

Article

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Who's Afraid of Hubba? Decoding the Wireframe of a Gangster



“What an exhausting effort it takes
To be evil ...”

Bertolt Brecht (commenting on the lines marking the physiognomy of a Japanese God, rendered in a decorative mask) ¹

1 Prologue

The question in the brief interaction with the filmmaker was rather predictable, all the more so since the concerned maker, Bratya Basu, his cultural persona apart, is an astute politician, thrice elected as a Member of the West Bengal Legislative Assembly, from the Dum Dum constituency and the incumbent

minister of Education, Government of West Bengal. Also the mask of some fictitious names and the customary disclaimer notwithstanding, the film under discussion here, *Hubba*, portrays the meteoric rise and the eventual fall of a real-life Bengali gangster who is said to have thrived in the protective shadow of the ruling political coalition in West Bengal during the late

nineties and the early years of the present century. Hence, the intrigued journalist hurled the customary (so way too predictable) question: ‘How is the nexus between criminals and political party portrayed in *Hubba*?’¹ Bratya Basu, the writer-director of *Hubba*, had a reply, interesting in more senses than one:

It was a small nexus between the criminal and the political party ruling in West Bengal then. But *Hubba* is not only about it. He is the seed of this kind of nexus. I tried to portray the socio-economic conditions. From a small container, an IPS officer can also come, a poet can also come, and an anti-social person too. If you go through the famous gangster films of the world, you will see there is no nexus between the underworld don and political leaders like *On The Waterfront*, *Scarface*, *Gangs of New York*, *The Godfather*. It (gangster-political nexus) is a particular creation of the Bombay film paradigm. So, in my film, there is a small nexus shown, but *Hubba* is *beyond that*.² (italics mine)

The present essay on *Hubba* vis-à-vis the Indian gangster film trend seeks to explore the performativity of the expression italicized above—*beyond that*. In the cinematic text has the film been able to produce what its maker has semantically sought to mean?

2 The Importance of being Hubba

Bombay (now Mumbai) film industry has been churning out gangster films for the last few decades at regular intervals. *Hubba*, in its genealogy, is linked to this Mumbai gangster genre which it, using explicit visual references, pays even direct tribute to. That,

too, on more than occasions. Still, in its core thematic premise the film looks for a decentering of the thought-principle (vis-à-vis gangster movies) in operation there. This is because – Basu sensitizes the viewer – *Hubba* has moved *beyond* the trajectory a gangster is supposed to be charting in the fictionalized space of what he has termed the ‘Bombay film paradigm’, canonically referred to as ‘Bollywood’ cinema.³ Such a comment problematizes the very critical frame that informs the discussions gathered round the gangster films, both in the pedagogical and informal space, to the extent that it asks for a reconstruction of the same. Now this is where this essay seeks to place its submission on what places *Hubba* apart in the rather familiar oeuvre of Bollywood gangster genre.



Popular movie information site IMDB introduces *Hubba* as the film ‘(b)ased on the life of Hubba Shyamal Das, a gangster, often referred to as the ‘Dawood Ibrahim of Hooghly’, who was booked in over 30 cases, including murder, extortion, and drug smuggling.’⁴ The gory tale of this gangster deftly documented by Supratim Sarkar (himself a highly competent IPS officer) in a bestselling volume titled *Goendapith Lalbazar* (loosely translated as Lalbazar: the

Den of the Detectives) is what lends this film its narratorial structure. Supratim, while documenting the details pertaining to this specific case, retained the actual name of his protagonist, though the filmmaker, understandably, has preferred to change it, but keeping the unusual (and widely known) nickname of the protagonist intact (i.e. *Hubba*, duly mentioned in the book also), he has made it the title of the film. Hence, there is an explicit hint of the originary biographical source that this cinematic narrative can be traced back to. So, using the phrase coined by Stephen Gaunson in his essay on Michael Mann's film *Public Enemies* (2009), *Hubba* may well be called a 'biographical gangster movie' that, as Gaunson has described,

shifts *beyond* the gangster genre's rigid structural codes and character archetypes to ask what the gangster film does with the histories and social climates that it represents.⁵ (italics mine)



Such movies, more often than not, carry an ineluctable inter-title like 'based on a true story', either stated explicitly or apparently muted yet hinted at surreptitiously, like an irrefutable sub-text prowling underneath, as in Ram Gopal Verma's *Sarkar*. In the title itself *Hubba* pays an unambiguous tribute to the real person, now deceased, as the

point of origination. Also, the sourcebook is duly credited. Then, as a 'biographical gangster movie', the cinematic narrative has to accept the double binds of institutionally documented history and oral historical accounts that, combined together, form a formidable paradox for the maker— ample source of information and simultaneously a closure on imaginative flights.

The conundrum gets trickier when the filmmaker cannot afford to reject either of the two. The positivist loyalty to the dataset (related to not-too-distant past) has to be there as much as the imaginative journey put in course to unfold the diegesis.

Thomas Leitch has spotted that Martin Scorsese has first tagged his gangster film *Goodfellas* (1990) with the 'true story' marker, though this type of films have been making such truth-claims since much earlier. In 1949 when Warner Bros. re-released their film '*G*' Men (Dir. William Keighley; 1935) to mark the 25th year of the FBI, a new scene was added in which an FBI senior agent (David Brean) introduced the movie to the new FBI agents saying,

"I'm going to take you back to these days and show you a motion picture about a man named Brick David who was in the Bureau. It's the daddy of all FBI pictures. It's the first one that called us ... G-Men."⁶

Clearly, two forces going in opposite directions, toward *fact* and *fict* respectively, threaten to constitute a fissure that every such gangster movie has to engage with. Basu, in his bio-gangster film, had to remain rooted to the claim to *truth* documented both in formal and informal ways. At the same time, for any supposedly overriding sake of facticity his will to *imagination* cannot be entirely done

away with too. In between, Basu has charted an interesting pathway in *Hubba*. In his aforesaid reply he did mention the ‘socio-economic condition’ as a curious cauldron, something that persons varying widely, from a poet to a rowdy criminal, might emerge from. Interestingly enough, *Hubba* does not portray ‘socio-economic condition’ as the sole and unmistakable springboard for the emergence of Hubba the gangster. This is where it unsettles the oft-used structural codes of Bollywood gangster movies. In other words, moves beyond it in a significant way.

Like any biographical gangster movie it catches glimpses of the real-life gangster’s journey. The sourcebook material has loads of information nicely stacked and narrated like a thriller. The filmmaker, to an extent, has duly picked up a few bleak moments to portray the troubled upbringing of his protagonist. As the chronicler of the life-event of his (real-life) subject, the film writer/maker is supposed to be considering such biographical nuggets as constituting the cinematic narrative. Bratya Basu has not been any exception. Also, in the mainstream Indian gangster movie genre such narrative voices are overwhelmingly inscribed with historical and cultural specificity that in turn institutes the operative modes and motives of the gangster in-making. As the gangster (a male figure, predominantly) unleashes the reign of terror, his past – riddled as it is with all the social and familial wrongs presumably meted out to him – carves out a circle of reason, wide enough to lend his vengeful, heinous acts a matrix of plausibility, if not some sort of social validation too. Put differently, the gangster (in most of such movies) lives in a *present* being

formed always already in the irresistible shadow of his *past*.

Basu places his own maneuverings



here. At first, he places a *past* (of the gangster) seemingly in line with the traditional modes of such narratives. Then, throwing an interesting twist, he has the *past* imploded with an acerbic sense of irony. Making most of the visual possibilities available to cinematic language, he makes the hegemonic codifications (of the Bollywood gangster movies) collide with a counter-narrative that not just questions the narrative convention, but, in effect, serves to dismantle it from within. In this respect, the case-in-point is two consecutive sequences, one being followed immediately by the other, in which the director shows two contrasting versions of the same event. Only when the narrator, Hubba himself here, explicates that the viewer could get to know that the first version – comprising the sad tale of a poor, hapless boy turning dropout in school – was a concocted one, engineered to squeeze sympathy out of the audience. Visibly enough, the filmmaker makes a spoof of the hegemonic content pattern and narrative style in the Bollywood gangster cinema. The parody-text, thrown with a palpable sense of jeer, gets straightaway undermined by another version

of the narrative that privileges the mindset (of the same boy) leaving school at will and revelling unapologetically in unlawful acts.

So, the writer-director of *Hubba* proffers two different sets of codification – one in line, another contrasting the convention – that makes his narratorial intent clear. *Hubba*, as conceived by Basu is going to be another rehash of the oft-used Bollywood gangster plot. The family of young Bimal (later rechristened as *Hubba*) had to fight hard to make ends meet, but that did not really drive him to choose shady antisocial activities at a rather tender age. Refusing to mirror the poverty-stricken lifestyle his father had, it was his conscious choice to become what he eventually turned out to be. This particular portrayal of *Hubba* gets diegetic validation as Basu, in line with the documented material, shows him enjoying the act of murder less for any specific earthly gain and mostly for the sake of just committing another assassination.



In one certain sequence *Hubba* tells his gang of sidekicks, ‘Do you know what gets me off? When the warm blood spurts at your face after a murder...’⁷ With such a pathological wireframe of a killer he hardly needs any provocation (stemming mostly from his socio-economic background, as seen

in Bollywood gangster films) to lend his grisly murders any justificatory context. Thus, *Hubba* marks itself as a rupture in the all-too-familiar narrative of the Bollywood gangster genre. This is where it moves *beyond* the familiar trope of causality, in which one evil leading to another with the latter being the revenge of the previous one. In almost all such cinematic narratives the impacting factors behind the making of a gangster (or *don*, in common parlance) are predominantly the *socio-economic* issues, the objective cause driving the slumdog to the underworld that might someday turn him millionaire. Basu rearranges this convention by having the narrative directed towards the subjective frame of his titular protagonist. He wished to be what he wanted to be and to get what he wanted most. So the Bollywoodesque ‘structural codes and character archetypes’ vis-à-vis the inner coordinates of a gangster are thus re-inscribed with a new set of codes in which evil is valorized to a self-signifying circuit. The root of *Hubba* lies within *Hubba*.

3 I, Me, Myself...

When Žižek’s looked at what he termed ‘diabolical evil’ in texts by Immanuel Kant, he found something as intriguing as acts of evil ‘which are not motivated by any pathological motivation, but are done “just for the sake of it,” elevating evil itself into an apriori non-pathological motivation—something akin to Poe’s “imp of perversity”.’⁸

This is the kind of evil, Žižek explicates, that is tantamount to ‘a pure spiritual attitude’, not performed for the sake of any expected selfish (or in Kantian

parlance ‘pathological’ gain), but committed for its own sake.⁹ In other words, the performance of evil is caught in a unique narcissistic bind of self-pleasure in which it is made to perceive itself only every time it is acted out. Such a type of evil does not seek any external gratification to repeat itself other than just the repetition of the act. One is reminded of this specific category as Hubba is shown in this film enjoying murder, committed using a dagger mostly, just for the sake of it. With the thick, warm blood (of the victim) splattering out to all conceivable directions, the assassinated ones are reduced to objects supplying blood and gore for the perilous pleasure of Hubba, the assassin.

Such macabre pleasure would often go to the extent of playing sickening games with the corpse. Right from cutting it to smaller pieces (*Boti Kebab*, as he would jokingly call it) to having its belly stuffed with pebbles (*Football ground*, in his horrific jargon), such diabolical pranks, as he stated, would give him the real high. In other words, it was a bizarre self-pleasure that he used to enjoy since corpses, irreducibly objectified and stripped of all agencies, wouldn’t ever reciprocate. Though in passing, it would be worth noting here that in the performative space of Hubba even living persons get reduced to objects, shorn of agency. He would enjoy sex with his would-be bride in open space, flanked by sidekicks who just couldn’t see the genitalia of the couple. Thus both kinds of partners he had – in sex and in crime – were as objectified as any other thing Hubba would enjoy spending time with – kicking, commanding or copulating.

The sort of self-pleasure Hubba liked to revel in would culminate in assassinations.

Even his fantasies would comprise flying into the house of his would-be in laws and while airborne shooting them down at will. In a macabre way, only death inflicted on others would make him feel alive within. Murder was the game of death played by Hubba only for the sake of it.



But then, didn’t Hubba have any hankering for earthly gain? He did, undeniably. The way he built his enormous network of extortion and smuggling and also the way he kept satiating his sexual craving with women picked from different segments of society would unmistakably point to his desire for material wealth/pleasure. Nevertheless, what he did and the way he did increasingly turned him into a *monologic* self, always in conversation with himself, putting little or no trust on others around him. He had a bunch of mobile SIM-card the operatives of which were a closely guarded secret, known to him only. Nobody had any command over the *modus operandi* of his illegal business empire other than carrying out his orders. As he hurls his favourite sentence to intimidate people, even his cohort at times – “I’m driving the car, not you. Keep it in mind!” – it’s not just any control-freak tyrant blabbering his bravado. This is Hubba speaking to Hubba in his dense and dizzy monologic world, visibly distinct in its pride

and prejudices. The intimidating expression that he uttered rather habitually, forecloses the possibilities of initiating any dialogue. The irreplaceable *first-person* that he chose to remain implicated to shuts all others down.

Unlike John Dillinger in *Public Enemies* or Sarkar in the titular movie *Sarkar* (Dir. Ram Gopal Verma; 2005) Hubba was not an outlaw to be celebrated as “Gentleman Bandit.” He became an outlaw by choice, threatened whoever came his way and killed people in gruesome ways whenever he wanted to. The ontological stance of this particular gangster was all too monologic to be considered as indulging in any kind of social banditry. As Eric Hobsbawm has pointed out, a social bandit would voice protests on behalf of his supporters and sympathizers.¹⁰ Such an act is a sheer impossibility in the monologic world of Hubba. It would only be the half-truth to state that he did not have such sympathizers. Also, he did not feel like having any. Since his self-signifying system precludes the agency of others save only a single thing – the unqualified allegiance – Hubba chose to operate irreversibly alone, even while working with a gang of goons. With a clear sight of what he wanted, he unleashed his reign of terror that, taken to a grievously narcissistic proportion, would constitute the *diabolical evil*.

At times though, he did help a few people in distress by arranging the required assistance from different quarters. Far from any kind-hearted response, it was a ploy to buy the loyalty (of the community). The other thing he made frequent use of to ensure their allegiance is intimidation, his most effective weapon. As a result, he was able to mobilize

a wide network of innocent informers – cautious eyes roving at every corner in different localities, sniffing any seemingly suspicious movement whatsoever. Not all of these people owed a thing or two to Hubba, but, like puppets, they had to move along his pulling of strings in a vast regime of fear.

4 The Don with a Difference

It has been interestingly argued in a recently published article that Hubba is the reflection of the personal greed in the time of the unbridled dominance of the capital, being currently evidenced in the neoliberal society. Blatantly self-serving and brazenly masculine, Hubba is the reflection of the collective will to wealth encapsulated in a single corporeal frame.¹¹ Another article has found in him the repressed, darker side of the common psyche that remains unsaid and mostly unearthed.¹² As a text *Hubba* is certainly open to interpretations which, expectedly, are way lot better when functioning in multidirectional ways. Eliciting any singular and monolithic meaning out of any text hardly does any justice to it. The scope of the present essay hardly allows separate engagements with a bevy of observations on *Hubba*, surfacing since the last few weeks in different sections of media, conventional or social. Nevertheless, engaging with the first two arguments seems to be interesting since they, in respective ways, focus on the inner coordinates of the supposedly *abnormal* Hubba in the, again supposedly, *normal* society.

The more the (imagined) distance from an explicitly evil figure like Hubba, the more

comforting it is for the larger societal fabric. However, as the kernel of these articles proposes, the *insane* Hubba is not that far as the *sane* society would like him to be. On the contrary, he is the intimate enemy that contemporary society – not simply the Bengali one – is rather condemned to be living dangerously with. Hence both these arguments, in individual way and style, seek to *refamiliarize* Hubba to the society that he sprang from. The underlying tone is one of diminishing the distance that the society feels it has placed Hubba at.

As the concluding submission this essay would be seeking to introduce a different dimension to the discursive space proposing the opposite. This means to say that the movie *Hubba* has opted not to refamiliarize Hubba, but to *defamiliarize* him, in the Bakhtinian sense, as a radically (or, diabolically) disruptive figure. The disruptions that he has brought about in the very genre of the movie it is considered to be belonging to have already been noted. In order to follow it from a closer distance a few words on the literary terms mentioned above is rather imperative.

The term *defamiliarization* was originally coined by Russian formalist critic Victor Shklovsky. In his path-breaking essay, ‘Art as Technique’, Shklovsky put forward a certain definition of art constructed on an underlying technique he called ‘defamiliarization’. This, according to him, is the act of making an object appear unfamiliar in the work of art and having it re-inscribed with newer meaning.¹³ The journey of this word took an interesting turn with another Russian critic Mikhail Bakhtin. What Bakhtin (and Pavel Medvedev) wrote in their critical

gloss over this theoretical position needs some attention:

The formalists do not so much find something new in the word as expose and do away with the old...The basic formalist concepts of this period—transrational language [*zaum*], ‘making it strange’ [*ostranenie*], device, material—are completely infused with this tendency...The novelty and strangeness of the word and the object it designates originates here, in the loss of its previous meaning. . .¹⁴

Apropos *defamiliarization* Bakhtin, in another essay, has stated clearly that,

(t)he so-called defamiliarization [*ostranenie*] of the Formalists is fundamentally the function of isolation... what is defamiliarized is the word by way of destroying its habitual place in a semantic series...¹⁵



So, vis-à-vis the word *defamiliarized* there is a void to be located ‘in the loss of its previous meaning’ and also, that blank space is filled with a new inscription of meaning that foregrounds a new place of the same word in the semantic series. This is where, this essay proposes, the term *defamiliarization* derives its exegetical currency when transferred to the context of *Hubba*. With the habitual connotations of the ‘gangster’ being destroyed, the figure (of the

don) is reformulated with some new constitution of meaning.

The poverty in his formative years notwithstanding Hubba did have a choice to stay away from evil but embraced it consciously. Unlike *Satya* (1998) or *Vaastav* (1999) any vintage score to settle with does not drive him to the path he chose to stick to. He assassinates people in macabre ways just for getting the orgiastic pleasure he derives out of such acts. He moves and operates with cohorts that he does not trust. While trying to evade the spray of bullets coming from the opponent group, he uses his brother as the shield and remains unfazed as his mother too, caught haplessly in the exchange of bullets, turns lifeless.

In his absurdly monologic space he reigns as the supreme and irreducible subject. Always he speaks, but is hardly spoken to. Always he acts and rarely gets acted upon. When he's spoken to or acted upon, he seeks to efface/replace the speaker/actor. Either he kills the person (e.g. his first murder or the murder of Bagha who tried to gun him down) or, in a retaliatory move, wants to take himself to a position that might enable him to replace the speaker. The latter is evident in Hubba's decision to join politics. Already being spoken to a lot by persons powerful in politics, he wishes for the power itself, i.e. a *bona fide* legal position in the political hierarchy.

Thus the narrative serves to defamiliarize his figure taking it to the level of a folklorish one. It is an interesting moral economy in which evil is not made to contest with its opposite but with itself only, with each heinous act expected to eclipse the former. This is not the mode the larger society

manoeuvres its operations. Different forms and formulations of disparity notwithstanding, agencies are distributed there and the mode is dialogic. Hence, *Hubba* comes as the *defamiliarized* version of the gangster.

Whether Hubba is a reflection of the society beyond or whether he enframes the alterity that makes the society face its disavowed self are certainly some intriguing ways to look at this cinematic narrative. As mentioned earlier both of these positions seek to place him closer than the society perceives he is. Yet, the present essay argues that the distance in question is interesting since Hubba resides, *a la* early Robinson Crusoe, in a world, formulated and exhausted within his *self* that interestingly does not have any *other*. This is the crux of the disruption in the familiar dialogic narrative of the society. Hence would it be a rather canny explanation that in the tale of Hubba, the *hamartia*, or the tragic flaw that precedes the ultimate fall, is constituted of his eventual leaning towards dialogic mode of conduct?

5 Had a great Fall...

Interestingly, the code of conduct that suits him most is the cautious monologic one which precludes the presence of anybody other than Hubba himself. Others, as argued earlier, are ruefully stripped of any subjectivity, hence not qualified enough for any exchange on a subjective level. Sadly for Hubba, on three separate occasions, driven by impeccable self-confidence, he flouted the norm he set for himself.

The first one is related to the public life persona he wished for. At a certain point of

time, he was no more happy just being the outlaw operating in the usual trajectory of illegal activities. Wishing to be a part of the legal system itself, thereby replacing the one he had to take orders from, Hubba breached the code of his monologic, self-signifying space. Living the public life as an elected politician (and not any outlaw any more) necessitates a dialogic mode, at different levels whatsoever, signalling a crucial change in his wireframe. Such a possibility sent shockwaves at several levels, both in the law-enforcer and the unlawful sections of the society. His gang-members saw red sensing the entire illegal business might take a hit while the police and the persons in the political pantheon sniffed danger predicting the extent of his histrionics after achieving the coveted position in the law-abiding side. Both these camps, opposite on almost all counts, suddenly had a common requirement: the termination of Hubba.

In private life, too, Hubba slipped from his position. Despite frequent sexual exchanges with several women, he could somehow keep his familial structure going with two wives vying for his attention. Nevertheless the second one, eventually, seemed to outpace the former since she brought her husband two offspring he was tremendously affectionate of. With the filial bond getting the better of him, Hubba secretly presented his second wife a lucrative apartment in the eastern part of Kolkata. His first wife, childless but standing all along by Hubba through thick and thin, got the information. Infuriated, she started planning a lethal revenge.

Thus, both in his public and private spaces, Hubba, the irreplaceable *subject* is

turned into the object of some vengeful activities. Things began to change, rather gingerly, at the final phase of his life. The fatal tragic flaw, like the mythical serpent sneaking into the iron-clad room in the popular Bengali folk-lore, found a hole in his world causing an eventual implosion. Feeling cheated, his first wife passed on some significant nuggets of information to police that in turn helped them to reach and take *Bokaro Bapi*, the closest one to Hubba in his gang, into confidence.



The absurdly *monologic* self of Hubba, instituted with self-confidence and criminal prowess, brought him scary moments that he eventually could get hold of. However, his leaning towards the *dialogic* one spelt his doom. In an uncharacteristic show of trust (in other words, the ideal epitome of dialogic mode), Hubba visited the place of one of his cohorts alone, leaving his personal gang of guards behind. Reaching, he found his near ones there, but this time on the other side of the fence. His signature phrase – “Keep it in mind I’m driving the car, not you” – is back with Hubba reduced to being the stunned listener, or object. He could not touch the handgun tucked at his waist. Echoing the phrase with disdain, Bokaro Bapi casually ordered the killers to rip apart the body of their hitherto boss just the same way he liked

killing some unfortunate ones – *Poite kat* (tearing one apart diagonally from shoulder to waist). A few days later, the body – now irrevocably objectified and stripped of all agencies – surfaced in a canal.

6 And Quiet Flows the corpse...

Marking a significant stylistic statement, Basu does not show pathologically alienated (by choice and at a deep-rooted level) Hubba in a bona fide noirish manner. The particular visual style he chooses for his protagonist is not identified by the noir-like tone of dark cynicism. On the contrary, Basu, with a kind of verve unmatched in Bengali cinema, captures the character of Hubba. The cinematic style carries a distinct sense of the carnivalesque frenzy and casts a terse, subversive gaze upon the oft-used narrative conventions of Noir films that, as Paul Schrader has listed, ‘emphasize loss, nostalgia, lack of clear priorities, insecurity.’¹⁶

Hubba stands just opposite to what Schrader describes. Never seen to be stung by either loss or nostalgia, he operates in his

histrionic style. Insecurity has definitely been an issue, yet he manages to play with it through his dual modes of unleashing fear and maneuvering the system of subterfuge.¹⁴ On the contrary, the signs of noir films mentioned above are clearly manifested in the look and demeanour of his nemesis, Dibakar – the efficient, relentless police officer. Sensing deep in his heart that he has started, in some ways, to mirror the criminal he’s been trying to arrest, Dibakar faces an intense moral dilemma.

However, the dilemma is something foreign to the moral economy of *Hubba*. Here is a gangster personifying a blank in the familiar narratives of gangster. Put differently, he defamiliarizes the persona of a gangster. As one insightful critic has pointed out, *Hubba* is a noun, and not an adjective.¹⁷ Hence, it is uniquely limited to its irreducible self only. The nominative *Hubba* is a lone one, just like the solitary corpse rotting in deep water.

There is one single thing that, presumably, was unknown to him. More often than not, this is the way the world ends. Not with a bang, but a whimper.

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