WATER IN ANAND GANDHI'S THE SHIP OF THESEUS (2012) / EL AGUA EN THE SHIP OF THESEUS (2012), DE ANAND GANDHI

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Abstract

Anand Gandhi's film *Ship of Theseus* (2012) has been praised as an art film that expresses a universal quest for personal truth and moral obligation in today's India. The text addresses the challenges of Rising India in the current global economy. Ancillary subthemes to discuss include women's empowerment within the new Indian middle class and organ trafficking to oblige the demand in the West. Eventually, the film points out too that the Nehruvian agenda for India is being washed away by the opposite currents of fundamentalism and neoliberalism. In all three episodes in the film water takes a focal point as metaphor, stage, or synecdoche.

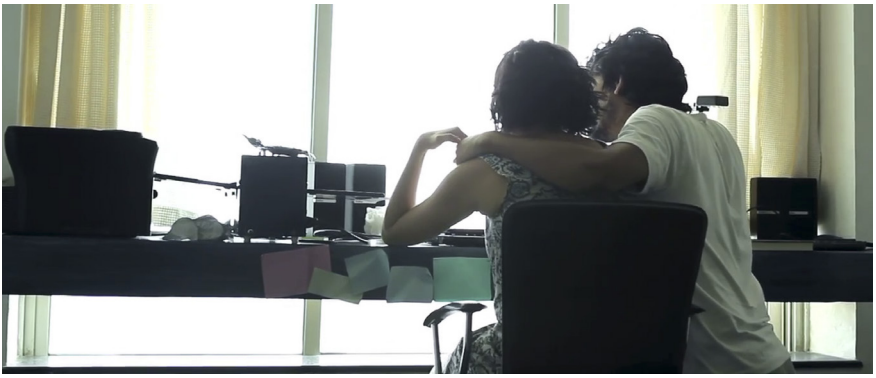
Keywords: Anand Gandhi /liberalisation in India/middle classes/organ trafficking /secularisation

Resumen

The Ship of Theseus, de Anand Gandhi, ha alcanzado notoriedad como film independiente que aborda los temas de la búsqueda de la verdad personal y la obligación moral en la India contemporánea. El texto estudia el desafío que supone para ese país su incorporación activa en el orden económico global. También se dan cita temas secundarios, como el empoderamiento de la mujer de clase media y el tráfico de órganos humanos para satisfacer la demanda en los países ricos. Finalmente, el film señala cómo la India secular ideada por Nehru está dando paso a una nueva realidad, sometida a las tensiones que causan el fundamentalismo y el neoliberalismo. En los tres episodios en que se divide el texto el agua ocupa un lugar central, bien como metáfora, entorno o sinécdoque.

Palabras clave: Anand Gandhi/lliberalización económica en India/ clases medias/ tráfico de órganos/ secularización

Since independence, Bollywood has re-circulated cultural codes that had once resisted Western conventions. Its more than three-hour stories combine song, romance, drama, the evils of dowry and inter-caste relationships. And they were a wonderful organ of expression for the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty with their Non-Aligned, reformist and autarkic agenda (Kishore-Ganpati 145).



(2:38) Fig 1. Episode 1: Aliya (Aida Elkasehf) and Vinay (Faraz Khan).

This of course did not preclude the oeuvre of creators like Satyajit Ray in the 1950s nor, more closely related to my presentation, the so-called New Indian Cinema of the late 1960s and 1970s (Ahmed par.3). It introduced a new view of the nation with a language largely imported from Europe. A 'social realist aesthetic, smaller budgets, location shooting, absence of song and dance sequences, lesser-known actors, and a naturalistic style' became its signature features (Tejaswine 25). Notice that this code, alien to Hindi cinema, had first been considered subversive in Europe too, as it denounced the cultural commodification that Hollywood and its epitomes in the West purported.

Liberalisation further expanded this cinema . Initially the limited measures carried out by Rajiv Gandhi in the 1980s, and later the major economic reforms implemented from the early 1990s onwards, led the way to current high rates of growth (cfr. Dreze-Sen 19). As we will see further, only a fraction of India's 1.2 billion people fully enjoy the benefits of globalized capitalism. They are what Amartya Sen and Jacques Drèze describe as 'islands of California in a sea of Subsaharan Africa.' But a large number of consumers ranging between 150 and 200 million is too large a number to ignore. In the mid Twentieth century Bollywood became an expression of nationhood; now multinational capitalism is decentring the nationalist discourse. Different niches are being created for cultural consumption, and this includes the production and circulation of independent films.

Anand Gandhi's *The Ship of Theseus* (2012) uses three stories to discuss the philosophical paradox: Do we continue to be the same kind of person if a key change occurs in our life? The film centres on three Mumbaians: a blind photographer who gets new eyes, a monk who has to choose between his moral principles and saving his own life, and a young ambitious stockbroker who receives a kidney transplant and discovers a ring of organ trafficking (Grover par. 12).

Gandhi`s extensive use of long takes, travelling camera, extreme close-ups and documentary style, blends topics related to the rising middle classes with a record of life in the slum. OK, you may say, but where is the water here? Well, the development and, especially, the resolution of the stories are marked by the sometimes unexpected presence of water as a backdrop: cesspool, ponds, sewage pipes, the Arabian Sea, the Baltic Sea,

fresh springs from the Himalayas, etc., are metaphors, synechdoques and stages in the film's views on human nature and on the political discourses prevalent in Rising India.

The first episode deals with the couple Aliya (Aida Elkasehf) and Vinay (Faraz Khan). They are upward and urban middle class professionals who live in what passes for a developed area in Mumbai. Aliya is a photographer affected by a cornea infection that has blinded her. Thanks to state-of-the-art technology, her camera is equipped with colour—and space— sensitive programmes that allow her to take pictures. She then prints on a braille-coded printer. Vinay is a lecturer in the academic circle. As she gradually recovers her eyesight thanks to a transplant, her latent assertiveness becomes an irritant in the power relationship established between the couple.

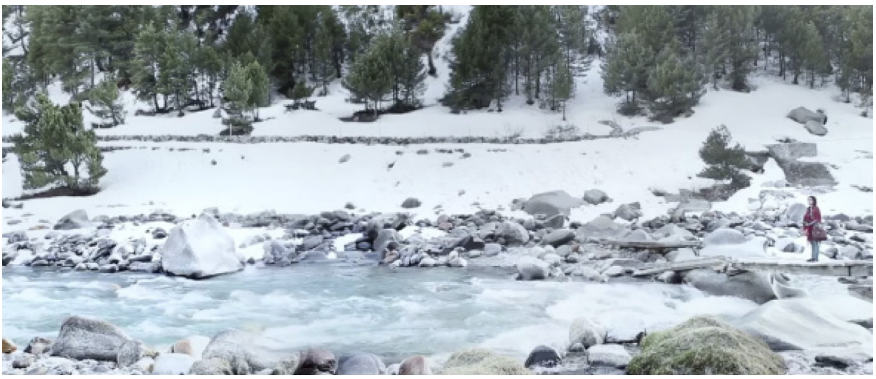
How feminist is Aliya? What role does water play in their story to underline her class/gender affirmation? As a man, I was at first tempted to place her as a 'feminist' the way the term is commonly taken for granted in our post- Civil Rights West. But I then found crisscrossing currents of anti-patriarchal discourse that problematized her position. She is adamant in defending a space of her own, at home and outside. But both diegetic and non-diegetic information in the script complicate her adscription. Aliya's background as an educated Egyptian professional woman expatriated in Mumbai puts her in line with what Chandra Talpade Mohanti labels 'Multicultural feminism.' Developed in the Third World and by differentiating itself from the West, it has complicated the 'questions of 'home,' 'belonging,' 'nation,' and 'community' (Mohanti 124).

Aliya's search for empowerment necessarily goes beyond Third World feminism. She was born in the Near East and lives in South Asia. But she was raised in a bourgeois, secular family, where the women enjoy economic means and cultural habitus that assimilate them to the West. Aliya does not seem to have any direct confrontation with patriarchal structures. In fact, her parents are separated or divorced, and her father is not just absent, but is rendered invisible in a matrifocal family (cfr. Scott 88). She seems to be unaffected by the ordeals of lower class/caste women in India, as we'll see in a moment. Her gender alienation is of another kind.

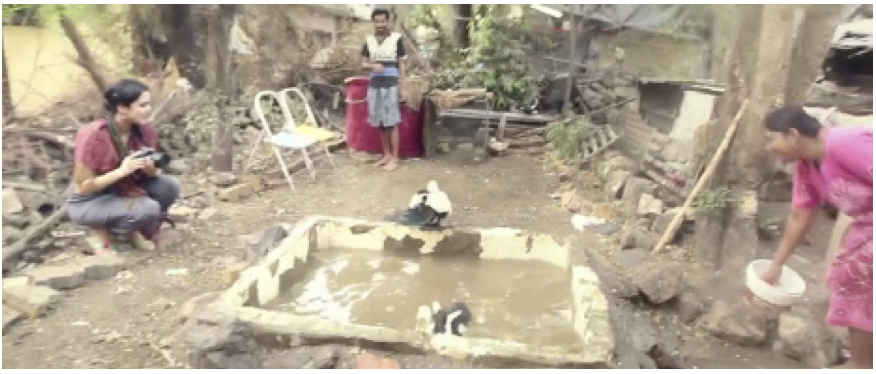
She's a professional young woman emotionally involved in her work and resents her being dependent on her husband, who edits her work and organises exhibits for her. In other words, she refuses Vinay to manage her career. As she recovers eyesight, she articulates a vision of her life free from restrictions originated by cultural/ethnic origin or gender division. But in contrast to her Western foremothers, Aliya is keen on escaping the problem with no name.

Vinay may pass for an example of the western 'new man'. He is likely to incarnate the 'limp dick' we men are warned against, and more so in societies so gender-unreconstructed like India, where random rape, female infanticide, and wet-sari Bollywood icons coexist in endless circulation.

Vinay inadvertently shares in the symbolic violence of the world outside. It is not easy for a young man alienated from his cultural environment to cross the hazy line that separates masculinist affirmation from family nurture.



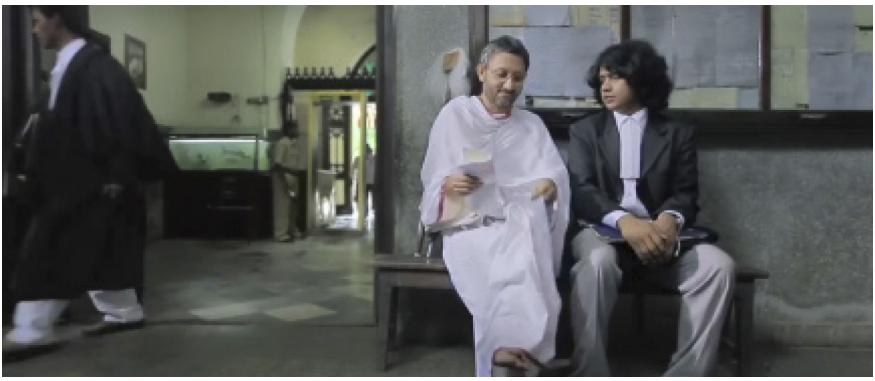
(35:55) Fig. 2. Episode 1: Aliya feels empowered away from Mumbai.



(11:02) Fig. 3. Episode 1: Aliya perceives the sublime in poverty.

Whereas Vinay is not conscious of his privilege in hegemonic masculinity, Aliya sees through their lopsided relationship (cfr. Mohanty 64; List 38-39). This finally becomes apparent even though she's unable to articulate it until she leaves the city to do field work in Himachal Pradesh. There springs rushing down from the Himalayas invite her to enjoy her freedom.

It might be risky on my part to pre judge that Aliya's final rejection of the power relationship between the couple leaves behind Western liberal feminism. She certainly does not accept the complementary role of women in the private sphere, and this fact puts her on the way to radical feminism. But her relation with economically less fortunate sisters rules out socially charged feminism. Abusing Gayatri Spivak's topos, for Aliya the subordinate need not speak. On one occasion when she was blind yet, Aliya does a photo session in the home of a very poor couple. The centrepiece of her interest is a small pond in the house yard-a sordid reminder of her memories of a family vacation in Egypt when she was a child. The contrast between Aliya's apartment on a posh area and the shanty house is striking. Since the better off command political discourse, these groups become invisible. For blind Aliya, urban squalor is an object of aesthetic speculation.



(41:09) Fig 4. Episode 2: Manesh Matreya (Neeraj Kabi) and Cārvāka (Shukla Vinay).

(68:05) Fig. 5. Episode 2: Maitreya's endless pilgrimage to fight pharmabusiness.

Three degrees of separation alienate Aliya from the woman she takes pictures of: nation (she's an Arabic-speaking foreigner expatriate in Mumbai), class (a yuppie who intrudes in a slum house) and gender role (not sex: she invades private spaces as part of her public activity). So, empathy, or sisterhood based on gender oppression is all but absent (cfr. Navarro 175).

The second story tells of Manesh Matreya (Neeraj Kabi) a Jain monk who is fighting a court case to ban animal testing in India, and Cārvāka (Shukla Vinay), a young lawyer. The main plot consists of the latter's effort to persuade the monk to adopt 'commonsense' reasoning to fight pharmabusiness, and this includes Maitreya accepting medical treatment for his liver cirrhosis.

A 'monk within a monk' as actor Kabi described the character in an interview (TIFF 2014), Maitreya shows the losing battles of Third World cultures to resist Westernisation: the good and evil of material progress and cultural homogenisa tion go hand in hand, and it is virtually impossible not to pollute one's national or cultural identity while embracing progress and modernisation.

(58:20) Fig 6. Episode 2: Kālā Pāni stops Maitreya short of confronting unsustainable medical research.

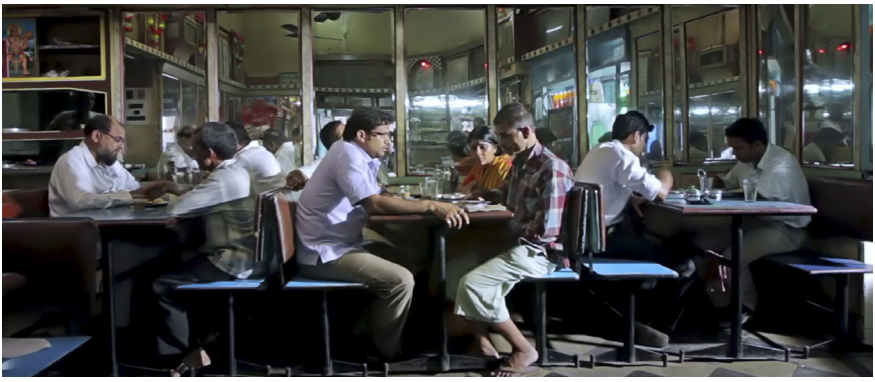
For Maitreya if an act of violence has to be carried out, it should be an act of free will against oneself, never violence against others. Nonviolence and the pursuit of truth are intertwined in his endless treks, from Mumbai to the suburbs and even to Jaipur. There he confronts his ultimate dilemma: to live or to die, either on behalf of or at the cost of others. His habitat is being reduced by the day, and only in remote, untouched abodes can he expect to find a natural cure to his (and the nation's) illness.

Long takes and travelling shots show Maitreya's mood in his battle against cirrhosis as well as his fight against consumerism. He is a mystic atheist who believes that no god but the human spirit will save our species, and that the human spirit has produced waste that pollutes the environment and the soul. Sustainability (ecological or ethical) seems to be a moot point in Rising India.

Pilgrimage is becoming increasingly more difficult, even ineffectual in contemporary India. Maitreya's is abruptly stopped by the kālā pāni, (the black sea) that separates Bharat from the barbarian lands. In his search for a solution to his existential problem, and those of the nation, Maitryea confronts the Arabian Sea, a wall that the Jain doctrine discourages its adepts to cross.

Eventually Maitreya clutches to survival. Here the young lawyer Cārvāka deserves our attention, as he persuades Maitreya into a secular way to solve his moral dilemma. By accepting a liver transplant, Maytreya defers his nirvana, but may gather more strength to fight his case against globalisation. The lawyer's name is meaningful in the story too. Cārvāka was a materialist philosophical system that rose in India in 5th century BCE, and has survived to this very day. In the film Gandhi he gives a current twist to this character, as he wears a Pastafari T shirt and sarcastically declares to Maitreya, his devotion to that postmodern and ecumenical (globalised) religion.

I believe that the secular influence is present in the monk's eventual acceptance of his urge to survive. Cārvāka's inspiration endures in the epilogue of the film, when a cured and secularised Maitreya is confronted from the inside the 'incredible' social formation that India is becoming in the 2010s.



(112.16) Fig 7. Episode 3: Naveen (Shohum Shah) and .Shankar (Yashwant Wasnik).

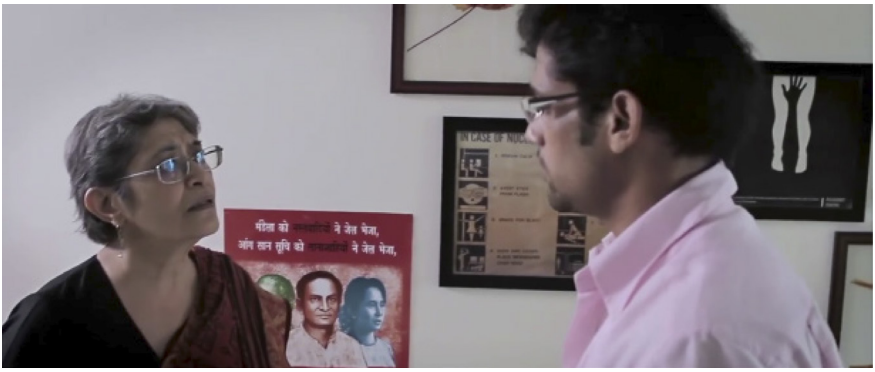
The final story focuses of Naveen (Shohum Shah), a Mumbai stockbroker who received a kidney. He learns of a human organ racket that steals organs from poor people for the market in Western countries. Naveen's quest to have justice done to Shankar (Yashwant Wasnik) one of the victims of the racket leads him to Stockholm where he meets the receiver face to face.

Naveen's profession recalls the unequal development of India. The establishing shot shows him in a hospital room where he is recovering from the transplant operation. Still wearing a protective mask, he is working on a desktop computer and discusses figures on the phone. His professional zeal suggests the obsession of corporate power in India to beat annual growth rates. And in parallel to Naveen risking his health, the nation's GDP is being topped at the cost of environmental hazards, the displacement of communities for the exploitation of natural resources, and rising social inequality (cfr. Drèze-Sen 41-2).

The mirage of development has placed people like Naveen (or Aliya and Vinay in the first story) as the clients of the new state of India. They, and not Shankar (or the overwhelming majority of the population) are part of what the establishment calls the 'common people' (Drèze-Sen 268-9). Policies to secure their welfare deduct funds for the underprivileged.

Naveen's segment shows too that this national version of Asiatic capitalism is being articulated by a shady network of professional criminals, dishonest politicians, and an economic oligarchy. As a result, corruption is entrenched: petty businessmen, civil servants, the police administration, even poorer voters, lured by populist slogans contribute to keeping the state greased and functioning (Chandra et al 685). Even Naveen does business with crony entrepreneurs with hazy political connections.

What Naveen perceives a boom time is a dystopia for Ajji (Amba Sanyal), his grandmother. Ajji is a lawyer who in the past had been involved in revolutionary movements and now works for a civil rights organisation. In the middle of an argument on idealism vs. practicality, Ajji asks Naveen what keeps him so happy about his lifestyle. He glibly replies 'I eat well, drink well... people around me respect me' (min. 98). This answer gives a touch of local colour to the



(89:29) Fig. 8. Episode 3: Ajji (Amba Sanyal) and Naveen: Socialism vs. Neoliberalism.

neoliberal tenet that 'there is no such thing as society.' For Ajji, her grandchild has become 'a slave to the Americans' as she says (104:24), who for decades and until 9/11 had strained relations with India (cfr. Kamdar 274).

The metanarrative of the script leads us to how liberalisation for many in India did not merely open the nation to the global markets. Just weeks ago prime minister Narenda Modi visited the United States. His adversaries in the press regret Modi's 'Make in India' campaign for foreign investment as a bid to sell out the nation for a spurious bid to top China in the eyes of the markets. ('Make in India' Shove 7). Ajji has it that the price that India will pay to be modern is far too high: it will lose its soul in exchange for producing second-rate consumer goods. Thus, the fate of the nation in the new order will be that of underdevelopment within development.

Liberalisation strikes in Ajji a sense of contradiction between her fight for social justice and her nostalgia for the more humane, harmonic relations that existed in the years before liberalisation. On the one hand, Naveen reproaches her for her ineffectual revolution, which in his opinion was limited to giving away condoms in remote villages (Kaviraj 245; cfr.Chandra et al. 408). Political posters are hanging on the walls of her living room/office —the revolution is crafted into an object for leisure consumption.[1]

On the other, Ajji's campaign for contraception is a token Gandhi introduced on the role of articulate women in the forefront of progressive pleas. This includes, of course, the family planning programmes mentioned in the script, but also the denunciation of human rights abuses. Ajji is looking after the case of a militant from Chhattisgarh charged with terrorism. Incidentally the area is one of those hot points where the Maoist guerrillas fight the vested interests of multinationals in resources-rich areas.

[1] My acknowledgment to Ms. Monalisa Brahma for her translation of the motto in the red poster shown in min 89: it alludes to the repression of prominent political prisoners who have become martyrs and examples to follow in their respective societies or nation-states.

Naveen is irked by Ajji's tirades on the evils of liberalisation; for his part Shankar leads him to discover how most Mumbaians live (and the peoples of the global South at large).

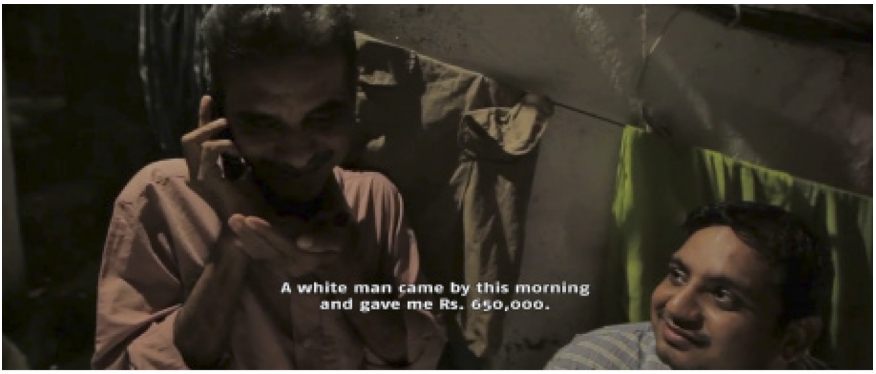
The camera shows Naveen and his brother Manu (Sameer Khurana) searching for and eventually meeting Shankar in a slum area in Tilak Nagar. I find the switch between the fiction narration and the documentary technique remarkable. The viewer empathises with Naveen's quest to right a wrong done to a slum dweller; also, we understand how superfluous his gesture may be, as he gets lost in the maze of alleys, cul de sacs, and endless flight of stairs that the locals cope with in their daily lives.

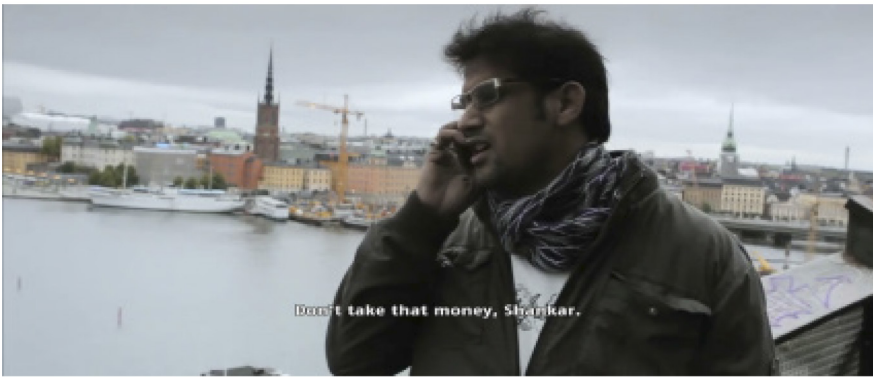
Life in the slum is outrageous, not just for its rampant poverty, but because of the symbolic violence that keeps the settlers away from middle-class Mumbai. When Naveen meets Shankar for the first time in the police station, a general view shot shows the neighbourhood engulfed by modern high-rises —a foreboding gentrification, with the consequences of relocation for the dwellers from the slum into sheer homelessness.

As the camera takes us further into the slum, we find how standard services gradually exclude the settlement and the people are forced to set up facilities of their own. These people are shackled to a never-ending cycle of social reproduction. They are the sacrificial victims of the liberal dispensation, redundant in all but as vote banks. Bollywood movie posters reach up to the point where the road traffic ends. However, we are shown a BJP poster stuck on an alley wall twice in the middle of the slum, in view and appreciation of the dwellers. Here Gandhi spurs a reflection on communitarian politics, the divide-and-rule-strategy that Hindu nationalism has successfully resorted to. The functional microcosm that the slum used to be is dishevelled and the social and cultural divisions occupy the void that follows (cfr. Sharma xxx-xxxi): locals against migrants, Hindus against the rest, Aryans against Tamils, etc. An ultimate consequence is that crime thrives and corruption involves a larger number of individuals. When Naveen encourages Shankar to sue those who ruined his health, he refuses to have anything to do with the courts. A monotheist invisible in the Hindu complex, Shankar only trusts that their God will punish them (min. 111).

But no one, not even Naveen can live untouched by corruption, and he learns from shady channels that Shankar's kidney has ended up in Stockholm. After he meets the recipient of Shankar's kidney in Sweden, he no longer believes in the sanctity of the free initiative that should grant him to 'eat well, drink well,...'. In other words, he learns his position and that of his country in the international order.

Naveen and a friend of his who had migrated in Sweden visit Mr. Jacobsen (Mats Qviström), a baby boomer who lives in a New Age utopia of sorts in the outskirts of Stockholm. The man ushers them into his house, while the camera is panned around a sort of IKEA exhibit, graced with multicultural paraphernalia. When they tackle the point of the meeting, hospitality evaporates and Western double standards emerge: 'I do not want to talk about it' Jacobsen curtly replies (min. 117) and invites them to leave his house.





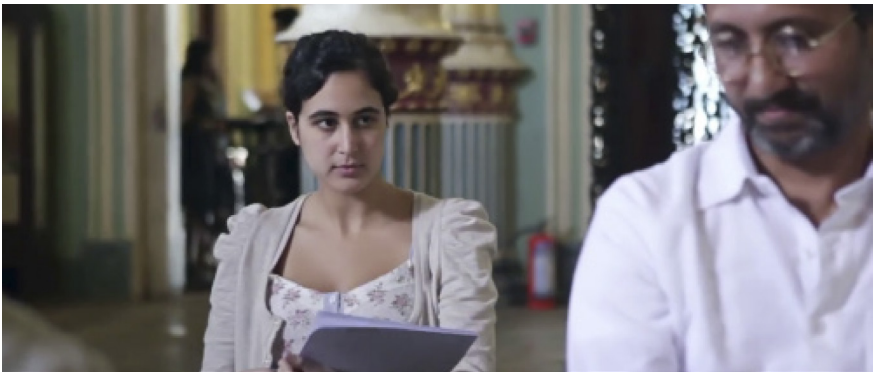
(130:17) Fig. 9 - (130:19) Fig. 10: Organ trafficking and the international division of labour.

Jacobsen turns into a pathetic image of an ageing Swedish liberal, a caricature of a White Western man ashamed of his privileges. To do so, the script includes mock Bergman-like lines on guilt and retribution, as he pledges to take care of Shankar's health in India.

The global system of capital and communication mobility has enabled Jacobsen to wash his conscience. Shankar's life is priced at 650.000 Indian Rupees, a generous sum to put an end to the scandal. The sequence is set up in shot/reverse shots that alternate Stockholm harbour with Mumbai's Tilak Nagar. Guilt is outsourced, from the Western judicial system (which indicts organ trafficking) into the informal, human rights-free environment of a Third-World slum.

At the end of the film we realise Anand Gandhi has carried us from the ship of Theseus (do people change?) into Plato's cave (nothing is like it seems).

The final sequence portrays the Indian receivers at a gathering organised by the foundation that conducted the transplants. We leave them watching an clip shot by the deceased, who we are told was an amateur cave explorer — a human shadow is portrayed on the screen, projected onto the quartz cave walls. We the viewers of the film are as intrigued as Aliya, Maitreya and Naveen, as they watch the shadows in the cave.



(136:30) Fig 11. Epilogue: The characters meet. Have they changed?

My aim has been to discuss the political discourse underlying the philosophical discussion expressed in Anand Gandhi's *The Ship of Theseus*. Liberalisation has unsurprisingly brought to the fore the rise of a new middle class, which produces and consumes services for and from the world market. These contentious forces prompt India's inclusion in the global economy. And here, water is a major background for all three stories: the fresh springs of the Himalayas, the troubled waters of Mumbai's Sealink, and the IKEA poster of Stockholm harbour. In these backgrounds Aliya, Maitreya and Naveen meet their fate and learn their place in the new worldwide dispensation.

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