The Hindu has no sense of history, said Mr Ratan on my last evening in Bombay. It was not a new statement since I had been reminded of it many times before. Its suddenness may have had something to do with my own tendency to relapse into the anecdotal and the inconsequential but it did seem a bit odd nevertheless that here I was faced with this bald statement after only a few minutes of hurried acquaintance. I suppose the Indian colonial in me (albeit of the diasporic variety: is there such a thing?) likes this historical claptrap and draws it out from unsuspecting people. In the colonies we were told that a race without history is never redeemed from time. That is how the Principal of Suva Grammar School (a historian who had read his *Four Quartets* well) established that essential difference between Western historiography and our own special brand of karmic recurrence even though in the Pacific karma was really quite meaningless. In fact in our everyday lives karma occurred only in the vulgarised phrase dharam-karam obviously modelled on the Sanskrit dvandva compound. The vulgarity of the Indian metatext quite possibly confirmed the schoolmaster’s worst fears about the Indian race. You know what I mean—these Indians are fatalists, they relapse so easily into the world of childhood, the world of pure fantasy. Not surprisingly, being brought up on a rigidly pragmatic conception of history, Mr Ratan’s comment hit an imaginative part of my being. Uncompromisingly Hegelian in my outlook (Hegel’s racism notwithstanding), I liked Mr Ratan’s implied connections between his own reading of the Indian and Hegel’s discourse of orientalism. Unwittingly Mr Ratan had opened something I had so carefully repressed during these past few weeks in India. Seduced by the opening statement, however, it was my turn to ask, ‘But why is this so, why this failure, this absence of historical awareness?’ The words were somehow inapt, what is ‘failure’ for an Indian, and doesn’t historical awareness sound like an undergraduate prescription for a revolution: ‘I’m going to raise your consciousness’ you hear from both the Bengali Marxist neophyte and the acolytes of the Ramakrishna mission. Mr Ratan, however, liked the question. It reinforced his earlier remark and who better to confess to than an outsider who after all will not be seen in the street the next day.

‘Have you seen the grand monuments of Bombay, those which have withstood time? Churchgate, Victoria Terminal, the Gateway of India. Have
you seen their massive columns, have you seen the gigantic gargoyles fleeing from their places of refuge? They're absolutely magnificent. Did you know that independent India has no architecture like them? I had noticed the Gothic design of the major metropolitan railway stations. So superior to those built in the other colonies—those in Australia for instance. In India the availability of a continuous supply of cheap labour probably encouraged the Empire-builders to construct on a grand scale. The Mughals had done the same. Humayun's tomb, the Taj Mahal all constructed by the cheap and abundant artisans of Hindu India. Nothing new in that grand vision of successive colonisers, though you could detect a touch of pathos in these grand monuments since their makers believed that they, the masters, will be there for all eternity. Empire-builders, like their archetypal Roman forbears, believed in the permanence of Empires. And their architecture always showed that. Independent India clearly lacked the idea of permanence, and contemporary Indian architecture, like the Dadar Terminal and Bridge, somehow presented the outsider with a very different philosophy, one of transience and dissolution, of decenteredness rather than total, if misplaced, faith in the destiny of a great race. The world of the Empire locked itself into meaning. Closed meaning, without flux or doubt, how so terribly predictable for the Indian and perhaps ultimately so terrifying. Samsara, our world of the sign, was what we escaped from. Didn't they say that for Shankara, the great eighth-century monist thinker, it were better if the world did not exist at all. So monuments were not to be preserved, and the grand architectural splendours of the Empire turned grey as cleaning grime off the walls was certainly not a matter of civic priority for the Hindu fundamentalist Shiv Sena Party that held power in metropolitan Bombay.

'But did you know', added Mr Ratan to reinforce his earlier observation, 'these old colonial buildings have not been cleaned for years. You know postcolonial India is all about symbolic transformations, sticker and tape quick-fix culture. Names of streets are changed, squares become chowks, all this naming and renaming is our sense of re-emergence from the shackles of Empire, a kind of consumer history. Now you see it, now you don't. See how easy it is to erase the terrible memory of the past. (Feroze Angrezi Fashionshopwalla, clearly disagrees with us here). Yet people continue to call 'Hautama Chowk', 'The Fountain' and 'Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose Road', 'Marine Drive'. The old colonial names persist and defy this new symbolic history. Then came the critical commentary, 'We won't get out of this morass unless we live through our own history, rechannel our enormous energies away from ritual and dogma into a thoroughgoing reappraisal of our own postcoloniality. What we lack is a
theory of what it is to be an Indian'. Somewhere, as if to underline his nostalgia for his Cambridge years, he had also included the phrase 'social change' but, I suspect misunderstanding my quizzical look, changed tack and continued, this time with concrete references. 'Have you seen rubbish on awnings in Bombay? From Bandra to Colaba (he was referring to the glamorous roads that connected these prestigious suburbs) have you noticed how in ten storey high apartments with awnings each awning has a pile of stinking rubbish. The rubbish stays there until it falls on to the next awning below or until the monsoon breaks. And then they drop on the pavements to be eaten by scavengers, dogs, vultures, pigs. This is the grand cycle of India, India's answer to Western greed and excess. Here in India everything is reprocessed'. 'Even filth is', he added as an afterthought. There was something of a proto-rubbish theory at work here. I remembered my earlier visit to India and how, armed with An Area of Darkness and A Wounded Civilisation, I made notes on every bit of rubbish I saw. That was a very colonial way of viewing things, of finding extreme differences so that the other was positioned in a binary system. Thus I looked for architecture without grime, and ran for cover from anything which looked even remotely polluting. The journey on a fisherman's boat from the Burning Ghats to the mosque built on the destroyed remnants of a Hindu temple in Benares threw up all the phobias about a Ganges that was becoming the river of death. Filth and contradiction got under the noses of the colonial. Mr Ratan was certainly aware of filth but gave it a slightly different emphasis. It was perhaps a matter of cadence one began to think, how you inflected the words so to speak. But his confessions were not mine which are always so mediated through the discourses of my own precursor, Naipaul. Mr Ratan was after all the first informant of his own culture. I could only interpret, refashion selves but not originate them. I felt then, as I feel even now, in this terrible double-bind, and wish that writing were not an act of such uncompromising honesty.

From the balcony of Mr Ratan's fourth floor apartment questions about Hindu history (and rubbish) were lost in the opulence of the surroundings and the remarkable view of the sea beyond. On the left was the Gateway of India, built for a former King-Emperor, which I had closely inspected only a few hours before only to find that, like so many other destinations of my life—Oxford, India, the Caribbean—V S Naipaul had been there before me. It was no consolation to me when I read that Naipaul felt the same way about Conrad. Precursors and antecedents, that's how our fictions get started. So there was the Gateway of India through which the grand Emperor George V would have entered the city and his many Maharaja minions would have paid colourful
obeisance like the old chieftains of Carthage or Alexandra. In the evening the Gateway cast its long shadow over the tourist boats anchored in its precincts only to be gradually shadowed in turn by the Taj Intercontinental Hotel. From Mr Ratan's apartment it certainly looked much larger than it actually was. I recall seeing the Taj Mahal from the air on my way back from the sensuous temples of Khajuraho and had found that it had the opposite effect. The Taj Mahal completely dominates Agra and is certainly a much larger edifice than meets the eye at ground level. Beyond the Gateway, however, you could see the lights of Vashi, and other adjoining suburbs of New Bombay, built to alleviate pressure on the island city. A harbour was very nearly complete there to take large tankers. Bombay may be the commercial heart of India but it has no natural, deep-water harbour and it is perhaps for this reason that Bombay never really became a truly oriental port like Singapore or Hongkong. But this new harbour was already in shambles. Permanence, the word that galvanised the Empire builders continues to elude the Indian. The harbour was just not deep enough, and more film-extras could be seen there than actual workers. They said that Amitabh Bachchan's megahit Hum (of the Jumma-chumma fame) was partly filmed there. Plan, design, pattern, relapse into chaos, the Indian condition par excellence. From rubbish theory to chaos theory, every conceivable postmodern phenomenon has been anticipated. And wasn't it also true that blind Dhritarashtra saw the battle of the Mahabharata on a specially designed television with a running commentary from Sanjaya?

From the Ratan balcony we saw the lights of Vashi once again. The beer flowed generously. To be rich in India is to be generous, and foreigners are particularly lucky, especially if you speak the language and were not born there. "Are you telling me that you are not coming from India?" (no that was not Mr Ratan speaking, his language was very pukka). Vashi was a planned city with huge three or four lane boulevards in the centre of the city. The city was constructed on a simple grid going North-South and East-West. But within a year, Indian chaos had taken over. The outer lanes closest to the footpaths were taken over completely by the street vendors and the homeless. So now the wide boulevards of Vashi had only two useable lanes each way. A new city build for about 250,000 people was already breaking at the seams. No one now knows the population of Vashi and new Bombay, probably over a million already with thousands being added to it every week. There is a bridge that connects the island of Bombay with Vashi and the mainland. Two of the three lanes of the bridge are under constant repair and if you want to go from Markhand, the last metropolitan station, to Vashi the bus journey could take up to two hours. The
bridge was probably under twenty years old but already it was structurally
unsound. The Government of Maharashtra recognised this and began
constructing two parallel bridges—one for rail, the other for autos—alongside
the existing one some years ago. Vashi residents told me that this time there
was not going to be anything kaccha (raw). No ministerial kickbacks, no
backroom deals, everything aboveboard. One needs that sort of faith some time
especially when you can see a bridge about to collapse. The pending collapse of
the not so old bridge at Vashi summed up so much about India and somehow
was a proof-text for Mr Ratan's opening line about the Indian lack of
permanence. Everything is somehow chalta hai. Countless apartments and
homes in Bombay were structurally unsound. I asked a taxi-driver if these
apartments were ever going to be pulled down. 'No', he said, 'they'll stand there
until they collapse. Then a few hundred lives would be lost, the municipal
council will get the blame, another Marwari developer will buy the land and
build another kaccha block of flats'. If you lived long enough you can actually
witness this cycle in your own lifetime. That somehow brought to an end any
wish for immortality you might have harboured. This was a case of the real
parodying an Indian metaphysics that gives the cyclical ontological status. The
starting point of all existence is recurrence itself, says the guru.

'Surely', I asked Mr Ratan, 'One can still build for time, take a longer lease
on life, a ninety-nine year one so that at least another generation can live under
the same roof. After all this is what descendants of Indian indentured labourers
did and survived'. 'Yes we also do that, but on the personal level', replied Mr
Ratan. 'Ours is a very individualistic culture in the family sense of the word.
Our intelligence, our theories about society operate at the level of the smallest
possible social unit. We lack history because we cannot involve ourselves into
the grand design. Just as there is no civic pride—the street outside is everybody's
rubbish bin—there is, similarly, no capacity to go beyond selfhood. It was for
this reason that the Indian sages emphasised the horrors of ahamkara, I-ness.
But they got it wrong because they never thought about socialising this I-ness.
They took a renouncer's view of life and history: deny ahamkara so that you can,
finally, find bliss in Brahman. What we have to deny is not selfhood but the
hamar ghar, hamar bibi, hamar bacche mentality. That's real Indian I-ness, a
social sense that begins and ends with self, wife and children. But that's not the
whole story. If everyone believed in the ego-as-nuclear-family we could at least
have a commonality of purpose and construct a civic order accordingly. No it
goes deeper, before you can arrive at a sense of nationhood (a precondition for
history) in India you must also know your caste and clan in great detail.' He
paused. Then asked abruptly, 'Do you know what caste you belong to?' 'Yes', I replied, 'I can’t hide that in India, my surname gives it away. I am a Brahmin'. 'What kind of a Brahmin, there are dozens of sub-castes of Brahmins who have that surname?' 'I'm a Sarvariya Brahmin', I ramble off in a parrot-like fashion a caste genealogy my grandfather taught us in the incongruous surroundings of an island state where race rather than caste really mattered. 'And your gotra?', asked Mr Ratan. 'Gautam', I replied. 'Impressive', he said and continued, 'and you know that in India that is really your history, your identity. That's where you belong, summed up in your caste genealogy. Say that to the priest and he'll understand; place your name in the Times of India Marriages column and you'll get appropriate responses, exact duplications in fact of your newspaper entry if you are looking for a spouse. And you're set for life. Your wife will know your eating habits, the rituals you perform, your temperament, she simply turns up one evening as your bride as if she had been part of the family all these years.' I was overawed by that knowledge. Is that why arranged marriages worked so well in India, and people were extremely uneasy if you married outside your group? Unless of course you were one of those 'film bourgeois Indians who had lost the rituals that defined their caste. India is like that, the secular state is simply an administrative structure that fires the imagination of expatriate Indians and Western historians. It is a political unity that exists because we have Muslim states on both sides and China to the north. Take those states away and India, the meaning of India disappears. The real India is a conglomeration of selves defined in terms of the logic or mentality of a group. You are what you are born into'.

I remembered introducing myself to the girl at the Filmfare desk. Filmfare is a cinema magazine which deals exclusively with Indian popular cinema. Within a matter of minutes a man came up to me and said, 'I'm also a Mishra, do sit down'. The woman at the desk had found a kith and kin and not necessarily the man I was looking for to give me the addresses of actors I wanted to interview. During the two hours he spent with me, there was an assumed bonhomie, a camaraderie, as if I should know, as he assumed he did, how two people of the same Brahmin clan behave. And some day I too may be asked to return the compliment. If I don't, his world would probably collapse.

History as a social unit. Family, clan, caste, a closed set. Naipaul tells us—correctly I think—that Gandhi spent twenty years in South Africa (twenty years in case you’d forgotten) and returned with a definition of 'Indian' for the first time in his life. It was in South Africa that the otherness of the Indian as a unified racial group surfaced so clearly. Racist, colonial South Africa treated all
Indians as coolies, descendants of indentured labourers with no real, legitimate rights. Gandhi found himself included in that mob. His Gujarati-ness, his caste, his vegetarianism were no longer marks of individuality in the eyes of the colonial overlords. In South Africa he tried out his satyagraha upon an unsuspecting colonial world. He returned to India convinced that there was such a thing as an Indian. The point that he missed in such a spectacular fashion was that there was something essentially Hegelian about the homogeneity of the Other in South Africa. For the colonial masters, slaves had to be homogenous otherwise their own selves could not be adequately fashioned. Remove the masters, as Gandhi succeeded in doing in India, and the fissures gape open, the contradictions rear their ugly heads, symbols triumph over sense. In this respect it wasn’t Gandhi but Jinnah who understood the real history of India. He understood new ways in which self and other were fashioned, he knew that once the masters were gone, at least the Muslims could define themselves, as a group, against the Hindus and construct a nation in opposition to it. Jinnah’s demand was then a stroke of genius, he got a nation state and left behind an even larger Muslim population within the mother state. And so far as this mother state was concerned it couldn’t define itself except as a secular state built upon English institutions. The Empire receded but left behind its institutions. You may hate the permanence of their buildings but you could not live without them. And suddenly in all this talk by Mr Ratan about history one wondered if history as permanence can ever be grasped if the sense of nationhood is lacking in the first instance. Hence the million mutinies of V S Naipaul’s recent book on India. Chastened by the perseverence of these institutions against great odds, Naipaul sees Indians as among the world’s great democrats. But postcolonial India’s problems are still locked into those of history, how to write it down, how to understand it. The frustration leads Indians to a refusal to accept India’s secularism because secularism lacks an ideology, it is empty, it cannot galvanise a race, it is a poor substitute for real nationhood. Hence the triumph of Jinnah, and a belated replaying of his kind of politics in postcolonial, secular India.

History returns to mock Indians because idealism—secular idealism—denied them a forum in which to ask fundamental questions. Yet we are told over and over again that the Hindu has no sense of history, only a congealed longing for an idealism, a kind of blissful unity of self and other. So nationalist or bourgeois history (ultimately predicated upon those of the imperialists in the first instance) now gets transformed into a fundamentalist history of the subalterns themselves. The thousands of Hindus who threaten to destroy the Babri Masjid in Agra seem to know one kind of flawed Brahminical history.
They are persuaded by it even though that version of history was based upon notions of power. And when the Muslims retaliate in the name of an absolute principle that cannot, under any circumstances, be disputed, another history of the masses gets replayed. Fundamentalism thus parodies the histories of the working classes by feeding them instant high culture histories, somehow transforming their folk histories into an enactment of some grand narrative of which they had never been a part. What class of people actually participate in these marches? One never really knows. But death is a simple enough index to measure. The bodies of the dead tell stories not of middle class chivalry but lower class manipulation. Those that die in these clashes on behalf of a decadent ideology have no part in constructing that ideology. Their deaths leave behind no history either. Fundamentalism is a kind of instant karma, created by demagogues to mobilise the masses towards a basically Brahminical ideology. Fundamentalism incorporates the subaltern in its grand narrative, illusorily speaks on their behalf, but continues to write its own time honoured histories.

Indian popular cinema acts on precisely this principle.

Then there are the Ratans of India who have no real fetish for any of the purities of Indian life. Eschewing ritual and dogma they are areligious, having effectively escaped from all those purities/verities that govern Hindu life: vegetarianism, nonalcoholism, ritualistic cleansing and so on. Funny in a way that the least polluted of all Indians, or at least those who seem to be beyond pollution, are in fact the Dalits, the Untouchables or to use Gandhi's dreadful name for them, the Harijans of India. They are indeed symbols of the ideal Indian, as nothing can pollute them. Apart from beef, they eat everything and given the opportunity would have little difficulty in marrying people from other castes and religions. Yet even bourgeois Indians, especially of the expatriate variety cannot see this. For them the Dalits occupy their position on the lowest rung of the Indian social hierarchy because they like their roles. Many years ago a woman relation of an Australian Indian friend of mine gave me a lesson in Dalit etiquette. 'Please don't stand up when the sweeper woman enters the house, she is an acchut, an Untouchable. You'd upset the apple cart and they'll begin to get ideas'. There is this dreadful insecurity that seems to have gripped the Indian psyche on the question of caste. They like it that way and we mustn't do anything to make them feel otherwise. It's for their own good. And that is precisely what India's dominant popular form, the Bombay film industry, endorses, pandering to a subaltern historicity by incorporating their discourse (the apan log form of Amitabh Bachchan for instance) and yet denying them radical action by, finally, falling for the law of karma. That's the real point at
issue, how does the Other find expression when the popular apparatuses, including democratic socialism, manipulates the Dalits and the lower classes, seemingly incorporating them into mainstream India only to deny them real voice. Since my proof text here, as elsewhere, is popular Indian cinema, what better way to examine this further than through an actor who played the role of the revolutionary younger brother Birju in Mehboob Khan’s *Mother India* (1957).

In retrospect he seemed like the ideal choice, but at the time he just happened to be one of two generous people I wrote to from the National Film Archives in Pune. The other was Amitabh Bachchan whose story must be set aside for another moment. As for Sunil Dutt, actor, director, Member of Parliament and husband of the enchanting Nargis whose films I saw in the old Empire Theatre in Nausori (Fiji) so many years ago, what history could I get from him? Probably none, but he had been kind enough to reply by Indian telegram (it reached me three days later) and so upon my return from Pune I rang Sunil Dutt’s number. It was about three in the afternoon and Bombay was getting rather sticky with all that sweat clunging to my Chirag Din shirt. ‘Sahib ghar par nahi hai’, said a voice. ‘What do you mean the actor is not at home? I’ve got his telegram with me. Look again, ek bar phir se dekhiye aur un se kahiye ki mai pune se patra likha tha’. A lengthy pause ensued, then came a heavy voice. ‘Sorry, this is Sunil Dutt, my secretary didn’t quite get your name. Maaf kijiyega lekin when can you come to Bandra?’ he mixed his languages in the typical Indian-English style. I had just made my way to a friend’s Colaba flat in downtown Bombay from the Pune terminal of the Dadar Bus Station and felt rather tired. ‘How about tomorrow?’. ‘That won’t do. I’m off to Delhi tomorrow morning. Parliament you know. Can you come this afternoon?’ ‘You mean now’, I asked. ‘Yes’, he replied, ‘It is very easy. Just take a cab from your Colabawala flat to Bandra and get off at the Zagebo Cafe, my driver will be waiting for you there’. So I took a passing cab and made my journey to Bandra. The Muslim cab driver from Bihar seemed to know the area well and spoke in a Hindi dialect I understood quite easily. ‘Sahib is a very great man’, he said. ‘He used to be the sheriff of Bombay, before all these Shiv Sena troubles began. I shook his hand once. No one has a bad word for Sunil Sahib’. That was reassuring because at least he seemed approachable, unlike the other film stars who were positively impossible, so dreadfully rude, the new Brahmins of India without the history of the Brahmins.

Zagebo Cafe was clearly the watering hole of the rich and famous in the Bandra-Juhu area. I dropped off and loitered around for a few minutes before a
car came along. 'Mr Dutt sent us, do hop in'. I did. 'Hope you have not been waiting for long. Sahib said you are from Australia'. 'Ji ha', I replied so as to suggest that I spoke their language and there was no need for the usual deference to the Indian who has made it to the outside world and carried stacks of money in foreign currency. How that word 'foreign' (pronounced faran) mesmerised urban Indians! From faran cars to faran bibis, the mystery of the faran simply added to the many mysteries of the nation. Words like faran became somehow mystical, utter it often enough and you may just get a glimpse of the elusive nirvana. And then suddenly amidst some highly colonial buildings of the Raj, there was Sunil Dutt's office.

Inside the office I was struck by the huge black and white pictures of Indira Gandhi and Nargis. Indira Gandhi liked posing with Nargis, you could see it from the way in which she always looked not at the camera but at Nargis. Perhaps there was something of the long lost history of the Raj Kapoor-Nargis film era (from Aag to Aah) being played out here. Or was I reading too much into these pictures. The Raj Kapoor-Nargis films were the love stories by which all others were judged. Love stories of every conceivable variety (sentimental love, constant love, spurned love, love in union or sambhoga, love in separation or vipralambha, sacrificial love, childhood love) generously sprinkled with some of the most memorable songs ever written for Indian cinema were to be found in these films. All of these made a generation look back at the first half of the fifties as somehow representing the euphoria following independence. They had their Clark Gable and Vivien Leigh, we had our Raj Kapoor and Nargis. Perhaps the parallel narratives of these photographs are going to be more important than anything that Sunil Dutt might have to say about India. Suddenly I turned around and saw Sunil Dutt walking towards me. 'How do you like India? You're from Feezee, I've got friends in Mauritius, in fact I have just farewelled a couple from there. They're in the theatre business and want me to vet films for them here in Bombay. Do you want some chai?' I politely declined for fear that the tea could be undrinkable if, as I suspected, it was made of premixed milk and sugar. I had a dreadful hour at the Filmfare office trying to gulp down an extremely syrupy tea of that nature. 'Well, what can I tell you, I believe you are writing a book on Indian cinema'. I said I was and quickly added that I wanted to hear his views on Mother India, a film that takes up a full chapter in the book. He relaxed a bit since Mother India had made him into an important, marketable actor. He had also married Nargis soon afterwards. Mother India was Mehboob Khan's remake of his Aurat (1940). Ten years after independence he celebrates Nehru's grand plan to make India into a self-
sufficient nation (on the Soviet model) by slightly shifting the focus from the struggles of a peasant woman in rural India to the dharmik efficacy of her sacrifice in killing her wayward, anti-establishment son. In the end the sacrificial mother becomes symbolic of Mother India herself as she opens a new dam in India. But Aurat, done in black and white, was a simple tale of rebelliousness on the part of a stubborn son and a mother’s dilemma in choosing between two sons. The new version done in the epic style lacked much of the simplicity of its prototype and became in fact a melodramatic spectacle in the genre of Bombay cinema. In an uncanny duplication of Mehboob Khan’s own marriage to Sardar Akhtar, the leading lady of Aurat, Sunil Dutt, the wayward Birju of Mother India, married Nargis soon after the completion of the film.

For years I had been intrigued by the conflicting messages of Mother India. As a kid I firmly believed that Mother India showed how one had to fight tyranny and regretted that the mother had to kill her son. Later on as I began to understand the mysteries of the Hindu metanarratives (of karma and dharma) I felt that Mehboob Khan had in fact let us down. I thought that as a Muslim outsider he should at least have stuck to his guns and demonstrated that at some point in one’s life one has to recreate history through struggle. Instead he had opted for karma, a metanarrative that placed all human history on a uniform plane, as a kind of timeless history of the gods. Since life was their lila, their sport, history too was part of their narrative. So this afternoon I raised these questions with Sunil Dutt himself. ‘Will get straight to the point. Do you think Mother India shows the impossibility of radical action on the part of the Indian, that, finally, we lack the will to change because the Birjus of this world will not be allowed to win?’ He paused to think through his answer and when he replied, in slow, measured tones, he was no longer speaking to me as an individual, I had instead become part of his Bombay constituency. ‘You have in India a clear choice. The way of Bhagat Singh or the way of the Mahatma. Birju chose the former; the mother chose the latter. The way of the revolutionary is like Bhagat Singh’s, full of hatred. You can’t bring about changes through hatred; you can only bring about reform through understanding. And Birju’s hatred was so consuming that he abducts the village bania’s daughter. Now Mother India cannot accept that. We value the honour of woman more than the honour of a nation. In the Punjab and in Kashmir people are being killed but women are not being dishonoured. Remember the words of Mother India, mai beta de sakti hu lekin taj nahi.’ I admired Sunil Dutt’s faith in the Indian male and the power of Sitahood in the culture but I couldn’t quite buy that part of his argument. In the red light areas of Bombay the exploitation of women had
become a way of life, and little cottage industries, in a manner of speaking, had grown around this fact. So I asked about Birju further, about the nature of social responsibility in the Indian male. Was Birju typical in this respect? 'If you mean social conscience, Birju had none of that. Social conscience can only come to the well-informed, to the learned. *Mother India* is a personal tragedy about widowhood and orphanhood, not a social commentary'.

Sunil Dutt's train of thought was suddenly interrupted by a constituent who came rushing in with her daughter. He apologised and turned towards the woman. 'Now what's the matter, you seem so agitated'. 'Mr Dutt, I have been putting my daughter's name down at this school for two years now and they are still telling me that there is no place for her. It is a Christian school and I think they are looking favourably at Christians only', she rattled off a prepared speech. Sunil Dutt asked her why she didn't want to send her daughter to the nearby state school. 'I want my daughter to go to an English medium school', she said and looked around the room examining the photographs of Nargis with some interest. She had other things to say and demanded that the school should be asked to explain itself. I recalled all those English-medium Dehra Dun schools in Bombay movies such as *Bobby* and *Mera Naam Joker*. The Sunil Duts of this world in fact always send their children to these schools which are after all relics of the Raj. The woman was out of the room rather abruptly, a fact which I hadn't noticed because in the mean time my mind had wandered off to the walls of Sunil Dutt's office and to all those photographs of Nargis. She was everywhere, haunting me with a face that recalled those years of innocence in one of the loveliest islands in the world.

And I wanted to ask him about Nargis, *Mother India* on the screen. What was she like? Did he really marry her for fame? After all he was a minor actor in films such as *Railway Platform* (1955), *Ek hi Rasta* (1956), *Kundan* (1955), *Kismet ka Khel* (1956), *Rajdhani* (1956), *Payal* (1957), forgettable movies all, except perhaps for Kishore Sahu's *Kismet ka Khel* but even Sahu had lost his former brilliance by then. Marriage seems to have given him a greater determination to make slightly more daring movies like *Yeh Raste hi Pyar ki* (1963) which was about the seduction of the hero's wife by his best friend. And there were also films such as *Sujata* (1959) and *Sadhana* (1958) in which he played the role of a man possessed with the radical fervour of a Birju. Though essentially love stories, these films, like V Shantaram's classic *Admi* (1940) show a man marrying either an Untouchable or a prostitute. So I asked about his marriage because that single marriage changed the face of Bombay cinema. For one Raj Kapoor's films were never the same again. Just look at his post-*Jagie Raho* corpus, all singularly...
forgettable movies. Was it true that he saved Nargis from that dreadful fire scene in *Mother India* and out of generosity she accepted his offer of marriage? At least that is how we heard it in Fiji and Arjun my cousin reputedly knew everything about Bombay Cinema and even now I can't accept that perhaps this once he was wrong. 'I never confirm or deny press reports', he replied in the diplomatic language of the American Navy. 'But let me tell you about something much more important, look at my own use of cinema for the moral uplifting of society, the kind of spiritual revolution that *Mother India* stood for. Look at my latest film *Yeh Aag Kab Bujhe Gi* (When will this fire be extinguished) which I have produced, directed and taken the lead role in. It is a major film about bride burning in India. I portray a family which gets around this problem through understanding and patience. Our social system is good for us, what we need is peaceful, Gandhian ways of change'. Then he became anecdotal. 'You know people don't understand the true meaning of sacrifice. Some months back I walked from Bombay to Amritsar so emphasise the unity of India. Punjab has been in turmoil for the past few years and so I walked 400 or 500 miles to show that we can live in peace. But when I reached Amritsar and held a press conference, a reporter piously asks me ye ap ki vaki pad yatra hai ki pad ke liye yatra hai?'Is this a real journey of substance or a journey to get votes?'). And there is a man with blisters on his feet, walking for his country, going to Amritsar for the unity of his land and here is this fellow saying that apni position ke liye cal raha hai'.

In some ways Sunil Dutt is much more interesting than that. He once made a film called *Yaadein* ('Memories', 1964) with only one actor (played by himself) who interacts with basically a silent cast throughout the film. He says of the film, 'It is very easy to make experimental films, all you need is an institution like Doordarshan willing to finance you'. Great commercial cinema like *Mother India* is a different matter. It is always a collective enterprise. Look at *Mother India* again, Mehboob Khan's direction, Naushad's music, Nargis's acting and above all Faredoon Irani's magnificent camera work. All these elements interact with the songs and the dialogue which again require powerful writers. It is not easy to make successful commercial art. Even so we never know when a film will be successful. There is no simple formula. It is *Mother India* one year, *Sholay* another, *Bobby* a third and *Nagina* or *Hum* the fourth. I made a beautiful romance called *Reshma Aur Shera* (1971) and it bombed, so much so that I had to mortgage my house to the bank.' Sunil Dutt is difficult to stop once he gets going, a delight to many but rather annoying when you want to get back to larger narratives. So I asked him about permanence and history. I
asked why the film archives in Pune were in a state of such negligence with shortage of resources at every level. I had seen technicians working with archaic equipment to restore old films. They had some gems there, like the early works of Himansu Rai and P C Barua but lack of funds made restoration an impossible task. And the library too suffered from the same fate. Its incomparable collection of Indian fanzines had become food for silverfish.

'You suffer from Western anxiety. A few years out of India (he seems to have forgotten my 'Feezee' connection here) and you think that we are decaying. We have a different history. Give us a hundred years, may be a thousand and then ask these questions. Gandhi was once asked what he thought about Western civilisation. He replied he thought it would be a very good idea. So you see there is our way, the way of the Mother in Mother India and Birju's way that you endorse. Sudden change to correct history. We are part of a timeless continuum and we will survive when others have gone. Don't forget that'. He said other things besides but it was getting late. There was a different smell in the air, the evening smell of Indian bazaars with a whiff of spice and urine, the cologne d'inde. I excused myself and was soon out of the building. I walked towards the Bandra open air markets and then towards the bus stop. Besides the bus stop a man approached me and said 'You must be faran'. 'How do you know?' I asked. He didn't answer but walked off. I watched him disappear and felt a slight tinge of uneasiness in my head. Was I being followed? The faran seduces but is threatening as well. Perhaps that is it, Mr Ratan too is somehow faran, speaking a different language, part of a different history. Maybe faran is the Indian term for the colonial, the pardesi, the vilayati. At one point in Mother India Nargis/Radha asks the village school master to teach her wayward younger son Birju accountancy so that he can read the ledger books of the landlord. The schoolmaster replied, 'Even the Angrezi can't understand the village bania's accountancy'. The Angrezi, the English, the colonial, like the gargoyles must flee from their places of refuge if they wish to reclaim India. Naipaul tried and in the footsteps of the master I too have made my journey. But can the diaspora return to the mother, can it return to an imaginary homeland, can it ever decolonise its own discourse? Even if it did, will that make any difference to the grand, imperialist metanarratives of Mother India itself? When the Janata Party came to power in 1977 one of the first things it did was dig up a time capsule that Indira Gandhi had placed in the grounds of the Red Fort, Delhi. In it it is said she had written her government's version of the 'real' history of India from the time of the first Aryan imperialists onwards. Even though the Janata Party's act was predicated upon a wish to dismantle the
memory of the Emergency years, the act was also symptomatic of a much larger truth: that in fact the history of India cannot be written down until, in Mr Ratan’s words, 'we learn to radically reconstruct our symbolic worlds'.

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