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The poetics and politics of 'progress' in neoliberal India: The state and its margins in *Shanghai* (2012)

ABSTRACT

The contemporary Indian state is exemplified by contradictions. Its workings are marked by a simultaneous retreat and deepening of state power under neoliberalism as well as burgeoning governmentalities that both produce and police political dissent. Such framings of the state problematize received political wisdom on the relations between centre and margin, state and government, citizen and subject. Anthropological approaches to the state map out its complex organizational logics, which are further embedded in the exercise of power and violence. Drawing on such approaches, this article examines the 2012 Indian film Shanghai, directed by Dibakar Banerjee. Based on Greek author Vassilis Vassilikos' 1966 novel Z, Shanghai represents the contemporary neoliberal Indian state's workings in the fictitious periurban town of Bharatnagar, slated to become a world-class Special Economic Zone. However, when a left-wing activist opposing land acquisition is fatally injured in an 'accident', a state bureaucrat's investigation unravels how the onward march of pragati ('progress') is undergirded by violence. Taking Shanghai as an example of 'realist fiction', I examine both representations and realities of the neoliberal Indian state using a thick and nuanced reading of the film's narrative,

KEYWORDS

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India
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the state and its
margins
political anthropology
progress
Shanghai

1. This idea was famously expressed by the former chief minister of Maharashtra, Vilasrao Deshmukh, in 2004.

cinematic details, context and characters, situating them in anthropological discussions on the state and its margins in contemporary India.

INTRODUCTION

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his right-wing Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janta Party (BJP) won the 2019 national re-election on the plank of national security and war-mongering with neighbouring Pakistan. Modi and BJP's 2019 campaign were marked by the conspicuous absence of *vikaas* ('development'), which saturated their 2014 election campaign and eventually defeated the Indian National Congress' hegemony (Asrar 2019). Indeed, the entire thrust of the BJP's 2014 campaign dominated Indian political discourse over the meaning of development – which defined Modi's tenure as the three-time chief minister of Gujarat and was achieved by high capital growth, low social spending and marginalization of, and violence against, Dalits, Adivasis and Muslims, including the anti-Muslim pogrom in 2002 (Berenschot 2013; Mitta 2014; Shah 2013).

The virtual abandonment of *vikaas* in 2019 led many to argue that the motif of development was indeed a façade; after all, some of Modi's key economic policies clearly had a disastrous impact on India's GDP (Venkataramakrishnan 2019). Yet, for the vast majority of citizen-subjects in India, the regime change from neoliberal *but* secular welfarist Congress to the neoliberal *and* Hindutva authoritarian BJP hardly signalled corresponding change in the exercise of state power in everyday life (cf. Gupta 2012), particularly for spaces and populations at the 'margins of the state' (Das and Poole 2004). Despite its relative absence in most recent election cycle, the chimera of development – as discourse and mode of power – represents the continued deepening of neoliberal governance and state power (Ferguson 1996).

In this article, I situate these discussions on the Indian state, power, politics, progress and development in Dibakar Banerjee's 2012 film *Shanghai*, which chronicles the state's developmental vision of making its cities 'into Shanghai',¹ and how, despite the promise of economic liberalization, such development entails an exercise of violence. In *Shanghai*, Banerjee narrativizes discourses and realities spanning the last two decades of Indian politics, particularly the thrust of economic liberalization and the rise of populist communal politics, signified by the demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992 (Banerjee 2016). Yet, *Shanghai* critically interrogates historiographical and anthropological scholarship that, in the early 1990s, was seen primarily through the prism of globalization and the failure of the nation-state, on the one hand (Appadurai 1996: 176), and the rise of Hindutva populism, on the other (Sarkar 1993). I argue that the film's focus on modalities of state power not only *critically represents* the realities illustrated by ethnographic scholarship on the state but also advances critical *discussions* on the workings of the modern Indian neoliberal state. Thus, *Shanghai* is situated at the confluence of historical fact and fictionalized representation, signified by the Janus-faced nature of its title. As it looks towards the past, *Shanghai* is retrospective, drawing on and reflecting the neoliberal policies that were unleashed in the 1990s. But, in its imagination of the future-yet-to-come, *Shanghai* is prescient, as it almost anticipates the referendum on *vikaas* that propelled Modi and BJP to victory.

Shanghai is set in the fictitious town of Bharatnagar, an area earmarked to be transformed into 'India Business Park' (IBP), a world-class Special Economic Zone (SEZ). However, the realities depicted in the film are far more complex. The image of 'Shanghai' that the state aspires to implement is, in the streets of Bharatnagar, both contested and celebrated. Its contestation is in the form of Dr Ali Ahemadi (Prosenjit Chatterjee), a New York-returned professor and left-wing activist leading the opposition against IBP. Ahemadi is accompanied by his former student, Shalini Sahai (Kalki Koechilin), the daughter of a disgraced army general accused in a 'Rs. 40 crore scam'. Others in their group include Professor (Pramod Pathak), Ranjan (Naveen Kasturia), Tiger (Suresh Diwedi), a local trade unionist and other activists and local villagers. At the same time, the idea of IBP is also celebrated and made an 'election issue' by the party workers and supporters of the Jan Mukti Morcha Party (People's Liberation Party), which is the alliance partner in the ruling coalition government with a national political party, Rashtriya Pragati Dal (National Progress Party).

However, with the apparent 'accident' of Dr Ahemadi – who is mowed down by a mini-truck after delivering a scathing speech against IBP and is fatally wounded – Bharatnagar becomes the site of contentious politics that may threaten the future of IBP and the fragile political alliance ruling the state. Since it is an election year, a 'high-level inquiry committee' is set up by the chief minister's office (CMO) as a response to the incident, headed by the vice-chairman of IBP, a senior Indian Administrative Service (IAS) officer T. A. Krishnan (Abhay Deol). His mandate, according to the CM's principal secretary, Mr Kaul (Farooq Sheikh), is to find the truth of the accident – which is ostensibly written off as a 'drunken driving episode' at the very beginning. As Krishnan begins his investigations into Ahemadi's death, the murkiness of Bharatnagar's local politics, the complicity of local police and the involvement of Morcha political actors become evident, indicating that Ahemadi's death was premeditated murder and involved the powers-that-be.

The motif of *pragati* ('progress') in *Shanghai* exemplifies the aforementioned exercise of state power. This article contextualizes the lifeworld of Bharatnagar in the anthropological discussions on the postcolonial neoliberal Indian state (Das and Poole 2004; Gupta 1995, 2012; also Ferguson 1996; Ferguson and Gupta 2002; Trouillot 2001). In doing so, I adopt certain perspectives and themes – margins, state practices, development, progress and violence – that specifically cast the state and its 'workings' as objects of anthropological analysis. As a 'text' or a representation, *Shanghai* derives its explanatory power because its cinematic elements – plot, cinematography, production design, character arcs and metanarrative – are intertwined with the realities it represents. Thus, my reading and interpretation of the film oscillate between its plot structure and cinematic details, and anthropological theories on the state, undergirded by its realism and fiction.

INTERROGATING REALISM: ANTHROPOLOGICAL LENSES, POLITICAL CINEMA

What does it mean to apply anthropological lenses – which are based on ethnographic participant observation with 'real' people in the 'real' world – to works of fiction? Fassin (2014) approaches this question by complicating the notion of 'the real' and 'the true' in his analysis of ethnography and fiction. He differentiates the two by arguing that

the real [...] [is that] which exists or has happened and the true being that which has to be regained from deception or convention. Reality is horizontal, existing on the surface of fact. Truth is vertical, discovered in the depths of inquiry.

(Fassin 2014: 41)

While both anthropology and fiction are endeavours to understand, represent and explain the world, Fassin takes the example of 'realist' fiction of the television show *The Wire* (2002–08) to show how critical works of fiction are able to demonstrate social processes more convincingly. He argues that such fiction is 'presented as faithful to the reality of contemporary society and as delivering profound truths about it' and 'the state of the world', such that we can 'learn about social issues through a fiction that seems more real and more true than the work of a sociologist' (2014: 50–52).

Following Fassin, I take *Shanghai* to be an example 'realist fiction' that both *represents* and *reveals* truths about the reality it represents – the workings of the neoliberal Indian state. Much like *The Wire*, this is achieved in terms of the film's aesthetic, attention to detail and casting – which include non-mainstream actors, non-actors and mainstream actors like Imraan Hashmi playing constrained roles. *Shanghai* follows the genre of India political cinema that aspired to realism and is situated in the well-established corpus of new-wave independent cinema from the 1970s that represented the experiences of caste, class and gendered violence faced by the subaltern (Bhaskar 2013), as well as contemporary films that deal with issues of state violence. These, for instance, include Anurag Kashyap's double-feature *Gangs of Wasseypur* (2012), Tigmanshu Dhulia's biopic of the athlete-turned-dacoit *Paan Singh Tomar* (2010) and Vishal Bhardwaj's *Haider* (2014). Like *Shanghai*, these films partially chronicle the historical development of the postcolonial Indian state and its use of violence.

Although some have argued that *Shanghai* bears a key resemblance with films that critique corruption and violence (Pauksnis 2014), both the film and my reading of it reject such simplistic conclusions. Instead, *Shanghai* posits critical accounts of state processes and structures that exist beyond the motivations of its individual protagonists and are yet driven by their actions and negotiations of the very same structures. Following Fassin, I too argue that, as a cultural artefact and genre exercise in representing social realities, *Shanghai* allows for an in-depth examination of the sociological and historical processes and effects of the neoliberal Indian state. These effects are examined in the realm of representation – both political realities that are represented *in* and *as* fiction, and how fiction itself *represents* these political realities as constellations and practices of power. In this regard, my interpretation of the film differs substantively from the critical receptions of the film, which either lose important nuances or subsume them into simplistic narratives.

For instance, film critic Anupama Chopra's (2020) recent retrospective review of Banerjee's filmography describes *Shanghai* as being about corruption in an 'unnamed Indian town', despite visual signifiers of 'Bharatnagar' being ever present in the text of the film. Whereas, others like Suparna Sharma (2012), writing at the time of the film's release, understand the film as emanating from righteous anger or anguish over the state of affairs in the country. Yet, unlike political genre films featuring righteous critiques of the system, I argue that *Shanghai* succeeds as *realist fiction* because it upends precisely these

tropes and signifiers and, instead, aligns with anthropological discussions of the neoliberal Indian state.

THEORIZING THE NEOLIBERAL INDIAN STATE AND ITS MARGINS IN SHANGHAI

The concept of the 'margin' has been a significant element in the anthropological study of the state, and understanding the state, too, is significant in understanding its margins (Das and Poole 2004; Ferguson 1996; Gupta 1995; Trouillot 2001; Tsing 1994). In *Shanghai's* geographical imagination of the nation, however, Bharatnagar is neither distant nor peripheral; it is located somewhere in the north-central region of the country, 'two hours away' from the capital New Delhi. Indeed, Bharatnagar – a combination of *Bharat* (India's traditional name) and *nagar* ('city') – represents the site where state formation in the post-economic reform era is visualized in terms of land acquisition for building SEZs.

The post-reform era refers to the economic policies adopted after 1991, where the economy – which was since Independence a mixed economy with strong state investment and thus was perceived as corrupt and inefficient in the public imagination (Gupta 1995) – was 'opened up' for foreign investment. This was characterized as 'liberalization-privatization-globalization', the so-called LPG model. In this sense, post-reform India is neoliberal insofar as neoliberalism is broadly understood as the deregulation of state economies and services as part of transnational capitalist restructuring that includes privatization of state assets, reduced trade tariffs that flood markets with imported goods, currency devaluation and implementation of harsh austerity measures (Harvey 2005).

Yet, despite its proliferating usage, scholarship on neoliberalism is still contested. While some argue that it is a 'controversial, incoherent and crisis-ridden term' (Venugopal 2015: 166), others – particularly anthropologists – have critically analysed it to discern how it entails local and contextual meanings and practices, as well as global, transnational and meta-discursive power structures (Kingfisher and Maskovsky 2008). For instance, while there is general consensus among critics and proponents of the term regarding its transformation from the 1980s to 1990s (Venugopal 2015: 168) – from 'late capitalism' to 'neoliberalism' (Ortner 2011) – anthropologists, instead, underscore its 'thwarted totalization' and 'contingency, ambiguity and instability' (Kingfisher and Maskovsky 2008: 118–19).

In the Indian context, anthropological theorizing on neoliberalism has mapped out these hybrid 'governing practices' (Kingfisher and Maskovsky 2008: 121) that explicate the relationship between private capital and state power, particularly over the Weberian monopoly on violence (Das and Poole 2004; Gupta 2012). Such theorizations follow Harvey's (2005) conceptualization of the neoliberal state as 'an unstable and contradictory political form' (2005: 64), which further 'creates the paradox of intense state interventions' (2005: 69). More recently, such neoliberal excesses are articulated in state policies to transform urban spaces into 'smart cities' to be governed by technobureaucracies of private capital and state surveillance (Banerjee-Guha 2020).

In this sense, *Shanghai* visualizes the 'workings' of the state at the local level and how this is engendered through power and violence. In the opening scenes after the title card, the view cuts to a TV spot advertising IBP to potential investors, with a voiceover in English describing it as 'an SEZ in the

most progressive state in the country, led by a dynamic and visionary chief minister, in alliance with the beloved voice of the people'. This narrative is visually corresponded by computer-generated imagery that literally erases shantytowns and replaces them with open green fields, grid-like roads, and glass and concrete high-rises.

Thus, even though *Shanghai* may be described as a 'critique of politics of development in rural India' (Paunksnis 2014: 119), it actually serves to contextualize what such 'development' entails. Understanding *Shanghai* and the margins it represents can, as Das and Poole (2004: 4) suggest, 'offer a unique perspective to the understanding of the state, not because it captures exotic practices, but because [...] such margins are a necessary entailment of the state'. This leads us to see the state as it exists on the local level and then analysing those local manifestations of bureaucracy and law as culturally informed interpretations or appropriations of the practices and forms that constitute the modern liberal state (2004: 5–6).

Thus, we see that the state is not an entity that 'has' or does not 'have' power; nor is state power 'a substance possessed by those individuals and groups who benefit from it' (Ferguson 1996: 272). Instead,

it may be more fruitful to think of the state as forming a relay or point of coordination and multiplication of power relations [...] a way of tying together, multiplying, and coordinating power relations, a *kind of knotting or congealing of power*.

(1996: 273, emphasis added)

The state, then, is not an inherently stable concept or power structure but one that 'appears as an open field with multiple boundaries and no institutional fixity – which is to say that it needs to be conceptualized at more than one level'. Though the state is 'linked to a number of apparatuses, not all of which may be governmental', it is 'not an apparatus but a set of processes. It is not necessarily bound by any institution, nor can any institution fully encapsulate it' (Trouillot 2001: 127). Given this view of the state, Das and Poole (2004: 30) argue that margins, too, are not 'inert spaces and populations that simply have to be managed but rather as bristling with life that is certainly managed and controlled but that also flows outside this control'. Accordingly, margins are neither 'geographical, descriptive locations', nor are they 'sites of deviance from social norms'; instead, the 'margin' signifies

an analytic placement that makes evident both the constraining, oppressive quality of cultural exclusion and the creative potential of re-articulating, enlivening and rearranging the very social categories that peripheralize a group's existence. Margins, in this use, are sites from which we see the instability of social categories.

(Tsing 1994: 279)

As the margin, Bharatnagar is where the state's presence or 'workings' is articulated. However, the processes through which such articulations take place also need to be analysed. One significant anthropological contribution to this is the notion of the 'everyday' and of bureaucratic 'state practices' – which involves 'the analysis of the everyday practices of local bureaucracies and the discursive construction of the state in public culture' (Gupta 1995: 375). Indeed, the process of development – accumulation, acquisition, dispossession – is not an exceptional moment of the state's functioning but is embedded in

its everyday workings in time and space. It is these encounters that give 'a concrete shape and structure to what would otherwise be an abstraction' and 'provide one of the critical components through which the state comes to be constructed' (Gupta 1995: 378).

The world of Bharatnagar is one in which the 'workings of the state' is conducted in a rather banal, quotidian manner – and not as a state of crisis, or exception, as it is in other events in Indian history. In other words, *Shanghai* conceptualizes margins 'beyond the sense of "exception" as an event confined to particular spaces [...] or a condition that stands opposed, somehow, to "normal" forms of state power' (Das and Poole 2004: 11). The spatial, social and political landscape it represents speaks of the local, colloquial and the everyday – of the violence that the banal workings of the state entail. Such an analysis enables us to look beyond the notions or standards of normative functions or values that a liberal, welfare state like India is supposed to adhere to.

Using a term like the 'workings' of the state, therefore, serves two important functions: first, it does not assume the predominance of the rational-legal or normative understandings of how a state should be (Gupta 1995; Ferguson and Gupta 2002; Ferguson 1996). Indeed, the film represents such 'workings' of the state through its institutions, bureaucrats and political actors, albeit in ways that are far from the normative understandings of the functions of the state – the use of violence, the banality of bureaucratic efficiency and patronage networks (Berenschot 2013; Gupta 1995). Second, there are inherent ambiguities that characterize the working of the state in postcolonial and post-liberalized India (Gupta 2012). While this is also true of other postcolonial Global South states, the Indian state is never seen as a 'failed state' or a state in crisis. Quite the opposite, the Indian state is seen as a strong state, and its ability to conduct regular elections at the national, state and local levels is often hailed to argue for the merits of liberal and multicultural democracy.

ANTI-PROGRESS, ANTI-POLITICS AND THE SPECTRAL FIGURE OF DR AHEMADI

While the overarching narrative in *Shanghai* follows the attack on Dr Ahemadi and Krishnan's inquiry into it, this process is contextualized in the politics of transformation that are already underway in Bharatnagar, visualized in the complex and nuanced lives of its characters. Nowhere is this more evident than in the unceasing celebratory spirit that seems to have gripped Bharatnagar on the cusp of being IBP. When we are introduced to Bhaggu (Pitobash Tripathy) and Jaggu (Anant Jogue) – Ahemadi's would-be assassins at this point – in the film's opening scene, the background is punctuated by the relentless and unceasing celebratory percussive beat of the *dhol* (ingeniously developed into the film's background score by composer Mikey McCleary). At other moments in the film, we see the town's *chowks* ('public squares') transformed into carnivalesque heterotopias; Morcha party flags and posters dot the skyline as virtual canopy, even as larger-than-life images of the chief minister and the Morcha leader, Deshnayak (Kiran Karmarkar), loom over the celebratory mobs of men and children dancing to the sound of drums, music and *pravachan* ('political discourse'). *Shanghai* makes it evident from the very beginning that Morcha and its supporters *want* Bharatnagar to be turned into a 'Shanghai'.

One the other side of this *pragati*, we see Morcha's leader, Deshnayak, who greets his political allies and crowds, both on-stage and via television spots, with the slogan '*Jai Pragati!*' ('Hail Progress!'). Even the idea of IBP itself is

2. Genron is a reference to the multinational, Enron, that had a contentious presence in India, where it was in charge of operating a power station in Maharashtra in the late 1990s and was involved in a corruption scandal and human rights abuses.

constructed as 'progress' incarnate, such that criticizing IBP was tantamount to 'abusing Morcha'. On the other side of *pragati*, we see the figure of Dr Ali Ahemadi, who arrives in Bharatnagar to give a speech against IBP. We first see Ahemadi as he disembarks from a private chartered aircraft and proceeds to speak to the news media that have gathered to interview Ahemadi's NRI actress co-passenger. Ahemadi speaks calmly, making it clear he is not against *pragati*, but criticizes a version of *pragati* that will resettle the residents of Bharatnagar '50 miles away from their home' and then hire the same people as security 'guards standing at IBP gates', indicating class- and caste-based discrimination and division of labour/ers in a distinctly neoliberal regime (Corbridge and Shah 2013).

Although Ahemadi is evidently modelled after the conventional figure of the left-wing academic-activist in India, his allure and authority derive significance from the transnational and global flows of social justice activism, as well as its vernacularization in the local lifeworld of Bharatnagar (cf. Merry 2006: 219), mainly through his alliance with local activists and mobilizers and the circulation of his image and ideas. In fact, some of the key visuals of Ahemadi in the beginning of the film, before we are introduced to him in person, include a picture of his pensive looking face on the dust jacket of his book *Kiski Pragati? Kiska Desh?* (*Whose Progress? Whose Country?*).

In the political landscape of Bharatnagar, Ahemadi's speech clearly has weight. His figure is one of countering the state – and Morcha's – agenda of *pragati* that is based on displacement and inequity. Ahemadi's threat to *pragati* triggers a coalescence of disparate entities (party workers, politicians, the police and bureaucrats) into a unifying articulation and exercise of state power, which tries to stop him from speaking at Bharatnagar at all costs: from canceling the permission for the hall at which he was supposed to speak, to eventually planning (and succeeding) at an extrajudicial attempt at his life. This coalescence and exercise of state power is chillingly evident in the moments leading up to the attack on Ahemadi. The Anti-IBP Committee manages to organize the speech at a local hall near Morcha headquarters (which is exactly where, as Ahemadi remarks earlier, 'we have to take a shit!').

Despite anti-Ahemadi protests led by Morcha workers, which break out into violence, Ahemadi successfully gives his speech to a packed hall filled with Bharatnagar residents, where he narrates an incident where a village approaches a company, Genron, to help them out of a famine, and where Genron (a multinational company that, the film implies, is the main investor of IBP) usurps their land.² When Ahemadi is informed about the attack on the committee members, he angrily strides onto the conspicuously emptied street and questions the police. In a split second, the truck speeds in and runs him over. All hell breaks loose in the ensuing chaos, and the scene sharply cuts to the NRI actress' performance at the IBP party.

While Ahemadi is the representational figure for the anti-development paradigm in *Shanghai*, he occupies a contradictory position as details about his past emerge. He certainly has had considerable success in getting the state to drop developmental projects in the past, including a dam project that was under Krishnan's administration. But, as his wife Aruna (Tilotama Shome) – who later arrives in Bharatnagar – reveals, he was unable to 'resettle even one family'. When Aruna is accused by Shalini of being jealous of Ahemadi, she mocks her – who, like Aruna, is also a former student of Ahemadi and has had a romantic affair with him – and says, 'people need a god, either to die for or to sacrifice'.

Ahemadi's figure, then, is one that is unable to articulate a clear political alternative to the 'progress' envisaged by IBP and Morcha, since this will have to be mediated by, and through, the structures of the state. This double-bind has its roots in the historical development of the postcolonial Indian state where development, modernity and progress were important logics through which the legitimacy of the state was deepened (Chatterjee [1986] 2006: 133). In the neoliberal state, however, development projects also have unintended consequences as they end up 'expanding the exercise of a particular sort of state power while simultaneously exerting a powerful depoliticizing effect' (Ferguson 1996: 20–21). Ferguson describes this 'depoliticizing effect' as the 'anti-politics machine', which is an essential feature of neoliberal governance, where transnational financial agencies and multinational corporations play an important role. Similarly, in the neoliberal political landscape of *Shanghai*, we do not see a retreat of the state, but processes of vertical encompassment (Ferguson and Gupta 2002: 982), albeit not only through bureaucratic practices but also in the practice of politics by state and non-state actors who are nevertheless associated with the state's 'workings' and its exercise of power, notably through the political party Morcha.

MORCHA AND THE POLITICS OF *POWERTONI* IN BHARATNAGAR

Although there are certain congruities between Ferguson's analysis of 'development' projects performing 'sensitive political operations' and *Shanghai*'s representation of *pragati*, the latter is markedly different in one critical aspect: instead of having a depoliticizing effect, the discourse of *pragati*, in fact, spews a very different form of politics altogether. This is seen in the spectre of the *morcha* – not only the political party Morcha but *morcha* in the literal sense of an 'organized march' or 'rally' on the streets of Bharatnagar, as a modality in which populist power is articulated most visibly and affectively. This *morcha*, however, is not merely a riotous mob, oblivious of the consequences of 'development'. They are, as we see, equally complex and have deeply invested their aspirations and dreams in Shanghaies of the future.

The characters of Bhaggu and Jaggu are crucial in this regard, the inconspicuous 'assassins' who run the truck over Ahemadi at the behest of Morcha leaders. The film opens with Bhaggu discussing his possible futures in Bharatnagar-turned-IBP with Jaggu, who is reluctant to carry out the attack. Not wanting to get stuck, Jaggu insists that 'there's no one behind them'. To this Bhaggu replies, 'I am before you! And behind us, there's *powertoni*!' and then proceeds to a Morcha protest that is vandalizing a bookstore selling copies of Ahemadi's book. The scene is punctured by relentless, percussive beating of drums that, for the rest of the film, signifies the auditory scape of Bharatnagar and Morcha's affective colonization of the city. Once Bharatnagar is metamorphosed into IBP, Bhaggu aspires to 'learn English' and work in a 'pizza restaurant' run by Damle (Megh Pant), a higher-up in Morcha and right-hand man to Deshnayak. This is not to say that he is apathetic to the issues of land acquisition or displacement; on the contrary, because he was handpicked by Damle to carry out the attack on Ahemadi, he sees himself as playing an important role in making Bharatnagar into 'Shanghai' – he sees himself as having *powertoni*.

'*Powertoni*' is a colloquial contraction of the phrase 'power of attorney', as used by journalist Suketu Mehta (2004). Mehta uses the term '*powertoni*' as it is used by his informants, the local party workers of Shiv Sena – the Hindu

nationalist party in Maharashtra and Mumbai. His informants use this term to describe the impunity they had while assaulting Muslims in the post-1992 riots, which were instigated by the Sena and its leader Balasaheb Thackeray – the ‘man with the greatest *powertoni* in Mumbai’. *Powertoni* refers to

the awesome ability to act on someone else’s behalf or to have others do your bidding, to sign documents, release wanted criminals, cure illnesses, get people killed. *Powertoni* – a power that does not originate in yourself; a power that you are holding on somebody else’s behalf.

(2004: 59)

Bhaggu’s invocation of *powertoni* is similar to the concept of ‘patronage networks’ that political anthropologists have described (Piliavsky 2014). Most notably, it resonates with the concept of ‘riot networks’ that Berenschot (2013) uses in his analysis of communal riots in Gujarat in 2002, where such networks function to ‘maintain relations’ between the political class, the state bureaucracy and the ordinary foot soldiers. It is through *powertoni* that Bhaggu and the other ‘faces’ of the Morcha’s political workers possess and enact the violence of the state, ostensibly in the name of development. In return, they have ‘Deshji’s hand on their head’ (the patronage and protection of a greater authority). *Powertoni* is cultivated by a proliferation and circulation of the political leaders’ image in the popular consciousness of the public. Indeed, for most of the film, this is how we perceive Deshnayak: through large hoardings and billboards in public spaces; on-stage surrounded by his party workers, politicians and police officials, where he is donating laptops worth his weight and giving prizes at a *kushti* (‘wrestling’) competition on his birthday. Even in seemingly intimate moments, such as shooting a TV advertisement in front of a green screen, he imbues his larger-than-life persona, greeting the yet-to-be computer-generated crowds with the slogan ‘Jai Pragati!’

If Bhaggu and Morcha represent one dimension of the cultivation of such patronage networks, then its other dimension – bargaining and negotiating political and economic precarity – is seen in the lives of Jogi (Imraan Hashmi) and Vinod (Chandrabhas Tiwari), who run a photography studio in Bharatnagar. The two are often employed by Damle and Morcha to shoot Deshnayak’s television advertisements and record his public appearances. However, their paths dangerously cross when Vinod unwittingly obtains evidence of Deshnayak’s involvement in Ahemadi’s attack. Seeking to profit from this information, they record Morcha mobs protesting Ahemadi’s speech. Eventually, Shalini negotiates with Jogi and Vinod to acquire the tape-recording, but before she is able to, we learn that Vinod has died under mysterious circumstances. Damle, the Morcha higher-up, later confronts Jogi, feigning concern and surprise, and reveals that Vinod approached him the previous night to talk about a cable license and mentioned a ‘jackpot tape’. Damle asks Jogi if he knows about the recording, evidently a threat, and then remarks, ‘is this a time to die, when the city’s Sensex (stock price) is so high?’

Cultivating *powertoni*, however, takes more personal forms than intimidation and violence. For instance, in Bhaggu’s case, Damle promises to enrol him in an English-speaking class and to post bail for Jaggu, who is in jail for running over Ahemadi whilst ‘driving drunk’. On the day of Ahemadi’s attack, Bhaggu even comes to Deshnayak to seek ‘his blessings’. When Jaggu is eventually bailed out from prison, Bhaggu takes him to meet Damle, who loses patience at Bhaggu’s persistence about the truck. Bhaggu does not tolerate this insult. He tells Damle, ‘if you say, I will cut off my head and bring it

to you. But don't tell me to not come here [to Morcha] [...] do I need permission to come to Deshji's temple? I have his hand on my head. I have *powertoni*! In the heat of the moment, Bhaggu threatens to 'open a chapter' (reveal secrets), only to be pacified by Damle. When Krishnan names Deshnayak and Morcha workers as potential suspects in his investigations, protests and riots break out in Bharatnagar. We see Bhaggu revelling the chaos and violence, but soon realize that possessing *powertoni* was not enough to save him. We finally glimpse Bhaggu's lifeless body in the middle of a street – killed, presumably, by Morcha workers because his *powertoni* was too much for his own good.

3. This phrase is a direct reference to Narendra Modi's comments after the Godhra riots in Gujarat, which led to the deaths of over 1000 Muslims, including brutal violence, mass rapes, burnings and arson (Mitta 2014).

THE INQUIRY COMMISSION, BUREAUCRATIC STATE PRACTICES AND POLITICS OF TRUTH

If the lifeworlds of Morcha's political actors like Damle and Bhaggu represent the highly complex, nuanced and thick 'workings' of the state on the streets of Bharatnagar, the inquiry commission headed by Krishnan represents the other dimension of 'bureaucratic state practices' (Ferguson and Gupta 2002: 982). As mentioned in the introduction, the 'high-level inquiry commission' was set up to damage-control 'before Delhi [the central government] gets into it'. In the first hurriedly set up meeting of the commission, Kaul emphasizes that the case is 'straightforward', and objective is to investigate 'shortcomings in the police *bandobast* ['preparedness'] because of which this accident happened'. At the very outset, we are made aware that the commission may as well be a smokescreen, as they often are in the contemporary Indian state (see Mitta 2014), and merely a stepping stone for Krishnan, the vice-chairman of IBP, who is soon to be promoted and sent to Stockholm as part of Genron's board.

The workings of the inquiry commission as 'bureaucratic practices' also highlight how the state entails 'verticality' and 'encompassment' (Ferguson and Gupta 2002). In other words, the state makes its presence – and indeed itself – visible in everyday through a vertical hierarchy of power relations, exemplified through mundane bureaucratic practices (Ferguson and Gupta 2002: 982–85). This is evinced, for instance, in the spaces where the commission operates: clean, polished bureaucratic conference rooms; government rest houses with non-functional swimming pools; government schools with non-functioning toilets; and the ubiquitous red beacon cars that, effectively and symbolically, represent the state in the public's everyday imagination. However, the commission's everyday functioning also represents ambiguities and contradictions in the workings of the state.

From the very beginning, Krishnan's inquiry meets obstacles in the form of the police force's reluctance to 'not hand over details of an ongoing investigation' and their conflicting and contradictory narratives that painstakingly attempt to classify Ahemadi's attack as an 'accident'. Krishnan's inquiries into the police's inconsistencies, which are repeatedly said to be 'internal matters of the department', uncover what can be described as a doublespeak at the heart of bureaucratic state practices, where one arm of the state (the police) uses it to resist the other (the bureaucracy). This doublespeak is visually represented in a Rashomon-esque sequence where, in the first instance, the police provide conflicting narratives of the 'accident'. In the first sequence, the junior police officer's description of 'calm' is visualized by Ahemadi greeting an amicable crowd of Morcha workers, when the truck suddenly enters the *chowk*. Yet, when Krishnan questions SSP Chavhan, the scene transitions to another Rashomon-esque flashback where Ahemadi is accused of spreading hatred and instigating the crowd, resignifying his 'accident'. As the SSP puts it, 'every action has its reaction'.³

The second instance is when the commission's request to obtain the case diary of the police station where Jaggu was arrested is met with continued apathy – a result of 'orders coming from above'. Eventually, Krishnan discovers that the missing page from the station diary was torn out by the station house officer at the behest of the SSP. This highlights how case diaries are continually manipulated instruments by police forces. These bureaucratic 'writing practices', like the case diary, thus 'bear the double sign of the state's distance and its penetration into the life of the everyday' (Das and Poole 2004: 15).

The other frustration the commission encounters is from Kaul, who keeps close tabs on Krishnan's investigations. In fact, when Kaul discovers that Krishnan has exceeded his mandate, he accuses him of 'trying to settle political score', insinuating that his actions would make him a 'hero for the Naxals', as a result of which IBP will not see the light of day. Meanwhile, we also see Kaul's repeated insistence on passing a file for a 'heart institute', apparently from the CMO's office. Krishnan's investigations, while for the most part being frustrated by the foot-dragging of the political machinery in Bharatnagar, are eventually assisted by Shalini and Jogi, who find evidence that implicates Morcha party workers and Deshnayak in Ahemadi's accident. However, this 'truth', which at the beginning would threaten IBP, actually helps the CM – who is referred to only as 'Madamji' (Supriya Pathak) – in gaining political mileage as her party and the central government form a new alliance. When Krishnan meets Madamji at her official residence, he calls the 'accident' a 'planned attack' for the first time, as the CM dissolves the 'toothless' commission. Krishnan also gets the nod to go to Stockholm.

Away from the sequestered and sanitized governmental offices and residences, the situation in Bharatnagar gets tense. Jogi and Shalini finally acquire the incriminating recording that Vinod had made, where Deshnayak is heard conspiring to kill Ahemadi with Madamji (the Chief Minister). Armed with this other part of the aforementioned 'truth' (i.e., Morcha's complicity), Krishnan uses it, and the fact that Kaul has vested interests in the heart institute, to blackmail him to approach the Home Ministry's secretary with the information – where 'Delhi would get IBP', and Kaul, 'a political career'. Kaul eventually relents, but caustically points to Krishnan that his greater oversight in this 'Robin Hood' style of justice was that 'this CM could have become the PM (Prime Minister) one day' and that the nation 'could have gone ahead of even China'.

Later, an epilogue shows that 'the Central Government set up another inquiry investigating the Chief Minister', and that Krishnan declined the Stockholm offer. Ahemadi dies in the hospital, with Aruna by his side. We learn that Shalini's book on Ahemadi's assassination was 'banned in India'. Jogi was charged with pornography but was declared untraceable. The scene transitions into silence, as visuals of medical equipment are interspersed with that of a bulldozer. As Ahemadi's vital sign crashes, the scene cuts to the bulldozer about to demolish a building. A political poster is revealed in the background: it is Aruna Ahemadi, clad in a white sari, and the slogan reads, 'with Aruna Ahemadi, the government will go ahead, we will go ahead' – indicating the start of her political career and IBP's resurrection. We get a glimpse of the man in the driver's cabin: Jaggu. As he is about to drive the bulldozer into what was once his home, the scene transitions to the final flashback to Ahemadi's attack, this time from Jaggu's perspective. Ahemadi looks at him – and the viewer – in the eye. As the frame fades to black, the credits roll to relentless drumbeats.

CONCLUSION

In his critique of the 'neoliberal heterotopia' represented in *Shanghai*, Paunksnis (2014: 119) argues that although the film appears to be a critique of the present-day state of affairs in India, it ultimately 'produces objective ambiguity, and a false realism'. His central criticism of the film is twofold: first is the fact that the main characters, a state bureaucrat and an NRI professor, are those 'with whom the urban upper middle class audiences could identify easily'; and second is that 'ultimately it is the system itself which solves the problem [...] which exonerates itself [...] and eventually stands with the common man'. It leads to the assumption that it is 'not the system but a few corrupt politicians that are at the heart of the problem'. I disagree with Paunksnis' conclusions.

As I have attempted to show through a nuanced reading of *Shanghai*, the lifeworld of the film is not just a state bureaucrat's investigation into an accident/attack of an NRI activist; it is about the multitude of political actors who occupy the imaginary space of Bharatnagar and are part of the political machinery attempting to transform Bharatnagar into IBP. The characters of Jaggu, Bhaggu, Vinod, Jogi, Damle, Deshnayak, the members of the Morcha party, the police officers and bureaucrats like Kaul – who, I insist, are the essential elements in the workings of the state in *Shanghai* – are not discussed by Paunksnis at all (however, I concede that a crucial limitation of the film is that it largely adopts the perspective of upper-caste primary characters).⁴ Bharatnagar, therefore, is not so much 'an unreal space where the urban middle class wage imaginary battles for the poor and dispossessed' (Paunksnis 2014: 120). Instead, as a form of 'realist fiction' (Fassin 2014), Bharatnagar is a site where we see the continuation of the state and political actors' dependence on such patronage and power networks to carry out its developmental agenda, especially through *povertoni*. But we also realize how such patronage is tenuous at best and lethal at worst. It is precisely because figures of Jaggu, Bhaggu and the Morcha members also act as representatives of the state that:

[t]hey are able to move across – and thus muddy – the seemingly clear divide separating legal and extra-legal forms of punishment and enforcement. [...] Such figures [...] represent at once the fading of the state's jurisdiction and its continual refounding through its (not so mythic) appropriation of private justice and violence [...] They are the public secret through which the persons who embody the law, bureaucracy and violence that together constitute the state move beyond the realm of myth to become joined with the reality of everyday life.

(Das and Poole 2004: 14)

At the same time, even as these actors are, in the everyday lifeworld, key to the neoliberal state, in situations of ensuing conflicts, the state 'typically favour[s] the integrity of the financial system [...] over the well-being of the population' (Harvey 2005: 71), including those affected by violence, dispossession and displacement; their lives remain unchanged amidst the changing faces of neoliberal governance. Thus, in fictionalizing the everyday realities of the neoliberal Indian state's workings, *Shanghai* also lays bare the fiction of the Weberian notion of state monopoly over legitimate use of violence (cf. Gupta 2012: 19).⁵

4. Another well-founded criticism is that *Shanghai* largely represents a Hindi-speaking, North Indian bias. Political cinema from southern India, most notably Tamil and Malayalam films, offer equally nuanced and critical readings of the Indian state and indignities of caste and class (a recent example includes the Dalit Tamil filmmaker Pa Ranjith).
5. I would like to thank Steven van Wolputte for originally raising this point.

Similarly, the motif of *pragati* is not so much embedded in the development of the nation through SEZs, but in the exercise of state power itself, 'not over territories, but over life and death' (Das and Poole 2004: 11). Further, contra Ferguson's (1996) understanding of 'development' as an 'anti-politics machine', we see that development itself spews its own kinds of politics, where the exercise of violence emanates from tenuous political relationships rather than the authority of the sovereign, and how development also engenders modes of resistance to it. Paunksnis' conclusion that the film 'exonerates the system' is also misleading, as a closer analysis of the epilogue shows. First, Paunksnis is right when he states that Krishnan appears as the state's 'loyal servant'. But Krishnan certainly does not stand by the 'common man' like Jaggu, whose prospects are decidedly uncertain, unfixed and precarious. IBP still continues as planned; and in an ironical turn, Ahemadi's wife, Aruna, is now appropriated by the party in power at the centre to be the state's chief minister and is the 'face' of IBP – which still represents the 'Shanghai' that the Indian state wishes to convert its cities to.

While globalization and neoliberal policies do indeed configure the state (and its power), the state never simply retreats. The political system we see in *Shanghai* is enabled by, and exceeds, the people who work in it, resist it and attempt to change it; and yet, it keeps marching onward. As director Dibakar Banerjee explained in an interview ahead of the film's release, '*Shanghai* is the difference between [the] dream and reality. It shows the reality between the dream and [...] the dream in the middle of reality [...] it is a dream to make Indian cities like Shanghai' (IBNLive, 13 May 2012). And it is precisely this dream that, to a large extent, continues to guide the development policies of the Indian state, which continues on, much like Ferguson's 'anti-politics machine', spewing a unique kind of politics in its wake, both violent and vibrant.

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