

# Subaltern Studies, Bollywood and *Lagaan*

*Using 'Lagaan' as a case in point, this paper argues that popular Bollywood films with their appeal to the mass audience of uprooted peasants, factory workers, the unemployed, uneducated and poor can decolonise the imagination of the Indian masses. It points out that Lagaan's efforts at indigenisation and interrogation of prescribed discourses of modernity and history deserve credit for making possible the creation of public debates within a culture where the majority of the population is non-literate, and is unable to partake in elite discussions of culture and modernity.*

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**L***agaan*, a popular Bollywood film, produced by film star Aamir Khan and directed by Ashutosh Gowariker won the Audience Award at the 2001 Locarno film festival and has also earned itself the distinctive reputation of being nominated in the Best Foreign Film category for the 2001 Academy Awards. As various critics and journalists have noted, the film's cinematography set in Gujarat, melodious songs and star actors have all played their part in the success of this film in the box office. *Lagaan* repeats the popular motif of Bollywood films – the defeat of British (colonial) rulers at the hands of Indians, but situates the struggle for decolonisation on apparently mutually exclusive domains – cricket, an 'elite' sport, and subaltern politics.<sup>1</sup> The film's primary appeal for the Indian masses lies, in my view, in its choice of this innovative theme – the subaltern's destabilising of the history of cricket.

This paper shows how *Lagaan* extends the 'subaltern studies project' in the visual medium in a country, which produces the largest number of films in the world, and where films are largely the only available form of entertainment in which the subordinate and marginalised peoples can be both active consumers and engaged audiences. Using *Lagaan*, as a case in point, I argue that popular Bollywood films with their appeal to the mass audience of uprooted peasants, factory workers, unemployed, uneducated and poor can decolonise the imagination of the Indian masses. I also point to the lacuna in Nissim Mannathukkaren and Boria Majumdar's articles on *Lagaan* published in *EPW*,<sup>2</sup> and further the debate they initiated in earlier editions of the journal to argue that *Lagaan*'s myriad efforts at indigenisation and interrogation of prescribed discourses of modernity and history deserve credit for making possible the creation of public debates within a culture where the majority of the population is non-literate, and therefore unable to partake in elite discussions of culture and modernity, usually articulated in academia.

## I **Lagaan and Subaltern History**

I begin with a brief overview of the subaltern studies project in order to illustrate the parallels between contributions of the subaltern studies historians and *Lagaan*. Subaltern studies began as an attempt to transform the writing of colonial Indian history. Ranajit Guha, the founding editor of *Subaltern Studies*, published

the first volume of the series in 1982. The project critiqued conventional historiography – colonialist, nationalist and Marxist – for treating the subalterns of south Asian society as devoid of consciousness, and hence without the ability to make their own history. Colonialist historiography, as various critics have elucidated, aided and abetted the more overt brutalities of colonisation by creating categories of the 'other,' which were used for the subjection and objectification of native societies to justify imperial processes of discrimination, subordination and oppression. Eurocentric perspectives claimed that Europe's colonisation of 'the rest of the world' made it possible for the "barbaric" natives to enter history and modernity.<sup>3</sup> Nationalist historiography, on the other hand, represented Indian nationalism, "as the sum of the activities and ideas by which the Indian elite responded to the institutions, opportunities, resources, etc, generated by colonialism."<sup>4</sup> The subaltern studies historians critiqued the Indian National Congress that led the anti-colonial or freedom struggle, for appropriating a variety of popular resistance(s) under its own agenda and prescriptions of anti-colonial struggle. They attempted to establish through a number of case studies how the Congress and Gandhian campaigns, far from leading movements of resistance, often intervened and subsumed movements that were generated independently and outside of it. Marxist historians are critiqued for seeing in the history of colonial south Asia only the linear development of class consciousness and for 'emptying' south Asian history of specific types of consciousness and practices of subaltern movements.

Thus, subaltern studies historians have brought to light the existence of a space that dominant historical discourses have failed to acknowledge or interpret. *Lagaan* extends the work of the subaltern studies collective in attempting to fill this 'emptiness', i.e., the representation of subaltern consciousness in elitist historiography, which the subaltern studies collective have identified. The film reiterates the subaltern studies project's call for "an opening up and restructuring of the received disciplinary boundaries for the study of peasant movements,"<sup>5</sup> by writing the dispossessed of the colonial margins into the history of a popular sport. The male narrative voice at the end of *Lagaan* suggests that the film's project has been to recover the experience, the specific and distinctive historical practice of a subaltern group, which has been lost or hidden by the processes of elite

historiography. It questions the 'universality' and 'authenticity' of official versions of Indian national history, the erasures and silences in it and raises doubts in the minds of the spectators about its claim to 'knowledge' of the Indian past.

Rosalind O' Hanlon identifies a basic model of explanation "[b]eneath the tremendous variety in the empirical material" of the subaltern studies historians: "a long tradition of exploitation, or a shorter-term economic dislocation, which provokes resistance and rebellion: challenges to landlords or the agents of the state, the appropriation or destruction of the signs and instruments of their authority."<sup>6</sup> *Lagaan* follows a similar pattern. The film is set in a village in Awadh, a princely state in 1893, in what is now central India. The East India Company looks after the defence of the state in lieu of taxes ('*lagaan*') paid by the subjects. The local ruler ('*raja*') is nothing more than a nominal head, although responsible for the welfare of his subjects. The year in which the plot of the film begins there has been no rain. There has been little rainfall in the previous year, too, yet Captain Russell, the British official of the East India Company demands double taxes from the people. The peasants' awareness of their 'long tradition of exploitation,' (*ala* O' Hanlon) but particularly their present destitution provoke dissent and anger. They approach the king with a request for tax waiver, while he is watching a game of cricket played by the officials of the East India Company. The king expresses his helplessness, but Captain Russell, who is in charge of the region, intervenes. He had overheard Bhuvan, a local youth comment that the English game of cricket was 'silly' and 'childish.' Angered by the disregard shown to English culture by a petty villager, he throws Bhuvan and the peasants a challenge. If the villagers can beat the English team in a cricket match they will have the taxes of the entire province waived for two years. But, if they lose they will have to pay three times the regular taxes. The peasants hesitatingly accept this challenge, and the film ends with the subaltern cricket team defeating the English cricket team, thus paying back the British on their own terms.

## II Creating the 'Enemy'

Nissim Mannathukkaren in his article on *Lagaan* critiques the "(a)bsolving of the *raja* of any part in the oppression of the peasants". He points to the episode in *Lagaan* where the villagers identify the English officer as the real 'enemy,' rather than the king. He writes: "It is interesting to note the parallels between this statement ("what can the *raja* do? His hands are tied") and Gandhi's advice to the peasants in Awadh after the 1921 insurrection, "You should bear a little if the zamindar torments you. We do not want to fight with the zamindars. Zamindars are also slaves and we do not want to trouble them."<sup>7</sup> It is ironical that while noting 'parallels' between the advice of a nationalist leader (Gandhi) and the peasant viewpoint in the film, Mannathukkaren fails to recognise the consciousness of the subaltern masses. He reiterates the colonialist and nationalist assumptions that the peasants in colonial India were simple, ignorant and unaware that the fact of their poverty was the result of the exploitative nature of colonial rule, and therefore in need of guidance and leadership to embark on effective political action.<sup>8</sup> The villagers of Champaner do not need Gandhi, (or any other elite political or social leader) an educated outsider, to educate them about the rapacious British official in charge of the

region. The villagers are intelligent enough to recognise their oppressor of the moment "*on their own*, that is, *independently of the elite*".<sup>9</sup>

Mannathukkaren also argues that in *Lagaan* "the other becomes defined as belonging outside the 'nation' – the white coloniser".<sup>10</sup> But the "other" that defines the subaltern's self-consciousness, both historically and in the film, is not only the white outsider: it is equally the '*raja*' (feudal lord); the comprador bourgeoisie (Ramnath, the translator); marginalised groups lower or outside the caste hierarchy (untouchables); the subordinate and discriminated (disabled or mentally ill) and the other gender (women). As Tanika Sarkar notes in her case study on Jitu Santal's Movement in Malda, for the subaltern 'striving to maintain a distance' not only from the elite but also from the classes and groups lower in the social hierarchy, i.e., the various 'others,' "may be the most important content of his self-image and self-respect".<sup>11</sup>

Coerced into agreeing to the bet of a colonial master, the villagers through a long process of persuasion create a cricket team. Mobilisation is done on the basis of what Guha describes as "traditional organisation of kinship and territoriality".<sup>12</sup> The "principle of community" functions as "the characteristic unifying feature of peasant consciousness".<sup>13</sup> Bhuvan, the protagonist, impress upon the villagers to act as a collectivity by reminding them of the bonds of solidarity that already exist between them. Consequently, Bhuvan's response to Lakha's treachery<sup>14</sup> does not draw upon their mutuality of interest, but is a chastisement of a kinsman for not doing his 'duty,' as incumbent upon him on the basis of his kinship relations. Under the leadership of Bhuvan, a land-owning peasant, Kachra, disabled and an untouchable, Lakha, a Muslim, Gauri's father, a doctor, Guran, a village god man/mad man become a team of rural cricketers. Regional boundaries are also transcended as a Sikh ex-army man of the East India Company joins the peasants of Champaner, without raising any doubts about his loyalty or questions about his linguistic and regional affiliation, to play against the de facto English rulers.

The film shows that the processes involved in constructing a team of villagers draw together social groups in unexpected ways. However, there seems to be a confluence of meanings of the terms unity and equality in Mannathukkaren's article. The long process of unification portrayed in *Lagaan* does not exorcise the reality of unequal identities, or the inequalities of the oppressive, indigenous, social structures that the subaltern inhabits. The impression of unity that the film forcefully exhibits does not erase the contentious relationships and differing opinions that are negotiated by Bhuvan, or the relationships of power between the subalterns that continue to exist. Champaner is by no means a "filmic embodiment of a pristine village community,"<sup>15</sup> as Boria Majumdar argues, nor does it contribute to "the myth of a benign and benevolent traditional order,"<sup>16</sup> as Mannathukkaren argues; rather, *Lagaan* falsifies such populist idealisations of the peasantry as a homogeneous and harmonious community, free from internal dissensions. The detailed delineation of the processes of specific and complex negotiations involved in creating a cricket team transcending class, caste and religious barriers reveal that Champaner's condition at the time of (or before) the colonial contact was neither just nor homogeneous. The hierarchy of social relations is evident from the depiction of the thakur, the village headman, the economic disparity between peasant land-owners with varying amounts of farming land, Lakha's uncertainty whether the Muslims would be included in the Champaner village team,

Kachra's double marginalisation because of his caste and disability, and finally the women, particularly Gauri, the heroine, who is not considered to be a member of the cricket team due to her gender. There is no doubt about the masculine preserve of the political and public sphere, including the game of cricket and the film's legitimisation of that state of affairs. The women characters in the film are given the task of bringing food, singing songs and supporting the hero. They are dispossessed through their removal from the public sphere in civil society and are granted companionate roles and responsibilities. The marginality of the 'darkies' (native males) is translated into double marginality for the brown women in the film.

### III Strategic Alliances

Taking into account the varying degrees and densities of power and domination enumerated above, I see *Lagaan* embodying a 'strategic alliance' where different individuals in the cricket team have different interests and desires, but the path to the fruition of those different hopes and aspirations is coterminant on the formation of an alliance of the moment. Realising that an alliance is necessary to resist the current oppression of the white "other," the villagers come together as a community. For the peasants of Champaner it is a struggle to retain their land, their means of existence, whereas for the Sikh ex-army man playing against (= fighting) the British is a way to recover his lost dignity and honour. Mannathukkaren fails to see that the local ruler in *Lagaan* may himself be his compatriots' oppressor, but in the scheme of the film he is himself oppressed by the colonial state, and therefore supports the peasants. His assumption is that subaltern groups pursued their political projects quite independently of anyone else at all times. The specificity of the Champaner case is forgotten as he presupposes a static idea of the subaltern collectivity, and fails to account for the dynamic and improvisational modes of peasant political agency. Not to recognise the unity as contingent, provisional and contextual is to merge consensus with homogeneity and project stasis. It would be ingenious to regard anti-colonial alliances such as these as permanent or immutable,<sup>17</sup> as the social structures do not change in the course of the film's progress, and *Lagaan* constantly makes us aware of the economic and social disparities that exist, although temporarily subsumed by the agenda to defeat the British in the cricket match.

It is important to note that the English officer of the East India Company, who has the power and the privilege to do so, throws a challenge to the peasants to defeat the cricket team comprised of British officials and get their taxes waived for two years. The villagers do not take an initiative to drive the British away from the land to save their 'nation,' although everyday resistance to forms of domination such as speaking out against the oppressor through insults, slurs, gossip and physical gestures are depicted. Significantly though, the peasants go beyond being voyeurs of cricket matches (like their king) and passive victims of colonial policy by seizing the opportunity made available to them due to the egoism and arrogance of the imperial ruler and using it for their betterment. Thus, it is solidarity for a specific cause that makes the villagers of Champaner to become active historical agents and exert some control over the conditions of their present and future. Their response to the white administrator's challenge contextualised within their popular religious culture and social

problems gives birth to a vision not of equity, but self-sustenance and survival, and this is directly political in intent. They voice their animosity and anger against the imposition of double taxes based on their understanding of their condition (unethical and unjust imposition of high taxes, shortage of water for farming with no rain in the horizon and their suppression and discriminatory treatment by the British officials) drawing upon their own profoundly moral, religious and political worldview. *Lagaan*'s demonstration of the participation of the subaltern groups in the fate of their province, in the fate of their future foregrounds for the audience that "colonised subjects are not passively produced by hegemonic projects but are active agents whose choices and discourses are of fundamental importance in the formation of their societies".<sup>18</sup> Further, in its representation of an 'autonomous domain' of politics, 'the politics of the people,'<sup>19</sup> which neither originated nor depended for its existence on elite politics, *Lagaan* recuperates the subaltern as a conscious agent of history, similar to the attempts of the subaltern studies contributors.

Mannathukkaren critiques *Lagaan* for failing to "extend the scope of their (peasants') attack from the European oppressors to the native collaborators of the raj".<sup>20</sup> But, dismantling structures of indigenous oppression is beyond the scope of *Lagaan*<sup>21</sup> because the limit of the peasants' identity is fixed by the very conditions of the subordination under which they live and work. The film points to the limits of the subaltern's agency. According to Guha "the initiatives which originated from the domain of subaltern politics were not, on their part, powerful enough to develop the nationalist movement into a full-fledged struggle for national liberation".<sup>22</sup> He concluded from his study of a number of peasant movements in colonial India that the insurgent consciousness was 'negative consciousness', in the sense that its identity was expressed solely through an opposition, namely, its difference from and antagonism to its dominators. In *Lagaan* hatred of the colonial oppressors, which was a direct result of the oppressive policies of the East India Company, provides the impetus for mobilisation as a community cutting across class, caste, economic, religion and other divides that infest the feudal village scene. However, these fragile bonds of unity across divisive lines have to be re-negotiated once the Europeans go – as in the end of the film – since this provisional, strategic alliance is left without a *raison d'être*.

The film portrays an anti-colonial subaltern struggle not a nationalist struggle for freedom from foreign rule.<sup>23</sup> There is no rebellion of the oppressed and no overt reference to the nation or motherland (the common rhetoric of Hindi films). The emphasis is on land, freedom from oppression and hopes for prosperity. The cricket 'nationalism' depicted in the film does not connote a notion of an "imagined community," as upheld by nationalist politicians in India. Sudipta Kaviraj argues, "All nationalist discourses after the coming of Gandhi tries to answer the implicit question: how can Indians best defeat and remove British rule? ... On closer inspection it appears that, in earlier horizons of anti-colonial discourse, this question is entirely absent."<sup>24</sup> According to him there is no "necessary connection between being patriotic and being Indian".<sup>25</sup> Equating the political and the nationalist is an agenda of a nationalist ideological account which "disallows any opposition to colonialism other than itself, any dissent organised on other lines the title to oppositional glory".<sup>26</sup> The organised cricket portrayed in the film is one particular peasant community's response to colonial rule. Cricket nationalism is depicted as different from nationalist

politics and the two are kept separate. It would be therefore anachronistic to read the specificity (local and contextual) of the past depicted in *Lagaan* in terms of the present, where cricket has become “an instrument for mobilising national sentiment.”<sup>27</sup>

#### IV Improvisations and Adaptations

*Lagaan* is a significant contribution to popular culture for its ability to convincingly portray how cultural improvisations of subaltern groups can co-opt and critique master forms and tropes of the west. In the film, the indigenous, non-official village game of ‘gilli-danda’ is placed in the same trajectory of the ‘official’ colonial game, of supposedly Victorian origins, when Bhuvan makes the game of cricket familiar to the Champaner masses by comparing it to ‘gilli-danda’. This desecrates the ‘purity’ of cricket’s roots since the sacrosanct space of imperial performance, the cricket pitch, and the cricket paraphernalia (ball, bat, wicket, gloves, etc.) that are kept rigidly ‘pure,’ free from native contamination are now alleged to have links to indigenous sports.<sup>28</sup> The English subject’s originality or cricket’s ‘purity’ as an Englishman’s game is destabilised through the assertion that the peasants of Champaner, i.e., the natives, have been playing the game for centuries in the villages of ‘barbaric’ India. It gestures to the possibility that the English subject, the assumed original is perhaps merely a sophisticated copy. The implication of cricket being born outside the logic of Englishness or Victorianism shows the appropriation of cricket at the margins of Englishness, i.e., outside the legitimated culture and British nationality. By wresting cricket away from Englishness and de-Victorianising the national sport of the modern UK, the monolithic structures of Englishness is destabilised and a non-English/native identity is weaved in “modernist instruments which had hitherto made the colonised subject into an object”.<sup>29</sup>

Vernacularisation of the game and making the game of the ‘master’ seem to be a variation of a rural children’s game not only denies the game its glamour, but also reduces cricket to an immature behaviour of the British citizen. A reversal of the terms and tropes of colonialist discourse is evident here as the ‘child-like,’ ‘ignorant’ native now names the ‘civilised’ as child. The villagers’ performance on the cricket field eclipses their subordinate position off the field. Their fortitude and goodness of character compensates for their lack of social grace, wealth and education. It asserts their agency and points to the strength of the peasant community. For the peasants of Champaner, appropriating cricket competence becomes a tool for recuperating their subjectivity and articulating their agency in the process of decolonisation.

Boria Majumdar in his article argues that through European sports the Indian natives’ “self-worth and strength of character could be articulated without the tension and fury that would accompany such articulation in the ‘political’ sphere”.<sup>30</sup> This distinction between the sphere of leisure (sports) and the political sphere is questionable, since *Lagaan* explicitly links subaltern politics to sports culture. The film’s narrator comments that a defeat in the cricket pitch is such a blow to English honour and pride that the English contingent decides to pack up and leave Champaner. Manthia Diawara in the context of the Caribbean writes: “The very introduction of cricket to new places is a way of asserting British cultural presence, a way of linking sports to politics”.<sup>31</sup> Another critic notes that cricket was “an unofficial

instrument of state cultural policy,” which attempted to teach the ‘barbaric’/‘uncivilised’ natives “sportsmanship, a sense of fair play, thorough control over the expression of strong sentiments by players on the field, subordination of personal sentiments and interests to those of the side, unquestioned loyalty to the team”.<sup>32</sup> All these valorised ethical codes of masculine and essentially sportsmanship behaviour, “the gospel of cricket,”<sup>33</sup> are questioned in *Lagaan*.

The cricket match between the British officials and the peasants is not begun as ‘fair play’. There can be no level playing ground in a game initiated by an egoist to feed his desire for power and domination over a poor, uncoached group of villagers who have their life at stake. Self-effacement is not possible in a game, which is so inextricably tied to English honour, colonial pride, superiority, and at the end, economics. Captain Russell and his men constantly make fun of the villagers’ clothes, physical characteristics and their poverty. They provoke the Indian team players to anger reminding them of their abject poverty and when deemed fit deliberately injure them, to punish them for their loyalty to their team or their ability to play well. Thus the film itself points to the fallacy of Majumdar’s description of cricket as being a “non-violent arena of assertion”<sup>34</sup> during colonial times.

While Majumdar tries to find in the historical archive of Indian sports ‘evidence’ of cricket’s roots in colonial India, Appadurai writes that cricket’s “history in England goes back into the precolonial period, and there is little doubt that the sport is English in origin”.<sup>35</sup> Thus, whether cricket was a game that the British (accidentally) discovered in Indian soil or a game that was taught to the Indians by the British is a historically contested terrain. *Lagaan* does not try to answer whether cricket originated in India or England, but raises the twofold issue of postcolonial nations trying to resist western hegemonising gaze (and occasionally reverting it) and subordinate classes appropriating elite discourses to voice their suppressed/erased histories. The inconsequentiality and marginality of the subalterns are interrogated, exclusionary practices are resisted and elite (British/Indian) privilege and dominance over the domain of aesthetics and culture is successfully undermined through *Lagaan*’s destabilisation of originary discourses.

*Lagaan* also consciously attempts to reverse the colonial gaze of Euro-imperialism by racialising the white characters – an issue not discussed in earlier published articles on *Lagaan*. References to the British officials using the colour of their skin abound. Filtered through the lens of race, the love triangle in the film between Bhuvan, Gauri and Elizabeth is replaced with the tensions of racial difference. I will try to highlight in the next few pages the film’s depiction of the unique position of the white female in the colonies. An analysis of the ambiguity of the white female character in *Lagaan* allows us to see how the ‘other’ gender ruptures colonial masculinity and disrupts the simple binary of the British versus the ‘Indians’ that Mannathukkaren identifies in *Lagaan*. It is indeed ironical that Mannathukkaren does not see the possibility of restoring presence without essentialism. The Manichean categories of ‘coloniser’ and ‘colonised’ that he reads in *Lagaan*, dichotomise the tense and complex relationships involving subjects that are situated very differently in terms of power within those categories. His profound silence about the white female character in the film helps one to locate another kind of silencing and the politics of ‘speaking’ that Mannathukkaren participates in while expressly attempting to foreground “The Silences of ‘Lagaan’ ” (subtitle of his article).

In *Lagaan*, Elizabeth, Captain Russell's sister, occupies a social category that is inescapably racialised as well as gendered. She is not only a white woman, she is thought of as a white woman, both by the whites and the non-whites. Elizabeth's presence in the colony (Champaner) makes her complicit to the imperial enterprise, although she is 'ambiguously placed' in the colonising process.<sup>36</sup> Anne McClintock notes that colonial women "experienced the process of colonialism very differently from colonial men" and that Victorian women appear to have held a different relationship to imperialism from men, mainly by virtue of their positioning in the domestic ideology of gender.<sup>37</sup> Elizabeth, like Gauri and other native women in the colonies, is not considered an equal partner in sports. She is not a member of the cricket team, only an engaged onlooker. However her appropriation of the role of the cricket coach and teaching the peasants the intricacies of the game disrupts the masculine preserve of the game. It allows us to locate the 'other' gender's challenge to rigid systems that maintain agency and 'culture' as western male preserve.

The situation of the transgressive European woman in *Lagaan* threatened with enclosure and expulsion from the colony, by her male sibling, is an acknowledgement of women's 'private' struggles and a pointer to the oppression of women across racial boundaries. It establishes that the imperial project followed a strict gender ideology of domesticity, and that transgressions against it culminated in punitive actions. Elizabeth's portrayal in *Lagaan* as a benevolent benefactor of the natives and her participation in native festivities also questions the sealed, homogeneous structure and content of western cultural discourse, while her love for Bhuvan interrogates the notions of racial purity enunciated in colonialist fiction. Her participation in Hindu festivals, and passion for a native is a threat to the projected cultural organicity of Victorian England. However, Elizabeth's positioning in the film also problematically projects the white woman as the rescuer of the 'other' race. Placed beside her cold, rapacious brother, the film veers towards an idealisation of Elizabeth, as woman. The film reiterates the essentialist notions of womanhood by connecting womanness with vulnerability, sensitivity, and passion, all suggested by Elizabeth's gender (not her race).

## Conclusion

Although Bollywood films can be and continue to be read as national allegories, to read *Lagaan* as a mythology of nationalism: Champaner/India was oppressed and gradually through communitarian alliance and leadership rose to consciousness and freedom is to regard all forms of oppositional movements, including Indian nationalism(s), as a linear, evolutionary project. Rather than a grand anti-colonial narrative to replace the meta-narratives of the west, or a linear trajectory of nationalism as closure, or Manichean constructions (Indians/British, Indianness/Englishness, barbaric/civilised, mimics/originals), I am suggesting a reading of the ambivalent subject positions of the bourgeois, the white woman and the villagers in *Lagaan*, which I think, can enable postcolonised subjects to decipher fractures and lines of fault that can free them from the capture of discourses of racial purity, of origin myths and other tropes and terms of Euro-Imperialism and nationalism. *Lagaan* deserves credit for being able to write into the prescribed history of modernity, the multi-acculturality of the lived experience of India – ambiguity, ambivalence and contradictions – and further for opening up spaces for alternative voices.

The film's narrative contains seeds of alternative readings, contested cultural assumptions, and thereby subversive political possibilities. It is important to note that one of the earliest published statements about the subaltern studies project in the US praised it not for its historiographical contributions or political commitments, but as "Indians ... perhaps for the first time since colonisation, showing sustained signs of reappropriating the capacity to represent themselves."<sup>38</sup> According to Spivak, "[t]he general political importance of Subaltern Studies is in the production of knowledge, to quote a Marxian phrase, in 'educating the educators'."<sup>39</sup> Bollywood films, like *Lagaan*, can go beyond the parameters of the 'educators' to include and engage the masses, 'the people', to actively and critically engage with mass culture in order to re-think forms of received knowledge, discourses and, of course, history.

The socio-historical interrogation of cricket in *Lagaan* with its appeal to 'the people' itself becomes an act of critical intervention and will go a long way to hijack cricket from its colonial origins. It is an important contribution for it demonstrates how popular cinema can un/consciously enable the subaltern subjects of postcolonial India to participate in debates on colonialism and modernity, which has been raging in academia and elite circles in India (and beyond). It reveals that for postcolonial nations the struggle for history is about much more than establishing "what actually happened". It involves destabilising official discourses to illustrate the interpellation of the subaltern into the colonial/elite episteme as primarily responsible for their continued subjection and objectification, and for enabling those who have so far been excluded or silenced, to recognise themselves not as passive victims but as agents who had an instrumental role in the past. [44]

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## Notes

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- 1 Cricket was an 'elite' sport in colonial times, patronised by the royal families of India and the local bourgeoisie who had the money and resources to promote the game. Even today, playing cricket is an expensive affair so that the subaltern classes are usually spectators rather than participants in cricket matches.
- 2 Boria Majumdar, 'Politics of Leisure in Colonial India, 'Lagaan' – Invocation of a Lost History', *Economic and Political Weekly*, September 1, 2001, pp 3399-04; Nissim Mannathukkaren, 'Subalterns, Cricket and the 'Nation': The Silences of 'Lagaan'', *Economic and Political Weekly*, December 8, 2001, pp 4580-88.
- 3 See Abdul R JanMohamed 'The Economy of Manichean Allegory: The Function of Racial Difference in Colonialist Literature', *Critical Inquiry*, 12 (1), 1985, pp 59-87; Edward Said, *Orientalism*, Vintage Books, New York, 1978; and Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, Routledge, London and New York, 1992.
- 4 Ranajit Guha, 'On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India' in *Subaltern Studies I Writings on South Asian History and Society*, Ranajit Guha, (ed), Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1982, p 2.
- 5 Partha Chatterjee, 'The Nation and its Peasants' in *Mapping Subaltern Studies and the Postcolonial*, Vinayak Chaturvedi (ed), Verso, London and New York, 2000, p 21.
- 6 Rosalind O'Hanlon, 'Recovering the Subject: *Subaltern Studies* and Histories of Resistance in Colonial South Asia', *Modern Asian Studies*, 22 (1), 1988, p 213.
- 7 Mannathukkaren, p 4581.
- 8 Chatterjee, p 9 writes: 'both colonial and nationalist politics thought of the peasantry as an object of their strategies, to be acted upon, controlled and appropriated within their respective structures of state power'.
- 9 Guha, p 3, emphasis in original.

- 10 Mannathukkaren, p 4581.
- 11 Tanika Sarkar, 'Jitu Santal's Movement in Malda, 1924-1932: A Study in Tribal Protest', *Subaltern Studies IV*, Ranajit Guha (ed), Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1984, p 153.
- 12 Guha, p 4.
- 13 Chatterjee, pp 8-23.
- 14 Lakha, a Muslim youth of the village, forms a pact with Captain Russell to aid the English team by making his team lose the cricket match. Driven by his love for the heroine, Gauri who loves Bhuvan (the hero) he sees it as a possible way to demolish Bhuvan's stature.
- 15 Majumdar, p 3399.
- 16 Mannathukkaren, p 4582.
- 17 See Gyanendra Pandey, 'Encounters and Calamities: The History of North Indian *Qasba* in the Nineteenth Century', *Subaltern Studies III*, Ranajit Guha (ed), Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1984, pp 231-270; David Hardiman, 'The Bhils and Shahukars in Eastern Gujarat', *Subaltern Studies V*, Ranajit Guha (ed), Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987, pp 1-54 and Tanika Sarkar 'Jitu Santal's Movement', pp 136-164 for a discussion of the problem of shifting boundaries of solidarity in terms of the changing context of struggle.
- 18 Carol A Breckenridge and Peter van der Veer (eds), *Orientalism and the Postcolonial Predicament: Perspectives on South Asia*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 1993, p 4.
- 19 Ibid, p 4, emphasis in original.
- 20 Mannathukkaren, p 4582.
- 21 This should not be read to imply that I am arguing for fighting the British as more important or prior to fighting elite oppression. My point is that the film focuses on a specific instance of anti-colonial mobilisation. Also, with *Lagaan's* success in the box office it will not be surprising to find ourselves viewing a sequel to the film with Bhuvan leading the villagers in a rebellion against the local ruler.
- 22 Guha, p 6.
- 23 My use of the term 'anti-colonialism' is different from Sudipta Kaviraj's usage in 'The imaginary institution of India' in *Subaltern Studies VII*, David Arnold and David Hardiman (eds), Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1994, p 12. I do not see the anti-colonial struggle as a "merely oppositional attitude towards colonialism," but also as a rejection of the west's "civilising pretensions."
- 24 Ibid, p 6.
- 25 Ibid, p 8.
- 26 Ibid, p 10.
- 27 Arjun Appadurai, 'Playing with Modernity: The Decolonisation of Indian Cricket' in *Consuming Modernity: Public Culture in a South Asian World*, Carol A Breckenridge (ed), University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1995, p 42. Kaviraj writes that "[a]n anachronistic view would imply that when we are looking for a history, i.e., the origins, the earlier stages of Indian nationalism, we must encounter it in some suitably smaller, paler, or otherwise immature form, a smaller-scale version of the later full-blown nationalism ... This view finds it much more difficult to acknowledge a patriotism for something else as an ancestor for Indian nationalism because today these two patriotisms would be politically opposed," p 8. In the subcontinent and beyond, India-Pakistan matches have become a release valve to express hostility, animosity, envy and pride against the neighbours. The national passion for cricket, which is utilised by radicals on both side of the border, encourages the citizens to patriotic fervour and frenzy. Thus violence has become an expected phenomenon in cricket stadiums during India-Pakistan tournaments.
- 28 The villagers (natives) have to sit outside the field, outside the public space of imperial sports. They are hit twice for touching the cricket ball.
- 29 Manthia Diawara, 'Englishness and Blackness: Cricket as Discourse on Colonialism', *Callaloo*, 13 (4), 1990, p 841.
- 30 Majumdar, p 3403.
- 31 Diawara, p 838.
- 32 Appadurai, pp 25, 27, 27, 26-27.
- 33 Keith A P Sandiford, *Cricket and the Victorians*, Scolar, England, 1994, p 158.
- 34 Majumdar, p 3400.
- 35 Appadurai, p 25; Majumdar, p 3399, pp 3399-3404.
- 36 Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Context*, Routledge, New York, 1995, p 6.
- 37 Ibid, p 6.
- 38 Ronald Inden, 'Orientalist Constructions of India,' *Modern Asian Studies*, 20 (3), 1986, p 445.
- 39 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'The New Subaltern: A Silent Interview' in *Mapping Subaltern Studies and the Postcolonial*, Vinayak Chaturvedi (ed), Verso, London and New York, 2000, p 325.

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