

Notes toward a Brahmanical Cinema: A Study of 'Cinema of Prayoga'

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ABSTRACT

Amrit Gangar attempts at theorizing Indian Experimental Cinema as a whole under the rubric of 'Cinema of Prayoga'. Experimental cinema, generally, examines the internal form and structure of cinema as a medium and deconstructs its hitherto prevalent conventions, reflecting on the material and political questions that govern it. It would be sensible, thus, to stipulate that "Indian experimental cinema" would also either adhere to "radical" "anti-establishment" politics (thereby being an "anti-caste" device), or, it would focus on "apolitical" formal abstraction. Yet, Gangar defines it in an entirely opposing manner, attempting to "found" an authentically Indian tradition of experiment, which, he claims is uniquely different from the "Western" conceptions of "avantgarde" or "experimental". His derivation is rooted in Sanskritic traditions, proffering a unique concentration of Brahmanical spirit that, commonsensically speaking, ought to be absent from "experimental cinema". Given this peculiar confluence of the two entities, that is, Sanskritic idiom and contemporary Experimental Cinema, an anti-caste analysis puts forth hitherto uncharted problematics pertaining to caste and cinema. By elaborating on the Brahmanical nature of the praxis that Gangar defines, and studying the spirit that it seeks to encode Indian Experimental Cinema as, this paper seeks to theorize a possible ontology of Brahmanical Cinema.

KEYWORDS: *Amrit Gangar, Cinema of Prayoga, Experimental Film, Brahmanical Cinema*

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Whenever we talk about the question of caste in film, it is an almost unavoidable tendency to conflate caste as a Dalit issue. This is facilitated by a two-fold structure that governs much of the mainstream film industries across the country: firstly, the fact that the filmmakers willing to adequately address questions concerning caste and its persistence vis-à-vis everyday being often belong to the oppressed communities (who have also historically been severely underrepresented within the film industry until now) and, thus, are creating films and tackling issues that coincide within their own respective lifeworlds; and secondly, the fact that the film industry, outside of these recent exceptions from within the avarna communities, has maintained a stubborn, nearly impenetrable silence regarding the question of caste. Even now we routinely see mainstream films produced by non-avarna filmmakers try every trick possible to circumvent their way around uttering 'caste' even as the content of those films may speak of systemic violence and structural issues pertaining to marginalized communities. 'Caste' thus, remains a thoroughly taboo word for Indian cinema outside of the purview of Dalit/avarna filmmakers' works. This two-fold structure leads to what can effectively be termed a hermeneutically closed circle that renders speaking about caste beyond its representation in films by avarna directors near impossible. But as anti-caste scholars we are confounded by the syllogism 'that caste is not a Dalit problem, but rather a Brahmanical problem' and thus are bound to look for strategies to move past this *aporia* that the status quo of the Indian film industry provides us with. How, then, do we develop a framework for anti-caste critique of Indian films that centers the non-avarna *experience*? How do we trace the Brahmanical spirit that lies at its core?

An obvious strategy that comes to mind is to deliberately and fideistically read every mainstream film, especially those immersed in Upper caste doctrines of 'castelessness', against the grain to unearth the residual/overt elements of caste that pervade each of these films' universe. This is a worthwhile exercise, no doubt, but its effectiveness is severely undercut by the sheer scale and complex machinations that need to be taken into account when we analyze any commercial film i.e. the behind-the-scenes labour networks, the predictable conservatism of the market-driven producers, the fear of

the right wing ecosystem 'boycotting' a particular film, and the innumerable other contingencies which go into the making of a mainstream film make it rather difficult to *read* a film at its face value vis-à-vis its content and intent in order to formulate a solid framework for anti-caste critique. If we take into account films that are substantially stripped down in their scale with respect to each of the elements that go into film production, however, our task shall become significantly more focused, and thus, easier. Thankfully, experimental filmmaking provides precisely such an avenue. Given their nature, history, and intent, experimental films tend to exist on the diametrically opposed scale to mainstream films: oftentimes made by filmmakers operating at a micro-scale, often stretching the limits of the term 'independent filmmaking' to its logical limit, and focused with themes and issues (both in terms of their form and content) that are uniquely singular. Not only does the experimental filmmaking 'scene' in India follow all of these criteria, but there has already been an attempt to codify it in a manner that plays greatly into our advantage as we try to develop a robust anti-caste critique. This attempt to codify Indian experimental filmmaking is Amrit Gangar's *Cinema of Prayoga*, which is the focus of this paper. Through an analysis of Gangar's work, we seek to demonstrate that it brilliantly encapsulates the 'Brahmanical spirit' that we are trying to trace here. The fact that Gangar's tract has an explicit intent that is quite opposed to our critique, i.e. it is invested in founding a *positive* idiom for this Brahmanical spirit makes this an 'against the grain' reading of the same, a critique of 'Cinema of Prayoga' if you will.

Cinema of Prayoga vs. Experimental Cinema

In order to begin our analysis, we must fully lay down the background to why Gangar feels compelled to "coin" Prayoga as a term to define a particular kind of films. The primary impulse that Gangar's method is derived from is a "post-colonial anxiety" that there is an irreducible, localized essence and context to the as-yet-unnamed entity that is 'Indian Experimental Film' which is not adequately representable by the "Euro-American" terms, "Experimental" and "avant-garde". He writes the following about his intent:

It was during the 'EXPERIMENTA 2005'² in Mumbai I thought of creating the term Cinema of *Prayōga*, as a *prayāya*, an alternative to *Experimental Film* and its synonyms. [Prayōga is pronounced as prayōg, and paryāya as paryāy]. And I wrote briefly about it in the festival catalogue. Since the first explorations into the so-called experimental /avant-garde /underground films started in Western Europe and North America, naturally the relevant theories also emerged from there. Why so? Isn't experimentation intrinsically universal – in one form or another? In the times when, the Euro-American establishment can only assimilate non-western art on manifestly ethnographic terms while keeping the option open to reject it precisely on those terms, how do we recognize the avant-garde in India?(Gangar10)

Gangar's critique is, thus, governed by his (what one could call a not entirely invalid) invocation of post-coloniality and how the local, "Indian" conception of what could be a "experimental/avant garde/underground" cinematic tradition "of our own", is always already mandated to function in a severely unequal power relation vis-a-vis the discursive point of origin of such conceptions, which is "Western Europe and North America". Gangar's concern, thus stems from recognizing this unequal power relation where the effective value of every non Euro-American/ non-western art object is wantonly determined away from its own paradigms without having to pay heed to any of the respective art object's own context, culture, or artistic merit vis-à-vis the local art history

² EXPERIMENTA was an experimental film festival curated by Shai Heredia which ran sporadically between 2003 and 2017, taking place between Mumbai, Delhi, and Bangalore. The first EXPERIMENTA, which took place in Mumbai in 2003 exclusively showed films that are now considered canonical experimental films from the global North including the works of Peter Kubelka, Michael Snow, and Stan Brakhage among others. Recollecting the experience of screening these experimental films from distant lands to an audience primarily attuned to narrative, mainstream films, Heredia writes- "These responses were a significant reflection of the need for, and interest in, alternative spaces in Bombay designed to re-examine, critique, and reformulate the idea of film in India. This was arts activism in its purest sense." (Heredia 42) The reflection to critique and reformulate the idea of film in India is something that was brought into the fore in the subsequent editions of EXPERIMENTA, which featured a steady focus on alternate short films made under the Films Division of India in the 1960s and 70s, and which also informs Gangar's creation of the category 'Cinema of Prayoga'.

and tradition. To this effect, one could perhaps see the critical impetus here as being on the lines of other scholars of *nativism*³, who seek to supplant and substitute discursive coordinates that have been hitherto derived from a "Western perspective" with what they think of as local, *native* ones. The difficult ethico-political compass of nativism notwithstanding, it can be seen as a consistent-even potentially rigorous-mode of scholarship. Prayoga could, in turn facilitate (itself as) a rigorous framework around which we determine the *true* artistic value of Indian avant-garde art objects.

However, this does not seem to be the goal that Gangar is after. He immediately undercuts the proposition of any form of nativism by invoking the universal and the transcendental. "Isn't experimentation intrinsically universal – in one form or another?... Do experiments happen in isolation of local conditions?", he writes further as part of the same passage where he says he will elaborate on *prayoga* i.e. the premise of experimentation happening in "isolation of local conditions":

Do experiments happen in isolation of local conditions? Do experiments rapidly outstrip theories across the spectrum? Or, in particular, how stable the theories or paradigms of these operative terms have been vis-à-vis developing cinematography and its technology? And does the experiment end once the artist has completed his work? If so, are we talking about just the process that the 'experimental film' has gone through? (Gangar 10)

What then, one is forced to ask, is the need to develop a local idiom of experimentation, if the purpose, the end, is to eventually progress toward a transcendental universalism? Could it not be adequate to abstract further and further the already given definitions of "experimental" or "avant-garde" to the point where one reaches the "universal common"? How does one reconcile this simultaneous co-existence of two antithetical *elements* i.e. the primacy of the local and the primacy of the universal?

Shortly after, Gangar reveals that his *method* to reconcile this opposed dialectic is to simply invert the equation, instead of searching for a synthetic equivocation. That is,

³ Of course, the impetus of this nativism, in the Indian context, more often than not runs into a problematic territory, focusing either on revisionist history or "Subaltern" strategies which are somehow always overrun by upper-caste, upper-class elites' discursive concerns

Gangar's ideal strategy would be to "prayoga-ize" any and all experimental/avant garde art objects on a global scale, that is, to make *prayoga* the universal governing praxis for all art (including Euro-American art) and not to erect a structure of localized praxis that is parallel and *equal* to the existent modalities of western art traditions. He writes:

I would like to check whether the idea of *cinema of prayōga* could be put in currency in the global cinematographic vocabulary and discourse for better employment and use. *Prayōga* includes both these applications. (Gangar 10)

The purportedly 'inclusive' doxa of the word *prayoga* becomes a central discursive strategy for Gangar to propound its virtues over hitherto prevalent terms such as avant-garde or experimental, and to seek to substitute them.

Moving further, Gangar elaborates on why he finds the term "avant-garde" as insufficient and problematic. He cites multiple sources and registers (curiously, all of them "Western") including the theatre critic Richard Schechner and the Russian filmmaker Andrei Tarkovsky, that find the term 'avant-garde' as limiting and uneasy within their own respective fields, be it video art, theatre, music, or film. Summing up his conviction that *prayogais* a positive deviation from this limiting idea that avant-garde presents, even as "it carries the sense of vanguard" (Gangar 24), he writes-

Unlike *avant-garde*, *prayōga* is a non-military word; it is, in fact, artistic and meditative. The English 'laboratory' becomes more connected as it is called *prayōgamandir* (temple of *prayōga*) or *prayōgashālā* (hall or saloon of *prayōga*). The word finds place in all major Indian languages (northern or southern) and with some interesting derivatives. (Gangar24)

Gangar then proceeds to chart out a veritable catalog of what the currently lexical and/or the historically available signification of the word *prayōga* has been in multiple Indian languages so as to prove how its seemingly exhaustive polysemy across languages is a justifiable reason, among others, to use it as an adequate index that can represent Indian *experimental* arts practices in general, and *experimental cinema* in particular.

The *gist* of Gangar's argumentation is therefore this: locating our discursive analysis within that indexical word (that is, *prayōga*) which is the most diffusible and

malleable, and "enriched" by diverse contexts and significations, is automatically a better and more positive strategy vis-à-vis the purportedly limiting significations of other words like experimental and avant-garde.

The conviction that *more/multiple is somehow always already good, and less/singular is bad*, combined with the fact that Sanskritic philology is the central axis of Gangar's argument, has a clear-cut implication when we see it vis-à-vis similar argumentation that has been employed repeatedly in the context of Indian history: i.e. it is remarkably consistent with the spirit of Brahmanism. We know all too well how this exact argument—that is, the originary primacy of the Sanskrit language, and the purportedly all inclusive, pluralistic core of Hinduism, is routinely applied to micro-histories, cultures, and religious deities of Dalit-Bahujan-Adivasi populations in order to assimilate and appropriate several of them into the folds of the Brahmanical fantasy that is Hindutva. But perhaps, it would be too hasty and presumptuous of us to already declare Gangar's project as being similar and/or contiguous to the more contentious project of Brahmanism that Hindutva is. Let us therefore suspend that judgment for now to proceed to Gangar's elaboration on the word *prayōga* itself.

The Brahmanical Ontology of "Prayoga"

There is a lot that gets unraveled through Gangar's argument with respect to the word *prayoga*, and thus, a lot for us to unpack, so I quote him here at length:

The loosely equivalent word for the English 'experiment' in Sanskrit is 'prayōga' which has several different connotations, including design, contrivance, device, plan; application, employment (esp. of drugs and magic); use, practice, experiment (opp. theory), exhibition (of dance), representation (of a drama), a piece to be represented, recitation, delivery; *prayōgātisaya* (in drama) is 'excess of representation' while *prayōgārtha* means 'having a sense of *prayōga*'. If we deconstruct the word *Prayōga*, we get Pra+Yoga, where the prefix 'pra' in a way is an engine. As a prefix to verbs, it means 'forward', 'forth', 'in front', 'onward', 'before'. In other words, it carries the sense of vanguard. With adjectives, it means 'very',

‘excessively’; and with nouns, whether derived from verbs or not, it is used in various senses including, commencement; power, intensity, source or origin, completion, perfectness, excellence, purity, etc. depending on what noun it is prefixed to. Among its many interpretations, yōga also means uniting, combination, contact, touch, employment, application, use, charm, spell, incantation, magic, magical art, substance, deep and abstract meditation, concentration of mind, contemplation of the Supreme Spirit, which in Yōgaphilosophy is defined as *cittavritinirodha*. Yōga is the system of philosophy established by Patanjali, etc. As stated before; I would like to propose *prayōga* as a better alternative to English *experiment-al*.

Prayōga is also practice or an experimental portion (of a subject); (opp. *shāstra*, ‘theory’) (Gangar²⁴)

[At its very outset, what is interesting to note is that Gangar's philological explorations and derivations of the "original essence" of the word *prayoga* are wholly reliant on *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary* by the prominent Orientalist and Professor of Sanskrit at the Oxford University, Sir Monier Monier-Williams. Of course, this is consistent with Gangar's broad scheme where he does something similar throughout this text, by citing "Western" theories and examples (e.g. his entire argument regarding the limiting aspects of "avant-garde" being derived wholly from citations of "Western" critics) so as to propagate the need for a more localized idiom, while also conveniently presenting examples of localized "context" so as to purportedly invalidate other "Western" idioms like the use of Experimental in favor of *prayoga*, and so on. But in this particular instance, where the very signifiatory "essence" of a word is being propagated as an inherently "better alternative" due to its supposed *ontological closeness* to the immediately given context, even as that word's ontological *origin* and 'facticity' is derived entirely out of an Orientalist project⁴, the fault-lines of Gangar's method come to the fore with an as-of-yet

⁴Orientalism, as we know, is considered the Western project par excellence by the logic of almost every significant variation of post-colonial critique: and Gangar's intent intersects considerably with more than one variations of such critical postcoloniality. This also brings out a general, structural issue that pervades any manner of postcolonial scholarship: how does one *access* a text or even a word in its original, *native* essence when the very basis of the same has been mutated, transformed, and disseminated by the

unforeseen immediacy. How could this *oppositional movement* of the methodological "form" against the "content" of the method be reconciled? That is, how does one arrive at an "authentic" conception of a localized term by employing an archive that is anything but that?]

Let us now analyze Gangar's philological elaboration on the word *Prayoga* more closely. To start our analysis, let us look at the *original* source of Gangar's philological arrangement, i.e., the entries for *Pra-* as well as *Prayoga* in Monier-Williams' dictionary. The entries are as follows:

¶ 1. *prá*, ind. before; forward, in front, on, forth (mostly in connection with a verb, esp. with a verb of motion which is often to be supplied; sometimes repeated before the verb, cf. Pāṇ. viii, 1, 6; rarely as a separate word, e.g. AitBr. ii, 40); as a prefix to subst. = forth, away, cf. *pra-vṛitti*, *pra-sthāna*; as pref. to adj. = excessively, very, much, cf. *pra-canḍa*, *pra-matta*; in nouns of relationship = great, cf. *pra-pitāmaha*, *pra-pautra*; (according to native lexicographers it may be used in the senses of *gati*, *ā-rambha*, *ut-karṣha*, *sarvato-bhāva*, *prāthamya*, *khyāti*, *ut-patti*, *vya-avahāra*), R.V. &c. &c. [Cf. *purā*, *purā*, *pūrva*; Zd. *fra*; Gk. *wpó*; Lat. *pro*; Slav. *pra-*, *pro-*; Lith. *pra-*; Goth. *faír*, *faíra*; Germ. *vor*; Eng. *fore*.]

¶ 2. *pra*, mfn. (√*prī* or *prā*) filling, fulfilling; (n. fulfilment, ifc.; cf. *ākūti-*, *kakshya-*, *kāma-*); like, resembling (ifc.; cf. *ikshu-*, *kshura-*).

(Monier-Williams 652)

And, the entry for the term *Prayoga* goes as follows:

2. **Prayoga**, m. (for 1. see under 2. *prāyas*, col. 1) joining together, connection, Var.; position, addition (of a word), VPrāt.; Pāṇ. (loc. often = in the case of, Kāt. on Pāṇ. i, 4, 25; 26 &c.); hurling, casting (of missiles), MBh.; R. &c.; offering, presenting, Hariv.; undertaking, beginning, commencement, ŚBr.; ŚrS.; a design, contrivance, device, plan, Mālav.; Rājāt.; application, employment (esp. of drugs or magic; cf. IW. 402, 1), use, GṛŚrS.; MBh. &c. (*ena*, *āt* and *ga-tar*, ifc. = by means of); practice, experiment (opp. to 'theory'), Mālav.; a means (only *ais*, by use of means), MBh.; Suśr.; (in gram.) an applicable or usual form, Siddh.; Vop.; exhibition (of a dance), representation (of a drama), Mṛicch.; Kālid. (*ga-to-ārit*, to see actually represented, see on the stage, Ratnāv.); a piece to be represented, Kālid.; Prāh.; utterance, pronunciation, recitation, delivery, ŚrS.; RPrāt.; Pāṇ., Sch.;

colonizer's discourse, i.e. the discourse against which the postcolonial critique is to be directed. This seems to be a matter of general anxiety (and at times, indefinite suspension) within the nativists. The most obvious tactic—which is often employed by Hindutvawadi/ right-wing factions in India—to forego this anxiety is to engage in the most literal case of historical revisionism by selecting arbitrary signifiers and methodologies and forcing them into a seemingly (non)cohesive synthesis that serves their immediate goal. In more than one ways, this act of arbitrarily synthesizing something, this bricolage, if you will, indeed resembles Gangar's methodology vis-à-vis *prayoga*.

a formula to be recited, sacred text, Śiksh. ; lending at interest or on usury, investment, Mn. ; MBh. ; principal, loan bearing interest, Gaut. ; an example, L. ; cause, motive, affair, object, W. ; consequence, result, ib. ; ceremonial form, course of proceeding, ib. ; a horse (cf. *pra-yāga*), L. — *kṛikā*, i.,

(Monier-Williams 688)

When we look at the entry for the prefix "Pra" in the dictionary, of which Gangar says, "the prefix 'pra' in a way is an engine", we notice something very interesting.

Beyond its own set of significations, we discover that "pra" has an equivalent cognate across many languages that are seen as deriving from the Proto-Indo-European roots, as is the case with Sanskrit. These include the Greek *πρό* (*pró*) and the Latin *pro*. This is important for our theorization because, as we know, this root also features in the etymological root of the word "experimental". Experimental is a composite of the original Latin word *experimentum* and the adjective suffix *-ālis*. *Experimentum*, in turn is from *experior* ("to experience, to attempt"), itself from *ex* + **perior*, that is, the prefix *ex* and the etymologically reconstructed root **perior*. **perior* is, in turn, from Proto-Indo-European reconstruction **per-* which has as its cognates, both the Graeco-Latin *pro* as well as the Sanskrit *prathat* we are discussing here. Working within the logic of etymological equivalences and originary associations that Gangar has laid out for us, we have then chanced upon a startling fact: that "experiment" and the "pra" of "prayoga" (which Gangar posits as a better alternative to the Indian context, in lieu of experiment-al) share the same cognate-ive root, albeit with one crucial difference: the presence of the prefix "ex". Now, we already know from Monier-Williams' entry itself, that "prayoga" denotes "practice or experiment (as opposed to theory)". It is the axis around which Gangar seeks to *substitute* "prayoga" for "experiment", thereby putting the signifiatory logic of "experimental" *under erasure*, as it were. But if we work with the prefix *pra-* itself, that is, the Proto-Indo-European root **per-*, we realize that "ex-perimental" signifies something which is literally the *opposite of itself*. That is, when the fact that the (Latin) prefix "ex-" denotes "outside of, before, from" is taken into account, we gather that the prefix "pra-", and its subsequent compound *prayoga*, and "ex-perimental" are, in fact, separated, split, and "outside of" each other. Experimental is, simply put, *not* within the signifiatory register of the Sanskrit prefix "pra-" even though something like (the

hypothetical non-word) *perimental could be. The word *prayogathen* is remarkable because:

1. It has a signification of "experiment" 2. (Following the rules of associative etymology that Gangar employs extensively to derive at his hypothesis) It has a signification of *not* "experiment."

Taking these two directly antithetical significations of the same word together, we arrive at the hypothesis above, that *prayoga is its own opposite*. What we finally have, then, is a literal "actualization" of the assimilative and self-de(con)structive spirit of Gangar's method (which, in turn, is contiguous, if not self-same to the spirit of Brahminism, as we have hypothesized in the chapter). That *prayoga* can accommodate and conceal its literal significative opposite-in the spirit of its purportedly exhaustive (and therefore, according to Gangar, *positive*) polysemy-is indeed truly remarkable.⁵ But this maneuver of *inclusion of multitude* hides a crucial fact: that is, the entire project is founded on the principle of putting-into-the-background and substituting, and excluding⁶ a single signification from within the exhaustive repertoire that *prayoga* boasts of containing: that is, the term "experiment-al" itself. A new problematic emerges before us: what are the exact stakes that *prayoga-as-experiment* possesses, and which, in lieu of the aforementioned subsumation, is (at least slightly) displaced? Let us now look at the exact context(s) in which *prayoga* signifies "experimental" from within the extant Sanskrit usages, to lay out this problematic in more detail.

According to the entry for *prayoga* in Monier-Williams' dictionary, we understand that there is only one entry that denotes the exact signification of experimental, and it reads as thus: "practice, experiment (opp. to 'theory')". This lone reference occurs in Kalidasa's play *Malavikagnimitram*.

⁵ To take this logic of assimilation even further, one could pose that in an *ideal world*, the end point of Gangar's method, or rather, the spirit of his method, would be to locate or *found* a single word whose polysemy is so vast and all encapsulating that it approaches a near-totality of *all signification* within itself. That one word/term/signifier that can contain anything and everything within itself, would be the probable literalization of the project of "unity in diversity" and so on, to ultimately *establish* the absolute Brahmin world order.

⁶ Precisely by including and subsuming into its folds: this excluding-by-including *technique* is part of an internally deconstructive structure, which, as we keep repeating, appears to be a central tenet of *prayoga*.

The play's narrative is summarily as follows: Malavika is a low-caste girl who is gifted to queen Dharini by her half-brother Virasena-who is introduced in the play as "The Queen has a brother of inferior caste, Virasena by name" (Kalidasa 7)-and engages in her service. The king Agnimitra chances upon Malavika and then falls in love with her. Sensing this, the queen Dharini places Malavika under guard and gets her engaged in learning dancing, under the tutor Ganadasa, away from Agnimitra's gaze. Because of the queen's censure, Agnimitra "devises"⁷ a plan with his Vidusaka⁸ to make the tutor Ganadasa quarrel with a rival teacher, Haradatta, with each claiming that the other is an inferior expert in the arts than the other. The exact quote, where the usage of *prayoga* is cited as "experiment" occurs within this context:

Haradatta.-King! This man was first engaged in abuse of me. According to him, there is the same difference between his reverence and myself that there is between the ocean and a puddle; therefore let your Highness examine him and me *in theoretical knowledge and in practical skill*⁹. Let the King be both judge and examiner

Vidusaka.- A fair proposal(Kalidasa14)

Based on this argument between Ganadasa and Haradatta, which was "a contrivance" i.e. *prayoga* that was planned by the Vidusaka, it is decided that there will be a contest between their respective pupils to see who is a better trainer in the art of dance. The Queen hesitantly agrees to this contest as well. Naturally, Ganadasa's protégé for this contest is Malavika, which allows the King to finally look at her properly, and derive pleasure, as she dances as part of the contest. Once the contest is over, the King and the Vidusaka congratulate each other over their *prayoga*, reveling in the fact that their ploy was undiscovered, and successfully executed.

The King later meets Malavika and declares his love for her. As he is to embrace her, the Queen interjects and imprisons her. Subsequently, through a series of plot

⁷ Co-incidentally, the entry for *prayoga* in Monier-Williams, that denotes "design, contrivance, device, plan" is also taken from this very play.

⁸Tawney's footnote, when the Vidusaka is introduced in the play reads: "The jocose friend and companion to the King. He is always a Brahman. He is the Leporello of the Indian drama" (Kalidasa 11)

⁹ Emphasis Mine

developments, Malavika escapes the prison and it is discovered that she is actually a princess herself: of royal, "high birth", after which the Queen finally accepts her as an equal. The play ends with the marriage of Malavika and Agnimitra.

On the basis of this very summary 'textual analysis' of Kalidasa's play, there are numerous observations that can be made regarding the 'nature' of *prayoga*. What is of foremost interest to note is that-even in its quoted "origin"-*prayoga* represents only an "approximate" meaning that may or may not converge with the term "experimental": and that the conflating of the two as one is an instance of scholarly misidentification from Monier-Williams (and subsequently, Gangar himself). For, the exact term that is used within the context of *Malavikagnimitra* is not "experiment" but practice¹⁰: that is, something which is outside the realm of 'theory' or *sastra*.

This presents to us an extremely interesting tangent of investigation: what constitutes of theory/*sastra* and its *other* within the history of 'Indian thought'? If we go by the commonsensical assertion that the domain of the *sastras* within Hindu civilization has been that of Brahmins, who have for a majority of history acted as their zealous guarders and arbiters, that automatically posits anyone that is opposed to *sastras* and/or *sastra*-ic being and engages extensively in modes of practice as being outside of the domain of *sastras* and, thus, as the true progenitors of *prayoga*. Logically speaking then, it would be the practitioners and artisan and producers of goods (majority of whom are classified as Shudras and Untouchables within the fold of Hinduism) who would be *prayogawadis* in opposition to *sastrawadis*. *Prayoga*, then, ironically could become a site

¹⁰ Tangentially, we must also remark that this exact absence of "experiment" or "experiment-al" (even if we were to consider the very 'spiritual' *definition* of the term that Gangar posits) is actually ever pervasive within Sanskrit ancestry. That is, when we scan through the breadth of Sanskrit texts, there is no exact word that signifies "experiment" in the sense that it is seen in 'the West'. Monier-Williams, for example, has no other reference to the term. In Apte and Macdonell, too, the term features very rarely (a total of four or five times) and when it does it has an extremely skewed presentation as an approximate illustration of another word (as with the term *prayoga*), rather than in the sense that it is generally seen. Could this staggering fact be taken as a symptom of a broader truth, that the Hindu civilization consistently lacked a coherently presentable sense of experimentation? This is an interesting line of enquiry that we must pursue in detail elsewhere. But if there were any semblance of truth to this fact, Gangar's counter-presentation through his project-that it is in fact the Sanskritic tradition that had a sustained engagement with experimentation-is undercut severely.

of laying out an issue of caste-conflict. But by laying it out carefully through the multitude of its varying and, in some cases, literally opposing meanings, Gangar enforces the diffusion of such a critique emerging from within the folds of this word. One could speculate that it is precisely the undoing of this political potential of *prayoga-as-experiment/practice*, i.e., *prayoga-as-opposite-of-sastras* that Gangar's Brahmanical spirit is invested in. Furthermore, one could state that Gangar's replacing of the exact signifier "experiment" with the local/broad term *prayoga* is a swift maneuver to hide the caste-based context of Kalidasa's play and, subsequently, "the caste question" itself.

If we look at the context of the other meaning of *prayoga* that is present in the text, i.e. "design, contrivance, device, plan" et al, it reveals that *prayoga* is a planned act of duplicity and "wit" from the part of a *Sutradhara*, i.e. a 'Brahman', in arrangement with a member of the ruling caste, so as to make a lower-caste woman¹¹ perform/dance, and provide an audience to them. Of course, this is in alignment with Gangar's idiom of seeking valid structures of "Erotology"¹² within or through the *device* of *Prayoga*: but when looked at from a "caste angle", it is nothing but a variation on what Phule in *Slavery* calls, the "deceitful practices", "mass of incredible fictions", "lies and falsehoods", "mere chimeras" residing "under the cloak of Brahmanism" and employed by Brahmins

¹¹ Who is later revealed to in fact not be so, but this is not known at this moment to the *Sutradhara* nor anyone else in the play. But more importantly, even the presence of a high-caste woman does not undermine the epistemic violence of this *prayoga*.

¹²"Erotology", Gangar propounds, is one of the several tenets that the affective signification of *prayoga* includes. He writes, "And thirdly, erotology, that fathoms the human body, mind and its deepest environs, in the realm of fantasy pleasure and pain. One of the greatest 'experimental' works of art, a grand *prayoga*, in this realm is Vatsayayna's *Kama Sutra*" (Gangar 11) Both within his essay, and elsewhere, Gangar goes on to highlight occasions of such erotology coming forth within the domain of works that adhere to the notion of cinema of *prayoga*. One of the pivotal cinematic moments he cites as part of the same are scenes from the films of Dadasaheb Phalke which feature a young Krishna 'playing with' and disrobing women as part of his *raas-lila*. Gangar matter-of-factly mentions that the role of the women being disrobed et al, i.e. the subjects who are to be supposedly evoking the erotological affect within these films, were often played by the maids of the Phalke family. This matter-of-fact statement in fact lays out the seriously casteist, epistemic violence that resides at the heart of this erotological coda. It is well known now that it was widely considered taboo by the Hindu orthodoxy in the early 20th century i.e. during the advent of cinema within the Indian subcontinent, for Upper caste women to act in front of the camera. This forced the producers and filmmakers (who were majorly traditional Upper castes) to cast lower caste women as actors, in a wide net of exploitation which is only recently being accounted for within Indian Film Studies. To posit such probable exploitation as the "erotological" element of *prayoga*, without factoring in the unequal power and caste dynamics that must have played out can be seen as part of Gangar's strategy to Sanskritify and sanctify the deeply problematic coda of *prayoga* as anything but itself.

throughout history so as to subjugate and dominate the Sudra-Atisudras. *Prayoga*, then, it seems, is coterminous and synonymous with Brahmanism even in its 'original' signifiatory configuration. By propounding on the positive value of *prayoga*, Gangar is-willingly or otherwise-reduplicating the order of the Brahmanical spirit, and in turn, actively aiding in its conservation.

Conclusion

Through this elaboration, we finally arrive at what is the central *thesis* of this paper: *that Cinema of Prayoga is, in its truest essence, "Brahmanical Cinema"*. By closely referring to Gangar's remarkable presentation of this fact in his theorization regarding Cinema of Prayoga throughout his oeuvre, and using its co-ordinates as our critical tool, we can chart out several, rigorously developed schemata that can illuminate the many intersecting facets of Brahmanism in/of Cinema.

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