

announced and enforced overnight in India, thousands of men, women, and children also fled big cities to save their lives both from the invisible virus and inevitable starvation. Just as the poor bore the brunt of the London epidemic in 1665, the poor are paying the heaviest price of the COVID-19 pandemic in India in 2020. As their meagre resources and savings keep depleting, the poor and marginalised are barely surviving.

Human beings think they have answers to most questions life throws at them—at least, that's what those who claim to have miraculous, supernatural powers believe. During the London Plague, as Defoe notes, dozens of quacks, healers, and fortune tellers emerged in swarms from the woodwork, conning people out of the little money they had by giving them the false hope of miraculous cure or escape from the plague. With disdain, the narrator notes, "With what blind, absurd, and ridiculous Stuff, these Oracles of the Devil pleas'd and satisfy'd the People, I really know not; but certain it is, that innumerable Attendants crouded about their Doors every Day ... I need not mention..., what a horrid Delusion this was, or what it tended to; but there was no Remedy for it, till the Plague it self put an End to it all; and I suppose, clear'd the Town of most of those Calculators themselves." In our time, too, quacks, godmen, and faith-healers initially claimed to save people from the novel coronavirus, one way or another. However, within days they shut shop and went cowering for cover to remain uninfected by the deadly virus against which their miraculous powers were found shockingly ineffective.

During the plague, though, most people found some peace and hope in religion. When everything else had failed, the plague-stricken Londoners turned to god for reassurance. According to the *Journal's* narrator, thousands turned to god to find spiritual strength in prayer: "The People shew'd an extraordinary Zeal in these religious Exercises and as the Church Doors were always open, People would go in single at all Times ... locking themselves into separate Pews, would be praying to God with great Fervency and Devotion." One aspect of India's collective response to the pandemic is increased religiosity. People of all religions have called upon gods for protection, healing, and safety in many different ways and means these days. Religious television serials, online prayers, personal devotion, prayer, and fasting are some noticeable markers of people's undiluted faith in religion and spirituality as the cure for their material woes. Fiction shows that some human tendencies have not changed for centuries. They might not for many more to come.

Novels such as Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year*—as well as Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* (1826) and Albert Camus's *La Peste* (*The Plague*, 1947)—are written not only as an account of the horrors of plagues but also to enthral people with hair-raising stories of human suffering, endurance, and triumph. Reading the *Journal* in the midst of this pandemic, staring at

the face of an unnerving, uncertain future reminded me of my own mortality, feebleness, and insignificance in the grand scheme of things called life. Fortunately, though, it also made me aware of the power of fiction to make that life more meaningful, instructive, and valuable.

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Indian Global Cinema and the People's History

Is contemporary Indian cinema doing the job of recording the people's history of our times?

DEVASHISH MAKHIJA

Like all storytellers are wont to do, I will start with a story. A little over 10 years ago, troubled at not being able to fully comprehend the Adivasi-Naxalite-mining-development conflict situation through mere research, I undertook a journey to north Andhra Pradesh and south Odisha. That was also the time when the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) was being implemented enthusiastically across rural India. We came across many roads being constructed under this scheme in the Adivasi areas where there had been none. And, often, it was the Adivasis displaced from their own lands who were employed as daily wage labourers to build the very roads they were displaced for.

The government claimed they were ensuring employment under this scheme so that those displaced could get a basic minimum wage to be able to buy the food and essentials they needed every day. Imagine an Adivasi on their own land, growing their own food, filling their own water from the river, weaving their own clothes, needing to buy nothing to survive. Now imagine that same Adivasi without their land, living far away from it in tin-sheet shanties, having to now buy food and clothing, and sometimes even water.

In those times, the government's daily wage for each labourer was ₹250. I was lucky to get a peek at one of the registers that the private contractor in charge of the road laying scheme in one such area had maintained. It had columns for name, gender, taluka, village, date, attendance, payment and signature. This was the only resource that the local government representatives would use to update the massive MGNREGA government database online.

The contractor had left the "payment" column empty as he paid out the wages—a 100 rupee note to each labourer—dutifully taking their thumbprints in the signature column. The remaining ₹150 simply disappeared into the ether even as I watched. I tried to object. But the labourers were silent.

The poor and deprived, when desperate, do not prioritise fairness and justice over a square meal.

Did the government even send ₹250 per labourer? Or did the entities that come in between the government and the labourer whisk it away? Every time someone questioned the government about the effectiveness of MGNREGA, its records showed that each labourer was paid the full amount. The “system,” therefore, has proof. It has evidence. It has witness. Because it has precise and undeniable documentation.

But there is no record of the fact that those labourers received only ₹100 each. Where does one record that? How will that be testified for? Who will bear witness for it? Because when one turns to the judiciary to fight for something, only evidence and proof matter.

In sum, the state’s perspective has it all. The people’s perspective has none. A system that does not allow for the people to be heard and represented and spoken for is a system that must be rejected, questioned, and overhauled. The records that such a system keeps must be rejected as well because there is no counter to it. And with no formal counter-perspective available, the only informal way to record it, is in “stories.”

The only thing that survives intact and unblemished once a generation dies is the art that was created in their time. All traces of the people’s perspective can be whitewashed from textbooks and history books and museums, and even YouTube, if a regime with contrary ideas comes to power. But the stories that represent it can remain, especially if they are encoded in a form that has some permanence. Until the 20th century, literature wielded this power. But increasingly, over the past 100 years, it has been cinema that has done—and can continue to do—the needful, whenever called upon.

If you wanted to see the partition of India today through a humanistic—and not simply a political, geographical or demographic—lens, what would you reach for? Literature. And within literature, most of us would reach for Saadat Hasan Manto’s stories. Manto was not documenting fact. He was not a government employee, nor was he a journalist. He was not an anthropologist. He was not of any political party. He wrote fiction. But he focused unflinchingly on the people’s perspective—that other perspective, which no formal entity ever documents. His stories move people; they start conversations.

Today, it is cinema that can do that job—if it wishes to, that is. In the parallel cinema movement of the late 1970s and 1980s, this was done with efficiency and passion by Shyam Benegal, Govind Nihalani, Saeed Mirza, Adoor Gopalakrishnan, Mrinal Sen, Buddhadeb Dasgupta, M S Sathyu, and so many others. Unfortunately, this enterprise nearly disappeared by the 1990s—perhaps liberalisation washed it all away in the sudden flash flood of global entertainment.

If it wants, contemporary Indian global cinema can record, for posterity, a people’s history of today’s times. But, unlike 40 years ago, those doing this are too few now. Chaitanya

Tamhane’s *Court* (2014), Nagraj Manjule’s *Fandry* (2013), Sanal Sasidharan’s *Sexy Durga* (2017), and Anusha Rizvi’s *Peepli Live* (2010) come to mind. These films place front and centre those Indians living on the margins of the informal and illegal in a country slowly crumbling on the grounds of caste (*Court* and *Fandry*), gender (*Sexy Durga*), and urban bias (*Peepli Live*).

We are at a point in modern history where all we have around us is the state’s narrative and what it wants us to believe. More than ever before, we need our art, our stories, and mostly our cinema, to aggressively seek out, nurture, shape, and exhibit the people’s narratives to ourselves and the world. Major international film festivals seek and reward the films that do this. There is a smell of authenticity and uniqueness to our cinema when it turns its lens fiercely on local truths. And the discerning global viewer catches it and cherishes it. But it’s becoming increasingly difficult to find any sort of resources to keep seeking and presenting such stories in a medium that needs money to sustain it. Because money, by its very nature, is drawn towards authority and power, both of which have always been contrarian to the people’s perspective of things. More so, today.

I leave us with some words from Howard Zinn, who implanted the idea of a people’s perspective in my own work.

A poem can inspire a movement. A pamphlet can spark a revolution. Civil disobedience can arouse people ... when we organize with one another, when we get involved, when we stand up and speak out together, we can create a power no government can suppress.

If politicians, corporate executives, and owners of press and television can dominate our ideas, they will be secure in their power. They will not need soldiers patrolling the streets. We will control ourselves.

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