

Idioms of Development, Work of Pedagogy: Two Hindi films

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Children are a precious lot, though the modality of their economic valuation, we could say with Viviana Zelizer, seems to have changed¹. From an earlier mode of valuing the child as an asset in the family-society-nation/state triad, we have moved on to a different frame of valuation of the child as individual within the triad – as an intimate other and as human capital. Globalized laws and norms of citizenship, labor, consumption, human rights and gender roles have added a different urgency, a social-pragmatic turn, to the existing structure of valuing these ‘little adults’ – roughly since the mid-twentieth century. This has also had a bearing on how children might become subjects, or are conditioned as proto-subjects. The imagination of children as little citizen-subjects has followed a similar ideological trajectory in postcolonial India. The representation of children in popular visual media (mass-produced photorealist prints, map litho posters, advertisements, films), as a corollary as it were, has also reflected the changing career of the Indian state – passing through different phases. From the image of a newly independent political entity full of optimism (as in the iconic, and apparently somewhat ‘sexless’ and ubiquitous, chubby ‘bonny baby’ posters, films like *Jagriti* or *Son of India*), to a state ridden with scams and controversies when the popular ‘utterly butterly’ Amul moppet girl stood in public visibility as a curious and ever-so-cheerful commentator, we are now in the presence of the contemporary avatar of a caretaking governmental state intent on securing the future of its young citizenry via legislations on nutrition, schooling, delinquency, labor, as well as setting guidelines or norms of behavior in general. Although education at all levels has consistently been a focal part of national planning/ policymaking since independence, close monitoring of the all-round development of youth under eighteen years has become professed part of national agenda roughly since 1980s.²

The above overview might give us an indication of how the Indian nation-state, following Partha Chatterjee’s thesis that the transfer of political power entailed a continuity of overall structural distribution of power through largely unchanged

¹ The dates (late 19th-early 20th century) will not be equally applicable to the third world/ex-colonies/global south although, as a larger socio-cultural insight, her argument about the ‘priceless’, familial-sentimental value of children remains valid. See V. Zelizer, *Pricing the Priceless Child: The Changing Social Value of Children* (Princeton, 1994). Her thesis could be seen as an extension of available cultural histories of childhood as a ‘modern’ (Western/European, middle-class, bourgeois/post-*Ancien Régime*) social phenomenon, especially Aries’s.

² If one has to think in terms of a, or even *the*, biopolitical moment or move/s in this context, it might well be around mid-1970s – a particularly turbulent and controversial time that also saw the political Emergency being imposed in 1975 and continued for nearly two years. The Integrated Child Development Services, a welfare programme linking preschool education and state-sponsored healthcare was introduced in the same year. These years (i.e. mid-70s) are also known for state-sponsored countrywide sterilization drives for promoting nuclear family structure. The Integrated Child Protection Scheme, a state-civil society partnership programme at national, state and district/rural block levels is a more recent development, proposed by the Ministry of Women and Child Development in 2006 and adopted towards implementation in 2009.

bureaucratic functionaries, conceived of its child-citizenry as intimate ruled subjects. This closely guarded community of eminent, diminutive child-population, in other words, offers a compelling image of the post-colony's vision of subjects in the light of an ideal futurity. In what follows, we will look at two recent Hindi films that received considerable global attention as providing an insight into how subjectivities occur in the education (or 'schooling') of 'special'/challenged children³. The education-schooling frame (*not* a binary although it could operate as one for principled educators of liberal persuasion) is important for our discussion insofar as the first term connotes, at least in popular currency, cultivation of formative habits and values and the second a method in its institutional capacity.

Visions of Progress: Black as a Parable of (Ab)Normal Development

Black (SLB Films, 2005), directed by Sanjay Leela Bhansali, is loosely based on the (auto)biography of Helen Keller.⁴ It narrates the iconic deaf-blind protagonist's early life experiences – especially her extraordinary experience of being educated by her teacher and lifelong companion Anne Sullivan⁵. Unlike previous representations, the protagonist here is named Michelle (played by Ayesha Kapur and Rani Mukherjee, as

³'Bollywood' (in its present form as a hybrid correlative of the Indian nation-state) became a global cultural phenomenon in the 1990s. Historically speaking, this is a *resurgence* (when one thinks of the popularity of some Raj Kapoor melodramas of the 1950s) of Hindi cinema's national-cultural currency in the time of neoliberal capital. See AshisRajadhyaksha, 'The 'Bollywoodization' of Indian Cinema: Cultural Nationalism in a Global Arena', *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 4.2 (Routledge, 2003). *Black* was screened and awarded in film festivals in India and abroad, and cited as one of Time (Europe) magazine's top10 films of the year.

⁴*The Story of My Life*, serialized and published when Helen was in her early twenties, was edited by Anne's husband and literary critic John Albert Macy.

⁵ There were charges of plagiarism against Bhansali, of being 'influenced' by previous screen adaptations of the same story – the Hollywood movie *The Miracle Worker* (script based on a TV and Broadway play by William Gibson who was also a script-writer for the movie, distributed by United Artists International, 1962, directed by Arthur Penn) and two television 'docu-dramas' bearing the same title in 1979 and 2000. The controversy is outside the scope of the present article. Still, a few clarifications seem appropriate. The two TV adaptations more or less follow the sequence of events in the Penn film and, between themselves there is a notable consistency in representation – both in visuals and dialogues. For example, in both TV versions, Anne's arrival at the Keller residence (a significant narratological moment) is preceded (and represented) by the shot of a diesel train emitting smoke and moving through woods from left to right. And all three show Keller's father expressing doubts about the possibility of a visually impaired person (Anne had several eye operations during her education at Perkins School for the Blind in Boston that partially improved her vision) helping another deaf-blind young girl in the capacity of a governess-tutor-companion. The dark glasses worn by Anne (Anne Bancroft) in the Penn film made in 1962 do not change much in subsequent TV versions, although separated by quite a few decades. The thick, round glasses also speak of a certain 'look' and (then current) fashion when seen on the screen and can be exploited for different purposes. I was struck by the use of very similar glasses elsewhere, worn by the character of Rote (Alan Arkin) in the 1967 film *Wait Until Dark* – the menacing villain in a crime thriller involving the theme of physical blindness and (inner/instinctive) 'vision'. Without adding to the list, we could say that such charges of plagiarism are possibly hard to resist (or completely deny) when several texts are adapted from the same source. Bhansali's film is formally more of an adaptation than the other texts mentioned here, a biopic rather than a 'docu-feature'. He has also cited another autobiography by a deaf-mute pianist as his inspiration behind the film under discussion. Michelle also does things on screen that were not possible for Helen, such as dancing to the rendition of a Nat King Cole jazz standard. The script of *Black* is bilingual (Hindi/English) and the translation of dialogues used in the film are mine. Since usage of English carries a certain connotation of formal education, power and 'class' in an ex-colony, I will indicate when the language is used in the dialogues by adding '(E)' at the end.

young child and as young adult respectively) – the daughter of the McNallys. She hails from a well-off, devout Christian family staying in a colonial bungalow in the hills (Shimla) whereas her mentor Devraj Sahai (a middle-aged male, unlike Anne, played by Amitabh Bachchan) comes from a middle-class background and is an enigmatic character as he arrives at the McNally family estate – proud, obstinate, even self-obsessed, and known among his colleagues for his unusual talent, idealism and commitment⁶. When Michelle's father calls him a 'paid servant' while objecting to his behavior, he defiantly raises his right hand and insists that he should be referred to as a "paid *teacher*".

Instead of taking the reader through the story as it happens, I will discuss how several themes are presented/underlined through combination of images and script. The narrative strategies of the medium do *not*, however, make *Black* primarily a film with a message, unlike the film that I discuss later. Also, unlike the three known screen representations of the story titled 'The Miracle Worker' (equally applicable to the teacher-student duo), *Black* tells the story in a flashback, accommodating the autobiographical narration by an adult Helen/Michelle through voiceover. It also traces the development of an (unfulfilled) romantic relationship between Michelle and her 'teacher' – a climactic moment – following which Devraj writes a parting letter (in Braille) and goes away⁷.

Now, we examine how various motifs deployed in the film shore up our main theme, namely how education factors in norm/s of development. The word 'development' used in this case is not restricted to formal education, but how training in controlled environment may abet body-mind development – grow motor coordination, cognitive skills and civic habits.⁸ Such norms, even from the limited scope of discussion offered by the film here, draw their strength from prescriptive codes of duty, care and moral behavior in Christianity as also from the larger ideal/ethos of human conduct or comportment within that discourse.⁹ The themes in *Black* can be listed, for the convenience of analysis, as the following binaries and frames (or meta-themes)

⁶ He is usually seen in a check (plaid) shirt, trousers, scarf and a woolen knit cap or bobble hat, and is distinguished by his sharp, uneven body movements. He is also portrayed as a 'known' alcoholic. The two main characters in the narrative exploit their histrionic skills to highlight their respective 'personality disorders', so to speak, throughout the film.

⁷ The 'romantic love' subplot offers a different framing of the 'education' theme that is outside the scope of this article. Devraj's reaction is interpreted (and appreciated) by the (reflective, adult) narrator as a gesture of idealism that was 'compromised' when they kissed each other at young Michelle's insistence. There is a possible intimate angle in the Helen-Anne relationship that had a role to play in Anne's separation from her husband after Helen came to stay with them. Bhansali alludes to (and stays clear of) the 'scandal' by turning the 'relation' into a heterosexual one.

⁸ I will not, for the sake of larger argument, discuss the whole film to its end but upto the point when Michelle/Helen delivers her graduation day 'speech' in sign language which her mother interprets/translates for the audience.

⁹ Helen's autobiography is replete with private-literary-religious metaphors, removed from *our* secular-public vein of daily citizenship behavior. I quote the opening sentences: "It is with a kind of fear that I begin to write the history of my life. I have, as it were, a superstitious hesitation in lifting the veil that clings about my childhood like a golden mist ... The woman paints the child's experiences in her own fantasy. A few impressions stand out vividly from the first years of my life; but "the shadows of the prison-house are on the rest." ... many of the joys and sorrows of childhood have lost their poignancy; and many incidents of vital importance in my early education have been forgotten in the excitement of great discoveries ..." (quotation marks original, accessed at <http://www.afb.org/mylife/book.asp>). The language and the mood might remind us of writers trained in the tradition of Christian scholasticism.

associated with each: blindness/sight ('light' as the overbearing motif/metaphor connecting Michelle/Helen's 'disabled' childhood and 'exceptional'/'special' adulthood), sensation/language ('meaning' as a process/act of relating to and identifying/naming of surrounding objects or persons), disability/normalcy (as a framework of body-mind development of individual-in-society), and teacher/magician (revisiting the motif of 'miracle worker'). *Black* as a film-text produces its signification through the interplay of these themes.

The teacher-magician and blindness-sight/light themes are introduced very early. Before Devraj meets the deaf-blind Michelle, we see him looking intently at a flickering electric bulb, about to burn out. When his colleague arrives, he greets her: "Come into the light, Ms. Nair" (E). She expresses her surprise as he is still recovering from a critical eye operation, and he tells her wistfully: "This bulb is dying Ms. Nair, I need to stand by it, right?" (E), and further, "I am looking for the proper sign of light – for my deaf and blind children. Their light has been snatched away."¹⁰ He utters the word 'light' several times, trying to find different signs and expressions for it, using fingers and pounding his heart. When Nair (visually) 'translates' the word using the standard sign language used in special schools, suggesting that he should follow that system, he says with a complacent smile: "Ah! The difference between a teacher and a magician!" (E). The letter from McNallys, appointing him as Michelle's tutor, is handed over to him at this point. Almost immediately, he sees the shape of things to come as in a verbal montage: "I see a golden morning, the snow-filled path, the little girl – mischievous and drifting, like the wind. I will give her the wings of words, teach her [how] to fly." We see how a host of information (Michelle and Devraj's physical disability, sign language-system), action-gestures (signs, hand movements, beating the heart), objects (bulb, which is more than a mere object and functions as a metonym), images and metaphors (physical/inspired vision, darkness, flight, signs as instances of language use/words, restoration/healing, natural/mythical symbols, e.g. the child/bird) are mobilized into a syntagmatic chain or plot.¹¹

The magic task of educating Michelle, however, does not ensue effortlessly, nor is the sign language learnt in a sleight-of-hand. In their first meeting, Devraj puts his dark glasses on his student's eyes, puts her hand on his lips and spells "t-e-a-c-h-e-r"; thereby sharing their 'blindness' and forming a bond.¹² He is surprised to find her wearing a bell around her waist – a tracking device – and tears it apart with a snarl. He scoffs: "If parents take their own child for an animal, how will she become a human being?", to which the father responds bluntly: "It is your job to make her into a human [person]. How will you do it?" Devraj waxes eloquent in reply: "Fingers, Mr. McNally. *This* is the eye of the blind, the voice of the dumb and the poetry of the deaf."

¹⁰ The Hindi word '*sahi*' can be translated as 'correct' or 'right' while '*roshni*' is also translated as 'illumination', a more loaded word. Devraj uses the word 'sign' in English. Before this episode, we see Michelle's mother ruminating on her daughter's future: "Perhaps he [i.e. the tutor-appointee] will bring light to her life."

¹¹ This taxonomy is important for our analysis although what we come upon in a film, at one level, are varieties of processed/ assembled visual and sonic data.

¹² He calls Michelle, who breaks a porcelain vessel as soon as he comes in, "bit of a brat (E)." He also takes her doll, the deaf-blind child's playmate and 'double' with jet black eyes, and is slapped for that. We might note how Michelle's action is interpreted/translated/'voiced' by her tutor in their first encounter, a body-mind 'exchange' that evolves into a code of communication later on.

This intense meeting is followed by a pretty violent episode at the lunch table. Michelle, who habitually goes around the table and grabs food from everybody's plate, is held and stopped by Devraj. He insists that "she has to learn manners. . . will have to eat from a plate if at all. . . otherwise starve."¹³ At the suggestion of the father that he should rather pity the "crippled child", he warns that she should be treated not as 'disabled' but as a little imp who just wants to have her way, and tells her "If you want to eat, eat like a human."¹⁴ When the girl hits out at him, he slaps her. He forces a spoonful of rice down his student's throat; she bangs her head in protest and spits the food on his face. Devraj throws a big bowl of water at her, saying: "That should cool you down." A little later, Michelle is seen eating with a spoon while Devraj utters a grace prayer.¹⁵ Throughout the first half of the film, we also see plaster-cast busts/statues of elderly noblemen-philosophers (Plato/Jesus-lookalikes) and also stock Madonna images on the wall¹⁶. The teacher's method of governing childhood introduces civic habits in a socially-biologically handicapped child, setting positive norms of growing up as an (average) individual-in-society. Visually as well as generally, there is a repeated association of the 'teacher' and the caring godly sovereign – developed as a thematic of *singular* authority.

Michelle's education in a controlled environment is a success, and a miracle, in terms of making a human person out of someone doubly challenged – as a young child with (severely) dysfunctional/non-/not-yet-functional sense organs, motor coordination, and cognitive skills. Developing these skills is crucial in creating a certain thing-word-identification-meaning continuum that makes us adapt to our surroundings, and make social life 'meaningful'. The lag/lack duality is important for our understanding of a young child who is 'below average' on course of biological-social development – the connotation ranging from the old idea of the 'feral child' to the now-familiar 'special child' – and keeps in play a range of older, loaded, 'popular' social-medical-cultural labels such as an idiot, imbecile, retard or cripple.¹⁷ The condition of the deaf-blind child's 'non-humanness' is put quite starkly by an agitated Devraj later: "Try to understand Michelle, every word has a meaning. Without words, you will never be able to get out of this darkness. . . you will never be able to see the light. They will put

¹³ The Hindi pronoun that he uses to refer to Michelle is 'ise[y]' which could translate also as 'this one' or 'it', hinting at an animality [lag/lack of 'person'-ality].

¹⁴ The word used is *insaana*. Devraj informs the father that Michelle has learnt her first lesson, of '*tehzeeb aur tameez*' (culture and manners). Aristotle associates childhood (the state of being a child) and animality with 'appetite' insofar it is a *sensation* opposed to reason although children are described as *potentially* lacking in that capability.

¹⁵ Bhansali's film uses a lot of music, mostly background score, to add to the effect. During this particular scene, something like a Gregorian chant is heard. Otherwise, it varies from high-pitched orchestrated violin, percussions, string instruments, ambience music or soft jazz.

¹⁶ The presence of Devraj/Bachchan in some of these frames visually suggests a teacher-Christ continuum as well as, for Bhansali, a certain culture of fandom. He is seen softly touching one such bust and convinces Michelle's mother that he is their last hope if the girl is not to be sent to a psychiatric institution. He uses a stronger, and presently 'archaic', word – '*pagalkhana*' – meaning lunatic asylum or bedlam.

¹⁷ The emergence of Disability Studies as a discipline affecting norms/normality-constructs (in academia, public architecture or policymaking) has significant implications in this regard.

this bell around you, and call you a cow (E). . . you will become [and remain] an animal.”¹⁸

Another important theme in *Black* is parent-teacher substitution/supplementarity. The father, quite a patriarch, insists that his daughter is primarily his responsibility and terminates Devraj’s service. But as soon as he goes away, Devraj arranges to stay with his student in a separate room. Even the mother is granted limited access during those twenty days and every furniture of the room is changed. Devraj says “I will change even the odour of this place”, and insists that that he will have complete freedom in his tutelage. Soon after, we see Devraj working on a Braille page that he reads out: “the magician is at work. Today is Michelle’s first day in school” (E).¹⁹ He argues (successfully) with the mother, till then the girl’s closest companion, not to come into the room during this period.²⁰ Virtually thrown out, the mother walks through a room downstairs full of statues (stock/popular representations, iconic visual stereotypes) of ‘scholar-pedagogues/noblemen/virtuous men’. As we are transported upstairs inside the ‘study’, we see Devraj typing again: “The magic has begun (E). . . I will transform her life.”

The cake episode follows.²¹ Devraj enters the room with the food on a plate, but allows Michelle only to touch and smell it – in order to teach her the association of the object and the sonic pattern/sequence of the word that he spells on his own lips. But Michelle bites on his hand to wrench herself free, and the electricity goes off. Devraj collapses on the floor and calls out to the girl’s mother for help while Michelle comes scurrying on all fours, snatches the cake and gobbles up with a vengeance²². The mother arrives in the dark with a big candle held upright in her hand, and in a long shot (with a heightened musical cue) is seen passing under a Madonna image (stock oil painting in a high Renaissance style), continuing the darkness-light-deliverance thematic. When he

¹⁸ ‘*Tum ekjaanvar ban kar rahe jaogi*’. This scene is preceded by the teacher and his student forming a close bond, particularly interesting because the young child is seen being playful with Devraj, repeatedly (and deliberately) calling a handkerchief a ‘spoon’. The light-theme also continues visually, this intimate scene showing both of them as silhouettes followed by a ‘close-up’ (telephoto shot) of the sun moving through clouds.

¹⁹ He is writing a letter on a Braille typewriter (which was produced by the Perkins Blind School when both Anne and Helen went) to his erstwhile colleague. The Devraj/Bachchan character does come across as a bit of a smug, given the popular nature of the film, and his pedagogic authority more extreme. Incidentally, the Braille script/code originated as ‘night writing’, a code developed for communicating among soldiers at night, at the behest of Napoleon.

²⁰ He says that she would not touch Michelle for twenty days, and holds Michelle back, saying: “... No more father, no more father, just me – the teacher.”

²¹ Devraj addresses the sleeping Michelle, for the first and last time in the film, in her formal/family/‘adult’ name, saying: “Wake up, Ms. McNally” (E). He exhorts the (deaf) child to come out of the darkness, saying that “we all will have to go through *that* someday”, into the ‘light’ – suggesting a death-resurrection or pre-natal-birth structure. Devraj tells Michelle that she is, and should take pride in, her ‘difference’ from the rest. He also tells her: “The alphabet of the world starts with A, B, C, D, E, but yours starts with B-l-a-c-k”. The title of the film is ‘derived’ from this statement and comes full circle in the scene where Michelle (braille) types the word at an ‘average’ speed of thirty per minute.

²² The scene shows Michelle in a silhouette, against tall curtain-drawn windows, adding a vertical depth to the dimly lit wooden floor. Throughout the film, Bhansali uses such zones of light as a theatrical/pro-filmic strategy. It is done through adding different sources of light in the frames (candles, chandeliers, fireplace, electricity) or through cuts and fade-outs.

gets up, Devraj says to the mother: “The significance lies not in the eyes but in the light/illumination, I realized that today. . .in darkness eyes are useless.”²³ Later he also tells the mother that Michelle, though deaf and blind, is not mentally retarded.²⁴ He adds categorically: “She needs *recognition* of words. . .whatever she touches or eats has a name. [That] I will teach her.”²⁵

The kind of ‘total schooling’ carried out here resembles the idea of ‘natural education’ proposed in a foundational European text of liberal education, namely *Emile*. With Rousseau, education or schooling as a method has moved from the ancient (Socratic) ethos of training in a Republic or Stoic ‘virtue’ to the ideal of the citizen-subject in the wake of Enlightenment. The author-narrator prepares and watches over his fictional protagonist through successive stages till the protégée is ready to enter the mature world of adults, fully equipped in every aspect. His goal is to bring forth the ideal citizen and a perfect member of society: the all-round ‘development’ of an infant (literally, someone unable to speak) is to be harnessed to the service of a strong nation-state.²⁶ The development of ‘faculties’ – to be attuned to matters of human conduct, reason, reflection and judgment – is a persistent Enlightenment theme. A related, key point in *Emile* is the concern with ‘common sense’ that “has its seat in the brain”, and “results from the well-regulated use of other five, and teaches the *nature of things* by the sum-total of their external aspects.”²⁷ The point is to lead the child from his raw ‘sensation’ to ‘reasoning’: “Thus what I call the reasoning of the senses, or the reasoning of the child, consists in the formation of simple ideas through the associated experience of several sensations; what I call the reasoning of the intellect, consists in the formation of complex ideas through the association of several simple ideas.”²⁸ Although the immediate context of Michelle/Helen is ‘different’ (biologically, to begin with), Devraj’s method of holistic education makes better sense when viewed from the framework proposed by Rousseau – mediated by ‘common sense.’ First, it forms the link or associative chain among sense-organs and perhaps more importantly, operates as the other name for ‘reason’: the formative/productive master-faculty that will order our physical and moral function.

We might also note the strong proprietary voice of the author-pedagogue in *Emile*– (then) a new voice of rationality interposing between the familial authority of parents and the political authority of the state.²⁹ The urgency for developing a

²³ The Hindi word is *ujala*, connoting a more poetic/metaphorically charged use of ‘light’ as physical property.

²⁴ Helen/Michelle was not born deaf and blind, but practically became one due to a critical illness (then called ‘brain fever’, now identified variously as rubella/scarlet fever/meningitis) when she was two years old.

²⁵ Italics added. The Hindi word ‘*pehchaan*’ could also be translated as familiarity/understanding, identity or mark/distinction.

²⁶Rousseau advocates Robinson Crusoe as an (fictional) ideal of individual development – an independent, autonomous character, a good ruler who builds his colony from the scratch and a devout Christian who saves Friday – and following Marx, one of the earliest representations of *homo economicus*.

²⁷*Emile* (translated by Barbara Foxley, Everyman’s Library, London, 1974), p. 122, italics added.

²⁸Ibid.

²⁹ The debate between the state and parental authorities regarding proper government of children was at the heart of things during the seventeenth century. For a brief discussion, see Alex Tuckness, ‘Locke on education and the rights of parents’, in *Oxford Review of Education* 36.5 (2010), pp. 627-638, who quotes Locke: “*Parents in Societies, where they themselves are Subjects, retain a power over their Children, and they have as much right to their Subjection, as those who are in the State of Nature.*” (italics original).

coordinating faculty in good education is followed later by a totalizing claim: “My business, mine I repeat, not his father’s; for when entrusted his son to my care, he gave up his place to me. He gave me his rights; it is I who am really Emile’s father; it is I who have [sic.] made a man of him. I would have refused to educate him if I were not free to marry him according to *his own choice, which is mine*” (italics added).³⁰

Rousseau’s gendered prescriptions of child-rearing elicited responses from Mary Wollstonecraft. She emphasized the importance of intimacy of the mother-child relation for the young one/s, although she too recommends that the ‘office’ of the mother is to “produce in herself a *rational affection* for her offspring”³¹ (italics added). The objective of education is to mend the ‘dictates’ of ‘an uncorrected temper’ for “if they are not governed they will run wild.”³² This book was written in the tradition of a ‘conduct book’, akin to today’s parenting manuals. Before we conclude this discussion for the moment, it is probably worthwhile to cite the full title of another book by her, intended almost as a companion piece to *Emile* as a frame narrative of ‘middle-class’ education: *Original Stories from Real Life; with Conversations Calculated to Regulate the Affections, and Form the Mind to Truth and Goodness* (London, 1796).

Perhaps we can now see what Devraj’s tutoring is able to accomplish for his student, and what every growing child learns at a young age – not mere words but the connection between words and meaning –the sensory-cognitive work of ‘reference’. The work/process results in knowing the sensations, cognitive understanding and bodily knowledge of habits, and continues to synchronize and regulate our daily life and social communications, developing into faculties. As the narrator Michelle reflects later: “in those days I felt that relation between thorns and pain, between water and thirst. . .name and meaning.”³³ The work of reference for Michelle is done through repeated acts of spelling and acting out the association between things and words.

We will end this section by taking a look at two scenes of Michelle facing the University interview board and the graduation convocation ceremony. When asked about the number of existing oceans she replies that every drop of water is like an ocean for her. She also says (interpreted partially in English by Ms. Nair) that knowledge is ‘everything’ – spirit, wisdom, courage, light, and sound, in that order – and that it is her Bible and her teacher. In her convocation address shot in a brightly lit hall, Michelle tells the audience that her teacher has taught her a ‘different’ meaning of ‘black’, for it is the color of knowledge and graduation robe.

We end this section by noting the figuration the sovereign in the teacher-pedagogue and of the ruled subject in the student. The transformation/overcoming of the handicap is an ‘exception’ by dint of developing a different sign-language of

Parental care and duty for Locke are notionally and ‘rightfully’ linked to political sovereignty in the matter of overall governance.

³⁰*Emile*, p. 369. Rousseau’s author-persona continues taking responsibility beyond a stage that Locke leaves out to the order of family life – by preparing Sophie in perfecting her ‘feminine’ virtues as the able wife-companion.

³¹*Thoughts on the Education of Daughters: with Reflections of Female Conduct in the more important Duties of Life* (London, 1787), p. 5.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 2.

³³ The scene is accompanied by an ur-image that Bhansali uses to refer to Michelle’s ‘miracle’ – that of a dove being released from iron cage, with obvious religious overtones.

communication, but the learning is both intimate and violent. The imparting of lessons becomes a miracle just as the act of teaching is carried out as a mission. The exceptional method of teaching a pupil with handicap also has implications for usual notions of physical/biological normality and schooling as means to produce normal standards of student-subjects.

Representing Childhood Now: *Taare Zameen Par*

Taare Zameen Par (PVR Pictures, 2007, title translated by US distributor Disney Corporation as *Like Stars on Earth*) has a tagline, like many other consumption items: 'Every child is special.' Produced and directed by Aamir Khan³⁴, this film tells the story of an eight-year old boy-child, Ishan Awasti (played by Darsheel Safary who was awarded for his performance and his instant rise to fame in India could draw comparisons with similar child-stars in Hollywood such as Macaulay Caulkin or Shirley Temple) who comes from an average middle-class household in Mumbai. Ishan is an introvert and imaginative kid with his share of fun and frolic but, much to his parents' discomfort, fares badly at school. Even at home, he delights in every possible mischief and is the perfect foil to his elder brother – an ideal son and model student. Very early in the film, the difference between Ishan and the rest of his family is highlighted through a musical cue. On a certain day, when the English language teacher asks him to read a sentence, a visibly uneasy Ishan tells her that the letters are 'dancing.' When she curtly repeats her instruction, the boy, even more shaken, starts mumbling loudly which causes a roar of laughter in the class. Thrown out, he happily takes a trip around the city, and fondly keeps gazing at every little thing – the multitude of human, animal and plant life-forms in a busy metropolis – that catches his fancy. The film, more than any other in recent memory, is indeed refreshing in making us sympathize with a childlike point-of-view.³⁵

Meanwhile, Ishan continues to bunk classes. When he is caught, his parents become furious and decide to send him to a boarding school.³⁶ The headmistress of Ishan's school only adds to the worry by suggesting that he should be sent to a 'special'

³⁴ The initial inspiration behind the story, reportedly, was from the noted film director Akira Kurosawa's autobiography, probably his reminiscences of his elder brother Heigo who was 'gifted' but became alienated from his parents after failing to get admission in a premier high school.

³⁵ The camera clearly identifies with Ishan's viewpoint and is sensitive to the richness and diversity of ordinary life in a big city. The title sequence is carefully done. It uses animated figures of fish, turtle, squid and various other organisms running against or chasing each other playfully. The credits are also done in a fittingly childlike calligraphy. The shot which shows the protagonist for the first time starts with a close-up of a closed waterbody full of greenish black mud and muck. As we enter the life under water and its vertical depth, Ishan's shadow falls on it. In another scene, sitting before the question paper during a maths test, he imagines himself to be flying through space like Calvin (of the popular 'Calvin and Hobbes' comic strip by Bill Watterson where Calvin invents a persona called Spaceman Spoo for such explorations).

³⁶ The boarding school has a particular connotation for the Indian middle-class. It is known to be disciplinarian, and looked upon as a sort of punishment. Both Ajay and Ishan are pressurized into going there, since perhaps it is customary for a child of that age to be staying under the loving care and protection of his parents.

school – the first time the word being used in the course of the movie³⁷. But the new school hardly turns out to be a better experience and Ishan, though he befriends a classmate there, only grows more solipsistic, closing in on a permanent maladjustment. However, assistance comes in the form of ‘Nikumbh Sir’ (Aamir Khan), an art teacher from a nearby informal school, who grows in popularity because of his novel, playful and friendly attitude inside and outside the classroom.³⁸ Nikumbh continues with his unconventional teaching methods despite being criticized by other teachers,³⁹ and soon begins to take interest in Ishan who is conspicuous by his lack of participation. Through his active intervention, Ishan is diagnosed as suffering from dyslexia much like Nikumbh himself did in his childhood. What follows is somewhat predictable. Nikumbh successfully persuades Ishan to rediscover the latter’s interest in art and crafts – where Ishan’s real talent lies – even as he helps his student with other (formal school) subjects through prescribed methods. Ishan is awarded the first prize in an art fair and also fares well in his (formal) school exam held at the end of the year. The parents, who have already realized their mistake, are now overjoyed to see their son come out with flying colors.⁴⁰ The movie ends with a freeze shot of Ishan being tossed up in the air by Nikumbh, followed by a tribute to the ‘real stars’ – shots of children in myriad moods and acts.

Taare, being an unusual film in terms of theme and treatment, opened to rave reviews in public media across regions, and turned out to be both a critical and box-office success. Besides regular commercial screenings, it was shown by the International Dyslexia Association in the US and was selected as India’s official entry for the Academy Awards nominations in 2009. When another British film about Mumbai slum boys eventually won the award for the best motion picture and *Taare* did not make the shortlist, quite a few public figures expressed surprise and hinted at a long-standing tradition of covert favoritism. But controversies apart, let us try to assess what is really ‘special’ about the film and its plot. Children, whether within a family, school or any such public spaces, are always unique. They belong to that transitional stage that defies any homogenizing straightjacket,⁴¹ hence the insistence (and debates) on a ‘proper’ upbringing. Scholars have drawn our attention to the various ways in which children invent and/or preserve intimate spaces (i.e. settings or actual locations, not to be equated with a more abstruse, conceptual term such as ‘site’) and perform other such

³⁷ Obviously, she suggests that Ishan might be mentally/cerebrally. One cannot miss how the word ‘special’ is uttered with a pejorative undertone by the headmistress and deemed as a social taboo by Ishan’s father who takes it to be an insult or embarrassment to his social position.

³⁸ He appears as a flute-playing, hip-shaking joker uttering doggerel verses and singing a joyous nonsense song. Perhaps it is rather unusual for a schoolteacher, but the song acts more as a metaphor that marks an important turn in the narrative.

³⁹ Nikumbh uses humor as means of showing his disagreement. In a significant scene in *Taare*, when a teacher condescendingly tells him that unity, faith and discipline are *the* three principles that work in New Era School, Nikumbh stands up, extends his right hand, and says with a smile: ‘Heil Hitler.’ Although the formal school pedagogy is criticized in the movie repeatedly, the producers start the film with a disclaimer about the schools where the film was actually shot (the implication being that the film does not criticize their teaching methods).

⁴⁰ Typically, again, the middle-class professional father is shown to be more upset with his son and treats him harshly; the mother is more caring and sympathetic.

⁴¹ I am also including young adults here. The standard UN definition of a child is someone who has not reached the age of 18 years.

acts of negotiating with predominantly adult environments/institutions.⁴² Such everyday operations or (re-)arrangements – what Michel de Certeau calls ‘bricolage’⁴³ – are instinctive and common among children, perhaps more common than full-grown adults. The boy in *Taare* is no exception, may be a touch more imaginative and gifted. And he is biologically ‘special’ in a technical sense, as we have already noted, as Nikumbh was in his childhood days or the children are in the Tulip school where he teaches. These cerebrally challenged children occupy screen space for a considerable period of time – a rare occurrence in Indian mainstream films. And at least equally important is the ‘art fair’ scene that portrays the schoolteachers with a healthy comic spirit.⁴⁴ It has a potentially subversive bent that might initiate an apposite self-critique among the adult audience.

Admittedly, the film offers a timely criticism of the formal school education system that (arguably) instills job hunting as foremost priority. But this liberal and topical reformism does not appear to dislodge, or forcefully criticize, the overall rhetoric of sentimentalism or care that is commonly associated with childhood⁴⁵. Rather, it reinforces that rhetoric with an act of balancing between nature and nurture. If ‘every child is special’, as the film’s punchline says, then the dancing letters need not be the symptom of a disease but a figment of playful fancy! If the parents/teachers treat Ishan’s ‘attitude’ (that is how a teacher describes his problem to his parents in his first school) as childish and therefore unfit for the routine-bound disciplines of school, then diagnosing it as a motor coordination problem does not work in favor of ‘childlikeness’ either.⁴⁶ The fact that Ishan turns out to not be like any child but exceptional (on two counts: precocious artist/craftsman and dyslexic) tends to rest the tagline (that appears on the DVD as well as the beginning of the movie) on unsure grounds.⁴⁷ I suggest that *Taare* advocates a more tolerant and discerning sensitivity to children – an improvement on the present (adult/familial) culture of instrumental care. It has a corrective and/or reformist agenda than a call to *rethink* the terms of childhood as social practice.

Clearly, what *Taare* advocates or appeals to has a wider implication – for the middle-class culture of rearing children. It has a vision of the 21st century Indian nation,

⁴² See, for example, C. Philo, ‘Spaces of Childhood’, in *Childhood* 7.3 (2000), 243-256, or J. Qvortrup, ‘Societal Position of Childhood’, in *Childhood* 1.1 (1993), 119-124. Also there is a strong Piagetian line of thinking inspired by J. Piaget and B. Inhelder, *The Child’s Conception of Space* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1956), as well as discussions on the theme in Aries and DeMause.

⁴³ The noted French structural anthropologist Levi-Strauss also uses the term bricolage/ bricoleur in more or less the same sense in *The Savage Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968) before Certeau’s book was published.

⁴⁴ The tables are turned in this particular scene. Students go around poking fun at their teachers who, for all their experience and formal education, turn out to be pathetic at making even simple illustrations on their own. Khan handles this scene admirably with a judicious sense of humor and balance.

⁴⁵ Aamir Khan films often contain criticisms of some middle-class stereotypes to recast it in a different value-structure. In *Taare*, it is most conspicuous stereotype is the character of Ishan’s father.

⁴⁶ Ashis Nandy points out that the whole gamut of adult response to childhood as a state of life or sociological phenomenon range between treating it as ‘childish’ (unfit and socially unacceptable, even cognate with ‘madness’) and ‘childlike’ (funny, immature though adorable). See his essay ‘Reconstructing Childhood’, in *Traditions, Tyranny and Utopias* (New Delhi: OUP, 1987), 56-76.

⁴⁷ One can think of it as a syllogistic proposition: every child is special, but Ishan is not like every child. They appear to be contradictory. Hence, either Ishan’s case amounts to a tautology (special child is special), or the argument has to shift its logical ground.

and also a ‘message’ for its citizens. The message has an important bearing on how the (adult) society should conduct itself in matters of upbringing its young members *because* it is indeed an important question relating one generation with the next, of responsible citizenship, and ultimately one of modernity. In many ways, a contention of *Taare* is that the present generation of parents is not modern enough, anxious as it might be in assuring the future of children. Explicit critiques of formal school education system or ‘job race’ point at that lack of flexibility. But again, it does not aim at formulating the questions anew or shift the grounds of present attitude to children as subjects. Rather, the film advocates suitable adjustments that would be beneficial to both generations and in turn usher in a better tomorrow for the country.

I would conclude the discussion of *Taare* with a couple more observations that seem to be relevant to our discussion in support of my argument. Once Nikumbh is shown (during the title song sequence that starts with the challenged schoolchildren) looking pensively at a young boy working at a tea-stall. The next shot shows him offering food to the boy that the latter gulps down with a rather inexpressive face – in fact he looks away from Nikumbh and the camera. I would suggest that this humane and charitable act gels well with the consistent portrayal of (disadvantaged) children as unsung heroes, and only extends the overall sentimentality borne in the film.

My last point is a speculative take on the problem of dyslexia.⁴⁸ I take this liberty to return to the issue of language as an entry point into the symbolic order of nation. If language is a major unifying or cementing element in forming a national community as Anderson says⁴⁹, and if, as Lacanian psychoanalysis suggests, unconscious is structured like a language, then dyslexia might have a metaphorical or even indexical-metonymic value. Is Ishan’s incapacity, or biological difficulty, to learn the rules of language (both mother-tongue, the minimum necessary requirement, and English, the ‘power’ language of the middle class/ public sphere) crucial because language as an enabling and empowering faculty points to something more than what meets the eye? Something that the parents and school-teachers perceive and nevertheless miss the point? In other words, I am trying to suggest that, at least symptomatically, the grammar of nation eludes him even as Ishan tries hard to grasp it by heart – the biological problem has an ideological referent as well. A lot hinges on that because he is still in an impressionable age, i.e. yet to become a fully formed citizen-subject. *Taare* looks forward to a nation more sensitive, egalitarian and accommodating towards its children because they *are* the future.

Language, Infancy, Childhood

The young protagonists of these films provide two instances of ‘special’ children, challenged and maladjusted, and exhibiting behavior which are different or considered

⁴⁸ There were reports of numerous parents filling in doctors’ chambers, following the film, to check whether their children were actually dyslexic because it came to connote the ‘reality’ of precocity in an otherwise impersonal set-up of mass schooling. It could probably happen with autism.

⁴⁹ Language *appears* to be natural or a matter of inheritance that history often belies. However, that does not make language any less a primordial force having far-reaching effects, at least on face value. Cf. Anderson, “What the eye is to the lover – that particular, ordinary eye he or she is born with – language – whatever language history has made his or her (i.e. potential citizen) mother-tongue – is to the patriot.”, in Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 154, and the first four chapters.

deviant. The extent of their perceived deviance will vary according to our own willingness, consent, compliance or participation in the matter of normal disposition of development – private and public spheres of social conduct or protocols of citizenship. Development as a thematic lays out the historical ground of such daily participation; the child's body becomes an index of his/her being, and 'character' an incarnation of normalcy. The normalcy in this case has myriad possibilities of representation and application as it forms the core of a detailed code of conduct in home, school or the society at large. It is also related to how the social body is imagined via indefinite operations of the normative. The indefiniteness is connected to its potentially infinitesimal, all-pervasive nature, as opposed to specific prescriptions in/by institutions of law.

The films discussed above offer two different instances of managing this problem, of addressing the economy of socialization. They present two instances of interrupting the developmental-behavioral arc whereby the young deviant/delinquent is reintegrated. *Black* offers a *vertical* model of power and *Taare* a more lateral, *dispersed* one. The relation between the pedagogue and his pupil is more direct and confrontational one in the first case – the mutual commitment and eventual personal bond are also proportionally higher – turning from hostility to love and care.⁵⁰ There is a strong element of gratitude on Michelle/Helen's part, as also care and empathy on her teacher's, and a bond of affective piety. Subordination/superordination corresponds to good/positive empowerment and deliverance – the teaching-learning process is akin to vocation.

The process in *Taare* is progressive in a different way, allied to the socially organized passage to normalization. It appears as part of the institutional capacity of 'special' school, at the intersection of knowledge economy and neoliberal norms of democratic citizenship. The young boy-child finds his identity along a prescribed, inclusive approach to schooling. The teacher is not really a pedagogue here, in the more authoritative or absolute sense of leading and supervising, but a facilitator. He is an expert in the art of diagnosing children who are differently abled and brings them back to the fold.⁵¹ Ishan's dyslexia appears more as a social-medical lag – an (as yet) unfamiliar body-mind disposition of skills and habits – than a congenital disorder in terms of eventual socialization.

Are young children like Michelle more threatening since they evoke figurations of a (mythical) monster – the 'feral child'? The uninitiated, unmannered young Michelle, as we have seen above, does come across as a human brute as she is seen crawling, gobbling food, rolling on the floor, or walking/running with uneven steps with her head bent and arms outstretched. The initiation of feral children, represented in literature by the likes of Kipling or Edgar Rice Burroughs, will conjure up problematic issues of race, colonization and the romantic interest in the noble savage.⁵² We might also think of the

⁵⁰ I follow the Foucauldian notion of power and Weber on legitimate forms of authority. Together, they present models of domination having basis in some social-moral ground, as constitutive and not (only) coercive power.

⁵¹ There are suggestions of autism in *Taare* also. Dyslexia and autism are often known to be intrinsic to precocity.

⁵² Visual references to the 'feral' child are quite common in popular horror films as well – it is a standard mythic prototype.

experimental education of the ‘wild boy of Aveyron’ by the noted doctor-pedagogue Jean Marc Itard around 1800, as a historical case in point.⁵³ The discourse on the ‘wild child’ and ‘natural’ education offers an intriguing genealogy of pedagogy, language acquisition and social discipline that we cannot fully explore here. As socially produced texts/objects intended for mass consumption, the narration of *Black* foregrounds the thematic of disciplining as means to normative growth, suggesting a link via infancy, animality and civic-anthropological primitivity, in tracing the development of an exceptional child. *Taare*, on the other hand, is more steeped in the contemporary corrective-reformist agenda of institutionalizing such a child as a would-be democratic subject.

⁵³ The boy was adopted and called Victor by Itard, echoing the Crusoe-Friday relation. Itard developed a special language of communication based on his medical experiments and then prevalent ideas of education. As is well-known, he was a pioneer in developing pedagogic methods for teaching children with mental-physical disabilities and inspired later experimental theoreticians such as (his own student) Edouard Seguin or Maria Montessori.