



Love on Wheels: The Toy Train and the Tea Plantation in Pradeep Sarkar's *Parineeta* (2005)¹

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In Pradeep Sarkar's award-winning Bollywood film *Parineeta* (2005),² an antique train navigates deep forest and tea plantations in the Darjeeling foothills before reaching its final destination, a quaint Victorian-era railway station (Chatterjee 2007; Baker 2013).³ Along the way, the hero Shekhar serenades his heroine Lalita from the train while fantasising about her, a beautiful young woman who in his eyes seems everywhere.⁴ One moment, she is a tea-picker in a plantation who watches the train go by (figure 1); in the next, she is a fellow passenger in the train compartment (figure 2) who startles him as he sings about her, her spectral, fluctuating presence a hallmark of montage practices in commercial Hindi cinema. Marking a key turning point in the narrative when sexual attraction is repackaged as romantic desire, the song sequence situates the two lead characters within the more formulaic patterns of courtship in Bollywood cinema, a move that also ensures that *Parineeta* conforms to the Indian Central Board of Film Certification's unwritten censorship mandate for 'clean and healthy entertainment' (Kumar 2011: 37f.).⁵



Figure 1: Lalita (Vidya Balan) as a tea picker



Source: Screen grab, Parineeta (2005).

Figure 2: Lalita (Vidya Balan) and Shekhar (Saif Ali Khan) inside the train compartment



Source: Screen grab, Parineeta (2005).

Uniquely, the *visual* re-casting of the sexual as romantic relies on a tea plantation and the toy train (known officially as the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway), two quintessential remnants of the British Raj that are used to spatialise Shekhar's fantasy of Lalita in the tea-growing landscapes of the eastern Himalaya.⁶ In the process, the two Raj-era loci are re-imagined as sites of desire where time, memory, and longing are mediated through their historic appeal.⁷ On the surface, these cinematic choices may seem out of place in an industry that has typically demonstrated an 'anti-British sentiment' to promote powerful mythologies of nationhood and national identity (Thomas 1998: 162). Yet, Hindi cinema has never shied away



from taking full advantage of the scenic potential of colonial hill stations in the Himalaya to choreograph its song-and-dance sequences, those 'pleasure-pauses' (Kumar 2011: 35-48) whose representations of masculinity and femininity continually negotiate and affirm 'traditional' Indian values in Bollywood terms for a local and global diasporic audience (Punathambekar & Kavoori 2008: 1-14).

In Sarkar's *Parineeta*, the hero's railway journey to Darjeeling is Sarkar's embellishment to a story published in 1914 by the celebrated Bengali author Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay.⁸ While Chattopadhyay's narrative has been picturised numerous times from 1942 onwards in Bengali and Hindi films⁹, no such railway journey exists in the original story; nor does it appear in Bimal Roy's 1953 Hindi version of *Parineeta* or in Ajoy Kar's 1969 Bengali adaptation.¹⁰ Another radical change in Sarkar's adaptation is the relocation of Chattopadhyay's story to 1962 when Darjeeling had emerged as a popular tourist spot for Indian travellers. For Sarkar, the temporal switch was a deliberate one. 'We have set the film in the 1960s, and not 1913, since it will be difficult for the modern generation to identify with the Brahmo Samaj notions of that time'.¹¹ For the primarily Hindi-speaking viewers of Bollywood movies who are unfamiliar with Bengali history and literature, such adjustments were crucial. One might go so far as to observe that Sarkar utilises the heterogeneous, fluid, and multi-layered matrix of nostalgia to evoke memories of an India of the 1960s that he himself probably carries (he was born in Calcutta in 1955).¹² For a Bengali film-maker like him, the toy train and the tea plantation (*cha bagaan*) represent two iconic Himalayan features of north Bengal.

Strikingly, Sarkar downplays the Raj heritage of the train and plantation by drawing them through a trail of nostalgic references to a famous song sequence—also set in Darjeeling—in the 1969 Hindi film *Aradhana*. Moreover, for Lalita's imaging, he appropriates the iconic picture of the woman tea-plucker or picker so heavily promoted by the Indian tea industry to represent Darjeeling tea (figure 3). As such, the train and plantation are re-presented as irrefutably contemporary Indian sites even while their material, spatial, and cultural realities remain yoked to a colonial past. Cinematic pleasure is thus mediated by the embeddedness of the colonial past in the celluloid past. By the time Sarkar made his version of *Parineeta*, 18 commercial Hindi films beginning with Raj Kapoor's *Barsaat* (1949) had been shot either partially or in their entirety



on location in Darjeeling,¹³ their cinematography harnessing the natural beauty of the area and the heritage buildings of the hill station to stage the ups and downs of romance and courtship. Not surprisingly, therefore, for movie goers watching *Parineeta*, Darjeeling was already synonymous with modern-day Indian romance, its romantic associations firmly embedded in the cinematic re-enactments of courtship anchored by the Himalayan splendour of its once colonial landscape.

Figure 3: Logo for Darjeeling Tea, Tea Board India



Source: Author's collection.

In this essay, I examine how Sarkar constructs Shekhar's fantasy of Lalita at the intersection of landscape, materiality, and memory within the broader framework of nostalgia whose very epistemologies rely on 'processes of idealization and simplification' (Brown & Humphreys 2002: 143). Often dismissed as a means of idealising the past, nostalgia, in fact, constitutes a 'critical tool' for 'opening up new spaces' for articulating that past and for examining how the past might be inscribed and articulated in the present (Pickering & Keightley 2006: 923f.).

Key to such articulations in *Parineeta* are historical artefacts and Himalayan landscapes that romanticise our sense of space and time while simultaneously bringing into sharp focus their continued relevance in the present and the future. Moreover, they clarify widely held expectations about heterosexual norms of courtship and marriage, for it is within the confines of the train and plantation that such norms are performed and



affirmed. Thus, nostalgia emerges as the matrix within which the contours of sexual desire, longing, and romance are explored and shaped, and a colonial artefact (train) and landscape (plantation) in the Himalaya are deployed as the material sites where modern-day narratives of love and yearning are inscribed.

How then does Sarkar represent the train and the plantation to stage heterosexual desire and courtship on the big screen? And how do his picturisations reinforce modern Indian identities for these remnants of the British Raj? Keeping these questions in mind, I now turn to Sarkar's aesthetic strategies to analyse how he harnesses the sights and sounds of a Himalayan landscape to visualise love and romance in the toy train and the tea plantation. Finally, I look at how nostalgia produces new axes of public memory and historicity for two recognisable colonial loci whose visual histories and identities in a post-Independence India, are drawn through the legacy of commercial Hindi cinema.

Into the Woods

A technological marvel, the railway was 'the grandest exponent of the enterprise, the wealth, and the intelligence of our race' rhapsodised the *Illustrated London News* in 1862.¹⁴ Just over a decade later, in 1879, the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway began to take shape at over 7,000 feet in the eastern Himalaya (figure 4). An engineering feat stretching across 48 miles of steep Himalayan slopes, the toy train represented the commercialisation of the Himalayan landscape where dense forest was cleared to create sprawling tea plantations (Ray 2013: 52-95). It was also frequently romanticised (Roy & Hannam 2013: 581-3) with one observer describing it as 'Liliputian' with a 'track' that looks like it was 'laid for a toy railway' (*Illustrated Guide for Tourists* 1896: 9). In the post-Independence era, the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway emerged as one of the quintessential attractions for Indian tourists, its novelty sealed by countless postcards, advertisements, stamps, and tourist guidebooks that promoted its scenic appeal (Roy & Hannam 2013: 580-94).



Figure 4: "Choonbatti Loop, Darjeeling Himalayan-Railway," early 1900s



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Source: Photographic print on postcard, author's collection.

While Dwyer and Patel have noted that the train functions as a 'major icon of modernity' in Hindi films (Dwyer & Patel 2002: 56), in *Parineeta*, however, the iconicity of the toy train hinges on its modern-day reputation as a unique relic of the Raj whose image has been widely disseminated by the Indian tourism industry especially since 1999 when the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway became a UNESCO World Heritage Site.¹⁵ A popular tourist attraction in Darjeeling today,¹⁶ the restored toy train regularly traces the famous railway tracks that wind their way through picturesque hill towns and scenic stretches of mountainscape (Roy & Hannam 2013: 83; Cleere 2001: 13).¹⁷

To make the journey look as authentic as possible in *Parineeta*, Sarkar recreated the toy train by utilising abandoned compartments that his production team "uncovered" in Sukna near Darjeeling. The original look of the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway was reconstructed by refurbishing the railway compartments and attaching them to an engine (the only surviving component offered to the film crew), a restoration process that took over six months after a series of negotiations with the West Bengal



government (Mazumder 2015; Vidhu Vinod Chopra Films 2016). As Sarkar recalled in a 2015 interview, '[a]fter pre-production, we waited long for this to get done, because this song is very important in the narrative. It drove us crazy but it made the film work' (Mazumder 2015).

What also made the song "work" was the tea country in which Sarkar situated the train sequence, a mixture of forest and plantation that instantly taps into the viewer's expectations of long-established visual tropes of Himalayan wonder associated with travelling in the toy train. Verdant plantation and dense forest permeate the screen as the train appears at different elevations puffing clouds of smoke and steam, its visuals interspersed with the image of Shekhar strumming his guitar, dreaming of Lalita, or leaning out of the compartment (a classic pose for a Bollywood hero). As train and romance become entangled with each other, a turning point is forged in Shekhar's friendship with Lalita, and sexual awakening is shown to crystallise into romantic longing. Positioned in the filmic narrative only after Lalita and Shekhar have consummated their relationship, the train ride can be read symbolically as a rite of passage for Shekhar, a journey of introspection and self-discovery that represents a shift away from the time-bound calibrations of urban life. Cocooned in a world of his own, the hero is far removed from the scrutiny of family and friends 'beyond the time and space of [his] normal, everyday [life]' (Dwyer & Patel 2002: 59). In the primal depths of the forest, chronological time appears to become timeless.

Buoyed up by his emotions, Shekhar savours the sensory delights of the leafy *Terai* jungle. Framed from within the interior of the railway compartment, the seemingly unbounded expanse of the forest draws attention to the unknown, the unexplored. In this beautiful but forbidding terrain, the train mediates the desire to navigate and overcome unfamiliar boundaries. In a radical departure from the sheltered urban interiors of Calcutta where Shekhar is generally portrayed in the film, the forest fundamentally constitutes an escape from the mundane, circumscribed life of the city. And it is here that Shekhar is shown to realise his longing for Lalita. Primal instincts are therefore reinstated as love, and the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway emerges as the controlled orbit of desires and memories where Lalita's image haunts a love-struck Shekhar, her fluctuating "presence" akin to a spectral fantasy whose projections signal the intensity of his attraction towards her. Corporeality wavers as Lalita's absent body is inserted into Shekhar's surroundings, her imagined



presence heightening a sense of the past defined by the hero's relationship with her back home in Calcutta, while anticipating her reunion with him in the future. To borrow from Gilles Deleuze, in the 'cinematographic image [...] there is no present which is not haunted by a past and a future' (Deleuze 1989: 37).

Indeed, Lalita's in-betweenness becomes a visual tease, her liminality ensuring that we grasp her image as a figment of Shekhar's imagination. Nostalgia is thus writ large in the hero's fantastical imaginings of his beloved, its ontologies foreshadowing in typical Bollywood style the marital union between the hero and heroine after they have managed to navigate the twists and turns of life's journey. Alternating between scenic views of the forest and plantation, and Shekhar singing in the compartment and dreaming of Lalita, Sarkar drops the camera to the level of the tracks, suspending it over the train as it executes one of its infamous loops, or positioning it deep in the forest where he aims it at the locomotive moving full steam ahead towards the viewer.

While such visual drama emphasises the full scope of Himalayan splendour, it also draws attention to the perilous terrain and the challenges that come with navigating steep mountainside. The deeper the train travels into the forest and the higher it climbs, the greater the intensity of Shekhar's emotions. Thus, the physical journey is shored up as a psychic journey, as the touristic experience of sightseeing focuses both on the exterior (the scenic views and "markers") and the psychic interior or the inner self (emotions and sentiments). As the song sequence progresses, it becomes increasingly clear that the train sets the pace at which the visualisations of Shekhar's desires and self-reflections unfold. Especially striking is how Sarkar harnesses the technologies of the toy train to express the depth of Shekhar and Lalita's growing bond.

In reality, the toy train journey is a noisy experience filled with the harsh sounds of iron scraping against iron, the rattling of train compartments, the boom of the engine, and the squeal of the train's high-pitched whistle. These sonic effects are re-arranged, edited, or eliminated to produce a harmonious audio experience. Seconds before the song begins, the piercing train whistle announces the transition to the song as Shekhar, flush with the discovery of attraction, begins to sing of his affection for Lalita. At first a jarring noise that mirrors Lalita's torment (she has just been insulted by Shekhar's father as an unsuitable partner



for his son), minutes later, the whistle forms a sonic bridge to the song sequence that commences with Shekhar strumming his guitar and fantasising about his beloved (he is blissfully unaware of Lalita's ordeal in Calcutta). Particularly dramatic is the musical score that follows for which the train becomes a sonic instrument. A series of distinctive beats articulated by the sound of iron wheels pounding the iron rails is complemented by the hiss of steam and the whistle of the train, their collective rhythms and melodies evoking the rhythm of a human heartbeat.¹⁸ As Shekhar reminisces about Lalita while journeying to Darjeeling, his heartbeat accelerates whenever he imagines her nearby. Consequently, the audio effects capture the unmistakably raw pulse of attraction and elicit the viewer's participation in an intimate moment of self-discovery.

Nostalgia is thus linked to the sentient body and its very capacity to feel, remember, and invoke love and longing all at once, while the body's visceral responses to memories of love and desire are mediated through sound and image. For its part, Sarkar's reconstructed train compartment takes viewers into an idealised world of train travel where sound becomes music and the Himalayan forest, a place of nostalgic reflection. Here too, Shekhar creates his fantasies of Lalita, first as a tea picker in a nearby plantation and next as a dutiful partner who joins him inside the train. In effect, the train frames and contains Lalita's fantastical images. Such visualisations not only express the intensity of yearning, their imaging in unexpected spaces relies on the power of fantasy to redirect the viewer's attention to the first concrete signs of romance. Thus, displacement and separation trigger nostalgic recollections of Lalita, enabling Shekhar to see himself as an ardent lover while ensuring that Lalita becomes who Shekhar wants her to be.

As Dwyer and Patel have observed, Bollywood caters directly to the expectations of India's primarily patriarchal society in which 'women's bodies do not belong to themselves, but to the patriarchal male' (2002: 84). Here, Lalita is a figment of Shekhar's imagination, her figure subject to *his* yearning. How, when, and where she appears is directed by *his* act of remembering. Memory is therefore lodged in nostalgia, in the longing (Greek *algia*) for home (*nostos*) articulated by Lalita's domestication as an idealised, chaste woman. Resurrected with the help of recognisable visual tropes, most notably the iconic motif of the tea picker in a plantation, Lalita crystallises into Shekhar's heroine.



A tea picker in the plantation

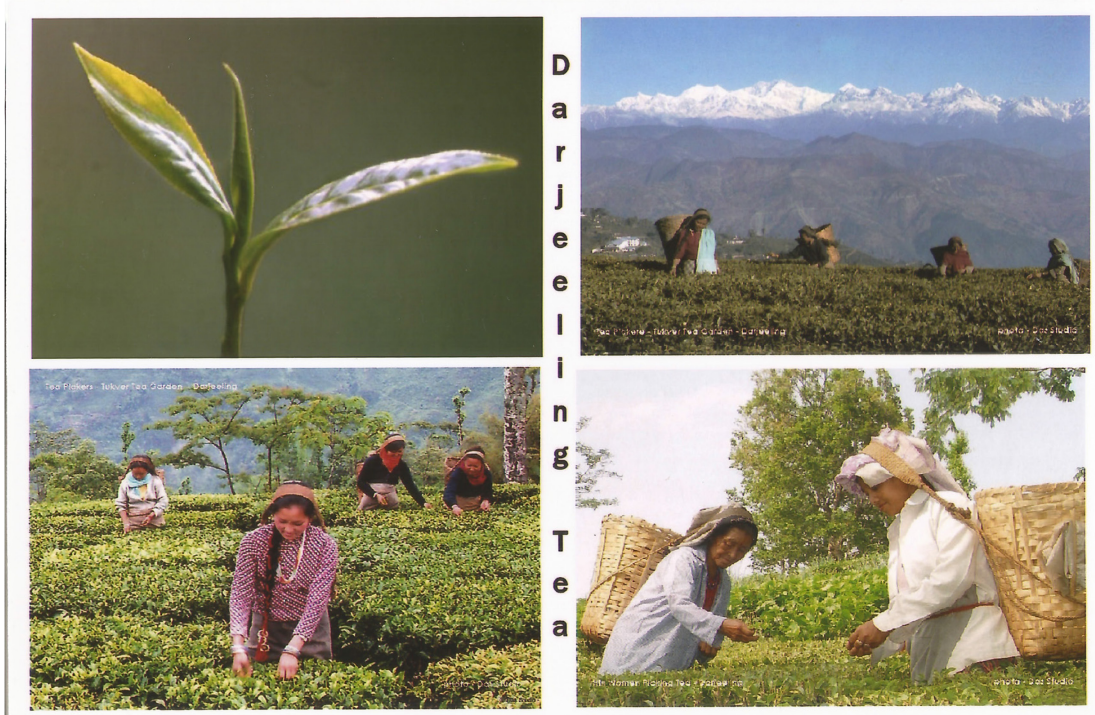
In the official logo for Darjeeling tea (figure 3), a woman labourer holds up a sprig of tea or two leaves and a bud, the tender, leafy portion of the tea bush plucked and processed into flavourful tea (Shil & Das 2012: 76f.).¹⁹ She also features in numerous postcards, advertisements, documentary films that reiterate the artisanal quality of Darjeeling tea (figure 5).²⁰ For the urban consumer, she represents the rural "other", an exotic figure who evokes both the distant, misty landscapes of Darjeeling's famed tea country and the unique flavour of Darjeeling tea—a duality that Sarkar harnesses to set Lalita's character apart from all others in *Pari-neeta* by orchestrating her appearance on the screen as a labourer dressed in traditional Nepali attire with the customary tea picker's basket strapped to her head (figure 1). Such imaging can also be traced back to commercial Hindi films from the 1970s and 1980s that centred on the "tribal" or village belle falling in love with an urban male hero. By framing Lalita as the quintessential villager, Sarkar shapes a fantasy that caters to urban taste and sensibility with Shekhar exemplifying the Calcutta-based businessman travelling to Darjeeling. Ensclosed in the toy train, Shekhar epitomises the rich urban Indian tourist.

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Here, I would like to turn to Dean MacCannell's observation that it is only by 'participat[ing] in a collective ritual, in connecting one's own marker to a sight already marked by others' that the touristic experience of sightseeing is affirmed (MacCannell 1999: 137). One can surmise that the 'marker' in this instance is the tea picker, while the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway is the artefact that mediates the 'collective ritual' of a train journey. Lalita's image conflated with that of an iconic labourer adds another layer of spectatorial engagement to the pleasure of recognising a long fetishised visual 'marker', but in the process, it empties the tea picker's image of any real signs of hard labour by wresting her away from the circulation of capital and the hierarchies of plantation life. Repositioned within the orbit of romantic desire and pure visual delight, the very act of plucking tea becomes an orchestrated performance, its artifice situating Lalita in the realm of the fantastical where flights of fancy in a song sequence flatten out the lived experience in a Himalayan plantation. Quite simply, the performance of labour is meant to entertain.



Figure 5: Tea pickers, "Darjeeling Tea" © Das Studio, Darjeeling, India, unknown date



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Source: Photographic print on postcard, author's collection.

As a medium in which the represented world can be suspended, rearranged, and destabilised, cinema offers the opportunity to make visible the scope and depth of the imagined, the fantastical. Fantasy can also be nostalgia writ large, its capacity to revisit the past making room for Sarkar to deploy the power of memory to create a self-narrative for Shekhar based on his fantasy of Lalita in the plantation, both as herself and as a tea picker. In doing so, Sarkar manages to romanticise both Shekhar and Lalita, a cinematic manoeuvre articulated by 'a heightened focus' on the past (memories of Lalita) that simultaneously sharpens a sense of the present (Shekhar discovers that he is in love) (Brown & Humphreys 2002: 143).

As such, Lalita's visualisation as a tea picker is the first sign of her reinvention as Shekhar's fantasy—one that is also eminently useful for the cinematic narrative. For it is in this song sequence that Lalita is reconstructed as the idealised heroine. Strikingly, Sarkar capitalises on the tea plant itself to reinstate Lalita's purity and innocence in the lyrics of the song: '*Yeh Hawaaye Gungunaaye/ Puchhe Tu Hai Kaha/ Tu Hai Phulo Me Kaliyo Mey/ Ya Mere Khwabo Kee Galiyo Mey*' (This whispering breeze



is asking where you might be/ You may be in the bud of a flower/ You may be in my dreams). Identified with the iconic fragment of two leaves and a bud, Lalita is framed as youthful, nubile, and wholesome. In the sylvan expanse of the plantation, she is as far removed as possible from the intimate world of sexual intercourse in Shekhar's bedroom in Calcutta where she was visualised earlier.

A heritage landscape in the Himalaya, therefore, shifts the attention from Lalita as a sexually desirable woman to Lalita as a romanticised and romantic heroine. Such duality or the juxtaposition of two opposites can be seen throughout the film and underscores specific paradigms of femininity defined by different settings. To this end, the plantation forms a counterpoint to the Moulin Rouge—a restaurant in Calcutta that features in *Parineeta* as a famous 1960s nightclub. Both locations constitute recognisable public spaces that break away from the interiors of Shekhar and Lalita's homes in which the movie is primarily set. As importantly, they frame two contrasting images of womanhood: if the plantation restores Lalita's chastity, then the Moulin Rouge represents the city's matrices of desire and seduction embodied by the vamp who entertains her customers in its glitzy interiors.²¹

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A 'newly freed urban space' borrowing from Brinda Bose, the nightclub 'assumes the metonymic equivalence of available sexual freedom for women, its powers and its dangers' (Bose 2008: 35). Portrayed on the heels of Shekhar thwarting Lalita's plan to visit the Moulin Rouge with her family, the vamp is everything Lalita is not—a seductive woman who entertains men and women. However, later, when a sexually awakened Lalita who has just slept with Shekhar comes close to being vamp-like herself, Sarkar introduces the train sequence in the Himalaya so that she emerges with her modesty and virtue intact. Enter the plantation, which reconfigures her femininity within the powerful male/patriarchal coding of women's sexuality cemented by Shekhar's fantasy.

When the viewer next encounters tea plantations in the film, Gayatri Tatiya, Lalita's rival, appears at Shekhar's side with her brother Siddharth; together, they help Shekhar negotiate a successful tea estate deal. In sharp contrast to Lalita, Gayatri's world of upper-class privilege is sealed off by her fashionable outfit and accessories. The Himalayan plantation is therefore used to draw attention to two radically different representations of femininity, wealth, and virtue to accentuate the con-



trast between the two women in Shekhar's life: Lalita, the childhood friend from a genteel but humble background with whom Shekhar has fallen in love, is depicted as a diligent worker in the plantation, whereas Gayatri, a wealthy acquaintance from his father's business circles, represents a confident business partner who owns the vast plantation property that surrounds her. Both female characters may share screen space with Shekhar, but it is Lalita's image that oscillates between the real and the imagined, and between landscape and locomotive, its liminality ensuring that the train compartment is fraught with Shekhar's memories and desires. As the setting shifts away from the leafy expanse of tea bushes into the woods, Shekhar's fantasies about Lalita intensify, drawing her into the train compartment where she next appears.

As Lalita's figure cuts across space and time, her mobile and malleable figure mirrors the unpredictable course of romance, a familiar visual strategy in Hindi film song sequences that dismantles the mundane defined by routine schedules and everyday encounters, to hone in on emotions, subplots, and narrative detours and disruptions. Thus, the very framework of romance is emphasised as anything but time-driven, while the different visual impressions of Lalita amplify the intensity of Shekhar's desire. Indeed, the train itself accentuates the slippages of time and space, for as Wolfgang Schivelbusch observes, the 'speed [of a train] causes objects to escape from one's gaze, but one nevertheless keeps on trying to grasp them' (1977: 60). As Lalita slips in and out of Shekhar's view, her desirability intensifies for him. Even the recurring refrain, '*Kasto Majja he railaima/Ramailo ukali oraal*' (how fun it is to journey by train, up and down the hill), accompanying the scene and sung by a chorus of schoolchildren as the train climbs uphill through Himalayan forest, registers Shekhar's growing attraction to Lalita. For it is the childrens' joyful performance that prompts Shekhar to spontaneously burst into song and fantasise about Lalita. As Natalie Sarrazin asserts, the 'seemingly impulsive outbreak into song self-reinforces the concept in that the character is moved by strong emotion' (2008: 205). It also diverts from the sexual intimacy portrayed earlier in the film, its heightened intensity now supplanted by a marked transition to the staple Bollywood fare of courtship enacted in the train compartment.



Inside the train

When Lalita first appears in the plantation outside the train compartment, Shekhar has just started daydreaming about her, but as the romantic intensity of the song gathers pace, she soon emerges *within* it, alongside him. Sarkar, therefore, harnesses the compartment as a mobile space where the combined pleasures of viewing and imagining converge, and where memory slides back and forth between the past and the present—between the Lalita whom Shekhar has left behind in Calcutta, and the (imaginary) Lalita who is currently with him. Unlike the tea picker in the plantation, Lalita in the train compartment epitomises the dutiful Bengali housewife who is preoccupied with embroidering a handkerchief (figure 2) Dressed in a traditional red and white Bengal cotton sari, she also wears the customary bridal ornaments of the *shakha* and *pola*.²² By comparison, Shekhar's outfit remains the same throughout the song sequence, indicating that Lalita's new and thoroughly domesticated incarnation is *his* fantasy of an ideal partner, a coy and submissive bride who is attentive to his every gesture, every word. She is also a recognisably Bengali woman amidst the cast of diverse characters seen to occupy the first-class carriage.

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As Sujama Roy and Kevin Hannam have observed, the motif of the train in commercial Hindi cinema tends to forge 'a new social connectedness' (Roy & Hannam 2013: 587) between its passengers. Moreover, Lalita and Shekhar, along with a European or Anglo-Indian woman, a Parsi gentleman, and a young Indian man in European style-clothing constitute what Marian Aguiar has aptly described as a railway 'tableau' (Aguiar 2011: 132), a recurring feature in Bollywood movies that showcases 'national diversity' through scenes enacted within the locomotive (figure 6). Here, diversity reverberates with the urban practice of holidaying in the Himalaya whereby the traveller encounters other travellers while travelling, each anchored by their relationships with other people, other strangers. It is this sense of 'connectedness' that is also echoed by Shekhar and Lalita whose intimacy, relocated within a diverse group of train passengers, is a reminder that the public domain comprises of multiple private worlds knitted together in their anonymity.



Figure 6: Shekhar (Saif Ali Khan) and other passengers in the train compartment



Source: Screen grab, *Parineeta* (2005).

What is important is that these worlds come together in *Parineeta* in a first-class compartment whose exclusive setting is characterised by the Darjeeling tea served in elegant silver and porcelain tea-ware (figure 2). A commodity inextricably linked with colonial Darjeeling, tea permeates the song's pictorialisation, first in the plantation where row upon row of leafy green tea bushes cascade across the screen, and next, as a beverage consumed inside the compartment. Along with its stylish utensils, tea represents the perks of travelling first-class. As such, its privileged consumers contrast sharply with the Nepali school children in a crowded compartment nearby. While their voices maybe interwoven with Shekhar's in a unified chorus, the children remain separated from Shekhar who travels in his exclusive compartment. A typical filmic fantasy centred on a democratic gathering of Indian citizens, rich and poor, in the toy train remains just that—an imaginary realm where the privileged citizen feels 'connected' to his local surroundings without actually engaging with them.

Indeed, the train compartment is a material reminder of a vibrant metropolitan culture that extends to holidaying in the Himalaya, a tradition that Calcutta's wealthy Bengali families had followed since the late nineteenth century (the famous writer Rabindranath Tagore called travelling on a 'small train' to Darjeeling in 1887, with his niece, Sarala Devi) (Alam & Chakravarty 2011: 84).²³ Staged like a drawing room or a parlour, the compartment presents an extension of a domestic setting where amenities like freshly brewed tea draw the familiar comforts of home into a public space. It is also here that the *bhadrolok* elite,²⁴ to



which Shekhar belongs, is shown cut off from the political unrest that was erupting in Bengal in the 1960s when 'communist radicalism' had taken root (Kaviraj 1997: 108; Nandi 2005: 172).²⁵ By the 1970s, a split in the communist party together with brutal clashes against the rival Congress party had culminated in the Naxalite Movement whose rural upheavals in places like the Darjeeling district in North Bengal, had triggered a spate of violence and anxiety in Calcutta. Sarkar's *Parineeta* remains far removed from these disruptions even though it alludes to them briefly in the opening credits. Instead, the film celebrates the scenic beauty of the Himalaya, the picturesque appeal of the tea plantation, and the colonial charm of the toy train, their visualisations collectively bolstering the pleasure of watching a romance unfold on the big screen.

These visualisations also render Shekhar's brooding, self-involved character a (somewhat) likeable hero.²⁶ Going by Sarrazin's observation that song sequences in Hindi cinema humanise the hero and heroine (Sarrazin 2008: 205), the scenic beauty of their locations accentuates the virtuousness of their sentiments expressed through the songs they perform. If the toy train and the tea plantation shore up the moody hero's better side, his virtuous self, then Lalita's fantasy figure inside the compartment draws out Shekhar's potential to see past himself. Framed in different ways inside the train, Shekhar appears as the classic Bollywood hero who expresses his unbridled joy and deep emotions through song. More specifically, his image in the toy train invokes a popular 1960s song sequence also featuring the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway in Shakti Samanta's movie *Aradhana*, in which the heroine Vandana appears in the train compartment while a dashing young Air Force officer flirts with her from afar in his jeep. Cinematic links aside, Shekhar and Vandana's characters share another, more tangible, connection: Vandana is played by the popular 1960s actress Sharmila Tagore whose son, Saif Ali Khan, essays the role of the troubled hero in *Parineeta*.

Consequently, the train sequence in *Parineeta* is bound up in multiple temporalities and memories shaped by an acting lineage that spans the 1960s and early 2000s. By emphasising such multi-layered connections, Sarkar relies on the power of nostalgia and recognition to heighten the appeal of the song and indeed, of the movie itself (Khan would later recall the joy of filming the song in 'the same train' as his 'mum') (Vidhu Vinod Chopra Films 2016). As we take in Sarkar's recreation of the 1960s, we are always aware of the early 2000s when *Parineeta* was made. Such



cinematic interplay ensures that *Parineeta* stays within the contemporary taste and sensibility of a Hindi movie-watching audience more capable of recognising the links between Sarkar's film and *Aradhana*, than between the film and Chattopadhyay's story on which it is based. Not surprisingly, Sarkar replaces the original context of the story—Chattopadhyay's Calcutta—with one that is bound to appeal to the well-informed Hindi film viewer—Samanta's *Aradhana*.

Invoking the 1960s

In one of the opening scenes of *Aradhana*, the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway snakes through dense Himalayan forest before executing one of its perilous loops. Finally, the camera zooms to a close-up of the train, drawing our attention to the unsuspecting heroine who is about to be distracted by the hero racing alongside in a jeep. In both *Parineeta* and *Aradhana*, the train ensures that the actor's gaze has what Aguiar calls 'voyeuristic possibilities', the potential of looking without being looked at, a mode of viewing that is shaped by the 'structure of the railway carriage, with its elevated view of the world protected by a metal shell' (Aguiar 2008: 79). The 'shell' also frames the countenance, with the result that Vandana's face outlined by a train window appears like a cinematic portrait throughout the song in a series of moving stills that accentuate her beauty from different angles, but always from a frontal vantage point (figure 7).

Such a visual approach seems driven by the desire to exploit the iconicity of Tagore's face, an aesthetic strategy that can be read via Geeta Kapur and Ashish Rajadhyaksha's observations that frontality in the Indian cinematic image is entangled with religious iconicity, theatre conventions, and the pictorial traditions of Mughal and pre-Mughal portraiture, Kalighat painting, and colonial paintings like Raja Ravi Varma's, all of which hinged upon the 'living tradition' of iconography (Kapur 1993: 20; Rajadhyaksha 1986: 32-7). Frontality commands attention. Characterised by a frontal gaze, icons bring into being a sustained act of looking that is akin to staring, a drawn-out mode of vision that fixates on something or someone. The more appealing the object of attention, the more sustained the stare and the more heightened the icon's ability to hold a viewer's attention.



Figure 7: Vandana (Sharmila Tagore) in *Aradhana*



Source: Screen grab, *Aradhana* (1969).

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Iconic beauty, for its part, triggers the desire to replicate it, or as Elaine Scarry puts it, 'beauty prompts a copy of itself' (Scarry 1999: 4-8), thus paving the way for its immortality, its iconicity. Sarkar fundamentally grasped this enduring appeal of beauty, unhesitatingly taking advantage of it to link Tagore's appearance in *Aradhana* with Khan's imaging in *Pari-neeta*. A cinematic move that can be read as an effective marketing ploy to ensure the popularity of the song in a country obsessed with Bollywood's acting dynasties, it is also a visual strategy that enshrines Shekhar and Vandana together with Khan and Tagore in the public imagination.

But there is something else that makes Tagore's beauty in *Aradhana* particularly memorable. For this we need to return to the opening lines of the song. '*Mere sapnon ki rani kab aayegi tu/Aayi rut mastaani kab aayegi tu/ Beeti jaaye zindagaani kab aayegi tu/Chali aa, tu chali aa*' (The Queen of my Dreams, when will you come? The season for love is here, when will you come? Time is flying, when will you come? Come, please come). Beauty is embodied by an imaginary 'rani' (queen) whose anticipated arrival permeates the hero's 'sapno' (dreams). Above all, beauty is inextricably linked with love, its desirability enhanced by that which is out



of reach, or yet to come. It is this dialectic between beauty, desirability, and yearning that underscores Sarkar's picturisation of Shekhar's longing for Lalita, with the cinematic throwback to Vandana in *Aradhana* ensuring that Shekhar's appearance in the toy train in *Parineeta* is also rendered iconic by association.

At the same time, beauty elicits the desire to contain and affix its visualities, the pull of its aesthetic appeal prompting film directors like Sarkar and Samanta to hold beauty hostage to the viewer's gaze. To this end, Sarkar's nostalgic throwback to the 1960s—both as the chronological framework for his film and as a cinematographic reference or gesture—returns us to the popular Bollywood theme of the modern Indian woman succumbing to patriarchal pressures. As in *Aradhana*, in *Parineeta* too, the heroine is shown subject to the all-consuming and all-commanding gaze of the hero, a time-honoured strategy that Bollywood filmmakers have leveraged countless times to appeal to their audience. In effect, the gaze embodies a proprietary approach to the woman's body, which is trapped and contained in the male fantasy that plays out on the screen. In *Parineeta*, ownership stabilises the equation between Shekhar and Lalita. It puts the genie back into the bottle so to speak as the sexually liberated Lalita is now fitted back, as every Bollywood heroine must, into the mould of the idealised woman who conforms rather than challenges.

Crucial to these cinematic manoeuvres is the toy train itself that frames (and thereby contains) Tagore's iconic beauty and Lalita's idealised womanhood, while being framed in turn by the picturesque splendour of its Himalayan surroundings. As such, the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway's signature blue locomotive in *Parineeta* is inseparable from both the beauty of the eastern Himalaya and the famous train sequence in *Aradhana* that it instantly summons. Seen together, the toy train, the Himalayan landscape, and Tagore's iconicity shape a powerful nexus of nostalgic links that Sarkar deploys to cement the appeal of *his* unique train sequence in *Parineeta*. Hence beauty constructs and mediates the vectors of nostalgia, such that the cinematic memory of a 1969 song sequence becomes embedded in a 2005 film.²⁷ By drawing this sequence through the thickness of Bollywood's cinematic history, Sarkar effectively lodges the toy train and the tea plantation in the contemporary Indian imagination not as colonial sites of pleasure, but as modern-day Indian landmarks where the fictive possibilities of a thoroughly modern Indian romance might be staged.



Conclusion

Nostalgia not only reclaims the past, it also imbues the artefacts, spaces, and people from the past with new meaning and identities. In *Parineeta*, historicity hinges on the appeal of the nostalgic as recognisable landscapes, historic artefacts and movie icons from a 1969 film insert flashes of vintage charm into the imaging of one of its most popular songs. As one picturisation is layered over another, the pleasure of watching the song sequence in a re-packaged form is the pleasure of recognising the pastness of the past set in the Himalaya. In effect, nostalgia produces the pleasure of tracing Sarkar's train sequence back to Samanta's film in which heritage sites like the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway and tea plantations are deployed to frame romantic desire. Thus, the 1960s create new patterns of departure and return for Shekhar and Lalita's duet, suspending time and space between *Aradhana* and *Parineeta* and reinventing colonial sites as cinematic landmarks.

By choosing the 1960s as both the chronological and cultural past to relocate Chattopadhyay's story, Sarkar effectively situates his characters in a more recent urban past that feels more accessible than the turn-of-the-twentieth century, the original time frame of Chattopadhyay's narrative. The temporal switch is a particularly strategic choice as Calcutta was ostensibly India's most cosmopolitan city in the 1960s²⁸, a time when Darjeeling had also emerged as a holiday destination favoured by Calcutta's elite who owned homes in the hill station and whose children were packed off to prestigious boarding schools in the area. Darjeeling is also where Bengali tea planters—a community to which Shekhar's character aspires to belong—had staked their claims on prime tea country in the post-Independence era. However, the most convincing *living* reminder of these spaces and places of the 1960s is Tagore herself, whose career began in Calcutta with the acclaimed Bengali film director Satyajit Ray's 1959 *Apur Sansar* (The World of Apu), and whose invocation in *Parineeta* renders Sarkar's picturisation of the era both credible and accessible. Indeed, it is these shades of the 1960s invoked in *Aradhana* that intensifies the spectatorial pleasure of watching *Parineeta* as Khan literally and cinematically forges a family link for his viewers.

What might such temporal and spatial heterogeneity mean especially within the construction of courtship and romance in a commercial Hindi film? As *Parineeta* demonstrates, nostalgia plays a key role in re-



arranging historicity, public memory, and historic identity. Shaped fundamentally by human emotions and relationships, nostalgia engenders deeply personal attachments to people, place, and time. By appropriating familiar emblems (tea logo) and popular visual images (tea picker), and invoking cinema icons (Tagore), Sarkar sharpens the tenor of nostalgia already forged by the train and the plantation that in turn cement a keen sense of looking at something or someone far away in a remote corner of the eastern Himalaya. Spatial distance, therefore, translates into temporal distance as the viewer encounters a Darjeeling filtered through Samanta's train sequence. And such distancing can be seen to challenge the linearity of time as the more unstructured, open-ended field of fantasy infuses Sarkar's visuals with the shadows of the past (the 1960s), even as they remain anchored in the taste and preferences of the present. Temporal multiplicity characterises the continual overlapping and disrupting of time frames, its heterogeneity shaping the fantastical.

While the fictional world created by Sarkar releases the train and the plantation from their colonial time frames, in doing so, it reveals how, in a post-colonial context, commercial Hindi cinema copes with the nation's colonial and imperial past. As Bliss Cua Lim observes, '[if] we discover things, it is in the ontological context of their involvement with human possibility, their place in the set of assignments we ourselves construct' (Lim 2009: 27). Going by this logic, colonial artefacts and landscapes are assigned a new set of cultural values in *Parineeta* precisely because 'it is human understanding that constitutes the world as a totality of relevances or involvements that we apprehend in relation to our own possibilities' (Lim 2009: 27).

Within the aesthetic framework of a Bollywood film, the toy train and the plantation function as props that tap into their fetishisation in a world driven by consumption and advertising, a world in which Indian tea is a popular national commodity and the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway is a historic novelty widely promoted by the Indian Tourism industry. They are, in effect, paradigms of what Arjun Appadurai calls 'imagined nostalgia' or 'nostalgia for things that never were' triggered by 'mass advertising' that '[teaches] consumers to miss what they have never lost' by generating 'experiences [...] that rewrite the lived histories of individuals, families, ethnic groups, and classes' (Appadurai 1996: 77). With his long career in making successful television commercials before he made his directorial debut in Bollywood with *Parineeta*, Sarkar, it is



safe to speculate, has an astute grasp on the power of advertising to leverage the appeal that such nostalgia of loss might hold for the Indian consumer.

In *Parineeta*, the strategic emphasis on the train, Tagore, the plantation, and the tea picker, all rely on different forms of nostalgia defined by loss: a nostalgia for idyllic landscapes, 'bygone lifestyles', yesteryear Hindi movies and movie icons, and material cultures (ibid.). Shekhar's fantasy of Lalita can, therefore, be read as a broader desire to return to the lost time of the 1960s. Thus, Sarkar gestures at how modernity rests on modern imaginings that re-arrange the axes of public memory and cultural identity. Our sense of the modern, the here and the now, is underpinned by how we imagine the past and how we envision the ways in which we are connected to that past.

With its over-the-top fantasies, Bollywood cinema is adept at producing worlds of fiction that bring into sharp relief, how modernity accepts or repudiates a historical past and how it copes with the loss of space and time. Contrary to what a slick Bollywood movie might suggest, none of these are seamless processes. Indeed, in *Parineeta*, the very desire to relocate Chattopadhyay's story in 1962 instead of 2002 signals a deep-seated ambivalence about the temporal dimensions of modernity. The choice to return to lost time (colonial), lost spaces (pristine tea country), and lost artefacts (a reconstructed toy train) reveals the need to affirm the very relevance of those things in our present time.

The nostalgia of loss is, therefore, inscribed in the desire to retrieve the very things that define that loss, such that the modern, the contemporary, retains the depth and texture of time. Seen along these lines, heritage sites like the train and the plantation recycled through the 1960s add historic depth to a film that otherwise conforms to the Bollywood convention of emptying the cinematic image of any serious or meaningful engagement with human relationships or emotions. Romance is inevitably fraught with melodrama whose emotional ups and downs saturate *Parineeta* as Sarkar transforms a potentially complex narrative of coming to terms with desire into a morality tale with a happy ending.

By inserting the thickness of time and memory into romance and yearning, Sarkar makes up for the lack of emotional and historic complexity of the cinematic narrative, thus unleashing the nostalgia for lost spaces and time to give a classic Bollywood song sequence the gravitas it



needs to match up to Chattopadhyay's densely layered story set in Calcutta in the early 1900s. The toy train and the tea plantation, therefore, emerge as 1960s landmarks, but their picturisation in their Himalayan settings relies on their popularity and indeed, on their visibility as contemporary tourist sites and national icons, something Sarkar was astute enough to recognise and harness to sharpen the aesthetic appeal of the song sequence for a broad spectrum of viewers.

Endnotes

¹ Different versions of this essay have been presented at the Himalayan Studies Conference, Yale University (2014) and the New York Conference on Asian Studies, Vassar College (2015). I thank Vivek Sachdeva, Queeny Pradhan, Arnika Fuhrmann, and Lawrence Chua for their feedback at various stages of writing this article.

² *Parineeta* garnered several awards for its music and art direction at the 2006 Indian Filmfare Awards and International Indian Film Academy (IIFA) Awards ceremonies (IMDB 2018).

³ An in-depth, solo analysis of the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway is yet to be written. For a basic but informative overview, see *Darjeeling and its mountain railway: a guide and souvenir published by the Darjeeling-Himalayan Railway Company, Ltd.* 1921, reprinted 1983. Darjeeling: Jetsum Publishing House; Anupam Chanda. 2014. Darjeeling: visiting Himalayas in a toy train, *India & You* (March-April 2014), *Incredible India*, <http://incredibleindia.org/magazines/PDF/Indiaandyou/54-59%20Toy%20Train.pdf> [retrieved 21.05.18].

⁴ Shekhar is played by Saif Ali Khan and Lalita is played by Vidya Balan who won the Filmfare Award for Best Female Debut for her performance.

⁵ As in most Hindi films, Sarkar's narrative relies on the traditional progression from romance to marriage, but his portrayal of Shekhar and Lalita consummating their relationship far in advance of their nuptials is an unusual subplot for a Hindi movie. Another popular film, *Salaam Namaste*, also released in 2005, broke away from the traditional Hindi film narrative to portray pre-marital sex. Such films remain the exception.

⁶ While the material vestiges of the British Raj have provided plenty of visual fodder for Hindi cinema, the period of the Raj itself has rarely been portrayed in Hindi films unlike the Mughal era, which has inspired many storylines for Bollywood directors.

⁷ Elsewhere in the film, Sarkar turns to Prinsep Ghat, a colonial structure built in 1843 in Calcutta, to stage another duet between Lalita and Shekhar for which he also uses the grounds of St. Johns Church (1787), the first Anglican house of worship in Calcutta, and the monumental Howrah Bridge (1943).

⁸ Chattopadhyay's *Devdas* (1917) has also been adapted successfully to Hindi cinema. See Dwyer & Patel, 63.

⁹ Pashupati Chatterjee's Bengali film, *Parineeta* (1942) was the first cinematic adaptation of Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay's story. This was followed by Bimal Roy's 1953 adaptation in Hindi. Subsequently, Ajoy Kar remade the film in 1969 in Bengali.



¹⁰ Like Sarkar, Roy (1909-66) was a Bengali film director who worked in the Hindi film industry.

¹¹ 2004. Star-Struck season. *The Telegraph*, 31 Oct., http://www.telegraphindia.com/1041031/asp/calcutta/story_3845957.asp [retrieved 11.09.16]. Sarkar refers to Brahmoism, a reform movement in Hinduism that played a significant role in Calcutta's evolution as a modern metropolis.

¹² Calcutta was renamed Kolkata in 2001. In this essay, however, I will continue to use the name "Calcutta" by which the city was known in the 1960s.

¹³ 2014. Darjeeling and Bollywood: an iconic love story. *Darjeeling Chronicle*, 24 Nov. Reprinted in *Darjeelingtonimes.com*, <http://darjeelingtonimes.com/darjeeling-and-bollywood-an-iconic-love-story/> [retrieved 14.02.16]. Aside from *Barsaat*, the other Hindi movies filmed in Darjeeling are *Jab Pyaar Kisi Se Hota Hai* (1961), *China Town* (1962) *Professor* (1962), *Hariyali Aur Raasta* (1962), *Aaye Din Bahar Ke* (1966), *Humraaz* (1967), *Baharon ki Manzil* (1968), *Mahal* (1969), *Aradhana* (1969); *Mera Naam Joker* (1970), *Joshila* (1973), *Sagina* (1974), *Do Anjaane* (1976), *Lahoo ke Do Rang* (1979), *Barsat ki ek Raat* (1981), *Raju Ban Gaya Gentleman* (1992), and *Mein Hoon Na* (2004). Post *Parineeta* (2005), Darjeeling has continued to be a popular destination for Hindi film directors for *Via Darjeeling* (2008), *Barfi* (2012), *Yaariyan* (2014) and *Jagga Jasoos* (2017). It is worth noting that Simla, Ootacamund or Ooty, Dehradun, and Mussouri, all colonial hill stations (Kennedy 1996; Pradhan 2017), have also been popular destinations among various Hindi film directors (Dwyer & Patel 2002: 67).

¹⁴ 1862. Mr. Frith's railway station. *Illustrated London News*, Saturday 3 May: 1142.

¹⁵ 2016. Mountain railways of India. UNESCO World Heritage Centre, <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/944> [retrieved 21.10.16].

¹⁶ 'So fancying a trip to Darjeeling?' asks the Darjeeling Tourism website that goes onto extol the alluring 'snow peaks of Kanchenjunga', 'the beautiful tea gardens on the slopes of rolling hills', and the 'cute Himalayan toy train whistling its way through the mountains' (Darjeeling Tourism 2018).

¹⁷ The historic Windamere Hotel in Darjeeling hosts The DHR club, which is located on its grounds. The DHR Club-Windamere. *Windamere Hotel*, http://www.windamerehotel.com/dhr_club.aspx [retrieved 21.05.18].

¹⁸ I am grateful to my colleague Theo Cateforis, associate professor of music history at Syracuse University, for drawing my attention to how the musical score of this song invokes a fluctuating heart-beat.

¹⁹ As Shil and Das observe, the logo was created in 1983 and registered by the Indian Tea Board in 1986. It marks the Board's attempt to protect Darjeeling tea as a Geographical Indication in the wake of Indian and foreign traders falsely marketing cheaper and inferior quality tea from elsewhere, as Darjeeling tea.

²⁰ For an early example of a documentary film that features tea pickers, see for instance, *The story of Indian tea* (1931), British Pathé, <https://www.britishpathe.com/video/the-story-of-india-tea-aka-the-story-of-indian-tea/query/tea> [retrieved 21.05.18].

²¹ Interestingly, the vamp is played by Rekha, a popular actress from the 1970s whose widely speculated affair with one of Bollywood's most prominent actors is frequently exploited by the Indian media to position her in the popular Indian imagination as a real-life vamp.



²² The *shakha* and *pola* are white and red bangles worn by married women. The former is made out of conch shell, and the latter is made of red coral.

²³ The Tagores have yet another connection to the railways. In the 1840s, Rabindranath's grandfather, the entrepreneur Dwarkanath Tagore invested in the Great Western of Bengal railway line (Kling 1976: 194f.; Chakrabarty 1974: 92-106).

²⁴ The *bhadrolok* (literally, a person of good manners) refers to the Bengali mercantile elite who built their fortunes through their collaborations with the East India Company.

²⁵ Such "radicalism" broke away from what the Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM called the "bourgeois landlord-led governments" of Calcutta and Delhi.

²⁶ Here I draw upon Natalie Sarrazin's point that the "embodied voice" in Hindi cinema is one of the most potent vehicles for expressing the hero or heroine's emotions (Sarrazin 2008: 205).

²⁷ Other visible clues to the 1960s can be found in Sarkar's train sequence, most notably in the acoustic guitar that Shekhar travels with, an object that supplants the Alistair Maclean thriller that Vandana appears to read on the train in *Aradhana*. Like the book that frames Vandana as a modern, anglicised woman of her time, the acoustic guitar gives Shekhar a westernised edge (it is worth noting here that Saif Ali Khan who plays Shekhar is a gifted guitarist in real life). Especially popular in the 1960s, 70s, and 80s, the guitar was frequently used to emphasise the youthful exuberance of the Bollywood hero or heroine. Be it Shammi Kapoor strumming a guitar in *China Town* (1962), Zeenat Aman in *Yadon ki Barat* (1973), or Rishi Kapoor in *Karz* (1980), the instrument anchored the lead character within the realm of western popular music and western culture in general. Sarkar appropriated this guitar-playing image to accentuate Shekhar's urban cosmopolitanism, while simultaneously paying homage to bygone heroes and heroines of Hindi cinema. Music directors for Hindi films also used the guitar in their orchestral ensembles. In the 1970s, the electric guitar became a staple in R. D. Burman's compositions (Beaster-Jones 2015: 101f.; Sarrazin 2008: 211).

²⁸ Sarkar references Calcutta's cosmopolitanism in another song sequence centred on the Calcutta-based restaurant Moulin Rouge.

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