stands there ruffled, emotionless.

He takes out the money from his pocket. Counts five shillings and gives it to her like a payment.

He promptly picks up his suitcase, closes the door behind them and walks away through the dark passage. LAURA keeps standing in the doorway of the empty passage with the money still in her extended hands.

She stands frozen with what has suddenly happened. Sees him walking away in long strides.

After he leaves, in the empty corridor, she crumbles on the floor, the money rolling away.

The same music that was heard when he had left his father's house, comes back here.

EXT. COFFEE SHOP, MUMBAI - DAY

58

KAVITA has a file with a few printed pages open on her lap while SHRAVANI sits beside her. Puts down the page, sighs. There are a few moments of awkward silence. Kavita is shaken.

KAVITA
Do you really want to show this side of Biswas?

SHRAVANI
Definitely.

KAVITA
Did this happen? I mean, you made this up? Why would you?

SHRAVANI
He claimed to have slept around with a lot of prostitutes.

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

SHRAVANI (cont'd)

Bragged about it but despised the women.

KAVITA

Bragged to his uncle? How odd!
Back then? Sounds absurd.

SHRAVANI

Hmm. Complicated.

KAVITA

Who isn't?

SHRAVANI

He loved his mother so much and yet ...

KAVITA

Which star wants to be seen like that? Can you still make him a hero?

SHRAVANI

I don't really care about his heroism. I'm interested in something else.

KAVITA

Mr Mehra and the star, all they see is his heroism.

SHRAVANI

Look, you will always see what you want to see. Just as I do. OK, he was a tiger-tamer. Needs guts to do that. But I feel no admiration for those male values.

KAVITA

What has changed, in more than 100 years, if we are still saying the same thing? What do you see?

SHRAVANI

There were millions of Indian migrants in the 19th century to the Caribbean but there is no story to hold on to. It's not like now, when overseas travel is easy and everybody is going everywhere. I admire how Suresh found his way through the world, tactfully survived in hostile conditions.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

65.

KAVITA

Suresh survived. Tactfully. Shall
we survive the telling of his
tale? Tact!

The waiter comes and gives them the bill. Kavita takes it.

INT. JOHN O'CONNORS' CIRCUS, KENT - NIGHT (1879)

59

The circus tent has *John O'Connor's 'The Great Cosmopolitan Circus'* painted on it in golden letters on canvas cloth with red and white stripes. There are painted posters of flying trapeze gymnasts all over along with pictures of dressed-up animals: horses, chimpanzees and lions and also a lady without a head.

Several people have lined up, mostly parents with children. The show is about to start and there are powerful lanterns outside.

At the entrance to the tent, there is a narrow stage from which a male TALKER announces in a mock-poetic tone, megaphone in hand. Beside the TALKER, there is a WOMAN-DRESSED-AS-A-WHITE-HORSE who pretends to be galloping.

TALKER

As sure a sign of spring as the
greening of the willow trees or
the whistle of the tree sparrows,
The Great Cosmopolitan Circus
begins a new season. For 10 pence
only, ladies and gentlemen, you
will see a bat big enough to kill
a horse. Elephants walk on glass
bottles. Fire-eaters,
sword-swallowers, two-headed
women. Believe it or not.

SURESH enters the tent. It is full and sparkling with gaslights and colourful drapery. There is a group of musicians in one corner who play joyful band music.

Two CLOWNS in harlequin pants and coats, roll around and do a series of backward somersaults. One bends while the other jumps over him. Then the EQUESTRIAN encircle the sawdust arena. He stands above one of the horses. Then departs.

Two ACROBATS arrive, one man, the other a young boy. They juggle with two knives at the same time. Then, the young boy stands against a board and the man throws several knives at him. Tension peaks before every throw. They all stick to the board around him. The audience sighs and applauds.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

66.

Then come two TRAPEZE DANCER GIRLS who swing from one end to another. Among them, there is a young girl, ELENA, 18, from whom SURESH cannot move his gaze, a blue-eyed blonde. She wears a glittering dress.

ELENA jumps from one swing to another, caught by the other girl, who throws her back into the next ring. Audiences gasp in excitement.

JOKER 1
(looking around)
Now, where is the bat you said
that can kill a horse?

JOKER 2 brings out a cricket bat.

JOKER 1 goes after JOKER 2. He runs away.

JOKER 1
Is that a bat?

JOKER 2
A bat that can kill a horse!

They disappear backstage, chasing each other. There are loud offscreen sounds of thrashing accompanied by drums.

The audience laughs heartily as does SURESH, along with all the children.

EXT. BACKLOT OF O'CONNORS' CIRCUS - DAY (1879) NEXT DAY 60

It is morning. The circus looks dreary like an after-party scene. SURESH goes around the tent in search of an entry to the backlot.

There are four horse-carriages painted in bright red and yellow with pictures of circus and O'Connors' name on them in golden letters.

The four white horses have been unhinged and they are grazing in the distance. There is an elephant that stands swinging hay into its mouth, rocking back and forth, clanking the chain around its foot.

SURESH walks further into the living area and sees a cage-carriage where a lion is fast asleep.

There are several canvas tents. One of them is full with pots and pans where someone is cooking with coal-fire, white fumes come out of it. He goes past a girl playing the hoolahoop and a young man practising a juggling act, a muscular man lifting weights.

Smoke billows from a pile of wood.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

67.

Two dwarfs in ordinary attire are playing cards over a wooden crate. Another performer is trying his hand at the saxophone.

SURESH

Where do I find Mr O'Connor?

CLOWN 1 looks serious. He checks him out and reluctantly shows him the trawler. SURESH waits outside.

SURESH

Mr O'Connor?

JOHN O'CONNOR looks out of the window of the trawler.

He comes out of the trawler and gives a strange look at SURESH. He is a pleasant-looking man in his mid-fifties with all white hair, grey moustache, blue eyes and a sharp nose.

O'CONNOR

(displeased) How did you get into the backlot?

SURESH

Sorry, sir. I wanted to meet you sir. I will do anything you want.

O'CONNOR

I got my own men to do the work. Things are slow this season.

He closes the door of the trawler.

EXT. BACKLOT OF O'CONNORS' CIRCUS - EVENING (HOURS LATER)
61

SURESH sits on a wooden crate outside the trawler. He tries in vain to make friends with people. Even the children turn away from him.

Sunlight has visibly dimmed. The lamps have started coming on. The performers are getting ready. SURESH keeps watching them. Everyone gives him cold stares.

Suddenly, the door of the trawler opens and O'CONNOR comes out. He is busy, walking straight ahead when SURESH runs after him, interrupting him.

O'CONNOR

(surprised)
Still here?

SURESH

I will do anything! I once fought a Bengal Tiger.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

68.

O'CONNOR laughs mockingly and keeps walking. SURESH keeps running after him.

Suddenly SURESH lifts his trouser that reveals some deep bite-mark wounds on his thigh.

SURESH

Here, look.

O'CONNOR stops, looks at it from a distance. Then gets close to the bite-marks, moves his finger over it and then looks up at him with a strange expression.

A muscular WRESTLER is passing by. O'CONNOR gestures him to come towards him.

O'CONNOR

You see that guy? (pointing to the wrestler). He's no tiger. Wanna try him?

O'CONNOR leads them to a nearby spot and marks a circle with a stick.

The WRESTLER breathes deeply to display his heaving muscles. He is in tight shorts and wears a vest. He is significantly taller than SURESH, who now looks very nervous.

SURESH takes off his shirt and rolls his trouser.

O'CONNOR

Ready? Come on, go!

They go round and round, looking for an opportunity to strike. SURESH pauses to pick up some dust and rub it on his body. The WRESTLER is confused by his actions.

SURESH emulates the moves of a tiger and attacks the WRESTLER by the neck who is taken aback but retaliates strongly and SURESH falls on the ground, almost defeated. He somehow garners the strength to get up.

They fight in contrasting styles, the WRESTLER in western style and SURESH in Indian *kusti* style. He remembers the *kusti* INSTRUCTOR's exhortation by the Ganges (in Bengali).

[INSERT]

INSTRUCTOR

Throw your shoulder... Strangle him with your elbows... entangle neck with your arms... drag his hips towards the ground.

[INSERT ENDS]

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

69.

SURESH does accordingly while his Western opponent is confused by his style. At one point SURESH uses his elbow to hit the WRESTLER on his spine.

[INSERT] SURESH sees flashes of the tiger-fight.

[INSERT ENDS]

[INSERT] He remembers witnessing a David-Goliath wrestling match when he was with UPEN. [INSERT ENDS]

This fight in opposing styles continues till the WRESTLER changes direction and SURESH throws him down with a front headlock.

SURESH stands up, triumphant, while the WRESTLER walks off.

A crowd has gathered and all the circus people have been watching the fight. Among them, there is the beautiful TRAPEZE DANCER ELENA with whom he had been captivated the night before. O'CONNOR smiles in appreciation.

INT. INSIDE O'CONNOR'S TRAWLER - DAY (1879) NEXT DAY 62

SURESH sits at the edge of a chair. O'CONNOR's name is painted in gold on the sides.

It is a modified Pullman bus done up in red velvet and mahogany, complete with a sleeping berth, woodstove and armchairs. O'CONNOR is smoking a cigar. Pours whisky to SURESH.

O'CONNOR

We are honest people. Not like Barnum! Damn that fraud. Buys old negro woman for 40 bucks. Calls her the 161-year old mother of George Washington! Earns ten times that money in a month. We do more than half the things we promise. That's a lot in this business. What's the name...

SURESH

Suresh.

O'CONNOR

Sir-race? Sirrace... There are two kinds of people in the world. The kind who stay are Town People. The kind who leave are Circus People. We are now in Ashford, due in a week in Lancashire; due in Norfolk week after.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

70.

SURESH
(romantically)
Waking up in a different town
every morning! Travelling with
the show.

SURESH looks highly enthused.

O'CONNOR
I want you to do the Hindoo
snake-charmer. All the mudshows
are doing it.

He searches for a positive answer.

SURESH
I caught a cobra once. It
attacked me when I climbed a
tree. I killed it.

O'CONNOR
Listen boy. You'll have a place
to sleep. Costs too much to feed.
People, animals. Work free for
three months. Show me what you
can do.

SURESH is just too excited with the offer. O'CONNOR stands
up. Opens the door of the trawler.

EXT. BACKLOT OF O'CONNORS' CIRCUS - DAY (1879)LITTLE LATER
63

O'CONNOR comes out of his trawler with SURESH. Now he is
far more cordial with the boy.

O'CONNOR
This is the craziest business
there is. But we are family.

He walks him through the place, introducing him to the
members.

O'CONNOR (CONTD)
ANDRADA, gypsy from Romania.

She is doing the hoop.

ANDRADA
(with a heavy accent)
I read your past, your footure.
For a shilling, I'll read your
mind.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

71.

SURESH

What about my present?

ANDRADA

There is no present. Only past
and footure.

O'CONNOR

The acrobat girls ... from
Germany, Italy, Yugoslavia.

SURESH is now greeted with warm smiles.

A black man is seen cleaning the wagon with soap and water.

O'CONNOR (CONTD)

The Negro... is a former slave.
Now we dress him up as African
Royalty. People love it when he
dances with the spear.

They all come and greet SURESH. Some of them give him a hug.

There is a man with a dark scar on one side of his face.

O'CONNOR (CONTD)

Jose from Spain, Andalucia. Earns
his keep eating fire. Petrol
exploded inside his mouth. Needs
to grow a beard to hide the
scar.

He caresses JOSE's face like a loving father.

O'CONNOR (CONTD)

(affectionately) Gymnasts,
Natalya from Russia, Pierre from
France. Don't be like this guy!
Borrows money the day after
salaries are paid. Any idea where
it goes?

O'CONNOR (CONTD)

ELENA, the dancer. She is new here. Does the trapeze act.

There is a moment of spark between them as SURESH prolongs the handshaking. She is an overgrown child, 18 years old.

INT. SHRAVANI'S HOUSE - NIGHT

64

KAVITA is in SHRAVANI's study where there is a small sofa.

She is browsing the books that are piled on SHRAVANI's desk. Most of these are books on the Victorian Circus, biographies and autobiographies of circus performers.

She looks at the notes that SHRAVANI has pinned on the board.

SHRAVANI walks in with two cups of coffee. Places it on the table.

KAVITA

Impressive! You are working
really hard. Does all this help?

She refers to the books.

SHRAVANI

You never know who suddenly
offers an insider's insight, a
little detail that rings so true.
Then I use that to imagine
Biswas' life. Is there any other
way?

KAVITA

Maybe, you are taking this a bit
too seriously. Screenwriters
don't research that much. They
just write.

SHRAVANI

One life opens the door to
another life in a way ...

KARAN drops in. Shakes hands with Kavita.

SHRAVANI

She is Kavita. This is Karan.

The coldness is evident.

KARAN

Heard a lot about you!

KAVITA

I am so lucky to reconnect with
Shravani.

KARAN

So, how's the tiger-fighting
superhero doing these days?

He is keen to hang around and chat with KAVITA.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

73.

SHRAVANI

We need to do some work, Karan.

She gets up and shows him out, closing the door. KAVITA looks uncomfortable.

KAVITA

So, where are we now? (thinks)
OK, so Suresh joins O'Connor's
circus.

Kavita picks up a book of circus publicity material and reads out randomly from a flyer.

EXT. JOHN O'CONNORS' CIRCUS - NIGHT (1879) FEW DAYS LATER
65

'The Great Cosmopolitan Circus' banner reveals a TALKER making announcements. We see the Talker but hear Kavita's voice.

KAVITA (O.S.)

(dramatically)

Tonight, History is Mystery, the
Czar of Bi-zarre. Jugglery by
Hindoo acrobat.(pauses) Hindoo
acrobat! The cataract of the
Ganges. Wow! A congestion of
amusement. A resonant tantara of
merriment. (laughs out loud) Love
it. Resonant tantara of
merriment!

The WOMAN-DRESSED-AS-A-HORSE continues to gallop onstage while the fiddle plays in the background.

SURESH is dressed up exotically as a 'Hindoo acrobat'. He wears a turban with a green jewel on it, a shining red shirt and loose yellow Turkish trousers, with a tight green sash around his waist. He looks nervous as he enters the arena, particularly with the cheering crowds and blazing lanterns.

A rope has been strung high up above the arena. He climbs the height by using a rope ladder suspended from above until he reaches the part which is strung diagonally across the arena.

He does well for some time, though trembling, and then falls off the rope mid-way through, onto the safety net. Bounces off it and starts climbing the rope ladder again. The audience boos.

ELENA, the trapeze dancer, walks in to divert the attention. The lights shift to her even as Suresh struggles to get out of the safety net in the dark.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

74.

ELENA starts performing gymnastics. SURESH now has to perform acro-yoga positions with her, going from simple to complex, holding her high with one of his legs as she rests on it and seems flying. She does it expertly but SURESH keeps failing. She can no longer cover them up. Even the children notice it and there are loud boos from the audience.

EXT. OUTSIDE CIRCUS TENT - DAY (1880)

66

O'CONNOR looks cranky and annoyed with SURESH whom he sees hanging around with ELENA in the distance, at the edge of the circus-grounds. The lions are raging in their cage. He calls SURESH.

O'CONNOR
(shouting)

Hey.

Gestures SURESH to come but both of them start running towards him.

O'CONNOR
Elena, get back to work.

He shows SURESH a tumbler with bloody raw meat in it.

O'CONNOR
Take this to George and Debra.
They are hungry.

SURESH is scared. He can hear the lions roaring.

O'CONNOR
I am not here to feed them all
the time. You got to do it.

ELENA too is scared. Before going away, she quickly whispers to him.

ELENA
George killed the last trainer.

SURESH pauses for a while, afraid. Then, he walks slowly towards the tub of meat, picks it up with fear.

The lions' roar increases in intensity as he approaches their cage. O'CONNOR accompanies him and then stops; orders him to go forward.

O'CONNOR
First you have to feed them
before you tame them. Carry the
meat. For two weeks. Then try to
comb the lion's mane through the
bars. If they are ok with that,
(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

75.

O'CONNOR (cont'd)
 you can walk inside the cage with
 the meat.

Suresh takes an iron rod and extends the meat to them
 through the bars. One of them try to snatch it from
 another.

When he withdraws the iron rod, he finds it bent.

EXT. FOREST IN ENGLAND - DAY (1880)

67

SURESH and ELENA wander in the forest. First they hold
 hands and then, kiss. She inclines against a rock and
 looks overwhelmed with emotion. She speaks with a heavy
 German accent.

ELENA
 Can I tell you something?
 Promise, you will not tell
 anybody.

SURESH
 What is it?

SURESH gets anxious and curious.

ELENA
 I ran away from home.

SURESH
 Me too!

ELENA
 My name is not Elena.

SURESH
 No?

ELENA
 Don't tell anybody.

SURESH
 Why you ran away? From where?

ELENA
 Bavaria. Germany. My family lives
 in a big house in Regensburg.

She starts crying.

SURESH
 How did you come here?

(CONTINUED)

ELENA

Don't want to be ballerina. Like a clock. (demonstrates some routine moves) The circus is so much fun! Here every day is sunshine. Never a cloud.

Now she starts crying inconsolably.

SURESH

I ran away from home when I was 15.

ELENA

You too?

SURESH

I had no one.

SURESH hugs her, trying to console her. She keeps sobbing.

SURESH

Want to go back home?

ELENA

No!

She shakes her head and wipes her tears as they sit together embracing each other in the woods.

SURESH

Are you sure?

ELENA

No!

While kissing, he holds her hands and finds that the soft flesh of both her palms is full of deep scratches where blood has dried up. Some of the scratches extend to the fingers. He is shocked.

INT. SHRAVANI'S HOUSE - NIGHT (CONTD)

68

SHRAVANI and KAVITA are still in conversation.

KAVITA

Is Elena real?

SHRAVANI

She is not there in the letters but very much there in the biographies. I just gave her a name.

(CONTINUED)

KAVITA

I thought you didn't like the biographies.

SHRAVANI

There must be some basis to it even if we cannot prove it. Lots of young people did run away to the circus.

KAVITA

Like they run away from small towns and come to Bombay to become actors! The film industry is a circus.

SHRAVANI

Both teenagers. Both runaways. So there may have been a connection.

KAVITA

Imagine Suresh going nuts over a blue-eyed blonde. Like, a creature from another planet.

INT. CIRCUS TENT - NIGHT (1880) DAYS LATER

69

The show starts amidst wild excitement and drumbeats. There are some aerial performances with red silky strands of fabric accompanied by dramatic music.

There is a fire-eater on the ground.

THE TALKER

And now, Ladies and Gentlemen, now comes *The Blonde Venus*, the Queen of the Trapeze.

The arena goes completely dark.

The spotlight falls on ELENA, who appears in a glittering red coat, her head crowned with golden hair. She is glowing.

She reaches the centre of the arena with the spotlight following her. Then, she makes a toe-ballet pose, throws away her red cloak and begins her slow, graceful ascent of the rope, 50 feet up, as the band plays a slow waltz.

SURESH is very tense, watching her from below. The arena lights up more and he is seen moving the thick rope suspended from the peak of the canopy. He moves it around in circles, Elena starts revolving around the rope, high up in the air. She holds the rope with her two hands and swirls around it until she creates a perfect circular, disc-like pattern.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

78.

Her palms have started bleeding.

The audience starts applauding. She moves higher until she catches a hanging swing and jumps onto it. She swings daringly at a great height, gliding effortlessly from one ring to another, performing somersaults.

And then suddenly, the swivel on the trapeze breaks even as she catches it.

Elena falls all the way, 50 feet below, in full public view, missing the safety net below, onto the bare boards of the stage with a deafening sound.

Everybody takes a few seconds to react until they see the dust settling and ELENA's body, face down, lying still on the ground. Blood oozes out of her blond hair.

The lights, the music, all the sounds, go off.

EXT. CIRCUS GROUNDS - DAY (1880)

70

The circus tent has come down.

The field is almost empty except for the litter.

KAVITA (O.S.)

God! You killed her so soon.

SHRAVANI (O.S.)

One of the fatal deaths so common
in the circus.

Most of the living tents are not there.

Smoke billows in the distance.

Even the animals are sleeping.

Only two horses can be seen grazing in the fields.

EXT. FOREST IN ENGLAND - DAY (1880)

71

SURESH is walking alone through the woods.

Stops where he had kissed ELENA.

He sees the rock where she had sat.

It starts raining but SURESH keeps walking until he disappears among the dense trees.

INT. SHRAVANI'S HOUSE - DAY

72

SHRAVANI is in her study, writing furiously on her laptop. The pin-board in front of her is now full with notes and photographs.

She has Biswas's photograph in front of her.

She has also marked timelines of his life.

She ponders over them.

Picks out for a journal on the shelf: *Journal of Bengali Studies*. She opens on the bookmarked page. It is Maria Barrera Agarwal's paper on Suresh Biswas.

SHRAVANI reaches out for her mobile and exchanges texts with KAVITA. These are displayed on-screen.

[INSERT]

SHRAVANI: A scholar from Ecuador, Maria-Barrera Agarwal travelled the world for 5 years researching SB.

KAVITA: Wow! And?

SHRAVANI: Lots of evidence + new info.

KAVITA: R u serious? Just in time for us? How lucky!

SHRAVANI: Say, how strange! '*Apna time ayega*' (Hindi).['My time has come!'] I mean, SB's.

KAVITA: *Aap ka bhi. Apna time ayega* (Hindi). [Your too. Your time will come!] Which SB? Shravani Banerjee or Suresh Biswas?

SHRAVANI: Lol. Biswas, stupid. (Smiley) Let's catch up soon. Bye! [INSERTS END]

SHRAVANI reverts to the journal, turning the pages to where there is a B&W circus flyer of the 'World Fair in Islington'.

[INSERT]

A montage of archival images of the Agricultural World Fair at Islington: posters, handbills, photographs and news reports. An Irish folk-band plays in the background.

[INSERT ENDS]

SURESH is seen entering a lion's cage.

EXT. WORLD FAIR IN ISLINGTON, ENGLAND - EVENING (1881) 73

An ornate red-and-black billboard says:
JOHN O'CONNOR'S

THE GREAT COSMOPOLITAN CIRCUS

Dec 24, 1881

It is the colour version of the flyer that Shravani had seen.

O'CONNOR is tense and excited, getting SURESH ready for the show. They are in the backstage area. A curtain separates them from the hub of the Fair.

O'CONNOR has a heap of clothes of different colours, from which he is trying out different ones for Suresh. He picks up a Persian shawl, then a Turkish cap and Alibaba trousers and tries them on SURESH. Wonders.

Throws them back into the pile. Draws a red line on his forehead with a red powder. Then wraps a Sikh turban on his head. Picks up a silk ribbon, wraps it around his waist. Tries tall leather boots on him. SURESH goes through it all patiently.

All along, the publicity announcements are heard along with the excited ambiance of the Fair.

ANNOUNCER (O.S.)
Free Menagerie show! As the
British Empire extends to the
remote parts of the world, even
the wild beasts of the jungle
enjoy the fruits of British
Civilisation.

A marching band adds to the cacophony, along with the roars of animals - elephants, lions, cows, bulls and different kind of birds.

ANNOUNCER (O.S.)
And now, ladies and gentlemen,
the clever Hindoo lion-tamer, the
master of the king of beasts,
will enter the cage of the
wildest animals on the planet.

At the mention of 'Hindoo lion-tamer', SURESH, 20, appears, whip in hand. He is in tall black boots, red pants, a blue jacket, a red sash across his waist and a blue turban. His moustache is thick and rolled downwards. His eyes are intense and focussed. There is a loud applause.

SURESH enters the cage to a sudden hushed silence. He makes a sound of the whip by beating it in the air.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

81.

The steel trap-door opens, just high enough for the beasts. Out come two lions, snarling and roaring, leaping at each other and at him. They frantically roam around the cage. With the sound of his whip, they get frightened and withdraw to a corner.

SURESH takes centre-stage, pulls a stool and gestures the lion to sit on it. One lion obeys him and then follows the second.

SURESH makes them stand on two legs and swing their heads. It seems they are swinging to the rhythms of the band playing outside. There is tremendous applause.

He holds the whip at a height and asks the lions to jump over it. He then puts it higher and they obey him again. The audience explodes. Gradually the sounds fade away.

SURESH (VO)
(in Bengali)
*Uncle, no other life is worth
living.*

EXT. JAMRACH'S MENAGERIE, LONDON - DAY (1881)

74

SURESH is 20 years old. He stands in front of a big three-storied building with a wide board in green that says:

[INSERT] JAMRACH'S MENAGERIE, EST. 1840 [ENDS]

It has several show-windows with pictures of birds and animals on them.

Suresh walks through the half-open dark green door and finds another sign board that says,

[INSERT] PROF. JAMRACH'S COLLEGE OF ANIMALS [ENDS]

As he follows the arrow, he hears all kinds of animal sounds, specially bird-calls.

There are huge crates all over the place.

A SMALL BOY with a heavy bucket, passes him by, without looking at SURESH. He notices an office with a glassdoor that says,

PROF. CHARLES JAMRACH

He cautiously knocks on the door.

JAMRACH
Yes, come in.

It is a large room filled with stuffed animals. Deers, hyenas, life-size polar bears and tigers divert his gaze.

(CONTINUED)

At the far end, against the window, there is a stout gentleman who sits across the table. This is CHARLES JAMRACH.

He is around 50 years old, with his hair parted through the middle, dignified-looking and dressed formally, smoking a cigar. He has a long moustache and a trimmed beard.

SURESH

Sir, my name is Suresh. You called for me.

JAMRACH

Oh yes, the Hindoo lion-tamer. I did call you over, didn't I?

SURESH now sees a copy of the newspaper *The Era* of Dec 27, 1881 on his desk.

He picks up the paper and displays it.

SURESH

My honour, Professor Jamrach.

JAMRACH gets up. He is a tall man. A picture of authority.

JAMRACH (CONTD)

I capture animals from the wild and bring them over here. I hold nothing in the animal kingdom alien or outside my business. The animals are fed and trained and sold to zoos and museums around the world for exhibition.

He shows him around the room which is full of framed pictures of Jamrach himself in distant corners of the world.

JAMRACH (CONTD)

Some are trained to perform in circuses. Some go as pets in private menageries. Sold in the supermarkets. Harrod's has an entire floor selling my animals. In fact, I received orders from an Indian maharajah who settled in Norfolk.

SURESH

Indian maharajahs? Buying Bengal tigers from England? Like buying from London, coals for Newcastle.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

83.

JAMRACH

Oh, no, no. They buy African
specimens for their menageries.

Suresh looks supremely happy and overwhelmed as JAMRACH
puts his hand on his shoulders.

INT. JAMRACH'S MENAGERIE - DAY (1881) MOMENTS LATER. 75

JAMRACH takes SURESH on a tour of his menagerie. There are
cages everywhere, stacked on top of each other. As he goes
past the cages, he introduces the animals.

JAMRACH

Wombats from Australia...
Woodchucks or groundhogs,
whistlers, from Canada... Brahman
bulls from Brazil... llamas from
...

SURESH

Peru?

JAMRACH gives him an appreciative look. A rare smile.

SURESH

Saw them in picture books.

JAMRACH

These are tiny parakeets, often
confused with love birds - little
beauties. These ones are bred
here but they came from
Argentina. Here, a hen bird of
paradise.

SURESH stands admiring its stunning plumage.

JAMRACH (CONTD)

They came from Papua New Guinea.
This vulturine guinea fowl from
Zanzibar goes for 150 pounds.

SURESH picks up a lovely brown spotted feather which lies
on the ground, admires it.

JAMRACH (CONTD)

Do you know what creatures are
these?

There are some erect creatures, around 8 inches tall,
swimming like fishes in an aquarium with horse-like heads.

SURESH

Sea horses! I thought they live
only in fairy tales. Like
mermaids.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

84.

JAMRACH

From East Timor. They are the only species in the universe where the male gives birth to the child.

He then takes him down a dark corridor. Nothing can be seen but the roar of animals becomes deafening. They reach an area where there are cages with classified animals on both sides.

JAMRACH

Get on to that ladder, my boy.

SURESH runs up the ladder.

JAMRACH

Now, what do you see?

He looks up. Doesn't see anything.

JAMRACH

Not up there. Down below... Look through the hole in the flooring.

SURESH

A rhinoceros!

A gigantic rhinoceros is standing in a pool surrounded by a high fence.

JAMRACH

(shouting out to him)

That's Begum, captured by elephant-hunting British officers in Burma, going for 300 pounds. Zebras 150 pounds, giraffes 40 pounds, ostriches 80 pounds.

A lion in its cage extends its paws towards JAMRACH as they pass by. He caresses the lion who reciprocates the affection.

INT. INSIDE JAMRACH'S MENAGERIE - DAY (1882)

76

SURESH, 21, sleeps on a mattress in the landing of a staircase. Beside it, there is a dented brown suitcase that he had been carrying all along. He uses the suitcase as his pillow.

He wakes up to the calling of birds and animals: a cacophony of parakeets, cockatoos, hyenas, bears and lions. He stays awake, smiles to himself, enjoying the animal sounds that feel like being in a forest.

Picks up a handful of soaked seeds kept in a tumbler on the shelves.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

85.

He goes to the bird cages and feeds the pet canaries, bluejays and magpies when he sees JAMRACH animatedly walking past, talking to a very elegantly dressed tall BRITISH WOMAN, about 45 years old.

She is visibly upper-class, dressed in a long striped luxurious tight-fitting white-velvet gown with a trail, a stole around her neck, long white ankle-gloves and a fancy white hat with flowers in it.

JAMRACH

... there are three lions right now and more are on their way from Kenya.

BRITISH WOMAN

Prof. Jamrach, I wish a lion-cub, not an adult. Someone born here would be a good pet. A lioness.

JAMRACH

African or Indian? It's the male that's more graceful. Unlike the human species.

BRITISH WOMAN

I want my lioness to breed and have a family. Could I perhaps bring her here, during the mating season?

JAMRACH

Sure, but not before she is four. By the way, Madam, lions mate around the year. Hmm...they are very... human.

SURESH sees them walk away.

INT. PRODUCTION OFFICE, MUMBAI - DAY

77

SHRAVANI and KAVITA sit close together, suggesting an intimacy. Going by the coffee mugs and empty plates, it seems that they have been around for a while.

KAVITA

It's like Walt Disney gone insane!

SHRAVANI

Other way around. Disney tried to recreate the world of Jamrach.

KAVITA

Our own 'Jungle Book' Mowgli!

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

86.

SHRAVANI is writing notes on the margin of the screenplay printouts while KAVITA is fiddling with her tab. She passes it on to SHRAVANI to look at.

Two novels are on the table: 'Jamrach's Menagerie' by Carol Birch and 'Nights at the Circus' by Angela Carter. Shravani opens one and casually flips through it while Kavita browses on her laptop.

KAVITA

Two more weeks to complete...

She sees something on the tab and gets transfixed.

KAVITA (CONTD)

I can't believe this! I just typed Jamrach, tiger, and this came up.

SHRAVANI looks at her screen.

KAVITA

(reads from the screen)
At Tobacco Dock in East London,
commemorating the famous incident
that happened at that spot in
1857. ... So, this really
happened!

It is a bronze statue of a small boy standing in front of a tiger.

INT. JAMRACH'S MENAGERIE - NIGHT (1882)

78

JAMRACH wears a top-hat with wide edges and carries a walking stick that he swings menacingly.

As SURESH walks behind him, he sees several shabbily-dressed boys aged between 13 to 18, carrying buckets of raw meat, sweeping the floor, washing the cages, moving the boxes, feeding the birds and animals.

Jamrach leads Suresh as they go down the dark staircase. Nothing can be seen except an occasional streak of light.

JAMRACH

Wild beasts are quite gentle when
they are in their dens. If they
get a chance, they break loose.
Their natural ferocity possesses
them again. They forget all
friendship.

They are now in front of a roaring tiger in a cage.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

87.

JAMRACH (CONTD)

Knock them on the head at once.
 Stun them. Show no mercy. That's
 how I felled her with the blow of
 a crowbar. She slipped out of her
 cage during unloading from a ship
 from Calcutta. Started strolling
 down the street in East London.
 Caught hold of a nine-year old
 boy who thought it was just a big
 cat.

INT. PRODUCTION OFFICE, MUMBAI - DAY

79

[INSERT] A cartoon shows JAMRACH riding a tiger, carrying
 a crowbar. The tiger has a CHILD in it's mouth.

Photograph of bronze statue of the tiger and child.

[INSERT ENDS]

SHRAVANI and KAVITA are lingering over these images. They
 go back and forth between the images while we hear
 JAMRACH's voice.

JAMRACH (O.S.)

(echoing)

I told the big scoundrel, if you
 show any more of your tricks,
 I'll knock your brains out. After
 that, she became the most famous
 tiger in the world. Thousands
 paid big money just to see her.
 But old age comes very quickly
 upon them.

Shravani sighs deeply.

INT. JAMRACH'S MENAGERIE, LONDON - DAY (1882, CONTINUOUS)
 80

SURESH stares at the tiger's eyes which have clearly
 developed scales.

With iron bars separating them, the tiger looks at Suresh
 sadly.

It is pleading, as it were, looking into his eyes
 directly. After a while, the tiger squats on the floor
 like a docile cat. Exhausted.

SURESH walks closer to him and holds the iron bars.

INT. PRODUCTION OFFICE, MUMBAI - DAY (CONTINUOUS) 81

KAVITA and SHRAVANI are still in office, with pizza boxes around them and a bottle of Coke. Kavita talks without taking her eyes away from her mobile. They look relaxed.

SHRAVANI shows KAVITA a *Punch* cartoon on her laptop. For once, Kavita raises her head from her mobile.

[INSERT] A foppish British woman is trying to stave off a tiger in the wild with the edge of her delicate white umbrella. [INSERT ENDS]

KAVITA is fascinated.

KAVITA

Isn't it amazing how a cartoon can tell us more about a time than a historical document?

SHRAVANI

The cartoon is made up and the document is hard evidence!

KAVITA

So why should you have any qualms about making up things where there is no evidence?

SHRAVANI

For 'making up', we need a different kind of evidence. Like the *Punch* cartoon. It shows the British fear of India after the bloodbath of 1857!

KAVITA has gone back to student-mode. She leans and hugs SHRAVANI.

KAVITA

Last thing I know, Suresh Biswas was working with Jamrach.

SHRAVANI

He left Jamrach after six months or so. And joined his rival.

KAVITA

'Better offer' as we say.

SHRAVANI

Carl Hagenbeck. That guy was the mogul of the animal trade. Based in Hamburg. Hagenbeck Tierpark. It still exists.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

89.

KAVITA
How did Ha..

SHRAVANI
Hagenbeck.

KAVITA
Get him?

SHRAVANI
No one knows. There are so many
gaps in the record. I can 'make
up' something if you insist.

They both laugh.

INT. PUBLIC LIBRARY - DAY

82

SHRAVANI opens an old, brown hardbound book.

[INSERT]

BEASTS AND MEN by

CARL HAGENBECK [INSERT ENDS]

She runs her fingers over it, as we read the subtitle:

[INSERT]

Being Carl Hagenbeck's
Experiences For Half a Century
Among Wild
Animals [INSERT ENDS]

There are several photographs of 'exotic' Indians and
other ethnicities.

EXT. HAGENBECK'S MENAGERIE, HAMBURG - DAY (1883)

83

CARL HAGENBECK is a saintly-looking man in his fifties. He
is tall, dressed formally in a suit with a bow tie,
back-brushed hair and a small white beard.

It is a bright, sunny day. HAGENBECK leads SURESH to a
tiger's den in the Hagenbeck Park.

It has artificial rocks and a fauna that simulates the
natural habitat of the wild beasts, complete with trees
offering shades, mountainous terrain, caves, pools and
fountains.

SURESH is now dressed in uniform, wearing grey trousers, a
blue shirt with long sleeves and a black cap. He struggles
to keep up with HAGENBECK's brisk pace.

He is almost running, looking around at everything with
amazement, carrying a bucket full of raw meat.

(CONTINUED)

HAGENBECK

(firmly)

No hitting, no violence! This is not bloody Jamrach's Menagerie! Do I ever carry a stick?

To make his point, HAGENBECK puts his hands on Suresh's shoulders while walking.

HAGENBECK

Tender them gently, my boy. They want to have fun, eat and play and be loved. Like us. Each one is different. You have to understand their characters and treat them accordingly. One is more lazy, another more agile, one loves to roll around on the floor, another keeps forgetting what has been taught. Note how each one reacts. It's all about patience and loyalty. Once you become their friend, they are no harder to handle than pet dogs.

Now they reach near the tigers' den.

HAGENBECK

That's my TIPU.

HAGENBECK looks at the tiger with tenderness. He calls out to the tiger.

HAGENBECK

(in German)

Tipu Sultan, Tipu, my beloved...

The tiger comes close to the gate of the cage like an obedient cat. Looks at him straight into his eyes.

HAGENBECK

(in German)

*Always talk to animals in German.
English is too short and soft.
German is easier for animals to understand.*

Tipu crouches down by the bars, licks his hands and wants to be caressed. HAGENBECK moves his fingers on its spine, alternately massaging and caressing its back.

The tiger makes groans of pleasure and extends its paw through the bar. He plays with it and kisses the tiger on its mouth, on the whiskers. He gestures Suresh to follow him with the bucket of meat.

(CONTINUED)

HAGENBECK opens the gate. Together, they go inside the den. The tiger hugs him with its front paws and then immediately gorges on the meat.

SURESH follows HAGENBECK's instructions, stroking Tipu down the back, gradually working up to the head, which he begins to scratch, and the tiger, like a cat, begins to rub her head against his hand.

HAGENBECK
(in German)
*The way to their heart is through
their stomach.*

After the tiger eats for some time, he gestures SURESH to take the bucket and leave the cage. Tipu, on seeing the bucket going away, rushes to the gate and roars at Suresh.

HAGENBECK diverts his attention by holding a board three feet above the ground.

HAGENBECK
(in German)
Jump, Tipu, jump.

Tipu jumps over it. Gradually the board is made higher and higher with Tipu successfully jumping it at every stage.

And then come the hoops, held on top of the board. To teach the tigress to jump over him, HAGENBECK stoops alongside the board.

Tipu clears one and he clears the other.

After repeating this several times, he makes Tipu lie down by flicking her over the back with a small tickle and at the same time pressing her down with one hand.

He puts one leg on top of the tiger and rewards Tipu with a big serving of meat. Calls SURESH inside again with the bucket of meat.

The tigress jumps onto it. SURESH looks at him with admiration. Now both of them leave the tiger alone and come out, watching the tiger eating.

HAGENBECK
Patience, loyalty and rewards.
Among animals, as among men, the
good and the bad are mixed. The
good will develop on its own. The
bad needs to be suppressed.

SURESH looks at his master with tenderness and admiration.

FADE OUT

EXT. HAGENBECK'S MENAGERIE - DAY (1883, MONTHS LATER) 84

SURESH, 22, is bathing an elephant in a small pool. They are like children sprinkling water at each other.

He gets on top of the animal to wash its back with a brush and then uses a bucket to wash off the dirt. The elephant too reciprocates the love by swinging its trunk. He throws a ball into the pool and the elephant picks it up with its trunk and returns it to him.

SURESH
(in German, with difficulty)
*Bosco, Good boy, Bosco... very
good boy!*

BOSCO lies down in the pool. SURESH inserts green leaves into its mouth. It raises its trunk and entangles him with it.

INT. SHRAVANI'S HOUSE - DAY 85

SHRAVANI and KAVITA are working at the dining table.

KAVITA
There we go again!

SHRAVANI
Listen, your mind has been corrupted by Disney. Find a new pair of lenses. You have to read the testimonies of people who were into it to understand the amazing human-animal bond.

KAVITA
You make Suresh kind of passive. How is it that a guy like him is quietly listening to whatever some white men are telling him to do? He is putting on the turban, tika, willingly playing the exotic Oriental!

SHRAVANI
(annoyed)
You think Suresh was a 21st century rebel? He never was. He could have no idea how he was playing the imperial game. Even when he converted, there was no love for Christianity. It was just a smart strategy, a way to move away from his father. Everywhere, he wanted to fit in. He chose to be showcased

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

93.

SHRAVANI (cont'd)

willingly as a 'Hindoo' because
he wanted to conform. For his own
benefit. Imposing PC politics of
today on characters of the past
is downright stupid.

KAVITA wasn't expecting this tirade.

KAVITA

I hope what you are doing goes
well with what Mr Mehra wants. He
asked for a meeting soon.

INT. HAGENBECK'S MENAGERIE - DAY (1883, A MONTH LATER) 86

SURESH stands in front of a glass wall watching a snake
swallowing a rat that is still alive. HAGENBECK comes and
stands behind him, puts his hand on his shoulder.

HAGENBECK

That rattlesnake you see, is a
gentleman. Before he bites, he
gives you warning by sounding his
rattle twice. You may safely
touch him after one rattle but
after rattling the second time,
stand clear or you are a dead
man. Seize them between finger
and thumb and hold them fast.
That's the only way ...

SURESH

That I know, sir.

They are about to move away when a beautiful red insect
crosses the doorframe. HAGENBECK lovingly takes it on his
palm and admires its beauty, showing it to SURESH almost
with devotion.

HAGENBECK

He prayeth best, who loveth best/
All things both great and small/
For the dear God who loveth
us/ He made and loveth all.

Suresh is trembling with emotion, his eyes moist.

FADE OUT

EXT. FAIR GROUND, LANCASHIRE, UK - NIGHT (LATE 1884) 87

[INSERT] A news clip in the Lancashire Daily: Hindoo lion-tamer mauled in public. Shravani's hand encircles it. [INSERT ENDS]

SURESH, 23, is performing at a fair with glittering lights. The billboard announces the location as BOLTON FAIR GROUND.

He commands the lion to roll over the floor with his hands (not whip). It does so reluctantly. The music rises. The lion crouches.

SURESH walks towards the audience at the edge of the cage to accept their applause.

Suddenly, in full public view, the lion jumps on him. It mauls his left arm and he starts bleeding profusely. It tears his clothes and keeps dragging him around.

The audience screams in panic and people start rushing out.

The tussle goes on relentlessly. Someone rushes in from backstage with a crowbar and hits the lion. It finally lets go of SURESH from his mouth and reluctantly retreats through the trap-door.

Children start crying.

SURESH falls on the sawdust, fainting, with blood all over the ground inside the cage.

He is carried out on a stretcher.

INT. HAGENBECK'S OFFICE - DAY (1885, SEVERAL WEEKS LATER)
88

SURESH enters HAGENBECK's office through a glass-door with 'Prof. Carl Hagenbeck' written on it.

It is a large room with elegant mahogany furniture, stacked with files and folders. The curtains of the window are drawn and there are framed photographs of animals all over the office that feature HAGENBECK with them: in a den with several lions, with a rhinoceros, with tigers and so on.

Beside his large office table, there is a wooden instrument with an engraving that says:

Telegraphen-Bauanstalt von Siemens & Halske.

(CONTINUED)

It is a wooden box with some protruding keys and above it, there is an inverted rectangular mirror with five needles running diagonically across it. This is an electric telegraph.

SURESH's left arm is entirely covered in bandage. He is trying hard to hide his pain. He walks with a limp.

HAGENBECK

(concerned)

How are you now?

SURESH

Better Sir.

HAGENBECK

(gets up, walks around)

It is never, never, the fault of the beast. They never attack without a reason. Maahes and Sekhmet and Daniel are noble creatures. Why do you think Maahes attacked you?

SURESH

I wore a new costume he was not used to.

HAGENBECK

There you go! They do not like surprises.

SURESH

Sorry sir.

HAGENBECK

It's not just that. A lion always crouches three seconds before attacking. Why didn't you notice that?

SURESH does not reply. He puts his head down in shame.

HAGENBECK

You were enjoying the applauses with your back to him, didn't you? If you saw Maahes crouching, what should you have done?

SURESH

(meekly)

Let him know I can see him.

HAGENBECK is more heartbroken than angry.

(CONTINUED)

HAGENBECK

So it was a lapse on your part.
Using that crowbar was a shame.
Hideous shame. (Pauses) That's
what that idiot Jamrach did. Did
I not tell you the humane way to
get a big cat off a person?

SURESH

Carbondioxide fire extinguisher.

SURESH stands rigidly with his head bowed down. There are a few seconds of awkward silence before HAGENBECK changes his tone.

HAGENBECK

Now, the reason I called. You
trained Bosco quite well. He is
one of my most talented pupils!
The Carlo Brothers circus people
in Argentina loved him and I sold
Bosco to them. But now, there is
some news here that leaves me
very worried.

He hands over to him a telegraph message.

SURESH

(reads aloud)

"BOSCO NOT EATING STOP DYING STOP
SEND TRAINER TO ARGENTINA STOP
FEDERICO CARLO STOP"

HAGENBECK shows him the photograph of the elephant BOSCO being lifted in a huge crane in the port, suspended in mid-air, dangling its legs.

SURESH holds the photo in his hand. He is crestfallen.

HAGENBECK

It was sad to let go of such a
dear friend. They loved how Bosco
was trained. I pray to Almighty
God so that the worst does not
happen.

HAGENBECK's voice fades away. SURESH holds the telegram in despair. All he can see is the telegram.

HAGENBECK

I need you to go to Buenos Aires
immediately.

SURESH is speechless. HAGENBECK turns around on his desk as he types into the telegraph printer:

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

97.

HAGENBECK
 (talking aloud while typing)
 SENDING BOSCO TRAINER SURESH
 BISWAS STOP LEAVING BY RMS
 SERVIA SHIP TODAY STOP

He turns around, opens the drawer and hands over a piece of paper to SURESH. It is a ship-ticket.

[INSERT]

CUNARD LINE'S HMS SERVIA

HAMBURG to BUENOS AIRES

FEBRUARY 10, 1885

TRAVEL CLASS: STEERAGE

[INSERT ENDS]

Suresh Biswas' name is handwritten on it.

FADE OUT

EXT. ON THE ROAD, BUENOS AIRES - DAY (1885) MINUTES LATER
 89

A horse-carriage with red wheels, driven by two white horses, goes through large fields, a landscape dotted with pretty *estancias* (ranches) that feature Tudor-style residential buildings, pools and vast fields.

SURESH, 24, is accompanied by a CIRCUS AGENT, a jovial man in his thirties, with a moustache. Two horses in a ranch run parallel to the carriage.

The AGENT talks to SURESH in Spanish, gesturing with his hands almost like a pantomime act. He replies in English.

CIRCUS AGENT
 (in Spanish)
*The elephant is not eating
 anything.*

SURESH looks disturbed.

CIRCUS AGENT
*The doctor said elephants go
 through severe depression when
 separated from loved ones.*

SURESH
 I have been with Bosco since he
 was one-year old. Every day.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

98.

The carriage stops in front of a farm where many horses are grazing and among them, an elephant sleeps below a tree where there is a visible turmoil in the way the land has been upturned.

Suresh drops his bag and runs towards BOSCO. He shouts.

SURESH

Bosco!!!

The elephant instantly recognises Suresh's voice and wakes up from sleep.

He trumpets loudly and starts running towards him like a little boy, albeit weakly.

When the two meet, BOSCO wraps SURESH tightly with his trunk and he puts his hand inside his mouth. He kisses and caresses the animal and lets BOSCO lick him all over with his trunk.

The AGENT comes running with a bucket full of cucumbers. SURESH feeds them to BOSCO and he delightfully devours them all in no time.

BOSCO swings its trunks and wags its small tail and soon starts drinking water from the tank, giving SURESH a shower with his trunk like before.

He too sprinkles water on the elephant.

INT. PRODUCTION OFFICE, MUMBAI - DAY

90

A production meeting is ongoing. MR MEHRA sits on one end of the conference table. SHRAVANI and KAVITA are the only other people in the room.

MR MEHRA is appreciative with SHRAVANI's work.

MR MEHRA

(going through printouts)

I am impressed with the effort you are putting in, with so much research. I have some early concerns though.

KAVITA and SHRAVANI listen attentively. MR MEHRA prolongs the pause.

MR MEHRA

For a film with so many foreign locations, scriptwriting has to be production conscious.

(CONTINUED)

KAVITA

That's true. But the story is such!

MR MEHRA

We have to see how much we can do in studios here. Try to bring in as many Indian scenes as you can. Imagine, we haven't come to Brazil yet.

SHRAVANI

I have also been concerned sir. That's why I wrote nearly 40 scenes in Calcutta. And then there are a few in 19th century London for which there are ready sets.

KAVITA

Where? In London?

SHRAVANI

Yes, they have maintained a model of 1880s slums.

MR MEHRA

Great! Anyway, keep an eye on that. It's spreading all over the place. Try to restrict scenes to studio situations. After all, everyone loves circus. We want to see some strong action scenes. Stars love them.

SHRAVANI

It's part of the story, Sir. Travel. People. Places. Countries. Cultures. Languages.

It all looks amiable.

INT. CARLO BROTHERS SHOW - NIGHT (1885) A MONTH LATER 91

The posters in Spanish announce the 'pantomime equestrian play', presented by "The Carlo Brothers' Equestrian Company and Zoological Marvels".

It is a glittering spectacle.

The poster shows the Caucasian *gaucho*, *Juan Moreira*, with a long beard and a hat riding on a highly decked-up horse with a sword in hand. Blood drips from the sword.

Beside the main poster there is another one. The black and white faded poster gradually becomes colourised.

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

THE CARLO BROTHERS PRESENT TODAY
 THE COLOSSAL ELEPHANT BOSCO
 AND HIS INDIAN TRAINER
 SUEESH BESWASH.

AUGUST 15, 1885

The circus canvas tent is of red and white stripes and a joyful Argentine folk *milonga* is being played on an ensemble of instruments: accordeon, violin, guitar and flute.

On the canvas tent at the entrance, there are hand-painted pictures of a fire-eater, a sword-swallower, a talking doll, a woman cut-in-half, a clown called *El Pepino 88*, *El Payaso Inglés* [The English Clown].

There are several gorgeously draped white horses with black tails with men and women riding them in acrobatic positions. The tent is glittering with lanterns that are hanging from every corner.

The circus is full. The 'Oriental Dancing Girls' number is in progress. The music takes on an Arabian tone and the backdrops feature scenes from the Arabian Nights.

The eroticised dance is a curious amalgam of Egyptian belly-dancing, classical Indian dance poses and Sufi *darvish*. During the latter, the dancers go frenetically around in circles and the audience applause becomes deafening, almost drowning the music.

At the end of the performance, the woman standing at the furthest end, comes forward, puts a stick into her own mouth and spits out a huge flash of fire.

The DANCERS exit to applause and the stage becomes dark.

ANNOUNCER
 (in Spanish)
*And now, friends, the act that we
 have been waiting for. The
 extremely talented elephant Bosco
 and his Hindu master, Su-es
 Bis-uas.*

The lights come on and from a distance we can see BOSCO walking into the stage.

There is a rumble in the audience which increases as the elephant comes nearer and we see BOSCO carrying SURESH on its trunk. He sits on it like a chair and then jumps out when he reaches the centre.

(CONTINUED)

BOSCO's head is decked with a large *Hermanos Carlo* logo on an embroidered cloth hanging from its ears.

SURESH is dressed in a red turban, Western trousers and shirt that glitter in the light. He is carrying a bagful of carrots wrapped around his waist like a belt.

BOSCO's acts are played out one after another. He dances to the rhythmic *milonga*, first swinging its head and massive ears, then it raises one feet, then another, to the beat of the music.

SURESH puts a circular stool in front of him and BOSCO puts one feet on it, first the left, then the right and then the hindlegs. He stands up all four on the stool. Then goes round and round looking at audiences on all sides.

After every act, SURESH takes out a carrot from his back and inserts it inside the mouth of BOSCO, caressing its trunk. Then, BOSCO extends its trunk and his master puts one leg on the trunk and another on his tusks to get on top of the elephant.

It takes him around the arena, swinging its tails, flapping its ears and nodding its head.

SURESH jumps from the top and brings a chair. BOSCO sits on the chair like a human with all its four legs dangling in the air. SURESH now talks to audiences in Spanish.

SURESH
(in Spanish, hiding a chip
of paper)
*Dear Friends, Bosco is very tired
now. He needs to sleep. Do you'll
think he should sleep?*

Audience responds with approval.

AUDIENCE CHORUS
Yes!

SURESH goes up to BOSCO and asks him to sleep.

SURESH
(in Spanish)
*Everybody wants you to sleep,
Bosco.*

BOSCO walks to the centre of the arena, folds his huge legs and lies down on the ground, to huge applause.

Then SURESH rides on top of him and sleeps on top of BOSCO. He pretends to fall asleep and slides down his body to the ground. BOSCO gets up and puts first his left leg and then his right on SURESH's head, only lightly.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

102.

He takes out three carrots and puts them into BOSCO's mouth and the elephant entangles him with its trunk and lifts SURESH on its back. They walk out to huge applause.

The deafening noise fades out and Bengali is heard.

SURESH (VO)
*You were right, Uncle.
 Vasudhaiva kutumbakkam. The
 World is indeed like a
 family.*

He bows to the public.

EXT. ON THE ROAD, VARIOUS PLACES - NIGHT (1885-1886) 92

MONTAGE of different cities and countries. These are intercepted by still images of circus acts, seen as swish-pan shots.

[INSERT] Photographs of the Statue of Liberty, horse-drawn streetcars, Spanish colonial buildings, different US cities, images of Rio de Janeiro. [INSERT ENDS]

INT. SURESH'S TENT, RJ, BRAZIL - NIGHT (1885) 93

SURESH, 24, is in his tent after the show, takes off his make-up and his turban, his gloves, rings and talisman necklace in front of a mirror lit up by three candles.

He closes his eyes and prays for a moment in front of a picture of the Cross when he hears something.

Someone is lightly coughing outside to draw attention. He sees a young woman through the canvas-curtain of the tent.

She is about 18 years old, white; her eyes are dazzling with excitement but she hides them with her shyness.

She wears a bright green gown which is tight on top but spreads out from the waist into a wide skirt with yellow cloth-buttons covered with a lace. She carries a decorative yellow hand-fan.

SURESH is pleasantly surprised. He steps out. A lantern hangs at the entrance to the tent which now illuminates them in the middle of the darkness.

YOUNG WOMAN
 (in Portuguese)
Excuse me.

SURESH
Good evening!

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

103.

YOUNG WOMAN
Good evening! I loved the show.

SURESH
(in Portuguese but
struggling)
Really?

He has a proud and satisfied smile.

YOUNG WOMAN
Very, very much.

SURESH
What's your name?

YOUNG WOMAN
Maria Augusta Fernandes.

SURESH
Maria Augusta! Nice name.

He smiles to himself as he sees her hiding her face in a shy but playful way. They both laugh, searching for something to say. Awkward silence.

MARIA AUGUSTA
*You, with the lion, are like
Saint George fighting the
Dragon... Good night.*

She blushes and then extends both her cheeks to be kissed goodbye.

She runs away into the darkness beyond which are the glittering lights of the circus tent. Suresh keeps staring at her even after she has disappeared.

The circus is playing a joyful music.

INT. SHRAVANI'S HOUSE - NIGHT

94

Out of the printer rolls out a full-page photo of MARIA AUGUSTA.

SHRAVANI is working under the table lamp.

She puts it up on the board, beside SURESH's photo.

Imagines them together.

The sound of circus-music is heard.

INT. CARLO BROTHERS SHOW - NIGHT (1885)

95

There are dazzling lights all over. Suddenly the yellow light turns to red and the entire arena, encircled with high fence, is bathed in red filter. The ANNOUNCER is heard over an empty stage.

ANNOUNCER

(in Portuguese)

The Impossible is Possible. You will now see before your eyes the Unimaginable. Carlo Brothers present, the Hindu Samson, Sureesh Beswash. With TIPU, the Bengal tiger that Brazil has never seen. Those weak in heart must keep their eyes closed.

Suddenly, the drums start beating. The trap door opens and the sprightly tiger TIPU walks in gracefully, roaring.

Then, SURESH enters, in his characteristic red turban, white pantaloons, blue tunic and a red sash at his waist.

He instructs the tiger to roll over. It does so obediently. Then he makes it sit on a small stool. He asks him in Portuguese to raise its forelegs and stand up on two legs.

SURESH

On your feet.

The tiger refuses to stand up. He repeats in Portuguese, then Spanish, English, French and Dutch but the tiger remains non-responsive, looking away. Then he says the same in German. Loudly.

SURESH

Stand up, Tipu.

Suddenly the lion stands on its hindlegs and raises its forelegs in the air. The audience explodes.

Then, SURESH instructs TIPU to sit on a raised platform. He takes off his turban, strokes the tiger's neck.

SURESH makes the tiger's jaws wide open by pressing on two sides and inserts his head inside the mouth of the tiger.

He holds it there for ten seconds and then releases it. The tiger roars at the audience.

There is an overwhelming applause.

An old woman faints.

INT. SURESH'S TENT, RJ, BRAZIL. NIGHT (1885)

96

It is around 7pm. SURESH is returning to his tent after the show when he sees MARIA AUGUSTA waiting in the backlot. He is pleasantly surprised.

He embraces MARIA AUGUSTA FERNANDES warmly and welcomes her inside the tent. She is dressed in a long white skirt, with her curly hair held high up at the back. She is beaming with excitement. All dialogues are in Portuguese.

SURESH

Boa noite! ...Maria Augusta!

MARIA AUGUSTA

Boa noite! (laughing joyfully)

SURESH

So, return...?

MARIA AUGUSTA

I love the way you pushed the tiger with your whip.

SURESH smiles in pride. He sits in front of the mirror as before and starts taking off his make-up while speaking with her.

SURESH

Came again?

MARIA AUGUSTA

(shyly) Saw the show three times. Sat at the edge of my seat all along.

SURESH

You must pay half price! Because you sat on only half the seat.

They both laugh heartily.

She starts inspecting the things on his make-up table.

He has rings on each of his fingers. She comes closer to see them. They all carry images of different animals. He lets her identify the animals.

MARIA AUGUSTA

How beautiful!

He shows her the rings.

MARIA AUGUSTA

Tiger... bear... lion.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

106.

The necklace draws her attention. A white hook hangs from a thread.

SURESH
(holding up the necklace)
This is a ...

Searching for the word in Portuguese, he points to his own nails.

MARIA AUGUSTA
Nail.

SURESH
Nail. Nail of a lioness. A lion I loved and worked with. Died.

He affectionately holds the lion-nail.

MARIA AUGUSTA
(shyly) My heart was beating during the show. I thought it was the stage that was trembling. But the next day it didn't stop beating. So, I returned to the Circus. Something more important...

SURESH gets up and kisses her passionately. She embraces him firmly.

While kissing, her hands pass through a part of his back that has a deep wound. Her fingers hover over it.

MARIA AUGUSTA
What's this?

SURESH
A wound. A tiger-attack. (Pauses) Every wound is a memory. Memories of attacks. Memories of cities.

He proceeds to show her some of the wounds - on his arms and legs. They are all deep bite-marks.

SURESH (CONT'D)
Maybe, I should leave the circus and settle down.

She looks at them with sympathy and concern, caressing the wounds.

MARIA AUGUSTA
How long will you be in Rio?

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

107.

SURESH

The Circus leaves in one week. We are always moving. After this contract ends in March, I will be a free man. But now, I have to go back to Hamburg.

MARIA AUGUSTA

And then?

SURESH

I'm a ship longing for the shore.

She blushes.

MARIA AGUSTA

Where are you from? Where is your hometown?

SURESH

The world is full of hometowns.

They kiss again. Music rises.

SLOW FADE OUT

EXT. BOTANICAL GARDEN, RIO DE JANEIRO - DAY (1885) 97

SURESH and MARIA AUGUSTA are in the RJ Botanical Garden. There are huge trees from around the world. They go past the entrance, an ornate gate, that announces its establishment date as 1822.

She is dressed in a white gown, almost like a bride. They walk side by side, without talking too much. The road, straight ahead of them, shows the peak of Mount Corcovado.

Both of them pause casually to read the small notes that accompany each tree.

They find themselves in front of a huge tamarind tree. She reads the caption.

MARIA AUGUSTA

Tamarindo! Tama-rin-dus Indi-ca
(reads slowly). *It came to Brazil*
from India! (teasing him) *Long*
before you!

SURESH is suddenly touched. He walks around the tamarind tree, inspecting it, touching its trunk, excited like a child.

MARIA AUGUSTA looks up at the tree. It's branches are swinging merrily in the wind.

She leans against it.

INT. CALCUTTA AIRPORT - DAY

98

Modern-day Indian airport.

The display-board shows a long list of arrivals and departures:

New York, Amsterdam, London, Beijing, Dubai.

SHRAVANI is carrying a suitcase and looking at it.

She stands in front of the display to locate her flight:

KOLKATA to MUMBAI.

INT. MARINE DEPARTURE LOUNGE, HAMBURG PORT - DAY (1886) 99

There is a large display board announcing departures.

APRIL 6, 6.00AM: RED STAR LINE
EMPRESS OF INDIA: HAMBURG TO
CALCUTTA

APRIL 6, 10.00AM: *WHITE LINE*
ABYSSINIA: HAMBURG TO NEW YORK

APRIL 6, 12.30PM: *CUNARD LINE*
LISSABON. HAMBURG TO RIO DE
JANEIRO

APRIL 7, 8.30AM: *P & O LINE*
DEMARARA. HAMBURG TO LONDON

APRIL 7, 11.00AM: *ALLAN LINE*
JURA. HAMBURG TO CANTON

APRIL 7, 4.00PM: *HAMBURG AMERICA*
LINE KAISERIN. HAMBURG TO NEW
YORK

A relaxed SURESH, 25, has been closely pondering over the departure schedule.

It is a large hall with circular glass windows.

His two leather suitcases are covered with shipping labels. Suresh walks towards a maritime check-in desk.

His gaze vacillates between two ships: one leaving for Calcutta and another for Rio de Janeiro.

He returns to one corner and sits. Opens a book, takes out a letter from its fold and reads it.

EXT. VILLAGE IN BENGAL - DAY (1886)

100

UNCLE is now older. He sits at a cemented seat beside the steps of a pond. Two children swim in the background.

On the side, there is a terracota Hindu temple. He sits by the steps of the pond, holding SURESH's letter. He folds it and starts writing on a piece of paper.

As village life passes by, we hear his voice as he writes in Bengali script.

UNCLE (VO)

(in Bengali)

Suresh, many things are changing in India. Injustice and torture are increasing by the day. Your friend Upen had been to Japan, God knows why. Later, he criticised British rule in Amrita Bazar Patrika. They arrested him on charges of sedition. Upen is now in prison. The Police claimed they found foreign bombs and arms in his house.

A woman comes to the pond to wash clothes, a priest performs rituals in the water, cows freely walk by, a palanquin carried by two people passes by.

FADE OUT

EXT. HAMBURG PORT - DAY (1886) AN HOUR LATER

101

SURESH is still waiting at the lounge, visibly distraught.

Gradually, the sounds of the port fade into the distance and the sounds of village festivity (drums) rise to a high level.

[INSERT] He remembers his MOTHER. She holds him in her embrace while he suffers from high fever.

His UNCLE teaches him in candle-light.

UPEN's bright eyes. They lie together by the river-side.

He loiters alone in the forests. [INSERT ENDS]

SURESH's anguished voice (in Bengali), languishing in one corner of the lounge, emerges.

SURESH (VO)

At the end of the day, lions lose their teeth, tigers lose their vision. Always the vagabond, your

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

110.

SURESH (VO) (cont'd)
*Suresh, Uncle, is again like a
 roving elephant, no longer
 chained to a circus. I am free to
 go anywhere.*

[INSERT] He remembers kissing MARIA AGUSTA.

Images of Rio de Janeiro. The courtship in Botanical
 Gardens.

MARIA AUGUSTA caresses his wounds. She smiles shyly.
 [INSERT ENDS]

Her green-and-yellow gown cuts to the green-and-yellow
 flag of Brazil flying on a ship's mast.

SURESH is still seated in the lounge, now with a smile.

EXT. HAMBURG PORT - DAY (1886) CONTINUOUS

102

A departing ship's loud horn wakes SURESH out of his
 reverie. He approaches the ticket desk.

SURESH
 (in German)
*One lower-deck ticket to Rio de
 Janeiro.*

TICKET-SELLER
 (in German)
*Today? 6th April. It's
 'Lissabon'. She is leaving in six
 hours.*

TICKET-SELLER issues the ticket and instructs him to fill
 up the Immigration form.

Suresh quickly fills up the form and hands it over to him.

TICKET-SELLER
 (in German)
Hamburg to Rio de Janeiro.

He verifies his details, reading aloud.

TICKET-SELLER (CONTD)
*Nationality- Indian. Age- 26
 years. This place is blank.
 Profession?*

Suresh takes the paper and promptly writes in bold German
 letters: K Ü N S T L E R

The TICKET-SELLER gives him a surprised look. In German:

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

111.

TICKET-SELLER (CONTD)

Artist?

SURESH

Performing Artist.

SURESH picks up his two brown suitcases and walks away with long steps as the TICKET-SELLER watches him from behind. The ship's horn is heard at a closer range.

INT. BISWAS' ROOM IN RJ - NIGHT (1887)

103

A Portuguese colonial-style red-tiled white house faces the sea. The windows are arch-shaped with full wooden shutters. The prosperity of the house is evident from the brass candle stands and rosewood furniture.

There is a framed painting on the walls, a Brazilian rendition of Rio's patron saint, St George and the Dragon.

On a table beside the bed there is a flower-vase with a bunch of purple flowers and a ceramic plate with tropical fruits like mangoes, bananas and guavas.

SURESH, 26, is in bed with MARIA AUGUSTA who is 19. Her wedding ring is engraved with greenstone. A white bedsheet covers them.

Now, SURESH speaks Portuguese better. Sounds worried.

SURESH

*What if I do not get a job when
the child is born?*

MARIA AUGUSTA

*Rio is a city of immigrants. All
kinds of people are here. With
your experience...*

Now she too shows signs of worry.

SURESH

*They are all here to do business.
What have I got...*

MARIA AUGUSTA

*Why? There are so many who come
here looking for jobs?*

SURESH

*Who will give a job to a lion-
tamer?*

MARIA AUGUSTA

*What about the zoo? They need
people like you. It's a
government job.*

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

112.

SURESH

(sighs)

Enough!

MARIA AUGUSTA

(kissing him)

*I want my man to do brave things.
I want you to come home and tell
me exciting stories. Like a brave
soldier.*

Suresh is struck by the mention. Takes time to ponder over it. Sits up in bed.

SURESH

*Soldier? A foreigner in the
Brazilian Army?*

MARIA AUGUSTA

Dad can help!

Suresh moves the curtains and looks out of the window.

For the first time, we see the vast sea, surrounded by mountains. The room becomes bathed in sunlight.

INT. SHRAVANI'S HOUSE - DAY

104

SHRAVANI closes the curtain from which strong sunlight was coming. Hurries back to her laptop where she is on zoom. The room is now darker. We see the image of a Brazilian man on her laptop.

SHRAVANI

Thanks, Professor Gustavo for
replying to my email.

PROF DA SILVA

My pleasure. I understand you are
looking for an Indian man who was
in the Brazilian Army from 1887
to 1905. Right?

SHRAVANI

Exactly. I wanted to know if
there are many cases of
foreigners in the Brazilian Army?

PROF DA SILVA

Seems to me, your guy was part
of, what we called *Polícia
Militar do Distrito Federal* or
PMDF. It was not a regular police
body, but a military corps with
infantry and cavalry units, which
was set up to protect the capital
city.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

113.

The door opens. KARAN walks in. Sees her talking, picks up something and leaves after making a sly comment.

KARAN

Who is this guy?

He leaves the door slightly ajar. In the background we see him monitoring her. Shravani gets up and closes the door.

SHRAVANI

Was a foreigner allowed into PMDF?

PROF DA SILVA

Depended on social connections. There were glass-ceilings. Limits to how high up a foreigner could go.

SHRAVANI

What was the PMDF's role during those years?

PROF DA SILVA

Based on the documents you sent, I can say, he served during a very turbulent political period in Brasil which saw the transition from Emperor Dom Pedro II to two military dictatorships. Back to back. There were frequent revolts. So, he did not...

The zoom connection gets interrupted.

SHRAVANI

Shit!

It is not connecting any more.

INT. MILITARY HOSPITAL, RIO - DAY (1889)

105

[INSERT] B&W photos of the Brazilian Army [INSERT ENDS]

The board says *Hospital Militar*.

It is a makeshift hospital, not a regular one: an old white house with tall round pillars. There is a military canvas tent just outside the building.

From outside one can hear the cries of soldiers groaning in pain. The main hospital ward is a big hall with high ceiling. Light comes inside through windows which are at a height as in a church. Sunlight highlights a large network of spiderweb.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

114.

The floor is not clean at all. There are around 15 beds, all of them occupied by soldiers. The conditions are very basic. The beds have very thin mattresses with wrought-iron frames.

There is only one DOCTOR around, a large man in his late 50s, wearing glasses and heavily distressed. He wears a long white gown over white trousers with the PMDF logo and other military honors. His mouth is covered.

There are no nurses except just one male nurse, SURESH, 28. He also wears a white coat with the logo.

There are TWO BLACK MEN, not in uniform, who are carrying out menial work like carrying a bucket out and closing a curtain made out of bedsheet and picking up large lumps of cotton stained with blood.

While the DOCTOR attends one of the soldiers bleeding profusely and crying, SURESH is attending another soldier by bandaging his leg. The DOCTOR looks distressed as there are men calling him from all sides, in Portuguese.

SOLDIER 1

Doctor, Doctor

SOLDIER 2

Doctor, help me, tell me, have I got the yellow fever!

SOLDIER 3

Doctor, I'll die. What'll happen to my wife, my kids, someone help me.

There are some soldiers who are lying so still that they seem already dead.

INT. MILITARY HOSPITAL, RIO - DAY (1889)

106

A small room in the building has been converted to a makeshift surgery cell. A man is moaning lying in bed while the DOCTOR is treating his wounds.

SURESH is cleaning several surgical instruments. There are several medical solutions on the racks, a washbasin and several white towels.

SURESH closely watches the doctor sewing up the wound of a soldier. After he finishes, he goes to the washbasin to clean his hands.

DOCTOR

(in Portuguese)

Clean him up. The way I showed you.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

115.

SURESH carefully dresses up the wound of the soldier.

DOCTOR comes back and inspects. He is impressed with his work but talks to him somewhat condescendingly.

DOCTOR (CONTD)

*Very good. I want you to learn
some basic surgical operations.
No doctor will work in these
areas.*

SURESH stares at the DOCTOR walking away, nervous about the immensity of the task he is being assigned.

INT. MILITARY HOSPITAL, RIO - NIGHT (1889) DAYS LATER 107

Some soldiers are seen standing in prayer in front of the bed of one of the soldiers who has presumably died. Even the crying patients are silent.

SURESH stands with his head bowed down. Two people take the dead away.

SURESH quickly goes back to the surgery room. The DOCTOR is nowhere to be seen. SURESH is running the place.

The table is systematically arranged with surgical instruments. His hands tremble even as he picks up the scissors.

INT. BISWAS' ROOM IN RIO - NIGHT (5 YEARS LATER, 1894)
108

SURESH, 34, is at his writing desk as wife and daughter sleep in the background. He is older and calmer. His hair has turned partly white. He is writing intensely, in Bengali script, a continuation of Sc 6.

The VO-texts are spoken in Bengali. They appear onscreen in English as subtitles.

SURESH (VO)

*I have moved from being an
ordinary soldier to a squadron
corporal to brigadier position in
just 6 years. In September 1893,
when our beautiful city of Rio
de Janeiro came under attack from
rebels in the Navy, I was asked
to lead a garrison. Uncle, this
life that we hold so dear to us,
becomes so easily lost in the
battle-field.*

Sound of cannon-fire is heard.

EXT. A MOUNTAIN-TOP GARRISON IN RJ - DAY (1893) 109

[INSERT] B&W archival images of the Naval Revolts [INSERT
ENDS]

From the top of a mountain in Rio, we can see a long stretch of mountains intercepted by the sea. It is early morning. A white ship can be seen in the distance, from whose deck several people are firing. There is a thick smoke that gradually envelopes the entire space. The sound of bombardment echoes around the hills.

At the top of a hill facing the sea, we see a wall of sandbags which are used as barricade. There are about twenty soldiers, all of them black, dressed in red Army uniform with an embroidered vest and a decorative belt at the waist. Behind them, we can see an army canvas tent where rifles are used as scaffolding.

SURESH is leading the soldiers. He has a long sword hanging on his left. Through a hole in the sandbag-barricade, two cannons are protruding towards the sea, targeting the ship from which the attacks are being launched.

There are two gunners behind each of the two cannons and three on the side. A long wooden-rod with a black sponge is visible. Another carries a bucket of black liquid.

A soldier dips the sponge in the bucket and inserts it in the barrel of the cannon. He runs back and takes his position. Another soldier carries the round cannon-ball while yet another carries the gunpowder bag.

After ramming, the left gunner elevates the cannon and targets it towards the sea. As the soldiers load the two cannons, SURESH gives order excitedly, in Portuguese.

SURESH
*Quick, quick. The assholes are
getting closer.*

The cannons are now ready to fire. There is frenetic activity around it.

SURESH
Fire, Shoot!

Tremendous sound and smoke accompanies the firing. The cannon lands in the sea where it explodes. The explosions continue for some time until there are more explosions at sea than the shots fired at the city.

INT. SHRAVANI'S HOUSE - NIGHT

110

SHRAVANI is writing furiously on the computer.

Stops for a moment and leans back. We see her from behind.

Her head is at the centre of the pin-board in front of her.

It is teeming with notes, photographs and index cards. Several books have piled up on her desk.

She picks up a folder containing the letters and her profusely handwritten markings. Turns the pages.

EXT. A MOUNTAIN PATH IN RIO - DAY (1893)

111

It is evening. Even the sea is tranquil now. Only the cannons remain on the mountain-top. No soldiers in sight. SURESH, still in military uniform, looks very tired and ruffled.

He walks down the mountain-path, the sword still hanging by his side. He carries a big circular key-chain with several keys in it. He inserts them in his trouser-pocket and keeps walking down-hill.

At the crossing of two paths he sees two men walking uphill. He is initially taken by surprise at seeing the men but soon realises from their dress - simple cotton white cloths around their body with a long walking stick in hand and a small backpack - that they are religious pilgrims.

They greet each other. The dialogues are in Portuguese.

SURESH

Good afternoon.

PILGRIMS

Good afternoon. May God be with you.

SURESH

Thank you very much.

He keeps walking further down-hill and goes past many bushes. Soon he sees a YOUNG DISTRESSED WOMAN running uphill.

She is white and quite well-dressed in a long skirt, suggesting an upper-class woman. He is concerned. She is crying. SURESH stops and goes ahead to attend her.

(CONTINUED)

YOUNG DISTRESSED WOMAN
Sir! Please help me. Please.

She keeps crying.

SURESH
Please tell me what's the matter.

YOUNG DISTRESSED WOMAN
*They said my husband was captured
by the Army. I just want to know
if he is wounded. Please tell me!*

SURESH
(thinks over) How does he look?

YOUNG DISTRESSED WOMAN
*Tall. White. With a beard that
covers his face. Grey shirt.*

SURESH struggles hard to remember.

SURESH
*11 rebels were captured. I locked
them up in a room up there. Some
of them are wounded, some may
die.*

He hesitates for a moment. Then he takes out the key-ring from his pocket. She cries louder on hearing about dying.

SURESH (CONT'D)
*Come with me. But he will still
be in jail.*

YOUNG DISTRESSED WOMAN
*Thank you. I just want to see
him.*

He makes a gesture to her to walk ahead of him.

Both of them keep walking up. There is only one path. After a while, they reach a point where the road has thick bush on both sides.

She stops as she is panting. He too stops for her.

Suddenly the YOUNG DISTRESSED WOMAN cries out loud.

YOUNG DISTRESSED WOMAN
Kill the sonofabitch. Kill him.

She drops her handkerchief and starts running downhill.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

119.

Suddenly, SURESH finds himself surrounded by four men who emerge from the bush. They seem to have been hiding strategically at different sides of the road. They take out their sword and jump towards SURESH to attack him, targeting his keys. It drops to the ground.

Realising that he has been ambushed by the woman, SURESH springs to defend himself.

He moves to one corner so that no one can get behind him. He takes out his sword and starts fighting with the FOUR REBELS.

The fight goes on for a long time. SURESH fights valiantly. Two of them run away into the bush but the other two keep fighting with him with their swords.

Ultimately, one of the men hit him on the knee. He starts bleeding from his calf. The other gives him such a strong blow that he falls down on a large piece of rock and faints.

The whole world becomes a blur. Over the screen that has gone out-of-focus, we hear the rebels taking away the key from the ground and running away.

Momentarily, we see the handkerchief on the ground.

INT. MILITARY HOSPITAL, RIO - DAY (1893, 5 DAYS LATER) 112

SURESH finds himself in his own hospital where he had treated other soldiers. Now he is in one of the beds. He opens his eyes slowly to see the same DOCTOR under whom he had worked.

DOCTOR

How do you feel now?

SURESH doesn't reply, just makes moans suggesting he is now no longer unconscious. The Doctor talks slowly.

DOCTOR

You were unconscious for five days. A soldier found you today lying on a rock in the hill. Can you remember what happened?

Now he sees that several of the soldiers are standing around him. From a distance, he sees MARIA AUGUSTA walking towards him. The soldiers give way to her. She sits on his bed, overwhelmed with joy. She wipes her tears.

MARIA AUGUSTA

Praise be to the Lord, my love.

SURESH is too weak to reply. She hugs and kisses him.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

120.

MARIA AUGUSTA

*We have very good news, my love.
The Army made you Captain for
defending Rio from the rebels.*

He extends his arm and lets her embrace him. The soldiers rejoice, including the doctor. They join in a chorus, clapping their hands.

VARIOUS

Captain Suresh Biswas!

SURESH

(mumbling)

No longer a foreigner!

He smiles with fulfillment as flowers are laid out.

FADE OUT

EXT. OUTSIDE PUBLIC LIBRARY, MUMBAI - EVENING

113

SHRAVANI is browsing news on her mobile on an English-language news channel. The 'Breaking News' shows:

[INSERT] "Citizenship Amendment Bill Passed: The End of Indian Democracy?" [INSERT ENDS]

She 'plays' the accompanying news-video. We see and hear the anchor.

[INSERT] "The Bill paves the way for the Hindu majority government to further sideline the Muslims in India. There are large-scale protests across various university campuses..." [INSERT ENDS]

There is a notification sound on her mobile.

Message from KAVITA.

[INSERT] Script-reading session scheduled next Friday. Best of luck. [INSERT ENDS]

SHRAVANI is seen from a distance. It is evening. She is sitting on a bench below a banyan tree.

After a pause, she texts back.

[INSERT] OK. Will be there. [INSERT ENDS]

The tree's aerial roots dangle over her head like tentacles. She is thoughtful. Disturbed.

EXT. CITY PARK, RIO DE JANEIRO - DAY (1905) 114

SURESH sits on a bench below a large banyan tree. Its long roots hover over his head. He is pensive.

He picks out a letter from his pocket. Starts reading it. We hear his UNCLE's tired voice in Bengali. The translation appears as subtitles.

UNCLE (VO)

Dear Suresh, Your mother passed away without seeing you. So will I. The British have decided to partition Bengal into two: Hindu Bengal and Muslim Bengal. There is unrest everywhere. Your friend Upen has died in police custody. Some of your letters were published in Amrita Bazar Patrika, the same paper where Upen's article came out. Suresh, you are Bengal's pride. Keep moving on.

It is evening. The streets are empty. SURESH still holds the letter in his hands.

EXT. CEMETERY, CALCUTTA - DAY (1877) 115

SURESH and UPEN are at Michael Madhusudan Dutt's grave. We only see UPEN at 18 (continuation of Sc 40).

Michael's bust stands on one side of the grave.

UPEN, the bright and firebrand young boy, stands proudly in front of the bust and recites in English with militant zeal.

UPEN

... For those fair climes I heave impatient sigh/ There let me live and there let me die.

INT. BISWAS' ROOM IN RIO - NIGHT (1905) 116

There is a Buddha statue on SURESH's writing desk.

He has now come to the end of his letter. He folds it, puts on the 1 reis snake-eye stamp, seals it, even as we hear his voice-over. His wife and child are asleep in the background. His VO is heard in Bengali with subtitles.

SURESH (VO)

A tiger I trained to perform before audiences, suddenly one

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

122.

SURESH (VO) (cont'd)
*day refused to perform. It had
 to be returned to its natural
 habitat. The soul, dear Uncle, is
 a wild animal. It wants to return
 where it can be truly happy. The
 life I am living is not the life
 that wants to live within me.*

He is putting together a small backpack, picking up some items from a brown leather-suitcase.

He finds the small pen-knife he had carried in the Bengal forests, looks at it tenderly and puts it in his backpack.

He finds his mother's golden bangle wrapped in a saffron cloth which he had never encashed.

[INSERT] He sees her from outside the window, pulling the bangle off from her wrist. [INSERT ENDS]

His eyes moist, he puts it in his bag, caressing it for a moment.

He finds the tattered map of the world given to him by his uncle. Spreads it out on a table. Traces his journeys with his fingers on the map.

His attention goes to the newspaper in which it is wrapped. He sees the masthead of *Amrita Bazar Patrika*.

SURESH digs deeper into the suitcase and finds a book on 'Peoples of the World' that Fr Ashton had gifted him.

He opens it. There is a section on Brazil that features the natural beauty of Rio de Janeiro.

He smiles to himself and puts it inside his backpack.

INT. CHURCH IN CALCUTTA - DAY (1876)

117

SURESH is a boy of 15 years. He is reading in the Church's library. FR ASHTON sits opposite him and reads out *Ulysses* to him from a volume of Alfred Tennyson.

Instead of his usual white Christian robe, Fr Ashton is now dressed in a long white Indian kurta and pyjama which look like priestly attire.

FR ASHTON
 ...All experience is an
 arch wherethro' / Gleams that
 untravell'd world whose margin
 fades / For ever and forever when
 I move. / How dull it is to pause,
 to make an end / To rust

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

123.

FR ASHTON (cont'd)
 unburnish'd, not to shine in
 use!/ As tho' to breathe were
 life! Life piled on life/ Were
 all too little/ and of one to me
 little remains...

EXT. FOREST ROAD IN BRAZIL - DAY (1905)

118

It is early morning. We see SURESH from behind. The morning fog is still there.

There is no one in the streets except a small group of religious pilgrims dressed in white robes and carrying long walking sticks, who are walking in a direction opposite to him. They sing an ardent devotional Yoruba (Afro-Brazilian) song as they walk.

Suresh is walking towards a dense forest. The trees are so huge that he is dwarfed by the landscape (as in the opening scene). He is wearing a simple white cotton trouser and a shirt and carries just a simple backpack.

He too carries a long walking stick like the pilgrims. He is limping. His right leg hurts. It is bandaged at the calf muscle. He walks slowly. He gradually gets enveloped by the fog.

CREDITS ROLL AND AFTER A WHILE, STOP.

EXT. PRODUCTION OFFICE COFFEE CORNER, MUMBAI - DAY

119

SHRAVANI is hanging out with KAVITA, holding coffee-cups. Several other people move around them.

SHRAVANI is formally dressed, holding the bound-script across her chest. KAVITA also has the script under her arms. While SHRAVANI looks tense, KAVITA tries to small-talk to relax her.

KAVITA
 You know, my favourite character
 in the script? Bosco. What
 happened to him?

SHRAVANI
 That's another story.

KAVITA
 Tell me no...

SHRAVANI
 Bosco refused to perform after a
 while.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

124.

KAVITA

Like that tiger?

SHRAVANI

(nods)

Like Suresh. Like *Monsieur
Chocolat*. They all get tired
after a point.

KAVITA nods.

SHRAVANI (CONTD)

Bosco returned to Hamburg with
Suresh. The elephant recognised
Hagenbeck's voice as he stepped
out of his horse carriage. He
called Bosco his 'best friend'.
Hagenbeck died of a snake bite,
in his eighties.

KAVITA

What, he did not heed the second
signal?

EXECUTIVE 1 suddenly appears at the corridor leading to
the coffee corner. There is a sense of urgency. He waves
to KAVITA and SHRAVANI, calling them to the conference
room immediately.

They leave their cups behind and rush along the corridor.
SHRAVANI adjusts her sari. KAVITA leads her, confident.

INT. CONFERENCE ROOM, MUMBAI - DAY (AN HOUR LATER) 120

SHRAVANI has just completed her narration in the
conference room. The bound screenplay is on the table in
front of her. She looks emotionally exhausted and is
looking forward to responses. There is an awkward silence.

There are several people. KAVITA sits on the side opposite
her, beside MR MEHRA, and the TWO EXECUTIVES. It is a
tense atmosphere.

MR MEHRA

You have worked really hard.
There are some good things in it.
(pause) I have to update the Board
about how the script has shaped
up. Look, Shravani, we are
talking here, of a major star.
And, what are we really offering
him?

SHRAVANI

(taken aback)

Why Sir? He is there in all

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

SHRAVANI (cont'd)
scenes. There is a lot of action.
Lots of visual effects.

EXECUTIVE 1
That's also the issue. It will
raise the budget beyond recovery
level. So many foreign locations,
foreign actors.

EXECUTIVE 2
This star has just had a big hit
with a superhero film. I'm not
sure it is the right kind of star
vehicle.

MR MEHRA
We like the script. But several
things have to change to make
this work. Are you open to
bringing in other screenwriters
to rework this, specially the
dialogues? The star will also
have his own views. So also the
director.

SHRAVANI
It is somebody's life we are
talking about, Sir! We just can't
change things like that. Besides,
you said, stars love biopics.

MR MEHRA
But the biopic has to suit their
public image! (tempers are rising
now) No one is interested in all
the dry, pedantic stuff you have
given us.

The EXECUTIVES nod their heads vehemently.

EXECUTIVE 2
And where is humour?

MR MEHRA
We want to see Suresh Biswas as
an inspiring hero that India
needs today. A rallying force for
Indian Nationalism. The audience
wants to see an Epic Indian Hero
undertaking Epic Adventures
across the world. Guts and glory!
Blood and Soil!

KAVITA
Sir, I think what Shravani is
trying to do is humanising Suresh
(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

126.

KAVITA (cont'd)

Biswas. He was a great guy but also a vulnerable man.

MR MEHRA

(turning to Kavita)

Who wants to see vulnerability in a tiger-tamer, dammit! You have completely missed the point. If he reads this script, he will throw it out of the window.

Animated, MR MEHRA gets up and goes near a cupboard and pulls out a book.

The whole atmosphere is tense. One can only hear the sound of him pacing across the room. The EXECUTIVES have retreated into total silence.

SHRAVANI is taken aback by the extreme response. KAVITA is clearly distraught.

MR MEHRA has a screenwriting manual in his hands: Chris Vogler's *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers*.

He goes around to Shravani's side and slams the book on the table, in front of her.

MR MEHRA

Please rewrite the script, creating plot-points exactly in accordance with the 'hero's journey' explained here. I was under the impression that you were aware of these things. Kavita suggested your name and so I thought, ok ... (looking at his watch) Sorry, I have another meeting lined up. I need to go. Bye guys.

He walks off in a huff. The two EXECUTIVES follow soon thereafter.

SHRAVANI is crestfallen. She and KAVITA just sit there in silence for a few seconds.

Soon, they quietly collect their things and leave, closing the door behind them.

The conference room is empty but the lights are blazing.

Vogler's screenwriting manual lies abandoned on the table.

EXT. STREET, MUMBAI - DAY (MOMENTS LATER)

121

KAVITA and SHRAVANI are walking together in silence.

The street is teeming with people and cars, filling up the silence between them.

KAVITA
Blood and soil!

SHRAVANI
Modi's 56-inch chest! Like
Mussolini's balls! This big!

She gestures with her hands to suggest an absurd size.

They are trying to cross a street in Marine Lines, with a row of Art Deco buildings. Cars are racing past.

They do not notice that a saffron brigade with a long line of young men in khaki shorts and saffron flags are marching down the road on the other side. Their slogans are drowned by the traffic noise.

SHRAVANI and KAVITA are busy talking between themselves.

KAVITA
Planning to join a start-up.
Let's meet some time soon and
talk about that spec-script of
yours. I loved it!

SHRAVANI
This week I am busy setting up a
new house. I left Karan. So,
maybe, the week after...

They are crossing the street dangerously. As the cars approach, they run quickly to the other side of the street.

Without realising it, they end up in the middle of the saffron marching brigade.

Surrounded by men in uniform, they find themselves trapped inside a saffron blur that fills the screen.

FADE OUT

THE END

CONCLUSION

I had chanced upon Suresh Biswas serendipitously one winter afternoon in Calcutta two decades ago while flipping through the subject-cards of the Indian National Library in search of historical links between India and Brazil while writing a screenplay about an Indian family split between Goa (an ex-Portuguese colony) and Brazil. I was engrossed by stories of Indian trees that migrated to Brazil and flourished there and vice versa, through Portuguese colonialists who carried the seeds from one colony to another (shadows of which can be found in the screenplay). Soon, I came across an unanticipated connection that captivated me more than the migration of tamarind and banyan trees. The six letters of Biswas that I read in a dog-eared volume in Bengali resonated with a voice across more than a century. I was fascinated with the extraordinary and unique journey of his life not because of his ‘manly’ valour that the two biographers eulogised but because of his adventures across unlikely lands, outside the pale of British dominion, transcending hostile social circumstances.

My choice of biopic as the biographical format was perhaps overdetermined by my academic and professional orientation. As a screenwriter rooted in Bengali culture who has also lived across several cultures and languages within and outside India with an interest in connections between India and Latin America that has grown out of a lived experience, I feel a personal compulsion and urgency to reclaim Suresh Biswas from quasi-oblivion. He too was a Bengali, travelled around the world, was fluent in multiple languages and developed a special emotional connection with Brazil while still being rooted to an Indian ethos.

In this concluding section, I summarise the findings of the thesis in relation to the key research questions, of both the critical and creative components as articulated in the Introduction. I thus reflect on my critical work, script research and screenwriting, making observations about the process and drawing conclusions that may be useful to other practicing screenwriters. The thesis has progressed through multiple iterations of film-viewing, research and writing with an awareness about the debates around Creative Practice Research in screenwriting. While the entire inquiry was initiated from the practice-based concern about writing a biopic-screenplay on a specific subject with limited reliable evidence, it has involved a multidisciplinary approach encompassing Film Studies (invoking biopic history and criticism), Film Production (screenwriting), historical and biographical research (for the screenplay), and theoretical

discourses such as cosmopolitanism and postcolonialism. I have thus used a “mixed methodology and methods framework” drawing concepts, resources and approaches from different disciplines which have proved beneficial to me, in conformity with the experiences of several CPR-screenplay doctoral candidates as reported by Sung-Ju Suya Lee et al. (90-91). Created and written under research conditions, the creative component here can be characterised as an “academic screenplay” (Price 319; Batty and McAulay’s title). Nita Cherry and Joy Higgs insist that such research/creative inquiry “requires us to bring multidisciplinary perspectives and creative research strategies to bear on issues and possibilities, and often to think outside the existing boxes” (13). I hope the research findings illustrate the effectiveness of my multidisciplinary approach which may not have been possible within an industry scenario due to time constraints and commercial imperatives.

In the critical component I have been particularly concerned about developing an understanding of how historical knowledge finds expression in the biopic, the usefulness of ‘vernacular cosmopolitanism’ as an interpretative framework for the screenplay, and research and narrative approaches used by screenwriters in cases of limited evidence. As a CPR thesis, I present my findings (‘new knowledge’ contribution) in three categories: those that have grown out of the critical component, my findings about research methods for screenwriting in case of limited evidence, and my own learning about screenwriting and biography-writing. The central research question – whether a study of fictional invention in biopics can offer insights, allowing me to overcome the practical problem of writing a biopic with very little evidence – has been affirmed by the observations of Chapter 3 and self-evident from the completed screenplay. Here I reflect on the effectiveness of the intertwining of the critical-creative components in light of the scholarly reflections around CPR, and the limitations of my thesis as well as its future possibilities. It is important to point out that the thesis has been significantly shaped by my own experience of screenwriting practice in the industry scenario and teaching the discipline in the academic scenario in the specific context of India, thus using “experiential starting points from which practice follows” (Haseman 100).

Research Findings

In the Introduction, I have explained how my thesis fulfils the conditions of CPR vis-à-vis scholarly reflections in the area, moving as it does, from practice to theory, history and criticism, reverting to practice with knowledge about research and writing that become an enabling experience for me. The “creative work” thus, indeed, “sits at the centre of the research

project,” as Batty and Kerrigan think it should (7). Further, Tara Brabazon and Zeynep Dagli insist that CPR must “follow the process of thought in order to identify the intellectual pathway in/to the creation of visual [or other] propositions” which I intend to do here (37). In retrospect, I do not recognise any clear sequence of work as I have moved between the creative and critical components except that the research started with the biopic screenplay (practice) itself.

My concerns related to the construction of Biswas’ life have demanded a critical engagement with some of the pervasive themes of the biopic: the notion of biographical truth, questions about which lives or what aspects of those lives get told at specific moments of history and how biographical evidence gets embedded into fictional narratives, what inventions are made by screenwriters unto what purposes, and the self-consciousness of the biographer in making the subject relevant to audiences. In the process of seeking answers, I soon realised that the snappy term ‘biopic’ is deceptive in its simplicity, protean in the way it assimilates elements of several other genres (romance, adventure, oral narratives, musical, documentary, news-reports, other films, etc.) into an intertextual collage. I thus sought clarity in order to identify methods of research and writing that have been used by screenwriters. With the intention of looking closely at some of these issues, I made a selection of biopics which are based on limited evidence from across the world in order to derive instructive guidelines about research/writing that I could test and explore through the writing of my own biopic.

Embarking upon the critical aspect of the venture, I realised that the biopic has been a contested site where a “tug of war” has taken place among fiction, biography, and history, “with biography in the middle” (Parke xvi). In order to disentangle them, I have tried to lay aside the hackneyed notions of ‘true’ versus ‘false’ in the discourse of historical fiction in film (implicitly, also the biopic) in favour of more nuanced approaches that allow us to appreciate how biographical evidence often integrates with fictional invention. While most historians assess such films on the basis of historical accuracy (true/what-really-happened), I have explicitly affiliated myself with the views of the opposite camp of historians such as White, Rosenstone and Davis. All biopic-scholars such as Bingham, Burgoyne, Epstein and Vidal unequivocally agree with Rosenstone that filmmakers/screenwriters often convey their understanding of the past through cinema-specific narrative approaches where evidence cannot always be located in the narrative in an easily recognisable way. Rosenstone affirms that the fictional inventions that these screenwriters make do not necessarily violate historical truth (*Visions of the Past* 67–69). Instead, “history on screen adds to historical understanding” (*Film on History* 155). These life-narratives

are thus less concerned about factual accuracy and authentic physical details than the analysis, interpretation and representation of social relations.

Rosenstone sets up an ethical criterion for fictional invention, ‘true’ or ‘false’ based on whether the narratives reveal a thoughtful, critical engagement with historical sources and debates (*Visions of the Past* 13-14). Several other scholars like Nadel, Bingham, Andrew or McKee have used different terms to make the same point that historical accuracy or realism are no guarantors of authenticity. In more extreme cases, a blatantly ‘false’ version of the past in terms of historical accuracy may give expression to a ‘true’ (authentic) version in terms of emotional resonance and understanding of the historical subject (E. Smith 466-489). Bingham also states that filmmakers see the “need to ‘complete’ history, to fill in what didn’t happen with what a viewer might wish to see happen” (8). As Virginia Woolf sharply observed already in 1928, “The truth of fact and the truth of fiction are essentially incompatible. The biographer is now more than ever urged to combine them. For it would seem that the life which is increasingly real to us is the fictitious life” (“The New Biography” 235).

A key question remains, perhaps unresolved, as to how an assessment of the ‘truth’ or ‘falsity’ of such fictional inventions can be made. To seek a literal correspondence between evidence and invention is certainly to miss the point of biographical/historical fiction itself. Rosenstone’s conceptual tools help us to develop a nuanced appreciation of how fictional invention works in relation to evidence but does not offer any objective criteria of how inventions can be assessed vis-à-vis evidence for their presumed truth/falsity. However, through his analysis of *Walker*, he does demonstrate how inventions grow out (and deviate) from evidence as commentaries on historical debates, concluding that “the inventions of the film work as apposite, symbolic historical assertions” as it “performs a variety of traditional historical tasks, and goes beyond these tasks to create new ways of visualizing our relationship to the past,” providing a ‘truth’ on par with written-historical texts (*Revisioning* 202, 206).

Rosenstone suggests that disparate or related facts, character traits, historical figures, events, circumstantial evidence or subsequent developments tend to combine, separate, connect, coalesce and transpose through fictional inventions. He identifies these processes as compression (composite characters), condensation (composite events), displacement (events transposed on the timeline) and alteration (one character voicing the emotion of another). These concepts have proved extremely useful in my own understanding and analysis of specific biopics

and in the writing of the screenplay, assimilating evidence with a large volume of allied information mined through research, connected through invention. In ‘Dramatic Choices’ of Chapter 4, I have indicated how I have abided by, and at times, consciously deviated from the evidence with specific intentions.

Through case studies of a select number of biopics based on limited evidence, I have analysed the final screenplay in relation to available sources and have arrived at a set of observations about research and writing for such a scenario. For this, I have used Rosenstone’s conceptual framework and Bingham’s methods. I have found four overlapping narrative patterns which all biopics based on limited evidence seem to follow and have offered a new taxonomy for conceptualising them. I have called them, ‘biopics of presentist fiction’, ‘biopics of interiority’, ‘biopics as group portrait’, and ‘biopics of narrative fragmentation’. As ‘presentist fiction’ (where the past is used to comment on the present) the biopic tends to recast a past life where some aspect of the story runs parallel to immediate concerns that audiences can palpably identify. Though I show Biswas as he lived, struggled and survived in the context of the 19th century, contemporary viewers can identify him as a ‘cosmopolitan’ (as we understand it today) in terms of his movement across countries, cultures and languages with multiple allegiances or ‘hometowns’. The historical Biswas is distinct from the film’s ‘screenwriter’ Shravani through whom we have the discourse of the present about the past.

Presentist fiction as a technique allows screenwriters to overcome scant evidence by dwelling more in a contemporary frame-story narrative (as I do). I have also used a technique that I have called ‘tethering’, often used in ‘biopics as group portrait’, to overcome inadequate evidence by connecting the poorly-documented subject (Biswas) with better-documented characters like his mentors, Hagenbeck and Jamrach. Though I have barely used the other two narrative patterns, I have elaborated them in order to provide a more inclusive answer to the research question for use by other screenwriters who may want to explore other pathways. With sparse evidence at hand, screenwriters at times take recourse to the third option (interiority), tracing the evolution of the subject’s inner life as reflected through creative works or personal statements (partly evoked in the screenplay through Suresh’s letter-texts as voice-overs). The fourth category, where a screenwriter invents a deliberately fragmented narrative structure to avoid fictional speculation in the absence of evidence is relatively rare but intellectually more rigorous for the writer and challenging for viewers.

“‘Knowing’ in creative practice research,” as Batty and Berry point out, “is for the benefit of others” (184). I came to ‘know’ about the four overlapping narrative approaches as I watched and reflected on the relevant biopics. While presentism was a familiar approach, the notion of ‘interiority’ as a governing idea was evoked by Millard’s introspective essay. It was reinforced by closer analysis of biopics and though major scholars did not use the term, they made observations to similar effect, emphasising the unusual passivity of the protagonist. The notion of group portrait fell quickly into place while reading Caine’s book on literary biography. I immediately recognised that an entire range of biopics were masquerading as group-portraits. The Glenn Gould and Bach biopics stood out in their uniqueness as they could not be conceptualised within any of the above three categories. Once I developed that approach, I was convinced that the four overlapping approaches comprehensively explain the functioning of all biopics based on limited evidence. Thus, ‘knowing in CPR’ constitutes elaboration of an idea as well as the process of its generation.

While the taxonomy summarises my research findings in the critical component, findings of the creative component about research and writing methods also need to be elaborated. Through the process of my own work, I realised that in terms of approach, academic research is significantly different from the screenwriter’s research for biographical/historical fiction. The latter is rarely guided by a central research question; it follows a meandering path through educated guesses and multiple iterations or trials, driven by intuition and the specific demands of a scene or character. The screenwriter’s historical research, apart from close studies of all primary and secondary biographical sources, does not necessarily involve standard texts that an academic historian would study. The research method consists in laying out the biographical timeline in the larger historical context (as Tarkovsky and Konchalovsky did for *Andrei Rublyev*) which provides indication of areas of inquiry where the subject can be investigated from multiple perspectives: social, political, cultural, using even artworks as evidence, exploring networks and connections between individuals and public events. Screenwriting research is thus necessarily inter-disciplinary as mentioned earlier. Throughout this thesis, I have maintained that the pursuit of evidence is as important as invention in creating a narrative form which, in this case, may resemble a mainstream narrative despite my elaborate emphasis on conceptual frameworks. It is a conscious decision as explained in Chapter 4, for historical reasons specific to the fate of India’s alternative (‘Parallel’) cinema. Shravani, after all, is working under mainstream parameters and has to deliver accordingly and also wants to move out of her marginal status in the film industry.

In terms of screenwriting research, I have derived an instructive method based on Davis' work in *Martin Guerre*. Davis demonstrated how even something as remote as linguistic analysis of popular proverbs or comedies can throw light on the character's conflict or motivation. This is why the microhistorical approach to a biographical subject can be immensely beneficial by way of redeeming 'the lost footsteps' of a forgotten human being through traces left behind across social institutions. I draw upon Barrera-Agarwal's microhistorical research on Biswas as my evidential grounding. Since fiction-writers can tread into areas where historians cannot, in the absence of life-traces the writer can search for analogous lives, people going through similar experiences, as I have done through my contextual research (e.g. consequences of 'conversion' in 19th century Bengal or the experience of feeding/training wild animals). Through these explorations, multiple peoples' experiences can be *compressed* to create composite characters as *alteration*, drawing from and contributing to, a rich emotional archive. Similarly, diverse events across time and place may be *condensed* as part of a larger human experience which are 'authentic' nevertheless, experienced through one life. This is also why foreground action becomes more important than meticulous background details, the human drama driving the story rather than authenticating signs of the past. So far as screenwriter's research is concerned, my inquiries about the development process have shown, that the screenwriter engages principally with *existing* primary and secondary sources and hardly ever venture out in pursuit of additional primary evidence.

Often, evidence sourced from multiple contexts (while still rooted to the specifically historical subject) *becomes* invention through creative processes that Rosenstone calls alteration, compression, displacement and alteration. Davis' research methods and Rosenstone's conceptual paradigm align with each other and have guided my research/invention on/about Biswas. I have often used the experiences of Biswas' contemporaries (in Bengal, in the circus, etc.) to develop a better understanding of what he *may* have experienced, thus contributing an evidential basis to my inventions. Constructing a life thus involves gathering diverse snippets of existence and then assembling them into something that is, hopefully, coherent and new. A life, however small, has to be invented out of whole cloth, as it were, of what might have happened, and this is what Salman Rushdie meant (cited in Chapter 4): "to know me, just the one of me, you'll have to swallow the lot as well" (4).

That Biswas was a subaltern is obvious from his non-elite, rural origins. In Calcutta, London and elsewhere, he continued to have a marginal status. Though he exerted agency to shape his own destiny in unforeseen ways, he had very limited agency while working within colonial institutions such as the hotel, circus, menagerie, and army. It has been important for me to imagine Biswas in his 19th century context, where he did not have awareness of colonialism or cosmopolitanism that Shravani, the 21st century narrator has. I agree with Spivak's conclusion that the 'subaltern cannot speak'. So, I show him often verbally 'silent' and conforming to his masters though not passively; he 'speaks' through his body (performance) that reverses colonial stereotypes about Indian men as weak. This happens as much outside the circus as within it.

In my understanding, Biswas could not be rebellious but was a conformist in a *strategic* way as he needed to survive in a culturally alien and unsympathetic world for adventurous life-experiences. He is rendered 'silent' in Hagenbeck's autobiography which I have read 'against the grain' to extract information about how his life must have been, a research method used by Subaltern historians to trace forgotten people from the pages of recorded history. I have also tried to imagine Biswas' experiences through testimonies of contemporary tiger-trainers in remote towns, ordinary circus-performers and lion-tamers and memoirs or photographs of insignificant people of Victorian London. Some of these sources are not always scholarly in the traditional sense but have proved immensely valuable for their wealth of detail: the trainer who had preserved the nail of a dead lion and made it into a necklace, the man who has rings on every finger with animal images, an ex-slave who was dressed up as African royalty, an animal-trainer who said that wounds become memories of the cities where the attacks happened, and so on. This is possibly what Carlsten and McGarry identified as a "a broadening of the notion of sources" in contemporary biography (12).

In relation to my findings about biopic-screenwriting through the process of writing, the most important decision has been the central organising idea in terms of developing clarity about why we want to remember the subject and how. This generates the point-of-view in the construction of a life, and as I demonstrated through the analysis of *Martin Guerre*, point-of-view helps realign facts and directs research accordingly, structuring the screenplay around a predetermined theme by articulating the premise accordingly. In my case, that theme was vernacular cosmopolitanism and different aspects of the story were organised to serve this theme, contrasting it with its antithesis: contemporary saffronisation.

Presentist biopics, however, evoke the story's relevance to the present through a suggestive dialogue or overall theme. They are rarely explicit in connecting the past and the present within the screen-story. For example, in Herzog's *Aguirre, the Wrath of God* (1972), Aguirre's final dialogue – "I will start a pure race" – suddenly establishes his parallelism with Hitler. In Furie's *Lady Sings the Blues* (1972), the jazz singer's racist victimisation is an implicit thematic commentary on contemporary race relations in US. (An exception to this is *Rang de Basanti* where the film explicitly intercuts between the subject's motivation for violence in the past and the impersonating actor's similar motivation in the present). In my screenplay, the presentism is made explicit through Shravani's frame-story (through suggestive dialogue as well as theme) but also implicit (in portraying Biswas' cosmopolitanism through his journey across cultures). The frame-story technique also allows the writer to dwell more on the ambience that one knows better instead of resorting to uncertain historical research for every detail. Finally, it brings a meta-fictional frame of reference by highlighting the relationship between fiction and reality (within the conventions of fiction). The meta-fictional device helps to emphasise reflexivity and demonstrate the constructed nature of a life-narrative. Thus, intertextuality (screenplay's references to other texts) as a technique of source-tagging allows me to acknowledge my sources, comment and assess them, making critical distancing from evidence as important as fictional immersion.

In screenplays with a frame-narrative, there tend to be two protagonists, the intended subject and the one who is constructing (or searching for) the subject: two characters with two character-arcs. In line with what Aronson calls the "tandem narrative," it may prove dramatically effective if the two character-journeys go hand-in-hand, which I have intended (107). It has proved strategic to *tether* the bio-subject with well-documented public figures with whom the subject may be connected on some substantial basis in the absence of adequate evidence on the subject itself. In slave-master narratives, for example, the master may be well-documented and throw oblique light on the undocumented slave if we manage to read 'against the grain' what the master has to say. As mentioned already, I was lucky to find two major public figures with whom to tether Biswas and these have opened up an aspect of his life not documented in the six letters but based, nevertheless, on reliable evidence.

Through the act of research and writing, I also realised that characters are always composite, both primary and secondary. The more composite they are, without becoming incoherent, the richer they become and open up dramatic possibilities within the story. Though

we start off in search of the historical subject, we soon reach a point where the biographer's own concerns become increasingly important. It is important for any biographer to become self-conscious about this connection which, in my case, I have hinted in the Introduction. Biography scholars (Nadel, Cain, Lee) concede that this act of transference is present in all biographies, to greater or lesser extent, and is practically unavoidable.

A certain degree of self-consciousness thus seems desirable in the writing process and metafictional devices come into play to highlight them, a function served by Shravani in my screenplay. This does not necessarily mean abiding by the mandates of screenwriting manuals which have proved schematic and sterile to me, more constricting than liberating. Instead, I have preferred to follow my intuition and impulses based on experience, confirming my creative process with what Webb and Brien identify as "exploration and accident" with its emphasis on intuitive leaps, rules of thumb and educated guesses (77). I show my own rejection of manual-culture through the 'screenwriter' refusing to pick up the Vogler-text thrust on her by the 'producer'. It lies abandoned in an empty room. Thus, I do not intend to offer either a manual or a "counter manual" (Arellano 203). I merely offer reflections on biopics, research methods and my own realisations, "probing one's own process through exegesis" (Skains 93). I may also claim to be "unpacking cultural knowledges" as they grow out my own cultural experiences (Maras 101).

In the process of developing the screenplay through multiple drafts, a major challenge has been to convey the multilingual ethos of the story that reflects the polyglot frenzy of the multicultural world in which it unfolds without making too many demands on the reader. The seven languages (and sprinkling of many more) may be exasperating for the general reader/viewer but not so much in linguistically riotous India where literatures/films have had to evolve mechanisms of dealing with a certain degree of multilingualism. In one of the early drafts, I had written all the dialogues in the seven languages that are spoken in the script but this made intelligibility very difficult. Without flattening diversity to a common linguistic register, I eventually found a solution by using italicised dialogues (whenever not in English) making a distinction between the original spoken language and the subtitled English text. Screenwriters choosing to work with cosmopolitan themes necessarily have to overcome this issue in their own ways where my work can be a point of reference.

In working within the conventional postcolonial paradigm, I found that it brings as many problems as benefits, unable to address the complexity of modern predicaments which are far removed from colonial reality. I soon found that my own discomfort with postcolonialism's negative self-definitions was part of a larger, growing phenomenon. I found it voiced through several contemporary Indian scholars, some of whom were founders of the movement itself – A. Ghosh, Spivak, Bhabha, Bhambra – through which I arrived at the idea of 'vernacular cosmopolitanism' that has proved apt as an interpretative framework for telling Biswas' story, connecting the present with the past. My/Shravani's way of interpolating vernacular cosmopolitanism within the screenplay is certainly an invention but 'probable' in the Aristotelian sense.

Usually, the postcolonial subject is seen as a passive recipient of Western largesse (cosmopolitanism, in this case). This was important for Biswas as he had indeed benefitted from Western institutions (Church, circus) and individuals. Vernacular cosmopolitanism (where the agency is mainly located in Biswas' Uncle's Sanskritic moorings while also acknowledging Father Ashton's role) allows me to break away from the traditional postcolonial binary (pre-modern India vs. modern West). It rejects the condescending gesture of largesse and insists on cosmopolitanism while refusing to repudiate nationalism, staying anchored but always looking for new horizons (D. Woolf 497). I try to show through Biswas that identities have less to do with origins and more to do with the cumulative experiences of a lifetime that change according to the context.

In fact, a self-conscious engagement with the postcolonial framework allowed me to foreground certain dramatic elements in order to interweave them throughout the narrative and reinforce the theme of cosmopolitanism and its vernacular dimension: the trans-national ship-journeys, the multi-racial aspect of the circus companies, the polyglot ambiance, the assembly of animals from the furthest corners of the world into the European metropolis, and so on. The screenplay thus contributes to postcolonial theory through a fictional embodiment of the 'vernacular cosmopolitan' position that opens up to a heterogeneous multilingual world of difference. It offers a counter-historical narrative to the Eurocentric version of cosmopolitanism, contrasting it with contemporary 'saffronisation', highlighting liberal Hinduism against its fundamentalist expressions in current Indian social-political life.

The ‘academic screenplay’ here has developed through a process of supervisor-driven feedback, working through multiple drafts and experimentations that Gina Wisker and Gillian Robinson identify in terms of conceptual threshold-crossing, suggesting a transcendence that is both personal and beneficial to the screenwriter’s community: “Both the supervisors and the students are focused on the cognitive and conceptual, as well as the personal and institutional dimensions of the work. Candidates are encouraged and nudged to face challenges, take risks, and to cross conceptual thresholds in their work, to make ‘learning leaps’” (53). Wisker and Robinson thus locate the creativity of CPR in problematising accepted constructions of knowledge, engaging creatively with theory, practice, the personal and the professional in their work to make something new (64). In other words, all the critical and creative processes that I have elaborated in this chapter make the biopic-screenplay the culminating text that contains, embodies and “performs research findings” through “an iterative process of reflection in which reflective insights shape the nature of the work” (ASPERA 2).

My ‘academic screenplay’ has developed over three major drafts through supervisory feedback (‘nudged to face challenges’) on one hand, and on the other, the elaboration of theoretical concepts and ‘reflective insights’ that have shaped the development of plot and characters. There are four shaping concepts or discursive areas that are contained within the four chapters of the critical component: biopic screenwriting practices and the ways in which evidence works together with invention, the framing ideas of postcolonialism with an emphasis on the notion of the subaltern and vernacular cosmopolitanism, narrative approaches in biopics with limited evidence, and biographical inquiry into the life of Biswas with a clear identification of evidence, highlighting how the inventions relate to evidence. I had come across the concept of ‘vernacular cosmopolitanism’ in the first quarter of my research period (documented in the Full Proposal) but had forgotten it until it came back to me a year-and-a-half later with its aptness for my screenplay. The frame-story with Shravani as a ‘screenwriter’ working within the modern-day Mumbai film industry was developed so that it could be used to bring out the conceptual issues and the process of research and writing that a straight-forward narrative cannot convey. Over successive drafts involving ‘conceptual threshold-crossing’ and ‘learning leaps’, the framing chapters and the screenplay have been calibrated for greater coherence. This also raises the complex question as to whether the biopic-screenplay *per se* can be considered a ‘new knowledge’ contribution where “screenplays contribute knowledge in their very fabric,” as Batty and Kerrigan assert (74). If we acknowledge research to be assimilated within fictional invention and

that the narrative conveys audiences an understanding of the subject, then it is certainly a knowledge discourse though not in the sense of being objectively verifiable.

While I have outlined my methods and research findings, there are significant limitations in my work that I must acknowledge. If I have not dwelt adequately with Indian biopics, it is precisely because it demands a separate full-length study, requiring extensive forays into Indian history. In the process of my critical inquiry, I have encountered several possible pathways of research and have consciously closed as many doors as I have opened, in order to restrict myself to a particular focus of my thesis and complete it within a specific timeframe. My observations about the narrative approaches in biopic has been succinctly presented here; it can potentially develop into an entire book-length study. There are multiple theses hidden within this one as there are numerous conceptual nodal points of inquiry: biographical truth, cosmopolitanism, postcolonialism, creative practice, innovations in the biopic, biopic and historiography, and so on. These are vast discursive areas and I have had to restrict myself to only those aspects of the debates that allow me to address my concerns and further my argument. This is a problem inherent in multidisciplinary research where one cannot delve deeper into any one of the areas. However, its weakness may also be the source of its strength. Dubrovsky, a CPR doctoral candidate who relates her examiner's comments, recalls: "One of my committee members, pushed me to dig deeper, encouraging me not to be deterred by the messiness: 'Your work is interdisciplinary. It will always have frayed edges. That is part of the richness'" (597). I too am aware of similar 'frayed edges' in my own work.

At the level of biographical research, the vast canvas of Suresh Biswas' life across three continents has been very challenging. No amount of background research seems adequate and a creative work never comes to an end; there is a point where a writer just gives up due to practical restrictions. Though I have carried out my own rendition of Biswas' life, I am certain that there would be considerable research and writing about him in both the near and distant future, if the resurgence of interest in him is anything to go by. I am not sure if any further biographical evidence can be unearthed but that is not something to deter creative work, fictional or non-fictional, cinematic or literary. I intend to expand my research and novelise the screenplay, post-thesis, into a literary biography in the format of creative non-fiction.

Over the period of my research, I have been bewildered by unforeseen developments in different aspects of my thesis. This involves the rise of interest in Suresh Biswas from quasi-

oblivion at the time I started my thesis (Feb. 2016) to being hailed as part of international folklore in late 2019 (Cheshire and Burke). In fact, I had initially problematised the research question in terms of the screenwriter's conundrum while working with 'scant' evidence. Though at the outset, I had only six letters as primary evidence and the biographies as secondary evidence, subsequent archival findings (Barrera-Agarwal) augmented the body of evidence. My own contextual research also yielded a volume of biographical and circumstantial material where the scantiness of evidence could no longer hold as the central premise. The emphasis in my research question thus shifted to the more abiding issue of fictional invention in the biopic with sparse evidence.

However, the unfathomable question remains as to how I got unconsciously imbricated in the vortex of these larger social developments. Instead of thinking in terms of coincidence, I imagine that the rise of globalised societies has made the theme of cosmopolitanism increasingly relevant to people's lives (thus, Biswas); the internet has made archival information and unforeseen connections possible (just as the new evidence on Biswas would not be possible without online resources); and the predominance of improbable fantasy films and celebrity voyeurism has deepened, perhaps, a simultaneous need for stories about 'real' people instead of fictional ones.

In other words, I imagine myself as part of a larger consciousness of which I was unaware. I have contrasted Suresh Biswas' unselfconscious, autochthonous cosmopolitanism with the unfolding of its ideological adversary and archenemy in contemporary India: the rise of 'saffronisation' (Hindu ultra-nationalism). As I come to the end of my thesis, the social confrontation with the Hindu-Right and its acts of changing the Indian constitution has escalated to large-scale, continuing student protests across many Indian cities ("JNU Students ..."; Kumar). In my screenplay too, a saffron cloud envelops the screenwriter Shravani, who refuses to conform to a nationalist version of Suresh Biswas' life even at the cost of seeing the project fall apart. The pessimistic tone is intended as a commentary: the only way one can tell Biswas' life-story in contemporary India from a liberal viewpoint, is, as a deconstructed one.

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[All in-text citations and references are in accordance with the guidelines of MLA 8]

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APPENDIX

The Letters of Suresh Biswas

These translations from the original Bengali are mine. For the Bengali version, see:
www.scribd.com/document/215645218/Lieutenant-Suresh-Biswas-Ed-1, pp. 200-218.

Only six letters written by Suresh Biswas have survived. These were all written from Brazil to his uncle (Kailashnath Biswas) over the ten-year period, 1887 to 1897. It is evident from his last letter that he wrote several other letters which were either lost in transit or not extant. They were all written in Bengali but were first published in HCD's English translation (1899) and then published in original Bengali in 1900 (UKB). The quality and accuracy of HCD's translation leave a lot to be desired. Some of these have been indicated in the notes. I have often compared my translation with that of HCD where the departures are significant. It is evident that several orthographical errors crept in at the time of printing, particularly in relation to foreign names. Since the handwritten letters are not available to us for verification, the errors, deletions and interpolations that were involved in the process of publishing them cannot be precisely assessed. Biswas wrote in very formal Bengali typical of the 19th century when the written language self-consciously maintained a distance from the colloquial form.¹ These nuances are almost impossible to convey in English translation though I have maintained the diglossic distinction in the screenplay by making the letter-texts appear in voice-over in formal, antiquated Bengali (including the language of Uncle's letters for which there is no extant evidence) while maintaining the free-flowing quotidian form for fictionalised situations. Since Bengali is a language with a plethora of synonyms, the choice of specific words with its corresponding nuances, throws light on the writer.² For example, he addresses his uncle by different names at different moments in the letters – 'pitribbo', 'kakamahashoi', 'kaka', 'khura', 'pitrobbo mahashoy' – all of which suggest different degrees of

¹ This is a linguistic phenomenon common in South Asia, referred as 'diglossia'. Schapiro, Michael C. & Harold F Schiffman. *Language and Society in South Asia*. Columbia: South Asia Books, 1981: "...unlike Tamil and other South Asian diglossic languages, ...literary Bengali and colloquial Bengali 'might be better thought of as opposite poles of the same language'." (168)

² Bose, Buddhadeva. *Kalidasher Meghdoot*. M C Sarkar & Sons, 1957: 26. Bose, a major scholar in comparative literature, explains that linguistic modernity entails stripping of excessive synonyms to sharpen the precision of language. He elaborates 23 synonyms for 'woman' in Sanskrit, many of which have been inherited by Bengali.

emotional proximity that may not be conveyed in the common English register ('uncle'), but these have been maintained in the voice-overs. In my translations, I have maintained Biswas' syntax, his (rather arbitrary) paragraph divisions and use of passive/active voice, unlike HCD's translations. There is a seventh letter that was included in both UKB (197-199) and HCD (184-185). It has also been included here. This was written by a certain "Punando Limos," supposedly a close Brazilian friend of Biswas and was addressed to his father in 1894 to inform him about his son's achievements.³ It is nowhere made clear whether it was written in Portuguese or English. Very few people in Brazil at that time knew English. In fact, UKB (82-83) mentions that Biswas had once sent some news clippings in Portuguese for which his uncle took the help of a Portuguese priest in Calcutta.⁴ The authenticity of this letter cannot be verified but in this case, I have used the English version as my primary reference document and have cross-referenced it with the Bengali translation because there is a mild likelihood that the English version is a transcription of the handwritten letter though it is more likely that the English version was already a translation from Portuguese. The Bengali version, in this case, is possibly the translation of a translation.

Letter 1 (L1)

Santa Cruz, 8th February, 1887

Dear Uncle,

Through the mention of Santa Cruz in the address above, you may have realised that I am no longer in Rio de Janeiro because I have been transferred from there to here. Santa Cruz is a small village which was the private estate of the Brazilian Emperor till a few years ago.⁵ It used to be maintained by his slaves but ever since the magnanimous Emperor gave them freedom, this place has been abandoned and is now fit only for the grazing of cattle.⁶ I am now in the cavalry and have taken charge of all the horses. There are vast expanses of mountainous land here which

³ The name "Punando Limos" raises doubts. Though it sounds Portuguese, neither "Punando" nor "Limos" appear in the telephone directories of Rio de Janeiro or São Paulo. If this letter has any claim to authenticity, the name will have to be acknowledged as an error of transcription.

⁴ There was a sizeable settlement of Portuguese around a place called Bandel Church, 40km from Calcutta.

⁵ He is referring to Dom Pedro II (1825-1891) who was nicknamed 'the Magnanimous.' (Barman 85).

⁶ Slavery was not legally ended nationwide until 1888 by the 'Lei Áurea', a legal act promulgated on May 13 by Isabel, Princess Imperial of Brazil. Brazil was the last nation in the Western world to abolish slavery (Bergad 288).

are ideal for grazing horses and other animals.⁷ Dear Uncle, I am delighted to inform you that I have now been promoted one grade higher in the ranks of the military. I am no longer a mere soldier but a Cabo de Esquadra⁸ as they call it here. The French call it Corporal. I now have free command over the soldiers. You always tell me to describe you in detail all the places and races I encounter, but that would require writing several volumes. Actually, many of my European friends tell me to do the same, that I should write down all my experiences and my work, and publish them in the form of a book. In fact, I have seen a lot. I have studied many scientific disciplines and learnt seven languages. I can speak English, German, French, Spanish and Portuguese and a bit of Italian, Danish and Dutch but I do not even count the last ones mentioned.⁹ I left home without a single penny in my pocket and with only one set of clothes.¹⁰ My earnest desire was to revisit my mother and beautify her with a crown of diamonds because I can now well afford to do so. I would have done that only if there was any hope of seeing her again. However, Heavenly Father wills otherwise and I do not hope to meet her in this life.¹¹ I am alone in this world and will remain forever so. Let the inevitable happen. My sole happiness now resides in wandering alone in the boundless kingdom of the Almighty to relish the enchanting beauty of one's true Mother.¹² True companionship and true love are rarely found in life and that is why philosophers insist, "living in this world and creating a world of one's own amounts to the same thing."¹³ I have constructed my own world of happiness and one day, I will see my warm-hearted mother there. You'll perhaps remember me as a mindless vagabond. But

⁷ HCD translates this as: "I am in the *detachments*..." (156). There is no such mention in the letter and may give quite a wrong idea about the nature of work allocated to him.

⁸ Squadron Corporal

⁹ The main languages mentioned add up to six if we include Bengali. He may have included the other three languages of minor expertise as collectively one language to make a claim to seven languages.

¹⁰ HCD translates this as: "I left home almost naked" (157).

¹¹ Considering his life-long hostility with his father and his failed attempts at reconciliation, it is tempting to see a Freudian drama at play: he complains that his father never let him be close to his mother. There is a repressed anger against the father here. It is also unusual for Bengalis to refer to God as Father.

¹² Here Biswas certainly conflates and confounds his biological mother with 'Mother Nature' as the nurturing and healing force. Since lower/upper case does not exist in Bengali, its translation into upper case is an act of interpretation. HCD curiously uses lower case for 'mother' but upper case for 'Heavenly Father' (187). Biswas' use of the synonym *janani* for mother in this context certainly raises the word to a metaphorical level, evocative of the Sanskrit *shloka* (verse): *Janani janma-bhoomischa swargadapi gariyasi* (Mother and Motherland are superior to Heaven).

¹³ Quotations in the original.

dear Uncle, there are thousands of people who now bow to that vagabond. Even ferocious, wild animals stand up in fear in front of this vagabond. Banished beggars come meaninglessly empty-handed. So also did your ostracised and banished 'Suri'.¹⁴ Uncle, I love that word – vagabond. Because what you'll call 'vagabond' has the sacredness of truth to me. Vagabonds are those who neither have a home of their own nor have a desire for it. They are the wisest of the lot because they forever seek a more blissful abode than the happiness this world can afford. The vagabonds of the earth believe that they are the ones who have deservedly inherited the endless bounty of the Lord and with that conviction, they freely wander around singing and dancing, spending their days in boundless joy.

Which great mind has ever been trapped by the allure of domestic felicity?¹⁵ Among the brave, from Pausanias¹⁶ to Wilhelm the German Emperor, and among the poets and philosophers, from Zoroaster, Plato and Horace down to Shakespeare, Schiller, Goethe and Goldsmith...¹⁷ they were all supremely intelligent and sensitive beings, original thinkers and vividly imaginative people. ...¹⁸ As I was saying, these vagabonds do not lust after family property.¹⁹ They are not at all interested in what others are keen to know, busy as they are in seeking their own paths. Driven by abundant imagination, they want to levitate into higher space where their minds, thoughts and actions can be forever immersed in unravelling mysteries. They find no inclination or interest in trivial social and everyday things. Their intellects aspire for higher states of being, justifiably so, because the soul which is a part of God, is full of divine knowledge ...²⁰ Anyway, let's leave aside these lofty matters. I am totally unable to fulfil my father's suggestion that I

¹⁴ The meaning is not clear here. HCD's translation complicates it further. 'Suri' must have been Suresh's pet-name.

¹⁵ He uses the Hindu philosophical terms 'maya' (illusion) and 'sansara' (material world) which I have translated respectively as 'allure' and 'domestic felicity' because *sansara* is preceded by 'delightful.' HCD's translation: 'What great-minded men ever cared for this world with all its sweet contents?' (158)

¹⁶ Greek traveller and geographer of the second century AD.

¹⁷ Missing text in both versions.

¹⁸ Missing text in both versions.

¹⁹ This line indicates that his uncle may have suggested him to visit his village home and claim his paternal inheritance as he was the elder of the two sons.

²⁰ Missing text in both versions.

should go to Calcutta and meet him and other family members. Nothing attracts me there anymore. That person whom I had loved and still continue to love, and who had loved me and will forever do so, cannot be found anymore on the face of this earth. I patiently await her here, and will continue to wait until the day when I can finally join her. That steadfast pilgrim awaits me there beyond the clouds, in the innermost sanctum of a golden temple.^{21 22}

Letter 2 (L2)

Rio de Janeiro, 5th January, 1889

Dear Uncle,

By the time you receive this letter, you may have received the one that preceded this. I am writing this letter with pain and disgust. In our hospital, there are people who are frequently dying of yellow fever. We have been forced to move to another house. Imagine the hard work we have to do in this hot weather. It is between 93 to 95°F now. Besides, there is an ongoing revolt where several of our soldiers have been wounded by bullets.²³ Even as I write this, I hear their groans. You cannot even imagine Uncle, how our old hospital looks. It is not far from the new hospital. It is located within a temple or church of the Jesuit community. I still have a room there as I have not yet been able to move my things. Besides, I need to go there to prepare medicines. It is needless to mention that I have learnt medicine. I also have several surgical instruments that are lying there. If I manage to stay here for a while longer, I may become a good surgeon. I can carry out all kinds of surgeries and all the doctors approve my work. The hospital

²¹ The intensity of his yearning for his mother suggests that he was still recovering from the news of her death through an earlier letter sent by his uncle.

²² The Bengali version has no signoff details but HCD adds: 'Remember these from your long-lost but living, Suresh.' (189)

²³ Though he uses the word 'revolt', HCD (189) calls it 'revolution'. The events Biswas mentions are referred as 'Revoltas da Armadas' (1891-94) in Brazilian history. These were naval revolts which followed the coup in 1889 that put an end to the monarchy in 1891. "The Navy, still resentful of the circumstances and outcomes of the coup that had put an end to the monarchy in Brazil, under the leadership of Admiral Custódio José de Melo, rose up and threatened to bombard the town of Rio de Janeiro, then capital of the Republic" (Smallman 20).

I have been talking about is like a large hall with high windows through which light enters. When it is empty, it looks like a graveyard. People are scared to enter it and in reality, no one dares to go inside. For reasons of work, I have to often go but I do not feel afraid at all because I believe that spirits do not come to disturb or scare us. One hears stories about spirits but they are all creations of human beings. I do know that spirits exist but they are very different things, and a haunted house can indeed be scary. Uncle, you know, I am not at all afraid of death. I have treated many patients prior to their death. And yet, I am still alive and if I happen to die, that would be fine too. If God protects me, it gives me great pleasure to think that one day I may see all of you. Well, let us leave aside for now these unpleasant thoughts.

Dear Uncle, I will soon leave this place and will invent something that will allow me to travel once again because only travel gives me unbound joy. And through that I may get some ideas that will make it possible for me to return home one day. I will forever travel because motion is the essence of all creation and the whole purpose of living.²⁴ Besides, whatever desire I had of power and prosperity by entering into the Brazilian Army, has now been fulfilled. My first intention was to test the honesty of the loathsome entity we call ‘women’; secondly, I wanted to seek vengeance of an insult inflicted on one of my friends by an Army man.²⁵ I have now accomplished both these tasks. I have rejected women with spite, and that enemy-friend now runs for his life whenever he sees me coming. I have accomplished these tasks at great cost. I left behind a pleasurable, eventful life-style and for three years, wilfully chose the arduous, painful life of a soldier. This life will come to an end on 10th May of this year and then, I will bid adieu to this and engage myself with some other work. As I mentioned earlier, I will go away somewhere and find a way by which I can live comfortably like a gentleman. Though in my childhood I was often a bit too naughty, I have perhaps managed to maintain my simplicity, honesty and open-

²⁴ This is condensed in *Hometowns* through the Sanskrit proverb, *charaiveti charaiveti*, as one of the key themes in the screenplay.

²⁵ This sentence illustrates both his misogyny and his solidarity with his male colleagues.

mindedness. It gives me immense joy to contemplate that soon I will travel again across different countries like a bird flying across the sky. I want to cultivate science again in search of certain inventions and experiments. Training or taming of lions, tigers, bears, elephants and other beasts was not science. I want to invent a talking head, an electric girl, a table game and a transparent girl with holes (where we can see every part of the body). In this country and elsewhere, I can earn a living with these four inventions. Uncle, making money is the easiest thing in the world for one who has the mind for it and an honest heart. Every man for himself and God for all. I am in the world and the world is there for me. If I accept that God's power is great and the world belongs to Him, then all living things will be there along with me. Medical science is the noblest of all disciplines. I have studied it diligently and have learnt its deepest secrets. I adore this science but I hate its guardians or professors because they do not have any kindness in their hearts. A doctor bereft of kindness is like an angel without wings. Of all disciplines, philosophy is the highest as it tries to understand the Creator, God. I would rather not comment on this because even the thought of it evokes fear in my heart. I have conducted some experiments in this regard and it has only evoked terror in my mind.²⁶

Affectionately yours,

Suresh

²⁶ The Bengali version of the letter ends here but the English biographer's version has an extra sentence which is a curious mix of English and Latin: "*In terrorem* let us give *lans Deo* and *jure divino ad jure humans* let us say *pace in per perpetuum*." (HCD 191, italics in original). Since the above phrase does not make much sense, it makes us wonder whether it was interpolated by HCD or Biswas was displaying himself as a polyglot or UKB purposely deleted it.

Letter 3 (L3)

Rio de Janeiro, 12th May, 1893

Dear Uncle,

I haven't in fact received any letter from you in a long time. In the last letter I wrote, I had mentioned a revolt that had taken place here, but I haven't received any reply to that. I am getting along well in the military. First, I was promoted to brigadier position from a Sergeant's post. I could have obtained a distinguished rank even earlier but matters have been delayed because of being a foreigner. I have been living here for six years now, and have become quite well-known, and so this has been convenient. You'll may know that here everyone speaks Portuguese and so when I first came here, I could neither speak to anyone nor understand others. Now I have learnt the language and the rank I have reached is not one that is easily achieved. I will let you know as soon as the President of the Republic makes an announcement about my promotion. The good services that I have rendered over the past six years is officially documented and I have attained military praise without any prison term.²⁷ Right now, we are confronted with rebellion in Rio Grande do Sul.²⁸ I was very keen to go there but till now, we have not received any orders. How is father these days? Does he still remember me? Tell father that thanks to God, I am quite well. I have now made a man of myself and have received a lot of respect and regard in society. I have been an omen of death to the wicked, a gangster to the

²⁷ This is a very revealing comment, reinforced by Army historians in Brazil: "... Brazilians [around 1889] viewed military service as a punishment. Soldiers hunted the poor and the unemployed in the streets to fill the ranks. ... Officers maintained discipline with physical punishment, which they justified by arguing that a large portion of their men were criminals. Joining the ranks did not appeal to whites with the opportunity or resources to avoid service, and conscripts were largely black or mixed-race" (Smallman 9).

²⁸ The Bengali printed version refers to the Brazilian state as 'Rayo Grandi di Shiule' (UKB 209) and the English biography mentions it as 'Rio Grande de Sule' (HCD 192). If Biswas had actually made the Bengali transcription of the Portuguese in the way mentioned, it would raise serious questions about his knowledge of basic Portuguese. However, it is more likely that this little detail is a strong indication of how the printed Bengali version of the letters deviated from the handwritten document. Since the latter is not available for verification, it suggests that we need to be vigilant about the printed text even in Bengali. I imagine that Biswas never really transcribed the Portuguese to Bengali script but used Roman script in the letter (common practice in Bengali). However, the Bengali publication demanded uniformity and so it may have been erroneously transcribed. If Biswas had transcribed it to Bengali script himself, it would have read, 'Hio Granje do Sul.'

gangster, a gentleman to the gentleman, a scholar to the scholar. I have become an accomplished person totally on my own. Since the age of fourteen, nobody has ever done anything for me. I imagine that now I am thirty-two or thirty-four years old; I cannot be sure.²⁹ Anyway, I am surprised that even at this age all my hair, beard and moustache have turned grey along with a bald that is spreading. Remind me to everyone, and please write to me soon about all the people whom I know.

Yours affectionately,

Suresh

Letter 4 (L4)

Rio de Janeiro, 10th January, 1894

Dear Uncle,

Once again I have got delayed in writing to you because I had been bedridden with rheumatism since then.³⁰ It is almost one year now that I have been inflicted with this disease. Last week, after applying an excess of mercury and iodine of potash, the pain³¹ had been relieved but I had to stop using it after observing certain symptoms of poisonous side-effects. The doctors tell me that a total relief from it may be particularly prolonged.

²⁹ This proves Biswas did not know his exact age. This was common at that time. Birth dates were remembered according to the Bengali calendar and its conversion to the Gregorian wasn't easy. Besides Hindus did not have any official registry unlike the Christians. Thus, the precise mention of his date of birth in a memorial slab at his home in his natal village seems like a latter-day invention.

³⁰ Possibly referring to the time that had lapsed since receiving a letter from his uncle.

³¹ Here Biswas uses a rather unusual and evocative word for physical pain: *bedona*. The word refers to emotional anguish rather than physical pain. There were several possible words he could have used - *byatha*, *jontrona*, *koshto*, *jaala* – but his choice of *bedona* in this context suggests a Freudian slip that voiced emotional suffering.

Along with this letter, I am sending two photographs – one for you and the other for father.³² I have a persistent feeling that he is no longer alive though I cannot be sure whether my perception is correct or wrong. He must be happy to see me in the uniform of a Brazilian Lieutenant, that is, a leader of the Infantry in Brazil. He entirely deserves that happiness, pride or bravura.³³ You will be totally stunned to know that it cost me³⁴ one thousand dollars to make this uniform because it is made of fine cloth, feathers, silk and golden lace. I am also sending here a photograph of my wife which was taken before our marriage. My son's photograph is yet to be taken and so I cannot send it here. Let me relate to you the facts around my disappearance. In the evening of the battle,³⁵ I took ten naval soldiers into custody and after returning home, I set out on a walk on my own. On my way, I encountered a very well-dressed woman who asked me where the dead persons have been kept or transferred. I enthusiastically showed her that place. All of a sudden, two naval soldiers pounced on me with their daggers. I defended myself by pulling out my sword. When they found me adept in both defensive and attacking techniques, they quickly took to their heels. I immediately started returning home but I was overwhelmed by the putrid smell of that place and I had hardly walked fifty steps when I started feeling giddy. Not knowing what to do, I collapsed on a rock that was nearby and started reflecting on my own condition. Everything became dark to me and I started feeling a cold sensation in my feet. The coldness gradually rose to my knees, my thighs and reached my chest. In the same way, I felt my ears becoming cold; the coldness rose through my face, stopped at my chest and I became unconscious. I regained consciousness after three days. Two unknown people carried me to the

³² This and the next three sentences poignantly evoke his desperate desire to reconcile with his father who could never forgive him for converting to Christianity. Now we know that his father was very much alive at this time (1894) since his obituary appeared in 1899 (*Amrita Bazar Patrika*, Sep 5, 1899: 5). So, we may surmise that his father maintained his hostility till his death and never reciprocated his son's reconciliatory gestures despite his success. It is also significant that his uncle never confirmed that his father was alive though he had presumably informed Suresh about his mother's death. For the purposes of fiction, this aspect throws light on his father's adamant character.

³³ His use of the word *spardha* (bravura) is rather awkward here. HCD altogether elides it.

³⁴ It is extremely strange that he would have to pay personally for the Brazilian uniform. This may either refer to the cost incurred by the Brazilian Army to make the uniform or, he may have made it to impress others. He specifically writes, "...it cost *me*." There is also a possibility that he was reimbursed by the Army.

³⁵ Referring to September 6, 1893. McCloskey, Michael B. "The United States and the Brazilian Naval Revolt, 1893–1894." *The Americas*, vol.2, no.3, 1946, p. 300.

hospital in a semi-naked state. When I managed to speak after eight days, I expressed a desire to go home and went back to my place. Everybody thought that I had got lost.

Affectionately yours,

Suresh

Letter 5 (L5)

Rio de Janeiro, 3rd September, 1894 ³⁶

My Dear Uncle,

A few days ago I received your letter and came to know that people in my country are delighted about my military honours.³⁷ These things have now become so trite that I do not find anything new or exciting about them.³⁸ There were, however, several other officers who had displayed great courage and tact, and my regret is that I will never meet them in this life. Let me tell you about my military education. At first, I worked for three years in the Cavalry, then five years in the Infantry. Last September on the 6th, when the fire of the revolt started spreading and the Harbour of our beautiful Rio de Janeiro was surrounded by marine vessels that bombarded the lovely forts of Santa Cruz, Guanabara and João, we knew we had quite some task at hand.³⁹ Streams of cannon fire rolled out of all those forts. Very soon, soldiers assembled from all sides. Every elevated spot around the Harbour was firmly defended. All over the place, there were continuous skirmishes and cannon-fire. Since there were thousands of foreigners who were

³⁶ The Bengali original does not have any date for this letter but HCD (195) puts a specific date to this which is coherent with the letter's content.

³⁷ Though he says 'country' (*desb*), he actually means Bengal only because his letters, published in Bengali could not be read in other parts of India.

³⁸ There is an interpretative issue here. By 'these things', HCD (195) has understood his military achievements while I think he refers to praise that has become commonplace.

³⁹ The orthographical errors of transcription are evident here. HCD (195) wrongly refers to the second fort as 'Cage'. The Rio forts that were attacked on September 6 (1893) were Santa Cruz da Barra, Feitoria da Baía de Guanabara and São João. (Barreto 368). UKB (213) mentions 'Feij'.

living in Rio de Janeiro, the rebellious mariners with twenty men-of-war, could not bombard the capital and instead attacked the city of Niterói. After razing the city to the ground, they landed in Rio thinking that we were few in number and were already exhausted. The final battle took place on February 9th and then after three hours of intense fighting, the mariners were defeated.⁴⁰

Some of them fled, some took refuge in their ships while the rest were captured by us and imprisoned. Dear Uncle, do not think that the rank I have now reached was achieved with ease. I never thought that one day I would become a distinguished officer. Often, they spoke of my promotion but my name was repeatedly removed from the register for being a foreigner.⁴¹

Recently, during the time of the revolt, my companions and I came under the orders of a certain General. Though he did not know me earlier, this General had witnessed how skillfully we had worked at the time of war. He had seen my valour and how daringly I penetrated the enemy-lines even in the face of heavy firing.

It did not matter to him whether I was a citizen of the country or a foreigner. My expertise itself was of sufficient worth to him to report my case to the Marshal Vice President of the Republic who elevated me to the rank of Lieutenant. It was in this post that I continued to assist till the final decisive battle at Niterói.

I am sending you here a picture of the Battle of Niterói. My comrades were fearful of me though I never treated them badly in any way. You'll have insisted that I describe to you everything in elaborate detail but Uncle, how can I describe to you the horror of war? This life that we hold so dear to us gets so easily forfeited in times of war. However, those who are best prepared for any eventuality are the ones who are better equipped to defend themselves. What is real courage, after all? Courage means dedicating one's life, resolutely and steadfastly, for a certain ideal. When the enemy is at a distance, it is fine to have all kinds of arguments, planning and speculation.

⁴⁰ The revolt broke out in September 1893 at RJ and was suppressed only in March 1894 (McCloskey 302).

⁴¹ Records show that Biswas made an appeal to Ministry of Interior for naturalisation as Brazilian citizen in Jan 1892 (*Diario Oficial*, RJ, January 12, 1892: 162) and his name appeared in the electoral rolls on 20th May, 1894 (*Diario Oficial*, RJ, June 29, 1894: 2029-2030).

However, when the enemy is at close range and approaching aggressively, there is only one option and that is, to gather all the soldiers and advance. The more swiftly one can move towards the enemy, the more likely it is to scare them. You want to know about my life in greater detail. Wherever in the world I have travelled to, I have sent you letters from there. Have I not told you that I have travelled across Europe as a lion-tamer and trainer and I have taught caged wild animals to perform shows? Along with this letter, I am sending you here the clipping of a newspaper in Buenos Aires where the story of my life has been published.⁴²

Yours affectionately,

Suresh

Letter 6 (L6)

Rio de Janeiro, 12th April, 1897

Dear Uncle,

I am quite worried about the fact that I have not yet received the reply to my letter of 15th November. Along with that letter, I had sent you some news clippings and some important documents. I am not yet able to ascertain whether you received them. I am physically a lot better now. I am delighted to let you know that I have completed a significant part of my autobiography but it will still take a long time to complete it.⁴³ Of late, I have so much pressure at work that I hardly get any time to work on it but I hope that I will eventually complete it. Uncle, I really enjoy reading about astrology and for a long time now I have been studying it with interest. My earnest request to you is that, if you could kindly do the needful and let me know the exact date of my birth. I have plans of preparing an astrological chart of my life where I will

⁴² There are no details of the publication in Spanish.

⁴³ This document would have been invaluable but it has been perhaps lost forever.

specify the exact hour of my birth and the corresponding stellar position. Such a chart will foresee any imminent danger or sickness and by doing so, can easily help me to overcome them. I have ventured into several disciplines and managed to learn the essentials of different knowledge-systems. However, I want to compare them with astrology and verify if there is any coherence between them. Through the study of palmistry and hydromancy,⁴⁴ I have come to know that the influence of Venus, Mars, Mercury and Luna are very strong on me. Luna has made me imaginative and adventurous. Through the force of Mercury, I am able to accomplish the tasks I set out to do and convert my ideas into action. Mars has given me the courage and sturdiness of a soldier. Under the influence of Venus, I have come to know quite a few women.⁴⁵ I also believe that even Jupiter, Saturn and Sun have some influence on me. I am very keen to understand their impact on me but in order to do that, I need to know the precise position of those planets. Uncle, you already know, that during my travels in Europe I have studied under some of the leading European professors. Some day in the future, I will provide you with the details of their names. But, by God's grace, if I have a long life, I would like to study magnetic therapy,⁴⁶ astrology and other occult sciences. I want to deepen my knowledge in these areas. It is through the learning of these disciplines that our ancient Indian sages attained Nirvana, the highest of all aspirations. It also gave our sages the power to accomplish mysterious feats. Burying oneself underground, making a tree grow instantly out of a seed and extracting a fruit out of it – these are all products of that knowledge. I do not know how you feel about these things or if you are at all interested in knowing these things. In case you are interested, on some occasion, I will explain all these things to you in elaborate detail. If you do not have much faith in these things, then I would like to show the youth of our country the way to fame and respect. Please let me know how father is doing. I know that he is very sick these days. If not physically,

⁴⁴ A method of divination championed by Pausanius (LI) which was based on observing the effect of pebbles thrown into waterbodies. UKB (217) literally mentions 'marine-based symbolic knowledge' but HCD (197) translates this as "Chiromancy and Chronology". Palmistry is mentioned separately (*jyotish bidya*).

⁴⁵ This is an important detail in terms of fictional reconstruction.

⁴⁶ Reinforced by the details of L7. HCD (198) calls it "science of magnetism".

at least mentally I may be able to do something for him if I get to know about his state. I do not know if he is still around and so I do not write to him.

Several young men from Calcutta have written to me. They want to know if there is any way of coming to Brazil. I will reply to all of them individually. Please convey my best wishes to all my friends and relatives.

Yours affectionately, Suresh

Letter 7 (L7)

Rio Janeiro, 12th March, 1894 ⁴⁷

You may know already that your son serves in the military of the Brazilian government. He holds the high rank of First Lieutenant in Brazil's Infantry Division. He has, of late, become famous through his undaunted bravery, devotion and military skill in the Battle of Niterói. During the momentous night of the battle when the enemies attacked the city with six hours of non-stop cannon-fire, our dear friend – your son – was lucky to be present at the spot. He was provided with fifty soldiers and called upon to attack the enemies. He was soon discovered by his foes because he heard them saying, 'Who comes?' Instantly he replied, 'Brave soldiers of the Republic.' The enemies shouted back, 'Either surrender or you will soon meet with death.'

To that he replied, 'Brave soldiers of the Republic never surrender.' And then, he ordered his soldiers to charge towards the enemy lines at an accelerated pace. The enemies tried to stop their advance by firing incessantly. Suresh stood steadfastly at one spot and addressed his own soldiers by saying, 'Friends, the enemies are in possession of revolvers and cannons and they have reached quite close to us. The brave sons of this beloved Brazil of ours, are not scared of death.'

⁴⁷ Though obviously addressed to his father, there is no formal address in either the English or Bengali version.

You will soon witness how a son of the sacred land of Hindustan will take over their cannons within five minutes.⁴⁸ And so, prepare yourselves.’ Repeatedly crying out a joyous ‘hurrah’, he ordered his fellow soldiers to follow him even as he charged towards the cannons of the enemy. Soon thereafter, he took over their cannons and a bitter fighting ensued which ultimately led to his victory.

Suresh stayed with us till the end of February because he is a close family friend. He once told me that in case he passes away, I should write a letter to Calcutta informing you that he achieved honour wherever he went. He also wished that his own son should be told the story of his achievements and fame so that he becomes a deserving son and follows the footsteps of his father. His newly-wedded wife and his son of 16 months is living with us. They will stay with us as long as they are alive because they are very dear to us. He has left enough of property and money for them to live on and I too own several houses and extensive wealth that is more than enough for them.

At the social level, Suresh Chandra⁴⁹ is a very reserved man, well-mannered and knowledgeable. His mind is full of ideas and he is engrossed in scientific study all the time. He is fearless in times of peril, yet he is deeply involved in the study of philosophy. His knowledge of medical science is so deep that within a week, he cured my wife’s paralysed leg. None of the doctors could cure her. He calls this type of treatment, animal magnetism. Without administering a single medicine, he cured my wife by just running his fingers over her body.⁵⁰

N.B.: The authenticity of this letter is highly suspect (for reasons mentioned in the comments). We know from the previous letters that Biswas had made repeated enquiries about his father’s well-being (L3, L4, L6) to which his

⁴⁸ This phrase, ‘sacred land of Hindustan’ is highly unlikely to have been used by Biswas in that situation and this somewhat adds to my doubts about the authenticity of this letter. The juxtaposition of ‘our Brazil’ and ‘son of Hindustan’ is intriguing.

⁴⁹ Biswas never used his middle name ‘Chandra’. Its use by a Brazilian friend sounds very unlikely.

⁵⁰ UKB (198) writes, ‘her body’ (*shorir*) but HCD (185) writes, ‘her well-covered members.’ The letter (in both versions) ends abruptly without any sign-off details.

uncle presumably did not reply. Biswas was tormented by his father's life-long hostility and earnestly desired recognition from him for his accomplishments. This letter was possibly ghost-written by Biswas himself as a reconciliatory gesture to his father whom he had never addressed directly in his letters. The lack of formal address and sign-off details in this letter are particularly revealing. He may have also thought that a third-person account would carry greater credibility, that too from a man well-placed in Brazilian society who writes a letter to a stranger without any clear purpose. "Punando Limos" could not have sent this letter without Biswas providing him with the postal address. It is also significant that this letter emphasises all the qualities that Biswas thought his father would appreciate: dignified and stable family life, material and educational accomplishments, social respect and spiritual inclinations. These were a far cry from his pride in taming wild animals which his religiously-obsessed father may have sneered at. Despite his efforts, his father did not respond as the subsequent letters testify. Seen from this perspective (as ghost-written), this letter may seem poignant, revealing more than any other letter, of what he thought of himself. We may also conclude that it was written in English.

APPENDIX: Illustrations

Illus. 4.1 *Bismarck in Hamburg Passenger Lists, 1886* (highlighted)

(Staatsarchiv Hamburg, Deutschland; Hamburger Passagierlisten; Microfilm No.: K_1734.

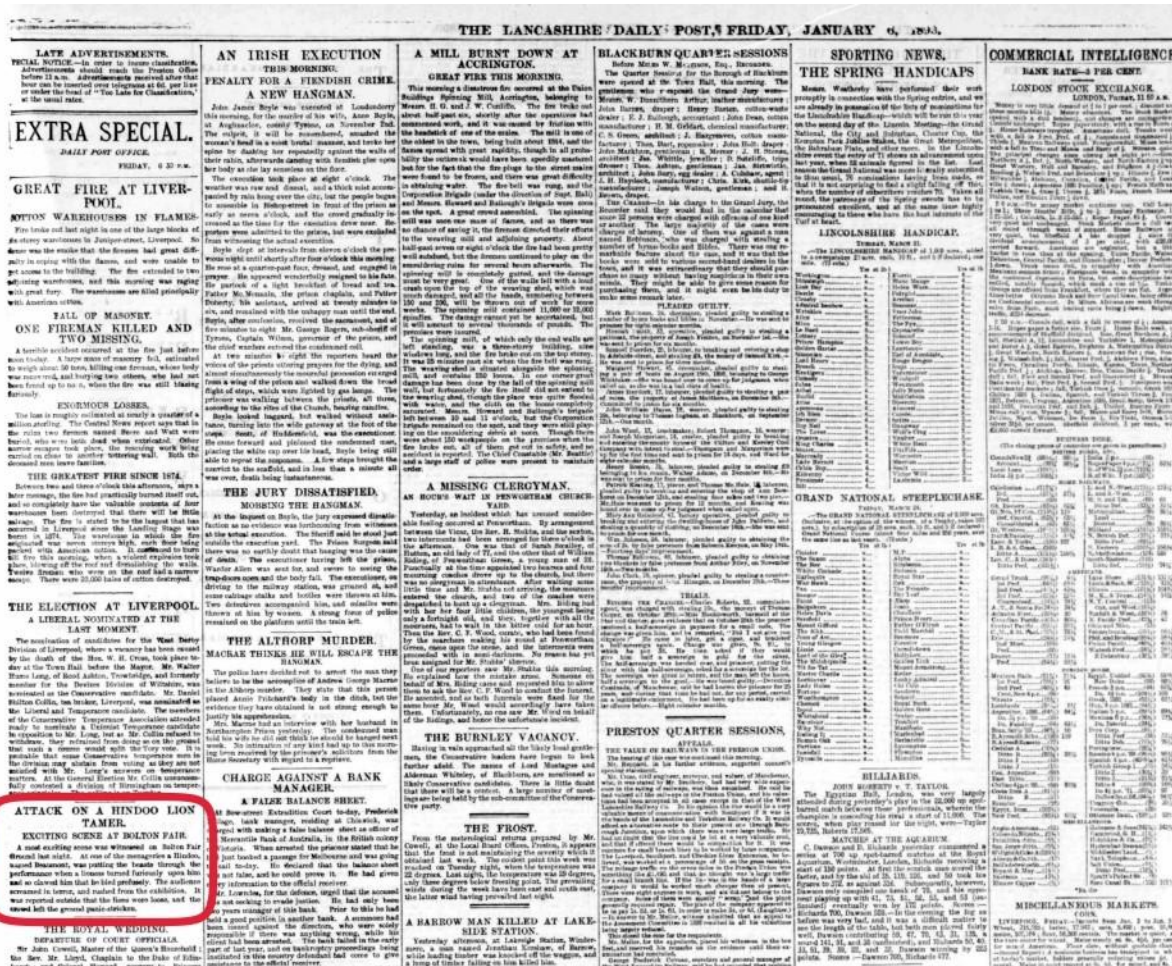
Hamburg Passenger Lists, 1850-1934 Ancestry.com, 2008.)



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This image is unavailable. Please refer to the printed version of the thesis for reference.





Illus 4.5 *World's Fair at the Royal Agricultural Hall, Islington, 1881-82* (Biswas in red inset)

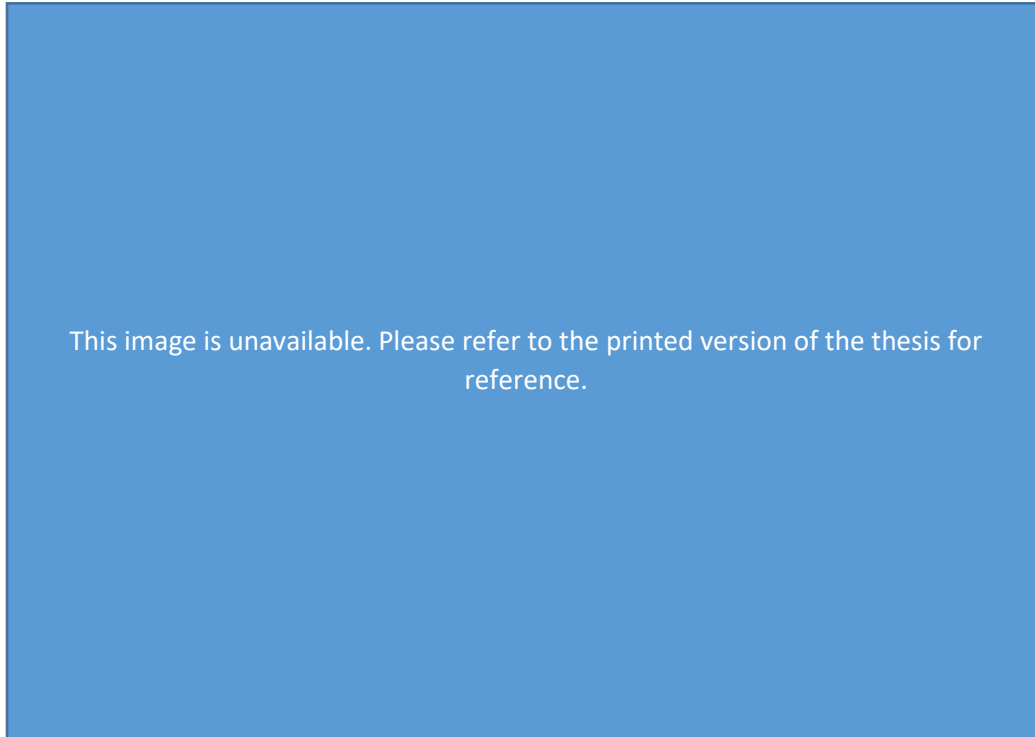
www.prints.bl.uk/products/worlds-fair-royal-agricultural-hall-084114 Accessed
10 Nov. 2017.

This image is unavailable. Please refer to the printed version of the thesis for reference.

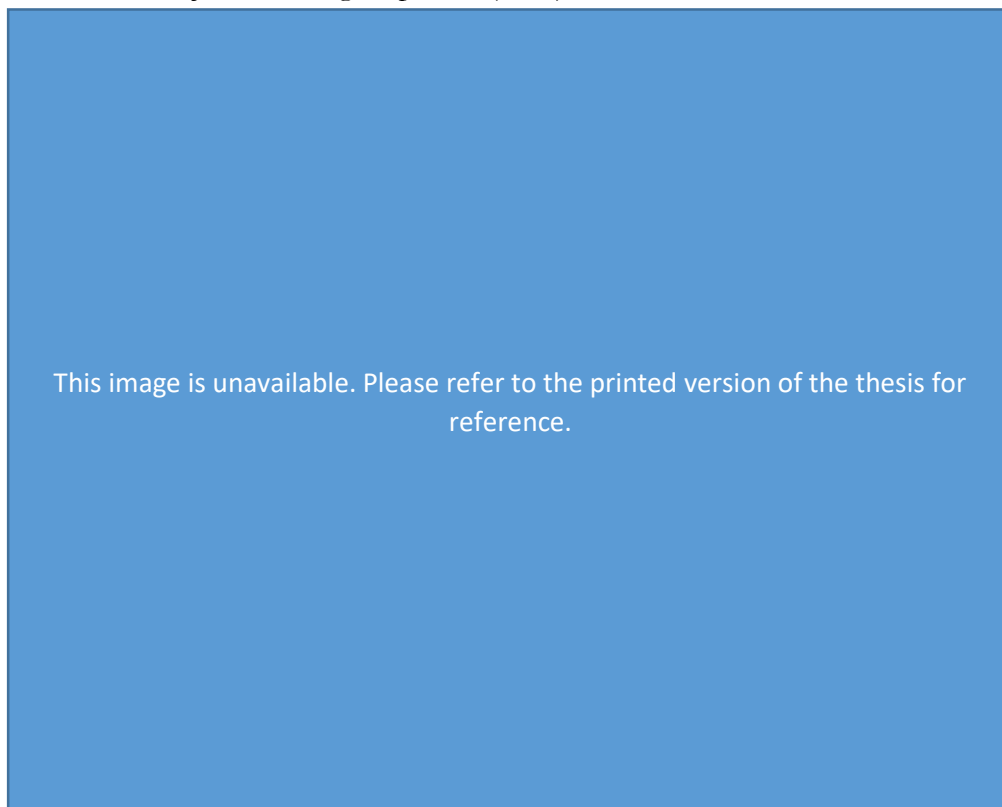
Illus. 4.6: **Charles Jamrach**

Source: Images 4.6A- 4.6C are from Larsson (2016), Animal History Museum.

A: Photo of Jamrach's menagerie from outside, to the left (1888)



B: Sketch of Jamrach's tiger episode (1857), cited in Larsson.



C: “At Jamrach’s, The Dealer in Wild Animals, East London.” Illustration. *The Illustrated London News*, 19 Feb. 1887. *Source: newspapers.org*

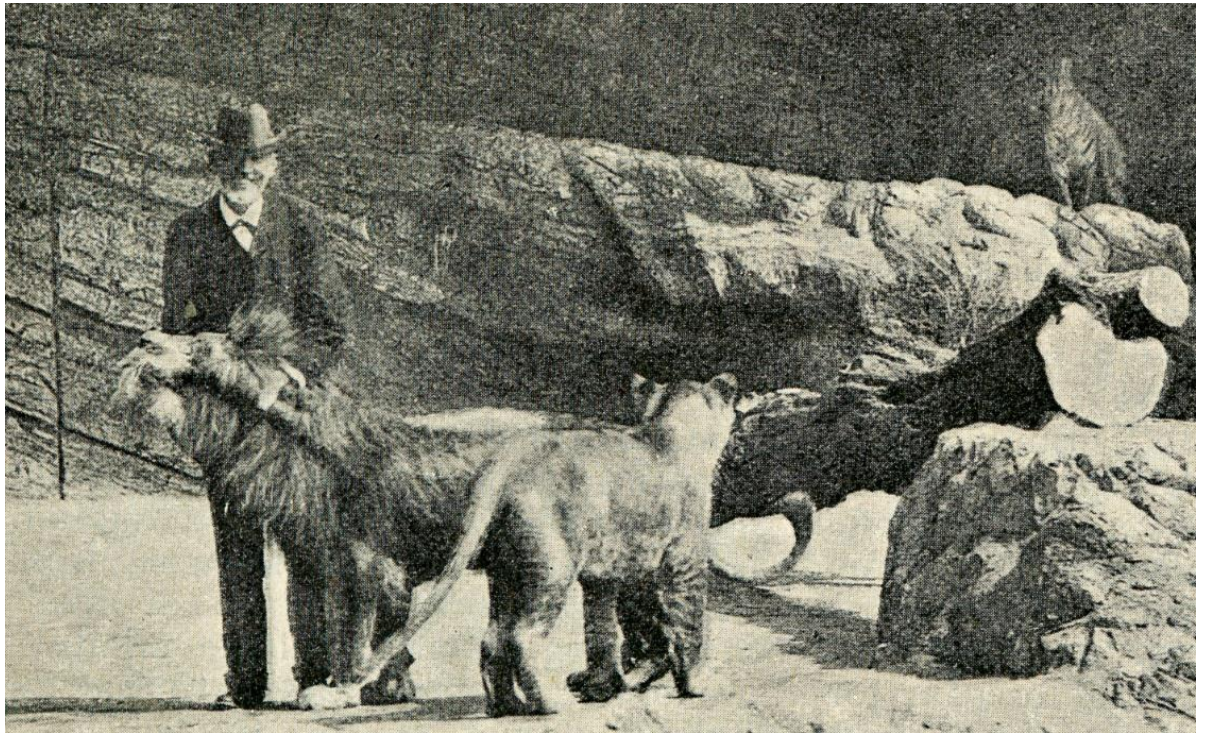


D: Jamrach’s tiger and child event commemorated in London’s Tobacco Dock in the East End
(Source: “The History of Tobacco Dock”. www.tobaccodocklondon.com/blog/the-history-of-tobacco-dock/ Accessed 26 Jul. 2019)

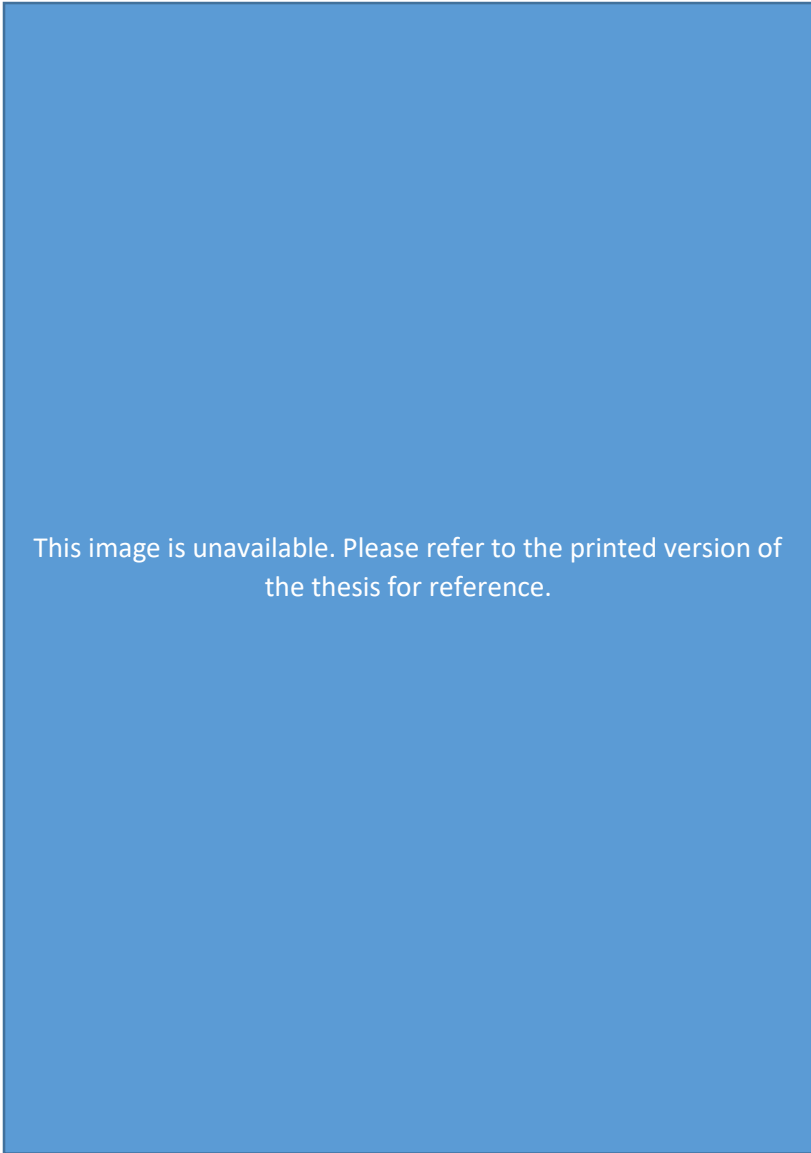
This image is unavailable. Please refer to the printed version of the thesis for reference.

Illus. 4.7: Carl Hagenbeck with his “friends” at the Hagenbeck Tierpark in Hamburg

Source: Hagenbeck, Carl. *Beasts and Men: Being Carl Hagenbeck's Experiences for Half a Century Among Wild Animals*. Longmans, Green and Co., 1909, p. 137.



Illus. 4.8: Announcement of Suresh Biswas' show with his elephant Bosco in Brazil (1885), cited in Barrera-Agarwal (65).



This image is unavailable. Please refer to the printed version of the thesis for reference.

Diário de Notícias, Rio de Janeiro, August 15, 1885

Illus. 4.9: Poster of Carlo Brothers' Show featuring Suresh Biswas, “the celebrated lion-tamer”
Jornal do Comercio, Rio de Janeiro, Aug. 28, 1885, cited in Barrera-Agarwal, 65.

This image is unavailable. Please refer to the printed version of the thesis for reference.

Illus. 4.10: Memorial slab (in Bengali) at Biswas' native house in Nathpur, Nadia, Bengal, dated 1964. Photograph taken by me in 2017.



পরিশিষ্ট



লেক্টেজাণ্ট সুরেশচন্দ্র বিদ্যাস—কলিকাতার তাঁহার পিতৃব্যকে অনেক পত্র লিখিয়াছিলেন তন্মধ্যে কতকগুলি হারাইয়া গিয়াছে কিন্তু যেগুলি আবাদিগের হস্তগত হইয়াছে, নিয়ে তৎসমস্ত উদ্ধৃত হইল—

[১]

সেন্টক্লড, ৮ই ফেব্রুয়ারী ১৮৮৭।

প্রিয় পিতৃব্য মহাশয় ;—উপরে সেন্টক্লড ঠিকানা দেখিয়া বুঝিতে পারিবেন যে, আমি আর এক্ষণে রাইমো ডি-জেনিরোতে নাই, কারণ আমি তথা হইতে এখানে বদলি হইয়াছি। এই সেন্টক্লড ক্লড গ্রাম, পূর্বে অর্থাৎ কয়েক বৎসর পূর্বে ইহা ব্রেজিলদেশীয় সম্রাটের নিজস্ব সম্পত্তি ছিল এবং তদীয় ক্রীতদাস গণ কর্তৃক তাঁহার আবাস হইত, কিন্তু তাঁহার সেই সুবিধাত-কারণ্যবশতঃ তাহাদিগকে মুক্তি প্রদান করিবার পর হইতে এই স্থান নিত্য পবিত্র অস্থান পতিত হইয়াছে এবং এক্ষণে কেবল ইহা গোচারণের মার্থ মধ্য গণ্য। আমি এক্ষণে অখা-রোহী সৈনিক শ্রেণীভুক্ত এবং এই সাময়িক পক্ষে অখাদির

পরিশিষ্ট ।

২০১

ভার গ্রহণ করিয়াছি। এই সকল অব ও অন্ত্যস্ত পণ্ডারণ বস্ত
 হানীর বিতীর্ণ পার্শ্বত্ব ভূমি রহিয়াছে। পিতৃব্য মহাশয়, আমি
 আপনাকে অতি আনন্দসহকারে এখন জানাইতেছি যে,
 আমি সৈনিকশ্রেণীর এক পদ উচ্চে উন্নীত হইয়াছি। আমি
 আর এক্ষণে সামান্য সৈন্য নহি,—আমি এক্ষণে কেবো-ডি-একো-
 রাড্রা ইহাকে করাসি ভাষার কর্ণোয়াল বলে, এবং সৈন্যদলকে
 স্বেচ্ছামত পরিচালন করিতেছি। আপনি আমাকে বারবার
 লিখিয়াছেন যে, আমি যেখানে বাই বা যে জাতি দেখি, তৎ-
 সম্বন্ধে আপনাকে কিছু লিখি, কিন্তু তাহা করিতে হইলে আমাকে
 রাশি রাশি পুস্তক লিখিতে হয়। আমার অনেক ইয়ুরোপীয়
 বন্ধুও সেই কথা বলেন অর্থাৎ আমার অভিজ্ঞতা, আমার কার্য,
 প্রভৃতি পুস্তকাকারে মুদ্রিত করিয়া প্রকাশ করিতে বলেন।
 বস্ততই আমি অনেক দেখিয়াছি। আমি প্রায় সমুদায় বিজ্ঞানই
 জানি এবং সাতটি ভাষাও জানি। আমি ইংরাজি, করাসি,
 লাতিন, স্পেনীয়, এবং পর্তুগীজ এবং অল্প অল্প ইটালী, ডেনিস, ও
 ওলন্দাজ ভাষার কথা কহিতে পারি, কিন্তু এই শেষোক্তগুলি
 আমি গণনা মধ্যে বরি না। আমি একটা কর্দক লইয়াও বাটা
 হইতে আমি নাই এবং যদিও আমার তখন একটা কর্দকও
 ছিল না, বলিতে কি, আমি এক বস্ত্রই বাটা হইতে বাহির হইয়া-
 ছিলাম। বরাবর আমার ঐকান্তিক বাসনা ছিল যে, মাতাঠাকুরা-
 নিকে দর্শন করিব এবং তাঁহার শিরোদেশমণিমুক্তার স্পোতিত
 করিব এবং যদি তাঁহার সহিত দেখা লাভাতের সম্ভাবনা থাকিত
 তাহা হইলে অনেক দিন আগেই তাহা করিতাম—কারণ, এক্ষণে
 আমার সেৱণ অবস্থাও হইয়াছে। কিন্তু বর্গের পিতার ইচ্ছা

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স্বভাব—স্বভাব্য এ জীবনে তাঁহার দর্শন লাভ আর ঘটিল না। কিন্তু হায়! আমি সংসারে একাকী এবং একাকীই থাকিব,—অদৃষ্টে বাহা ঘটবার তাহা ঘটবে। অহো! সৰ্ব্ব-শক্তিমান পরমেশ্বরের অসাম রাজ্যে একাকী ভ্রমণ করা এবং প্রকৃতি জননীর শোভা সৌন্দর্য্য উপভোগই এক্ষণে আমার একমাত্র সুখ। প্রকৃত সখ্যতা, প্রকৃত প্রেম সংসারে দুর্লভ, এবং সেই জন্যই দার্শনিক পণ্ডিতগণ কহিয়াছেন, ‘পৃথিবীতে বাস করা আর অপর এক জগতের সৃষ্টি করা একই কথা’। আমি আমার সুখনিকেতন নির্মাণ করিয়াছি, এবং এক দিন আমিও সেইখানে আমার সেই স্নেহময়ী জননীকে দর্শন করিব। আপনারা সকলে হয় ত মনে করেন যে, আমি নির্মম ভবঘুরে। কিন্তু হে পিতৃব্য মহাশয়, এই ভবঘুরের নিকট সহস্র সহস্র ব্যক্তি পদানত। অধিক কি, ভয়াকুল বস্ত্র ঝাপদ জঙ্কগণও এই ভবঘুরের সম্মুখে ভয়বিকম্পিত কলেবরে দাঁড়াইয়া থাকে। বিভাঙ্কিত অৰ্ধহীন ত্রিভুজগণ বিনা সম্মলে বারম্বার আসিয়াছে, এবং আমি আপনায় বিভাঙ্কিত ও পরিত্যক্ত ‘সুরী’ও তাহাই। পিতৃব্য মহাশয়। ভবঘুরে কথা আমি বড় ভালবাসি, এ শব্দটি আমার বড় ভাল লাগে; কারণ, আপনি বাহাকে ভবঘুরে বলেন, তাহা আমার কাছে অতি পবিত্রসত্য। ভবঘুরে কাহাকে বলে, না বাহার কোথাও থাকিবার স্থান নাই, এবং বাহার তাহার জন্ত একবারও চিন্তা করে না। তাহারই সমধিক জানী, কেননা অপেক্ষাকৃত অধিকতর সুখের স্থান অন্বেষণ করিয়া থাকে,—এবং পৃথিবীতে বস্তু সুখ লাভ হইতে পারে, তাহাণেকাও অধিকতর সুখী। এই সকল ভবঘুরেদিগের বিশ্বাস

পরিশিষ্ট ।

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‘বে, অধিল ব্রহ্মাণ্ডপতি পবনেশ্বরের এই বিশাল বিচিত্র বিশ্বের তাহারাই উত্তরাধিকারী, এবং এই বিশ্বাস,—এই ক্রম বিশ্বাসে তাহারাই কোনদিকে ভ্রমণ না করিয়া আনন্দে বৃত্তান্তাদি করিয়া দিনযাপন করে ।

এতাবৎ কোন্ মনসী ব্যক্তি কবে এই শ্রাদ্ধাচার্য সংসারের আশ্রয় সুখ হইয়াছেন ? বীরগণের মধ্যে স্ট্রেটোরা-বিজিত্তা । পসিনিয়স্ হইতে জর্জান সত্রাট্ উইল্‌হেল্‌ম্ অবধি, কবি ও দার্শনিকগণের মধ্যে জেরোরাটাস্ স্ট্রেটো, হোরেন্স্ হইতে সেক্স-পিয়াস্, লিলান্, গেটী, মোল্ড্‌স্‌মিথ্ পর্যন্ত দেখুন, * * ইটালির সকলেই মহাবীরজিস্ম্পদ ও সাতিশর অভিমানী বিত্তহুচেতা ও স্ত্রীক কল্পনাশালী পুরুষ । * * * বাহা বলিতেছিলাম,—এই সকল ভবঘুরে গৈরিক সম্পত্তির লালসা রাখে না । অপর সকলে বাহা আনিতে বাস্তু, ভজ্ঞত উৎসুক ও নহে ; স্ব স্ব মনো-বৃত্তি অনুসরণেই সর্বল্য ব্যস্ত । উর্করা কল্পনা এতাবে তাহার। যেন শূন্তমার্গে উড্ডয়ন প্ররাসী ; সকল বিষয়েই, বাবর্তীর রহস্য ভেদকল্পে তাহাদিগের চিন্তা, কল্পনা, কার্য নিরন্তর নিবৃত্ত । লাধারণ সামাজিক বা বৈবরিক ব্যাপারে তাহাদিগের অসুবিধা ও আসক্তি নাই । তাহাদিগের চিত্তবৃত্তি সর্বদাই উর্কতন রাজ্যে পরিণামান,—হইবারই কথা, কারণ আত্মা যে উর্কতনের অংশ, বিবাক্তানসম্পন্ন । * * * বাহা হউক, এ সকল উর্কতন প্রদেশের অঙ্গ বাউক ।—বাহ্য বে আনার কলিকাতার গিয়া ভাঁকার ও আপনাদিগের সকলের সঙ্গে সাক্ষাৎ করিবার কুখা বলিয়াছেন, সে সম্বন্ধে আমি একান্তই অক্ষম ;—তথ্যর অপরূপ বিশেষ আকর্ষণ নাই । আমি বাহাকে কামদমিত্যম ও কল্পিত

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এবং যিনি আমাকে ভালবাসিতেন ও এখনও বাসেন, তিনিও আর এ মর্ত্যবাসে নাই। আমি একপে বৈধা ধরিয়া তাঁহারই অপেক্ষায় এখানে রহিয়াছি, এবং থাকিব বতদিন না তাঁহার সহিত পিতা মিলিত হইতে পারি। সেই অনন্ত পথের বাজী,—চকুর অগোচর মেঘমালায় অত্যন্তরে নদিস্রব নদীরদ্বারে তিনি যে আমার অন্ত অপেক্ষা করিতেছেন।

দ্বিতীয় পত্র।

রায়োডি-জেনিরে! ৫—১—৮৯।

পিতৃব্য মহাশয়! এই পত্র প্রাপ্ত হইবার পূর্বে বোধ হয়, আমার আর একখানি পত্র পাইয়া থাকিবেন। একপে অতীব হৃৎখিত অন্তরে ও বিরক্তির সহিত লিখিতেছি। আমাদের ইদগাদালাে তাঁহার। পীতজরে ঘন ঘন মরিয়া বাইতেছে, অগত্যা আমরা সে বাড়ী পরিত্যাগ করিয়া অন্ত বাড়ী লইয়াছি। একবার অস্থাবন করুন যে, এই ভীষণ গ্রীষ্মের দিনে আমাদেরকে কি কষ্টকর কার্য্য করিতে হইতেছে! আজকাল এখানে তাপমাত্রা বস্তুর ৯০ হইতে ৯৫ ডিগ্রী পর্যন্ত গমন হইয়া থাকে, তা'হাড়া বিদ্রোহ ত আছেই এবং তাহাতে আমাদের কতকগুলি সৈন্য তলিতে আহত হইয়া পড়িয়াছে। নিবিবার সময় আমি তাহাদের কাতর ধ্বনি শুনিতেছি। কাকা মহাশয়, আমাদের প্রাণতঃ ইদগাদালাে যে ভীষণ দুষ্ট আশনি করনাও করিতে

পরিশিষ্ট

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সকল হইবেন না। পুরাতন হাঁসপাতাল নুতন হান হইতে অধিক দূর নহে। যেহুট সম্ভাব্যের যে পুরাতন মন্দির বা চর্চ ছিল, তাহাতেই পুরাতন হাঁসপাতাল অবস্থিত। এখনও সেখানে আমার একটা ঘর আছে, কারণ আমার সকল জিনিষপত্র এখনও সেখানে হইতে আনিতে পারি নাই, তাহা ব্যতীত আমাকে সেখানে গিয়া ভ্রমণ তৈয়ার করিতে হয়, (বলা বাহুল্য আমি ভাঙারী শিখিয়াছি) এবং অল্প চিকিৎসার ব্যয়াদিও সেখানে আছে। আর কিছু দিন যদি এখানে থাকি, তাহা হইলে আমি একজন ভাল অল্প চিকিৎসক হইতে পারিব। আমি প্রায় সকল প্রকার অস্ত্রোপচারে সক্ষম এবং ভাঙারেরা তৎসমুদয় ঠিক হইয়াছে বলিয়া অহুমোদন করেন। আমি যে হাঁসপাতালের কথা বলিতেছিলাম, তাহা একটা বিলানবিলিট লুভহৎ গৃহ বা হল, উহার উপরে ক্রাই-লাইট বা আলোক আশিবার পঞ্চ আছে। বরটা বখন খুঁজ থাকে, তখন উহাকে সমাধি মন্দির বলিয়া বোধ হয়। সকলেই সেই গৃহে প্রবেশ করিতে ভীত হইয়া থাকে এবং বস্তুতঃ সকলে কেহ তথায় প্রবেশ করে না; আমাকে কার্যক্রমে বাধ্য হইয়া সেইখান দিয়া সচরাচর যাতায়াত করিতে হয়, কিন্তু আমার তাহাতে কিছুমাত্র ভয় হয় না, কারণ আমার বিশ্বাস যে, প্রেতাশ্বাপ কখনই আমাদিগকে আশঙ্কিত বা বিরক্ত করিতে আসে না। প্রেতাশ্বা সবদেহ অনেক গঙ্গাধি ভূমিতে পাওয়া যায় বটে, কিন্তু তৎসমুদায় মাহু-বের নিজের করনাপ্রসূত। তবে আমি ইহা জানি যে, প্রেতাশ্বা আছে কিন্তু তাহারা সম্পূর্ণ মৃত্যু পদার্থ, আর তুচ্ছকে বাঙীতেও মর্দাবধি ভয় করে। কাকা মরণর, আমি মরণে কিছুমাত্র

২০৬ লেফটেন্যান্ট সুরেশ বিশ্বাস ।

তর করি না। যুদ্ধের পূর্বে অনেক রোগীকে আমি চিকিৎসা করিয়াছি; অনেক রোগ হইয়া মরিয়াও গিয়াছে, তথাপি আমি এখানে অবস্থান করিতেছি আর যদি আমিও মরিয়া বাই, তাহা হইলে আরও ভাল। যদি ভগবান আমাকে রক্ষা করেন, তাহা হইলে আমার এক দিন না একদিন আপনাদিগকে যে ক্ষেপিতে পাইব, ইহাই আমার পরম আনন্দের বিষয়। বা'ক, এই অপ্রীতিকর কথাই আর কাজ নাই।

পিতৃব্য মহাশয়, আমি শীঘ্রই এ স্থান হইতে চলিয়া বাইক এবং এমন কোন একটা উপায় আবিষ্কার করিব যে, আমি অন্যত্র গিয়া পরিভ্রমণ করিতে পারিব; কারণ, ভ্রমণেই আমার অপার আনন্দ এবং তাহা হইতেই একটা নূতন মঙ্গল পাওয়া যাইবে ও কোন দিন বাটা কিরিয়া বাইতে পারিব বলিয়া মনে হয়। আমি সর্বদাই ভ্রমণ করিব, কারণ গতিই সৃষ্টির নিয়ম এবং জীবনের লক্ষ্য। তা'ছাড়া ত্রেজিনে আমিও সাময়িক বিভাগে পলার অতিপত্তি লাভের যে বাসনা ছিল তাহা আমার পূর্ণ হইয়াছে। আমার প্রথম উদ্দেশ্য ছিল—সুগার্ল রমণী জাতির সাধুতার বিষয় পরীক্ষা করা; দ্বিতীয়, আমার অনেক বন্ধু যে কোন সাময়িক কর্মচারীর দ্বারা অবমানিত হইয়াছিলেন, তাহারা প্রতিশোধ লওয়া। এ দুইই আমার হইয়াছে, আমি রমণী জাতিকে সুগার্ল সহিত পরিত্যাগ করিয়াছি,—আর সেই বন্ধু ঠৈরী আমার আগমনে ভয়ে পলায়ন করিয়াছে। অনেক কষ্টে এই সকল কার্য সমাধা হইয়াছে। আমি সুবলনক স্যাটার্ন জীবন পরিত্যাগ করিয়া হুঃখ ও কঠোরতার দৈনিক জীবন-ইচ্ছাপূর্বক তিন বৎসরের জন্য প্রেরণ করিয়াছিলাম। এই

পরিশিষ্ট

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বৎসরের ১০ই মে তারিখে আমার দৈনিক জীবন শেষ হইবে—
 তখন ইহাকে নসফার করিয়া নুতন কার্যে ব্যাপ্ত হইব। পূর্বেই
 বলিয়াছি, আমার বেখানে ইচ্ছা চলিয়া গিয়া এমন কোন উপায়
 অবলম্বন করিব, যদ্বারা পূর্বের জ্ঞান স্থখে সচ্ছন্দে তত্ত্বলোকের
 জ্ঞান থাকিতে পারিব। যদিও বালাকালে বাড়ীতে থাকিতে
 কোন কোন বিষয়ে আমি অভিশয় হুটে ছিলাম তথাপি চিরদিন
 সরল ও সৎপথে থাকিয়া হৃদয় ও মনের উদারতা রক্ষা করিয়া
 আসিয়াছি। বিমানচারী বিহঙ্গমিগের জ্ঞান পুনরায় যে আমি
 স্বাধীন হইয়া প্রকৃষ্টচিত্তে নানাদেশ পরিভ্রমণ করিব ইহা স্মরণ
 করিয়া আমার যে কি অপার আনন্দ হইতেছে তাহা আর কি
 বলিব। আবিষ্কার বা অনুকরণ কার্যের জন্য আমি আমার
 বিজ্ঞানের চর্চ্চাই করিব। সিংহ, ব্যাঘ্র, তরুণ, হস্তী প্রভৃতি
 হৃদয় পত্তনদগকে শিক্ষা দেওয়া বা খাণন করা—সে বিজ্ঞানের
 অন্তর্গত নহে। আমি একটা বাক্যলাপী হুও, বৈজ্ঞানিক
 বালিকা, টেবিলের ক্রীড়া এবং ছিলিবিশিষ্ট বহু বালিকা (বাহার
 শরীরের অভ্যন্তর দেখা যায়) সৃষ্টি করিব। এদেশে ও অন্তর্জ
 এই চারিটা জিনিষ বার। আমি অর্থোপার্জন করিতে পারিব।
 কাকা মহাশয়, বাহার অর্থোপার্জন করিবার নতিক আছে এবং
 সরলহৃদয় আছে, তাহার পক্ষে এ জগতে অর্থ অতি সহজ
 সামগ্রী। প্রত্যেক ব্যক্তি আপনায়, এবং জীবর সকলের। পৃথি-
 বীতে আমি আছি ও পৃথিবী আমার জন্য আছে। জীবরের শক্তি
 মহান জানিয়া এবং পৃথিবী জীবরের বলিয়া যদি মনে করিয়া নই,
 তাহা হইলে আমার সঙ্গে সঙ্গে সকল সৃজিত প্রদর্শই চলিতে
 থাকিবে। সকল শাস্ত্র অপেক্ষা চিকিৎসা শাস্ত্রই উচ্চ। আমি ইচ্ছা

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লেফটেন্যান্ট সুরেশ বিবাস ।

খুব দৃঢ়তার সহিত শিখিয়াছি এবং উহার গুহ্যতম বিষয় পর্যন্ত জানিয়াছি । এই শাস্ত্রকে আমি পূজা করি কিন্তু উহার পাণ্ডা বা প্রোফেসরদিগকে ঘৃণা করি কারণ তাহাদিগের দ্বন্দ্বের উদারতার বড়ই অভাব । উদারতাবিহীন চিকিৎসক আর গন্ধহীন পরী একই পদার্থ । সকল শাস্ত্র অপেক্ষা মনোবিজ্ঞান অর্থাৎ যে শাস্ত্র সৃষ্টি কর্তা জীবকে অজ্ঞান করে এবং বন্দীরা তাঁহাকে জানিতে পারা যায়, তাহাই মদান্ ও উচ্চ । এ সম্বন্ধে আমি কোন সমালোচনা করিব না, কারণ উহা স্মরণে আমার কদরে ভীতির সঞ্চার হয় । এ বিষয়ে আমি কিছু কিছু পরীক্ষা করিয়াছি এবং তাহাতে কেবল আমার প্রাণে ভয় সঞ্চিত হইরাছে ।

আপনার মেহাবীন

সুরেশ ।

তৃতীয় পত্র



রায়ো-ডি-জেনিরো,

২২ই মে, ১৮৯৩ ।

গির্জা মহাশয়,—বসন্তঃ অনেক দিন হইল, আপনার নিকট হইতে কোন পত্রাদি পাই নাই, গত বৎসর আপনাকে যে একখানি পত্র লিখি, তাহাতে এখানে যে একটা বিজোহ ঘটনা ছিল, তাহার বিষয় উল্লেখ করিয়াছিলাম কিন্তু এ পর্যন্ত তাহার কোন উত্তর পাই নাই । সাময়িক বিত্ত গো আমার তাল হই-



পারিশিষ্ট ।

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তেছে। প্রথম সার্জেন্ট পদ হইতে আমি ব্রিগেড পদে উন্নীত হইয়াছি। ইতিপূর্বেই আমি একজন চিহ্নিত-কর্মচারী দ্বারা অকিসার হইতে পারিতাম, কিন্তু আমি বিদেশী বলিয়া তৎপক্ষে কিছু ব্যাঘাত ঘটাইয়াছিল। ছয় বৎসর কাল আমি এখানে আছি এবং বিশেষ সুপরিচিত হইয়াছি সুতরাং আমার পক্ষে ইহা অনেকটা সুবিধার কথা বলিয়া বিশ্বাস করি। তার পর আপনারা সকলে বোধ হয় জানেন যে, এখানে সকলে গুরুগীর্ণ ভাবার কথাবার্তা কর, কাজেই আমি যখন প্রথম এখানে আসি, তখন কাহারও কথা বুঝিতে পারিতাম না কিম্বা কাহারও সহিত কথা কহিতে পারিতাম না। এক্ষণে সে ভাষা আমি শিখিয়াছি এবং যে পদে অধিষ্ঠিত আছি, তাহা অতি অল্প লোকই পাইবার উপযোগী। সাপাবণ তত্ত্বের প্রেসিডেন্ট কর্তৃক আমার পদোন্নতিব কথা প্রচারিত হইলে, আপনাকে যথাক্রমে জানাইব। বিগত ছয় বৎসর যে আমি সুখ্যাতির সহিত কাজ করিয়াছি, তাহা সরকারে লিখিত আছে, এবং বিনা কারাবাসে সাময়িক যশলাভ করিয়াছি। এক্ষণে রায়ো গ্রাণ্ড ডি শিউলে যুদ্ধ বিগ্রহ উপস্থিত হইয়াছে। আমি তথায় বাইতে ইচ্ছা করিয়াছিলাম কিন্তু তথায় আমাদিগের বাইবাব কোন হুকুম এখনও হয় নাই। পিতা মহাশয় আজ কাল কেমন আছেন? তিনি কি আমাকে মনে করেন। বাবাকে বলিবেন যে, ঈশ্বরের ইচ্ছায় আমি ভালই আছি। আমি এক্ষণে মাতুষ হইয়া উঠিয়াছি এবং সমাজে আমার মান সম্মান হইয়াছে। বদমায়েসের কাছে আমি বদ, ডাফাতের কাছে ডাকাত, ভদ্রলোকের নিকট ভদ্রলোক, এবং পণ্ডিতের কাছে পণ্ডিত। আমি আপনা হইতেই সন্মান্য ভদ্র-

২১০ লেফটেন্যান্ট স্মরণে বিশ্বাস ।

লোক হইরাছি, কেননা চতুর্দশ বৎসর বয়ঃক্রম হইতেই কেহই আমার মত কোন চেষ্টা চরিত্র করেন নাই। আজ বোধ করি, আমার বক্তৃতা কি চৌজিশ বৎসর বয়ঃক্রম হইয়াছে কিন্তু ঠিক বলিতে পারি না কত! বাহা হউক আমি বিম্মিত হইরাছি যে, ইহার মধ্যেই আমার মস্তকের কেশ এবং মুখের গোঁপ দাড়ি পাকিয়া গিয়াছে, তা'ছাড়া মস্তকে টাকও পড়িয়াছে। সকলকে আমার কথা বলিবেন—আর আমাকে বাহারা জানে তাহাদের ধবরাধবর সমেত ঈদ্রই পত্র লিখিবেন।

আপনার মেহাবীন

স্মরণে ।

চতুর্থ পত্র

মারো ডি-জেনিরো ১০-১ ৯৪ ।

কাঁকা মহাপ্রভু,—আবার আপনাকে চিঠি লিখিতে বিলম্ব হইয়া গিয়াছে, কারণ, সেই অবধি আমি রিউম্যাটিস্ রোগে লব্যাগত হইরা আছি। প্রায় এক বৎসর হইল আমি এই রোগে আক্রান্ত হইরাছি। গত সপ্তাহে অধিক পরিমাণে মার্কসি ও আরোডাইড অন্-পট্যাশ সেবন করিয়া বেদনা ধানিয়াছে, কিন্তু উক্ত ঔষধ সেবনে বিব সেবনের লক্ষণ দেখা বাওয়ার উহা বন্ধ করিয়াছি। ডাক্তারেরা বলে যে, উহা হইতে অব্যাহতি পাইতে অনেক সময় লাগিবে।

পত্রমধ্যে আমার ছইখানি কটোগ্রাফ পাঠাইতেছি—একখানি আপনায় ও অপরখানি বাবার জন্য। কেমন আমার একটা ধারণা হইয়া গিয়াছে যে, তিনি বোধ হয় আর জীবিত নাই আর তাহাও আমি জানি না যে, আমার এই ধারণা সত্য কি মিথ্যা। আমি যে ব্রেজিলদেশীয় পদাতি সৈন্তদের অধিনায়ক বা লেফ্টেন্যান্টের পরিচ্ছদ পরিয়াছি, তাহা দেখিলে নিশ্চয়ই তিনি স্মৃতি হইবেন এবং সে স্মৃতি বা আনন্দ, গৌরব বা স্পর্ধা— তাঁহারই। আপনি ও নিয়া হয়ত একেবারে স্তম্ভিত হইবেন যে, এই পৌষাকটী প্রস্তুত করাইতে আমার এক সহস্র ডলার খরচ হইয়াছে, কারণ স্কন্দর কাপড়, পালক, রেশম ও সোণার জড়িতে ইহা তৈয়ার হইয়াছে। আমার সহধর্মিণীরও একখানি কটোগ্রাফ পাঠাইলাম, উহা বিবাহের পূর্বকায়। এখন আমার পুত্রের কটোগ্রাফ তোলাই হয় নাই, সুতরাং তাহা পাঠাইতে পারিলাম না। আমি যে অসুস্থ হইয়াছিলাম, তৎসময়ে বাহ্য ঘটনাছিল, তাহা নিয়ে বিবৃত করিতেছি। বৃদ্ধ সংঘটনের স্বায়ং-কালে দশজন নৌ-সেনাটক করেদীরূপে ধরিয়া লইয়া বাসাক কিরিয়া গেলার, পরে আবার একাধী ভ্রমণে বহির্গত হইলাম। পথিমধ্যে একটী ভয়ঙ্করী রমণী আসিয়া আমাকে ভিজাসা করিল যে, মৃত ব্যক্তিগণ কোথায় রক্ষিত বা স্থানান্তরিত হইয়াছে। আমি আগ্রহের সহিত গিয়া তাহাকে সেই স্থান দেখাইয়া দিলাম। সহসা ছই জন নৌ-সেনা ছোরা হস্তে আমাকে আক্রমণ করিল। আমিও তরবারি নিকাষিত করিয়া আত্মরক্ষা করিলাম। আত্মরক্ষা ও আক্রমণে তাহারা আমাকে বখেটে সমর্থ দেখিয়া ক্রতপদে উদ্ধৃতিসে পলায়ন করিল। আমিও তৎক্ষণাৎ

২১২ লেফটেন্যান্ট সুরেশ বিবাস।

স্বহানে প্রত্যাগমন মানসে ফিরিবার কালে স্থানীয় দুর্গকে কটবোধ হইল এবং বিশ পকাশ হাত বাইতে না বাইতে আমার মস্তক এমন ঘুরিয়া গেল যে, উপায়াত্তর না দেখিয়া নিকটস্থিত একখণ্ড প্রস্তরোপরি বলিয়া পড়িলাম এবং সতঃই নিজ অবস্থার বিষয় আলোচনা করিতে লাগিলাম। চারি দিক অন্ধকার দেখিলাম এবং পায়ে ঠাণ্ডা অনুভব করিলাম। সেই ঠাণ্ডা ক্রমে জাহ্ন ও উরু বহিরা বুক পর্য্যন্ত উঠিল। অনন্তর ঠিক সেইরূপ শৈত্য কর্ণে অনুভূত হইয়া পঞ্চদশ বাহিয়া বুক আসিয়া ধামিল আর আমি সংজ্ঞাহীন হইলাম। তিন দিবস পরে আমার জ্ঞান হইল। হুই জন অপরিচিত ব্যক্তি কর্তৃক অর্ধ উল্লাবস্থার আমি হাঁসপাতালে নীত হই। অষ্টাহ পরে কথা কহিতে পারিলে স্বহানে আসিবার ইচ্ছা প্রকাশ করিলাম ও বধাহানে ফিরিয়া আসিলাম। সকলে মনে করিয়াছিল যে, আমি হারা-ইয়া গিয়াছিলাম।

আপনার মেহাপন্ন

সুরেশ।

পঞ্চম পত্র।

প্রিয় পিতৃব্য মহোদয়—আজ কয়েক দিন হইল আমি আপ-
নার পত্র পাইয়াছি এবং তাহাতে অবগত হইলাম যে, আমি
সাময়িক অরুণাত করায় মেঘের লোক বন্ধ সন্তুষ্ট হইয়াছে।

পরিশিষ্ট ।

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এ সকল আমার কাছে এখন এক সহজ হইয়া গিয়াছে যে, তাহাতে আমি কিছু নুতন বা আশ্চর্য্যভাব দেখিতে পাই না । তবে অত্যন্ত অনেক অকিসার বিশেষ কার্য্য-কুশলতা দেখাইয়া দ্বিগুন, কিন্তু সম্ভাপের বিষয় যে, আর তাঁহাদিগকে ইহকালে দেখিতে পাইব না । আমার সাময়িক শিক্ষার কথা তবে বলি,—

প্রথম অখারোহী দলে দৈনিকরূপে তিন বৎসর কার্য্য করি, পরে পরাতিক দলে পাঁচ বৎসর । বিগত ৩৫ সেপ্টেম্বর তারিখে বর্ষক বিজ্ঞোহারি প্রচ্ছলিত হইয়া উঠে এবং আমাদিগের সেই জ্বলন্ত হারো-ডি-জেনিরো উপসাগরে ভাবৎ রণপোত সম্মিলিত হইয়া ঘেরিয়া কেনিয়া, "সাত্তাকুত;" "ফেল, স" ও "জোরাও" নামক জ্বলন্ত জ্বলন্ত দুর্গ সকলের প্রতি গোলা বর্ষণ করিতে থাকে, তখন আমরা বুঝিতে পারিলাম যে, আমাদিগের কার্য্য আছে । সেই সকল দুর্গ হইতে তীব্রভাবে রণপোত প্রতি গোলা ছুটিতে লাগিল । দেখিতে দেখিতে বেশ ব্যাপিয়া চারি দিকে সৈন্ত সংগ্রহ হইতে লাগিল । উপসাগর কুলের ভাবৎ উচ্চ স্থান হাজই দুর্ভুৎ রূপে রক্ষিত হইল । যেখানে সেখানে ও সর্ব্বত্রই কাটাকাটি ও প্রতিনিরত গোলাবর্ষণ চলিতে লাগিল । সহস্র সহস্র বিবেচী লোক হারো-ডি-জেনিরো সহরে বাস করিতেছিল বলিয়া উহাকে বিধ্বংস করিতে না পারিয়া, বিজ্ঞোহী নৌসেনাগণ বিশধানি রণপোত সমেত নাথিরর সহরকে আক্রমণ করিল । শেযোক্ত নগর ভূমিসাৎ করতঃ আমরা অতি অল্প সংখ্যক ও পরিভ্রান্ত হইয়া পড়িয়াছি মনে করিয়া তাহার নগরে অবতরণ করিলাম । অতঃপর ৯ই ফেব্রুয়ারি তারিখে যুদ্ধ হইল এবং তিনকণ্টা কাল ভীষণ যুদ্ধের পর নৌসেনাগণ পরাজিত হইয়া কতক পলায়নপূর্ব্বক

২১৪ লেক্টেন্যান্ট সুরেশ বিদ্যাপাণি ।

যুব আঁহাজে গিরা আশ্রয় লইল, অবশিষ্ট আমাদিগের হস্তে বন্দী হইল। পিতৃব্য মহাপ্রসন্ন, আপনি মনে করিবেন না যে, আমি যে পদে অধিষ্ঠিত, তাহা সহজে লাভ করিয়াছি। আমি যে কখনও বিশিষ্ট কর্মচারি বা অফিসার হইতে পারিব, তাহা একবারও ভাবি নাই। প্রায় সর্বদাই আমার পদোন্নতির কথা উদ্ভিত কিন্তু আমি বিদেশী বলিয়া ধর্ম্ম হইতে আমার নাম কাটা গিয়াছে। সম্ভ্রান্তি বিজ্ঞোহাষি জলিয়া উঠিলে আমি ও আমার অন্তঃসহচর কোন জেনারেলের অধীনে কাজ পাই। উক্ত জেনারেল যদিও আমাকে চিনিতেন না। কিন্তু যুদ্ধকালে আমরা কিরণ দক্ষতার সহিত কার্য্য করিয়াছি তাহা লক্ষ্য করিয়াছিলেন এবং তৎকালে আমার বীরত্ব ও শত্রুপক্ষের গোলাবর্ষণ মধ্যে কিরণ সাহসের সহিত প্রবেশ করি তাহাও দেখিয়াছিলেন।

আমি দেখি কি বিদেশী, তিনি তাহা জানিবার জন্য জ্ঞপ্তি করেন নাই। আমার দক্ষতাই আমার পক্ষে যথেষ্ট হইরাছিল এবং তদনুসারে তিনি সাধারণ তত্ত্বের সাময়িক সহকারী প্রেসিডেন্টের নিকট রিপোর্ট করিলে আমি লেক্টেনেন্টের পদে উন্নীত হই এবং এই পদে থাকিয়া নাথিররের অদৃষ্ট-মীমাংসার শেষ পর্য্যন্ত আমি সাহায্য করিয়াছি।

এই সূত্রে আমি আপনাকে একখানি নাথিরর বুদ্ধের ছবি পাঠাইতেছি। এইখানে আমার সহকারীগণ আমাকে বিশেষ ভীতিপ্রদর্শন করিয়াছিল আমি কিন্তু কখনই তাহাদিগের ভীতি অনুসরণ করি নাই। আপনারা সকলেই বলেন যে, আমি আপনাদিগকে সবিশেষ বিবরণ লিখিয়া পাঠাই কিন্তু পিতৃব্য মহাপ্রসন্ন, বুদ্ধের বিভীষিকার বিষয় আর কি বর্ণন করিব। আমারা

পরিশিষ্ট ।

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এমন যে মহামূল্য জীবন বুদ্ধকেজে তাহা আমরা সহজে বিস-
র্জন করিতে পারি। তবে যে বস্তুটা ইহার জন্য প্রস্তুত হইতে
পারে সে বস্তুটা আপনাকে রক্ষা করিতে পারে। কিন্তু বলুন দেখি
প্রকৃত সাহস কি ? কোন অতিশ্লিষ্ট বস্তু লাভের জন্য অবিচলিত
'ও দৃঢ়প্রতিজ্ঞভাবে জীবন উৎসর্গ করাকেই সাহস কহে। শত্রুগণ
যখন দূরে অবস্থান করে তখন বিবিধ বিচার, বিতর্ক, অহুমান,
পরিমাণ প্রভৃতি সকলই সম্ভব, কিন্তু শত্রু নিকট হইয়া আক্র-
মণোদ্বেগী হইলে একমাত্র উপায়—সমগ্র সেনা একত্র করিয়া
অগ্রসর হওয়া,—এবং বস্তু দ্রুতগতিতে ধাবমান হইতে পারিবে,
তত অধিক পরিমাণে শত্রুদিগকে আতঙ্কিত করিতে পারিবে।
আপনি আমার জীবনের আরও বিশেষ বিবরণ জানিতে চাহেন।
পৃথিবীর যে যে দেশে আমি গিয়াছি, সেটুকু হইতেই ত আপ-
নাকে পত্র লিখিয়াছি। আমি কি আপনাকে বলি নাই যে,
সার্কাসের সহিত সিংহ পোষক বা শাসক হইয়া সমগ্র ইউরোপ
পরিভ্রমণ করিয়াছি এবং পিঞ্জরাবদ্ধ বস্তু পশুদিগকে খেলা শিখা-
ইয়াছি ? এই সঙ্গে আমি এই পত্রের সহিত আপনার জন্য
বেনস্‌ এরেস্‌ (Buenos Ayres) হইতে প্রকাশিত একখানি
সংবাদপত্র পাঠাইতেছি ; উহাতে আমার জীবনচরিত প্রকাশিত
হইরাছে।

আপনার দ্বেহের,

জুয়েশ ।

২১৬ লেফটেন্যান্ট স্মরেশ বিশ্বাস ।

ষষ্ঠ পত্র ।

রিঃ ; ১২ই এপ্রেল, ১৮৯৭ ।

প্রিয় পিতৃব্য মহাশয়,—আমি ১৫ই নবেম্বর তারিখে যে পত্র লিখিয়াছি, তাহার কোনও প্রত্যুত্তর না পাইয়া সাতিশর হুঃখিত আছি। সেই পত্রসহ আপনাকে কতকগুলি সংবাদ পত্র ও অভ্যন্ত আবৃত্তকীর কাগজ পত্র পাঠাইয়াছিলাম, সেগুলি পাইলেন কি না তাহাও জানিতে পারিলাম না। আমি অনেকটা শারীরিক ভাল আছি। আজ সাতিশর আত্মাদের সহিত আপনাকে জানাইতেছি যে, আমার আশ্চরিত অনেকটা লেখা হইয়াছে, তবে সেটা সম্পূর্ণ করিতে অবশ্যই বিলম্ব হইবে। সম্প্রতি আমার কাজের এতই ভিড় পড়িয়াছে যে, উহা লিখিবার আরই সময় পাই না, তবে আশা করি, সময়ে শেষ করিয়া তুলিতে পারিব। কাকা, জ্যোতিষ পড়িতে আমি বড়ই আনন্দ অনুভব করি—এবং বহু দিবস হইতেই সাগ্রহে পড়িতেও আরম্ভ করিয়াছি। আমার একান্ত ইচ্ছা যে, আপনি একটু কষ্ট স্বীকার করিয়া আমার অন্ত জ্ঞানিৎ বথাবথ লিখিয়া পাঠান। আমি বহুতে নিজের একটা আন্তরিক প্রস্তাব কবির মনস্থ করিয়াছি—তাহাতে আমার জন্ম-ভিধি, নক্ষত্র ও গ্রহ উপগ্রহের বথাবথ স্থান নির্দেশ করিয়া রাখিব। সেই চক্রবানি থাকিলে ভাবী বিপদ, পীড়া প্রভৃতির কথা পূর্ক হইতে জ্ঞাত হইয়া সে গুলি সহজেই দূর করিতে পারিব। আমি অভ্যন্ত অনেক শূত্র শিক্ষা করিয়াছি, এবং ঐ সকল শাস্ত্রের প্রকৃত তথ্যও জানিতে পারিয়াছি; কিন্তু আমি খিলাইয়া যেখানে চাই যে, জ্যোতিষ কলের সহিত সে গুলির

ঐক্য হয় কি না। সামুদ্রিক ও অস্ত্রাস্ত্র লাক্ষণিক বিজ্ঞানকে আমি জানিতে পারিয়াছি যে, বৃহস্পতি, মঙ্গল, শুক্র ও চন্দ্র আমার সান্তিশর বলবান। চন্দ্রের বলে আমাকে এত কামনিক করিয়াছে এবং আমার জলবাত্ম্য হেতুত্ব হইয়াছে। শুক্রের বলে আমি মনোমত কার্য্যসিদ্ধি করিতে পারিতেছি—কল্পিত বিষয়গুলিকে কার্য্যে পরিণত করিবার উপযোগী ক্ষমতা ও বিদ্যালাত করিয়াছি। মঙ্গল আমাকে সৈনিকের সাহস ও হঠকারিতা প্রদান করিয়াছে এবং বৃহস্পতির প্রভাবে অনেকগুলি জীলোকের সহিত আমার পরিচয় হইয়াছে। আমি ইহাও জানি যে, বুধ, শনি, সূর্য্য প্রভৃতি অস্ত্রাস্ত্র গ্রহগণেরও অস্বাভাবিক আমার উপর দৃষ্টি আছে; তবে তাহাদের কলাকল জানিবার জন্য আমি সান্তিশর উৎসুক এবং তজ্জন্য তাহাদের স্থান নির্ণয় আবশ্যক। কাকা, আপনিও জানেন যে, ইউরোপ পর্য্যটনের সময় ইউরোপের সর্ক্সাগ্রগণ অধ্যাপকদিগের নিকট আমি এই সকল শাস্ত্রের অঙ্গীকরণ করি; তাহাতে তাহাদের নাম ধাম আপনাকে জানাইব। কিন্তু ভগবৎ প্রসাদে যদি বাঁচিয়া থাকি, তাহা হইলে সম্বোধন তব্ব এবং জ্যোতিষ ও অন্যান্য গূঢ় বিজ্ঞানগুলি আমি সম্যকরূপে অধ্যয়ন করিব—সেই সকল বিষয়ে অধিকতর ব্যুৎপত্তি লাভ করিব। এই সকল বিদ্যাবলেই ত আমাদের ভারতবর্ষীয় প্রাচীন মনসী-গণ সর্ক্সলোক-আরাধ্য নির্ক্সণ লাভ করিতেন এবং অস্বাণি সন্ন্যাসীরা নানাবিধ অদ্ভুত ক্রিয়াকলাপ সাধিত করিয়া থাকেন, —ভূগর্ভে ইচ্ছামত বাল, সুদূর মধ্যে বীজ হইতে বৃক্সোক্ষম ও তাহা হইতে কলোৎপাদন প্রভৃতি অলৌকিক কার্য্য ইহারই কলে। জানি না, এই সকল বিষয়ে আপনার মনোভাব কি রূপ,

২১৮. লেফটেন্যান্ট সুরেশ বিখাস

—এই সকল বিষয় জানিতে আপনায় ঔৎসুক্য আছে কি না ; প্রকৃত এই সকল বিষয় জানিতে যদি আপনি আনন্দ অহুতব করেন জানিতে পারি, তাহা হইলে এক সময়ে এই সকল বিষয় বিশ্বভাবে বিপ্লবণ করিয়া আপনাকে বুঝাইয়া দিব। যদি এই মুকলে আপনায় বিশ্বাস না থাকে তাহা হইলে আমাদিগের মস্তকের সুবকসিগকে বণ ও সম্মান লাভের পথ প্রদর্শন করিব। অল্পপ্রহপূরক দাব্য কেমন আছেন লিখিবেন। আমি জানি তিনি গুরুত্বপূর্ণ আছেন—শারীরিক না হইলেও মানসিকত দ্বারা তাহার অবস্থা জানিতে পারিলে আমি তাহার কোন-না-কেন উপকার করিতে পারি। আমি জানি না তিনি কিসে আছেন কি না ; তজ্জনাই আমি তাহাকে পত্র লিখি

স্বাক্ষরতার অনেকগুলি সুবক আমাকে পত্রযোগে জিজ্ঞাসা করিয়া জানাইয়াছেন যে, ত্রেকিলে আসিবার কোনও উপায় আছে কি না। আমি পৃথক পৃথক ভাবে তাহাদিগের পত্রের উত্তর

দেখিব ও আত্মীয় বন্ধনকে অল্পপ্রহপূরক আমার বণো-
কিছু পরিচালন জানাইবেন।

আপনায় ক্ষেত্রে,

সুরেশ।

৩০ বঙ্গাব্দ।

উপসংহার ।

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ফ্রেন্সচমেনের পিতাকে এই পত্র লিখেন,—তিনি ব্রেজিলের এক জন সম্ভ্রান্ত অধিবাসী, স্মৃতরাং তাঁহার লেখনী-গ্রন্থত কথাগুলি যে অতীব মূল্যবান ভবিষ্যে সংশয় নাই বলিয়াই আমরা সে পত্র এখানে উদ্ধৃত করিলাম ।

পত্র ।

রাইমো-ডি-জেনিরো, ১২ই মার্চ ১৮৯৪ ।

আপনি ইতিপূর্বে বোধ করি, নিশ্চয় জানিয়া থাকিবেন যে, আপনার পুত্র ব্রেজিল গবর্ণমেন্টের সামরিক বিভাগের কর্মচারী । ব্রেজিলের পদাতি সৈন্তদলের তিনি প্রথম লেফটেন্যান্ট ; সম্ভ্রান্তি নাথেরয়ের (Nitheroy) যুদ্ধে স্বীয় অদম্য বীৰ্য্য, উৎসাহ ও রণ-কুশলতার তিনি বিপুল যশস্বী হইয়াছেন । সেই সুবিখ্যাত ভীষণ যুদ্ধের রজনীতে ; শত্রুগণ হ্রস্বকাল অবিরত উক্ত নগরীতে গোলাবর্ষণ করিলে আমাদের পেরমবন্ধ আপনার পুত্র সৌভাগ্য-বশতঃ সেইস্থলে স্বীয় সেনাদলের সহিত উপস্থিত থাকায় ৫০ জন সৈনিক সম্ভিব্যাহারে তিনি শত্রুপক্ষকে আক্রমণ করিবার জন্ত প্রেরিত হইলেন । শত্রুপক্ষীয়গণ শীঘ্রই তাঁহাকে চিনিতে পারিয়াছিল, এবং তৎপক্ষ হইতে তাঁহার কর্ণে এইমাত্র শ্রুত হইল যে “কে আসিতেছে” । তদুত্তরেই তাহার প্রত্যুত্তর হইল, “সাধারণ তরের বীর সৈন্তগণ” । পুনরায় শত্রুপক্ষ কহিল, “হয় আত্ম সমর্পণ কর অথবা মৃত্যু নিশ্চয় ।”

তদন্তরে তিনি কহিলেন, “সাধারণ তরের বীরসৈনিকগণ

১৯৮ লেক্টেন্যান্ট সুরেশ বিশ্বাস ।

কখন আত্মসমর্পণ করে না ।” অনন্তর তিনি বীর সৈন্তগণকে উদ্দেশ্য করিয়া শত্রুগণের দিকে অধিকতর বেগে ধাবমান হইবার জন্য আদেশ করিলেন । শত্রুগণ তাহাদিগের কামান লইয়া তাঁহার প্রতি রোধ করিবার জন্য অবিভ্রান্ত গোলাবর্ষণ করিতে লাগিল । সুরেশচন্দ্র দণ্ডায়মান হইলেন এবং বীর সৈনিকদিগের প্রতি চাহিয়া বলিলেন, “সঙ্গীগণ,—শত্রুদিগের রিভলভার-কামান আছে এবং উহা আমাদের অস্ত্র নিকটে স্থাপিত । আমাদের প্রিয়ভূমি ব্রেন্সিলের বীরপুত্রগণের দ্বন্দ্ব যত্নকে ভয় করে না, এবং তোমরাও দেখিবে যে, পবিত্র ভূমি হিন্দুস্থানের সন্তান কেমন করিয়া পাঁচ মিনিটকাল মধ্যে উহা অধিকার করিয়া লইবে, অতঃপর প্রস্তুত হও ।” অনন্তর কয়েকবার আনন্দশূচক “হুয়ে”-ধ্বনি করতঃ বীর সহচরবর্গকে অনুসরণ করিতে বলিয়া ভীমবেগে সেই শত্রুর কামানের মুখে তিনি অগ্রসর হইলেন । প্রবেশমাত্র যান্ত্রিকই তিনি কামানগুলি অধিকার করিয়া লইয়াছিলেন, পরে ভীষণ কাটাকাটি আরম্ভ হইল এবং পরিশেষে তিনিই জয়লাভ করিলেন ।

বিগত কয়েকবারি মাসের শেষ অবধি তিনি (সুরেশ) আমাদের দিগের কাছে ছিলেন ; কারণ তিনি আমাদের পরিবারবর্গের বিশেষ আত্মীয় । তিনি এক দিন আমাদের বলিয়াছিলেন যে, গতানুগত্য হইলে আমি যেন এই মর্মে কলিকাতার একখানি পত্র লিখি যে, তিনি যেখানে গিয়াছেন সেইখানেই বণবী হইয়াছেন, এবং যেন তাঁহার পুত্র তাঁহার কীৰ্ত্তি ও যশের কাহিনী জানিতে পারে এবং পিতার উপযুক্ত পুত্র হইয়া তৎপথ অনুসরণ করিতে যত্ন পায় । তিনি নববিবাহিত পত্নী ও ১৮ মাসের একটা পুত্রকে

উপসংহার।

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আমাদিগের নিকট রাধিয়া গিয়াছেন এবং তাহারা বহু দিন জীবিত থাকিবে তাবৎ তাহারা আমার পবন আদরের ধন হইবে। ইহাদিগের জীবিকা নির্বাহোপযোগী যথেষ্ট বিষয়-বিভব তিনি রাধিয়া গিয়াছেন এবং আমায়ও অনেকগুলি বাড়ী আছে, বিপুল সম্পত্তি আছে এবং তৎসমুদয় তাহাদিগের আশাতিবিক্ত।

সমাজে সুরেশচন্দ্র অতি ধীর প্রকৃতির লোক, আচার ব্যবহারে অতি সভ্য, এবং সুপণ্ডিত। তাহার মস্তিষ্ক নূতন নূতন ভাবে পূর্ণ এবং সর্বদাই বিজ্ঞানচর্চায় রত। বিপদকালে তিনি নির্ভীক, এদিকে দর্শনশাস্ত্রে বিশেষ অনুরক্ত। চিকিৎসাবিজ্ঞানে তিনি এতই সুপণ্ডিত যে, এক সপ্তাহের মধ্যে আমার পরিবারের পক্ষাঘাতগ্রস্ত একটা পদ একবারে আরোগ্য করিয়াছেন। কোন ডাক্তারেই তাহাকে আরোগ্য করিতে পারে নাই। এই চিকিৎসা প্রণালীকে তিনি দৈহিক-তাড়িত কহেন। তিনি আমার পত্নীকে কোন ঔষধ সেবন করান নাই; তাহার শরীরে কেবলমাত্র স্বীয় হস্তের অঙ্গুলি চাপনা মাত্রেরই তাহাকে আরোগ্য করেন।”

