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The Fleeting Taste of *Mazaa*: From Embodied Philology to an Alegropolitics for South Asia

Ananya Jahanara Kabir

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ARTICLE

The Fleeting Taste of *Mazaa*: From Embodied Philology to an Alegropolitics for South Asia

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ABSTRACT

Through a methodology that I term 'embodied philology', I trace a genealogy of *mazaa* as an understanding of enjoyment calibrated through the indices of taste and time. Using this genealogy to mark out an 'alegropolitics', or a politics of happiness, I extract its political potential in two ways: first, by assessing it through scholarship on the archive, repertoire, and what Spanish calls *sabor*, and, second, by applying these ideas, gleaned largely through scholarship from Latin America, to the assessment of Bollywood's masala repertoire and film star Govinda's role therein. Govinda's subscription to a Bhojpuri performativity leads me to relocate *mazaa* within a decolonising agenda for pleasure formed through transnational and cross-border communities united by an embodied memory of collective enjoyment. A vignette from the 2018–19 Kochi-Muziris Biennale allows me to demonstrate how such memory may be activated to transform the present.

KEYWORDS

Alegropolitics; archive and repertoire; Bollywood dance; embodied philology; enjoyment; Govinda; *mazaa*; post-colonial pleasure; *sabor*; taste; temporality

In the linguistic spectrum of Hindi–Hindustani–Urdu,¹ *mazaa* is apprehended through the body and, prominently, through an appeal to the sense of taste: *mazaa chakhna* (to taste *mazaa*) is a common phrasal verb. Through similar constructions, we understand its fullest experience as an extravagant, no-holds-barred exercise in grab-and-run robbery: hence, *mazaa karna* (to do *mazaa*), up one notch, leads to *mazaa lootna* (to loot *mazaa*). Once purloined, it is to be airily and freely expended, not hoarded in miserly fashion for a grey day in an undefined future: hence, *mazaa udana* (to make *mazaa* fly free). The fact that once grabbed, it is best tasted also endows *mazaa* with a delectable ephemerality. *Mazaa* resides in small acts; it lurks undercover, just below the surface of the humdrum, quotidian tenor of responsible life. The *mazaa* that breaks through that

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1. Francesca Orsini, *Before the Divide: Hindi and Urdu Literary Culture* (Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2010); Harish Trivedi, 'The Anxiety of Hindustani', in Rajendra Singh (ed.), *The Yearbook of South Asian Languages and Linguistics* (Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 2004), pp. 267–76; and Alok Rai, *Hindi Nationalism* (Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2001). This essay focuses on *mazaa* as rendered within this linguistic spectrum rather than its cognates within any other language(s) of modern South Asia, e.g. Bangla (where it appears as *moja*). It also focuses on evidence from India rather than Pakistan. These are choices imposed by constraints of scope for this particular essay; future research should certainly look for comparative evidence in the use of *mazaa* and its cognates across ethno-linguistic and political borders in South Asia.

everyday surface is robbed out of time through the intense and free deployment of certain senses. Syntactically, it is most often articulated either in the imperative—*mazaa le le!* (seize your *mazaa!*)—or as having just happened—*mazaa aa gaya* (*mazaa* was had; lit. *mazaa* has arrived). These phrasal verbs involving *mazaa* are conjugated typically in the familiar and non-respectful second person *tu* (you) or collective *hum* (us); inquiring after someone's *mazedaar* experience using the respectful *aap* strikes the ear as improbable, if not bizarre. Parsing *mazaa* thus, we reaffirm its fleeting, collective, familiar and sensuous qualities. *Mazaa* is to be relished through the tongue's capacity to taste and, wanting to experience or having experienced this *mazaa*, we have to affirm our desire for or enjoyment of it with at least one other person with a familiarity bred from complicity. '*Mazaa aaya?*' '*Kitna mazaa aaya!*' (in an inadequate translation: 'Did you have fun?' '[We] had so much fun!'). *Mazaa* encodes a sensuous dip into embodied fun and pleasure: it is the *chatpata* (hot and sour), *khatta-meetha* (sweet and sour) taste of the world.

This essay uses a reading method of embodied philology to extract from its lexicographic and syntactic inscriptions what I term as an alegropolitics of *mazaa*. Through these twin heuristics, I return a word to its world to assess how a linguistic community understands the impact of that word on itself. Guided by the lexical clusters and semantic fields within which *mazaa* operates, I extract two parameters for a sensuous, interruptive, affective domain that its use defines: firstly, the body's ability to receive and transmit sense-perceptions in the participatory mode of the first-person plural of 'we' and 'us', and secondly, the optimum time frame for this ability to manifest itself—that which must happen or that which is just happening, intruding pleasurably into the tempo of life but slipping into experience's peripheral zone even as words try and pin it down. *Mazaa's* collective appeal is to the closer senses, most importantly taste, but also taste's handmaiden, touch, together with the interruptive and evanescent temporality I have extracted for it. These aspects endow the word with a powerful capacity to trigger an experiential zone where intimacy enters and transforms public space by creating a veritable continuum out of the surface of bodies. To understand *mazaa* in this way is to excavate a radical politics of pleasure that can threaten the status quo while empowering those who dare seize their *mazaa* out of the time of the everyday. Hence there is an illicit and immanent penumbra to *mazaa*. Whatever the precise activity that generates *mazaa*, we cannot help feeling that it is something a bit naughty. It is the memory of tangy, sweet-sour-hot concoctions in paper cones refashioned from out-of-date newspapers, bought by schoolgirls in uniform from vendors outside convent school gates. It is the thin shell of the *gol-gappa* messily bursting to release the sweet-sour-hot tamarind juice in the mouths of those who cluster around the *gol-gappa-wala*, transformed into a community of delicious anticipation created by the makeshift temporality of the *gol-gappa* round.²

Prima facie, the associations of philology diverge from those of *mazaa* thus defined. Something of a fusty air clings to 'philology', the comparative study of language that determines the interrelations between linguistic groups. Although abandoned as a

2. Note to the scholar-reader: this project of writing about the fleeting taste of *mazaa* fails if we do not tussle with writing protocols to convey the ineffable and intractable experience the word conveys, hence the deliberately experimental style to the argumentation I develop here.

methodological term within Humanities in the English-speaking world, it is current within continental European pedagogy as a label for departments that study literature through the mastery of language—with strongly residual connotations of philology as an Enlightenment project with distinct imperialist and orientalist dimensions. The persistence of this term has motivated the emergence of European projects aimed at the rehabilitation of philological methods to serve broadly decolonising purposes.³ My interest in developing an ‘embodied philology’ constellated around *mazaa* derives from this context. This essay is a divining rod of sorts, pointing to resources needed that lie beyond the scope of the present investigation. Using my training as a comparative philologist and my inclination to deploy that training to construct methodologies for the study of the ephemeral and the elusive, I merely present here a set of propositions around *mazaa* that contributes to this volume as a long-awaited investigation into this affect, so ubiquitous in our experiencing of a *desi*, South Asian collective identity, but hitherto neglected within scholarship. To explore the reasons for this neglect as well as present routes towards *mazaa*’s scholarly recovery, I conjoin its exploration here to my ongoing work on what I term ‘alegropolitics’, or the politics of embodied happiness.⁴ Alegropolitics cannot be restricted to any one society, but embodied happiness enters politics through culture-specific routes. In our globalised world, investigations of those routes must traverse the intersection of several transnational and local axes. I offer here a prolegomenon to a thorough examination of South Asian, *mazaa*-centred alegropolitics situated along these axes. In this task, I have found useful theoretical and historical explorations of performance in Latin America, where under the rubric of ‘performance’, I include music, dance and theatricality.

Taking *mazaa* from the archive

What does the word *mazaa* ‘mean’, and when did it come to assume this meaning? What is its etymology, and what can that tell us about the network of power relations from which the word crystallised? The phonemics of the word, involving the alveolar consonant/s/, suggest its entry into the Indic world through Persian as a lingua franca of medieval India. And, indeed, it shares a cognate relationship with Persian ‘*maza*’, defined by Francis Joseph Steingass as ‘taste, flavour, smack, relish’, alongside several compounds elaborating on this gustatory application: ‘*maza dāshtan*, to have a flavour; –*bī-maza*, insipid, tasteless, flavourless, vapid; –*khwush-maza*, well-flavoured, sweet, delicate’.⁵ Persian *maza* entered Turkish as a loan word that apparently became associated with small plates of variable delights: ‘*mezze*’, which circulated further in the eastern Mediterranean thanks to the Ottoman empire.⁶ Yet cognates mean nothing if they are

3. The Sukunftsphilologie project at the Freie Universität, Berlin, aimed at such a rehabilitation. For its results, see the monograph series and journal published from Brill under the title *Philological Encounters*.

4. I have generated the term in dialogic response to Achille Mbembé and Libby Meintjes, ‘Necropolitics’, in *Public Culture*, Vol. 15, no. 1 (2003), pp. 11–40.

5. Francis Joseph Steingass, *Persian–English Dictionary, Including Arabic Words and Phrases in Persian Literature* (London/New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 1224.

6. That *mezze* and *mazaa* are cognates via loan-word movement from Persian into Turkish is anecdotally attested in several places on the internet. While the relationship is both semantically and historically plausible, it is beyond my expertise to provide confirmation from scholarly sources in the relevant languages. However, to track and establish this relationship, which would then take us to the further circulation of *mezze* in several

not embedded into a spatio-temporal horizon within the geographic milieu under investigation. To track the Indian circulation of this Persian word, I (re)turned to John Borthwick Gilchrist's multivolume *Dictionary of Hindoostanee*, published in instalments between 1786 and 1790 from Calcutta (now Kolkata). Here, Gilchrist defines *mazaa*, transliterated by him as *muzu*, as 'pleasure', and [*muzu*]-*dar* as 'pleasant'.⁷ This laconic entry is not the only presence of *mazaa* within a founding moment of the colonial archive, the first ever dictionary of Hindustani compiled in the service of the British empire-in-the-making. The other side of Gilchrist's project—the collation of Hindustani equivalents for English words—yields a lot more information. Under 'delicious', we find both *muzudar* and *muzu*, under 'delectable', *muze-dar*.⁸ Under 'to enjoy', we find several of the verbs of expenditure including *lena* (to take), *oorana* (*udana*, to fly) and *lootna* (to loot), which, as I noted earlier, enter phrasal conjunctions with the noun *mazaa*.⁹ The near-homology between the Persian *maza* and the Arabic *muzaaq* (joke), which eventually overlaid the Hindustani *mazaa* with connotations of enjoyment beyond the gustatory, is also evident in Gilchrist's reportage: both *muzu* and *muzuq* are listed as synonyms for 'taste', alongside *suwad*, *lussut*, *saiqu*, *rooch*, *chashnee*, *chat* and *pusund*.¹⁰

Let me pause for a moment of self-reflection. My scholarly training sent me to the colonial dictionary as a building block within the 'archive... as an entire epistemological complex for assembling comprehensive knowledge under the domain of empire'.¹¹ This predictable yet constitutive irony within embodied philology as method is a necessary prelude to its deeper project of turning the colonial project inside out. I called up several volumes and editions of Gilchrist's *Dictionary* in the British Library, an iconic post-imperial repository. My intention was to check 'quickly' (efficiency being the hallmark of the dictionary as a tool) how Gilchrist might have defined *mazaa*. But nothing was 'quickly' recoverable. Instead, the colonial archive's reputation for efficiency ceded to a labyrinthine confusion which reveals 'the epistemological project of empire [as being] fundamentally unstable'.¹² Gilchrist had envisaged his *Dictionary* as a comprehensive, multipart philological endeavour. The *Dictionary English and Hindoostanee* constitutes its first volume, as confirmed by the frontispiece to its 1810 edition from Edinburgh: 'Hindoostanee Philology comprising Dictionary English and Hindoostanee and Hindoostanee and English, and a Grammatical Introduction to which is prefixed a copperplate, exhibiting a comparative view of the

Slavic languages via the Ottoman empire's cultural and political influence, would be another exciting project for embodied philology.

7. John Borthwick Gilchrist, *Grammar of the Hindoostanee Language, or Part Third of Volume First* (Calcutta: Chronicle Press, 1796), p. 96.

8. John Borthwick Gilchrist, *Hindoostanee Philology: Comprising a Dictionary, English and Hindoostanee also Hindoostanee and English, With a Grammatical Introduction, Vol. 1, 1759–1841* (Edinburgh: Manners & Miller, 1810), pp. 154 and 155, respectively.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 202.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 645.

11. Thomas Richards, *The Imperial Archive* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 14.

12. James L. Hevia, 'The Archive State and the Fear of Pollution: From the Opium Wars to Fu-Manchu', in *Cultural Studies*, Vol. 12, no. 2 (1998), pp. 234–64 (239). For an elaboration of the imperial archive's contingent instability through an examination of the circumstances under which George Grierson undertook and published *The Linguistic Survey of India*, see now Javed Majeed, *Colonialism and Knowledge in Grierson's Linguistic Survey of India* (Delhi: Routledge India, 2018), esp. pp. 50–77. On the archive as a labyrinth, see Roberto Gonsles Echevarra, *Myth and Archive: A Theory of Latin American Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

Roman and Oriental characters used in the Hindoostanee Language, in two volumes; Volume I'. This was the volume I combed for the definition of *mazaa*, but backwards, looking up a range of English words which were likely to have been translated thus. In the process, I went through every page of the dictionary. I had plenty of time because I kept waiting for the elusive second volume of the *Philology*, which common sense indicated would house the 'Dictionary Hindoostanee and English'. With mounting frustration, I chased it through edition after successive edition of the *Philology* that I called up from the British Library's storage, in its different reading rooms. That volume never materialised, but the 'Dictionary Hindoostanee and English' ultimately revealed itself as an adjunct publication by Gilchrist, *Grammar of the Hindoostanee Language, or Part Third of Volume First or a System of Hindoostanee Philology*. Leafing eagerly through the entries until 'm', I had to be content with the bald one-word translation Gilchrist provided for his *muzu*: 'pleasure'.¹³

Embodied philology must accept with humour and irony such frustrations, deceptions and shortfalls of the archive while extracting from these archival manifestations of 'the dialectics of absence and presence'¹⁴ a calculus of pleasure itself—in this instance, augmented by its *mazedaar* coincidence with the very word being chased down the labyrinth. In taking *mazaa* from the archive, moreover, we join several fruitful re-engagements with 'archive fever' that aim to destabilise 'panoptical readings' of the archive 'as the total (albeit precarious) site of colonial knowledge'.¹⁵ From this perspective, the archive is more than a sum of articulations that circumscribe the limits of knowledge by recourse to the colonial past. As Lorand Matory demonstrates in his re-reading of Freud and Marx on the fetish, the texts which sediment into the archive are 'materialisations of mental and social experience, as well as hieroglyphs of social relationships'.¹⁶ Underlying 'the cleanliness and rectilinearity of the page' heaves a sea of contingencies that determines the shape and size of the book in hand as well as the very typography that renders its contents legible.¹⁷ While the vagaries of funding through subscription transformed Gilchrist's neat schema of volumes into an erratic and retrospectively unpredictable composite, his showcasing of Devanagari in copperplate literally engraves on graphic record the words it catalogues. As the first text to print in Devanagari script, Gilchrist's *Philology* was the direct outcome of local blacksmiths casting letters in bazaar foundries at the instructions of a medical surgeon turned lexicographer.¹⁸ The archive reveals a porosity which invites enquiry into not

13. Gilchrist, *Grammar of the Hindoostanee Language*. See note 7 above.

14. Anjali Arondekar, 'What More Remains: Slavery, Sexuality, South Asia', in *History of the Present*, Vol. 6, no. 2 (2016), pp. 146–54 (147).

15. Anjali Arondekar, 'Without a Trace: Sexuality and the Colonial Archive', in *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, Vol. 14, no. 1 (2005), pp. 10–27 (14). See also Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

16. Lorand Matory, *The Fetish Revisited: Marx, Freud, and the Gods Black People Make* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), p. 164.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 164. See also, in this connection, the discussion of how *The Linguistic Survey of India* was impacted by Grierson's failing eyesight and consequent dependence on spectacles in Majeed, *Colonialism and Knowledge in Grierson's Linguistic Survey of India*, pp. 78–140.

18. Robert Fraser, *Book History through Postcolonial Eyes: Rewriting the Script* (London: Routledge, 2018), pp. 53–78; and Vinay Dharwadker, 'Print Culture and Literary Markets in Colonial India', in Jeffrey Masten, Peter Stallybrass and Nancy J. Vickers (eds), *Language Machines: Technologies of Literary and Cultural Production* (New York: Routledge, 1997), pp. 108–35. On the vernacular economies of the bazaar, see Kajri Jain, *Gods in the Bazaar: The Economies of Indian Calendar Art* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).

merely what Arondekar calls ‘the forensics and metaphysics’ of the trace, but, in Matory’s words, ‘the material and emotional conditions’ that dictate the physical forms it takes.¹⁹ It communes with the bazaar, and the bazaar is the vortex of *mazaa*. To put Gilchrist back in the bazaar is to vivify his inscription of the word through tracking its sensuous referents, pleasures that Gilchrist could have well experienced, but which must remain outside the dictionary’s rectilinear columns. Embodied philology takes us beyond that lexicographic discipline towards a messier alegopolitics that transacts between the oral/aural and the graphic/written; the embodied and the abstracted; and the trace and taste of *mazaa*.

Mazaa and its Masala repertoire

Recent interventions aimed at ‘queering’ colonial historiography ‘have not only decen-ter[ed] the idea of a coherent and desirable imperial archive’, according to Anjali Arondekar, they have also ‘forc[ed] us to rethink colonial methodologies’.²⁰ Yet, as she cautions, such rethinking continues to rely on the ‘assumption that the archive, in all its multiple articulations, is still the source of knowledge about the colonial past’.²¹ How do we correct such assumptions? We may turn to indigenous lexicography in order to note, for instance, that a few decades before Gilchrist’s arrival in India, *mazaa* was also defined as ‘a taste for food’ by Lalla Tek Chand Bahar in his landmark dictionary of Persian.²² But this lateral move from one written source to another arguably confirms that in our attempts ‘to shift the telos of knowledge production’, we simply ‘think of more capacious ways to look’.²³ Such persistent oculocentrism constrains the radical potential of opening up the archive to ‘the inclusion of oral histories, ethnographic data, popular culture, and performances’.²⁴ Rather, these materials have to be completely reconceptualised to build embodied philology as a method. Hence Diana Taylor advocates ‘shifting the focus from written to embodied culture, from the discursive to the performative [*sic*]’.²⁵ Recovering *mazaa* from the archive must go hand in hand with a turn to what Taylor, in the context of Latin America, defines as ‘repertoire’. The archive as a system of power generates a mandarin elite through controlling access to knowledge by fixing it in written documents. In contrast, the repertoire is a non-archival system of transferring knowledge that revolves around performance as generating subaltern agency: ‘if performance did not transmit knowledge, only the literate and powerful could claim social memory and identity’.²⁶ While performance functions ‘as vital acts of transfer, transmitting social knowledge, memory, and a sense of identity through reiterated or what Richard Schechner has called “twice-behaved behaviour”’, the repertoire crystallises these performances into

19. Arondekar, ‘Without a Trace’, p. 22; and Matory, *The Fetish Revisited*, p. 164.

20. Arondekar, ‘Without a Trace’, p. 11.

21. *Ibid.*

22. Munshi Tek Chand, *Bahār-i Ajam* (c. 1739). Author’s personal communication with Francesca Orsini, Mar. 2019.

23. Arondekar, ‘Without a Trace’, p. 11.

24. *Ibid.*

25. Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), p. 16.

26. *Ibid.*, p. xvii.

an alternative epistemology.²⁷ It is important to note, though, that Taylor's formulation of the repertoire works not through *opposition to* but in constant *dialogue with* the archive.

Following this dialogic mode, I propose for *mazaa* a *masala* repertoire that teases out the implications of the lexicographic horizon we extract from the archive.²⁸ Taylor's concept of repertoire is devised from and for a hemispheric cultural politics of the Americas. But it works singularly well to explicate the spectacular and complexly multisensory channel for acts of cultural transfer that is Indian popular cinema, short-handed as 'Bollywood'. Adapting Taylor's formulations, I use the *masala* repertoire to highlight a semiotics of 'sweet-sour-hot spiciness' which has run through Bollywood historically to keep alive that South Asian cultural register of enjoyment we articulate as *mazaa*. The lexicographer's tying of *mazaa* to taste is repeatedly prised open and elaborated through a *chatpata* semiotics that enables us to assess, and appreciate, ways of occupying space and time as *mazedaar*. The *masala* repertoire thus places a certain kind of taste in a continuum with non-gustatory experiences to communicate a cultural experience of enjoyment that is synaesthetic. To feel *mazaa* is to be capable of assessing a range of stimuli as 'tasty'—or, conversely, to be able to invest 'tastiness' in a range of gestures, utterances and sonic registers—accents, melodies, percussive rhythms, dance styles and modes of dress. South Asia is not the only culture that invokes taste in this manner—Latin American popular speech uses *sabor* (Spanish, 'flavour') and *sabroso* ('flavourful; delicious; savoury') in a similar way to pinpoint an optimum quality within music and dance. Like *mazaa* and *mazedaar*, *sabor* and *sabroso* indicate savoury, not sweet, tastes that are conjoined to these non-gustatory experiences to transmit pleasurable affect.²⁹ Both *mazaa* and *sabor* allow us to understand the pleasure derived from aesthetic experiences in a somatic and sensuous fashion, opening the door to an embodied appreciation of those experiences. Through the concept of the *masala* repertoire, we are able to track those culture-specific axes along which *mazaa* diverges from *sabor*, despite the similar heuristic utility of both terms within a decolonising agenda for pleasure. This specificity is grounded in South Asian experiences of colonial and post-colonial modernity, mediated and complicated by the machinery of Bollywood.

'*Mazaa kar le meri jaan / phir se na honge jawaan* (Let's enjoy ourselves, darling/ we won't be young forever)'. With these opening lines, Bollywood superstar Govinda unleashed onto the world yet another *desi* carpe diem lyric featuring *mazaa*—this time as part of the soundtrack of the film, *Andolan* (dir. Aziz Sejawal, 1995). As songs featuring the word *mazaa* are everywhere in Bollywood, I could have chosen any of them; what led me to this one was the clear illustration it affords of *mazaa*'s circulation through the *masala* repertoire and the exemplary role therein of a star such as

27. *Ibid.*, pp. 2–3, citing Richard Schechner, *Between Theater and Anthropology* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), p. 36; for the phrase 'acts of transfer', Taylor acknowledges Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 39; see Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*, p. 279, n. 3.

28. The word *masala* (Hindi: spice, spicy) has long been used as a descriptor for Bollywood films in both popular and academic discourse. I use this term slightly differently, however, by aligning it specifically to the gustatory dimension of *mazaa*.

29. Pilar Eguiz Guevara, 'Sabor Colonial: Crafting Savory Bodies through Cuban Music and Dance', in *Cuban Studies*, Vol. 45 (2017), pp. 119–226; see also Ángel Quintero Rivera, *Salsa, Sabor y Control! Sociología de la Música Tropical* (Coyocan: Siglo XXI, 1998).

Govinda. He is the ideal vehicle for a brand of faux-rustic buffoonery, which the song transmits. I enumerate the characteristics which are important in evoking this effect: (a) a dress sense that muddles sartorial registers and indulges in loud patterns and clashing colours; (b) an accent that changes the sound of the Persianate /s/ to the Bhojpuri /j/,³⁰ enunciating *mazaa* as *majaa*; (c) lyrics that amplify comic effect by bringing in words from an Anglophone domain (e.g. ‘darling’) associated with sophistication and elite behaviour, together with descriptions of behaviour (‘I’m going to walk arm-in-arm with you publicly’) that also point to assumptions about world; (d) a syn-copated singing style that unexpectedly compresses the even space between beats in the *taal*—e.g., in the second repetition of the titular phrase;³¹ (e) exaggerated facial expressions conveying extreme emotions; and, most importantly; (f) a mode of dancing that incorporates the *jhatak-matak*—the jutting outwards of the hips in time to the beat of the *taal*, or rhythm cycle.³² Furthermore, there is a perfect fit between the song’s lyrical content and its realisation through dance moves, accent and timbre, melody and percussion style, and the dress and deportment of the protagonists. The song was a ‘hit’ because, through these performative dimensions, it exemplified that which its lyrics exhorted its public to do—make *mazaa* (or better still, *majaa*) by drawing on the *masala* repertoire freely and without embarrassment. In a carnivalesque move, the *masala* repertoire even marshals into the service of its call to enjoyment signifiers of elite power, precisely in order to mock them through this inversion.³³

The embodied memory of *mazaa* as affect

If the repertoire is culturally valuable because it constitutes embodied memory, analysis must be able to explain the valence and necessity of that which is being remembered thus, and how it is remembered. In ‘*Mazaa kar le meri jaan*’, the cannibalisation of elite signifiers of taste by the subaltern personas of Govinda and Mamta Kulkarni, the film’s heroine, is all the more *mazedaar* because the audience knows full well that Bollywood stars are far from subaltern in their earning power. Such narrative and dramatic scenarios within which *mazaa* is embedded through the *masala* repertoire unlock the potential of ‘reversal, parody, and change’; Bollywood actors (and directors) become thereby ‘social actors’, granted the ‘opportunity to rearrange characters in parodic and subversive ways’,³⁴ even as the mass viewership afforded *Andolan* through the Bollywood cinematic apparatus converts its *mazaa* into a collective experience.³⁵ In the process, the pleasures of *mazaa* are amplified and updated to fit new socio-political circumstances even while affirming the social and affective relevance of pre-existing

30. See Grahame T. Bailey, ‘The Pronunciation of Urdu and Hindi’, in *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, Vol. 2, no. 3 (1922), pp. 539–47.

31. For the deeper implications of such syncopation, see Ananya J. Kabir, ‘The Dhantal’s Irreverence: Off-Beat at the In-Between Time of Indenture’, in Maurits S. Hassankhan, Lomarsh Roopnarine and Radica Mahase (eds), *Social and Cultural Dimensions of Indian Indentured Labour and Its Diaspora* (London: Routledge, 2016), pp. 305–16.

32. Kabir, ‘The Dhantal’s Irreverence’.

33. See Hrishikesh Ingle, ‘Regionalist Disjuncture in Bollywood: *Dabangg* and the Consumerist Cinema’, in Vikrant Kishore, Amit Sarwal and Parichay Patra (eds), *Salaam Bollywood: Representations and Interpretations* (London: Routledge, 2016), pp. 161–82.

34. Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*, p. 31.

35. Madhava Prasad, *Ideology of the Hindi Film: A Historical Construction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

scenarios. An examination of *mazaa* as politically charged pleasurable affect can help us unpack what these circumstances and scenarios may be as well as the political stakes involved in keeping alive that affective charge. Very illuminating in this context is Pilar Eguez Guevara's analysis of the changing valence of *sabor* in nineteenth-century Cuba, which cites Sara Ahmed's influential view that 'discursive analysis entails examining how words for feeling and objects of feeling circulate and generate effects', so as to prepare the ground for her 'own discussion of music and dance as an object of feeling and emotion'.³⁶ Her 'objectification' of music and dance in adherence to Ahmed's distinction between 'words' and 'objects' strikes a rare false note in an otherwise perspicacious discussion of how 'Cuban music may be understood as an object saturated with a history of affect that can be articulated as *sabor* through its movement between bodies and through time'.³⁷ However, by replacing the dependence here on Ahmed's use of 'object' with Taylor's concept of 'repertoire', we can mobilise optimally Guevara's focus on the field of transtemporal, intersubjective movement through which words such as *sabor* and *mazaa* become invested with affective significance.

Circulating within the *masala* repertoire of Bollywood, *mazaa* accrues affective capital as an enactment of embodied memory through 'performances, gestures, orality, movement, dance, singing—in short, all those acts usually thought of as ephemeral and nonreproducible knowledge' that 'exceed the archive's ability to capture it'.³⁸ Again, Guevara's analysis of how 'savory bodies were crafted' through *sabor*'s discursive deployment at a historical juncture significant for Cuban modernity offers a useful model for *mazaa*. Through a detailed reading of elite reportage of popular music and dance, Guevara demonstrates that *sabor* developed as a 'white bourgeois construct', which emerged from early nineteenth-century upheavals caused by a new socially impactful group that formed following the abolition of slavery: free people of colour. A careful study of the circulation of *mazaa* within late colonial discourse would likewise clarify what were the pathways for its development as an affective concept that mediates between social groups as they jockey for power. There is, nevertheless, an important difference in the mediating roles *sabor* and *mazaa* play within their respective milieus. While *sabor* rendered Afro-descendant dance and music acceptable to all groups in Cuban society, *mazaa*, as I pointed out earlier, bears faintly illicit connotations. This ostensibly subtle difference actually points to a fundamental divergence in Latin American and South Asian attitudes towards pleasure and the body—the former calibrated through theories of transculturation, *mestisaje* and creolisation, and the latter through an emphasis on caste-based purity that is the hallmark of South Asian cultural arrangements persistent even in diaspora.³⁹ As Tejaswini Niranjana's work on Indo-Caribbean music first suggested, this emphasis merged with two aspects of anti-colonial consolidations of 'Indian national culture': the presentation of certain music and dance traditions as classical and aesthetically refined alongside the inevitable

36. Eguez Guevara, 'Sabor Colonial', p. 201, citing Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (New York: Routledge, 2013), p. 14.

37. Eguez Guevara, 'Sabor Colonial', p. 202.

38. Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*, p. 20.

39. See Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*, on *mestisaje*. See also Aniket Jaaware, *Practising Caste: On Touching and Not Touching* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018); and Aisha Khan, *Callaloo Nation: Metaphors of Race and Religious Identity among South Asians in Trinidad* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

labelling of others as low or popular culture, and the progressive marginalisation of people from the Hindustani-speaking heartland, the very region which yielded material for Gilchrist's *Dictionary*.⁴⁰ I asseverate that it is these developments that together pushed *mazaa* and its embodied, temporally interruptive associations to the margins of socially acceptable experience.

This perspective reveals the deeper significance of Govinda's *mazedaar* star-text: that of the 'regional' hero, whose deportment, accent and style are associated with the heartlands of Bihar and eastern Uttar Pradesh, the place where Hindustani was spoken in the guise of several regional variations (Awadhi, Maithili, Kaithi, Bhojpuri). It was from these regions that migrant labour departed in waves during the late colonial period—to construct an interlocking national and transnational modernity in the plantations of islands in the Pacific, Indian and Atlantic Ocean worlds.⁴¹ The music and dance repertoires of these migrant groups are strongly marked by what has been called elsewhere a 'happiness effect', and which is precisely that *mazedaar* quality which has been marginalised by nationalist impulses in colonial and post-colonial India.⁴² The explicit and ribald content of Bhojpuri song lyrics, drawing attention to female sexual pleasure, breasts and pubic hair, male and female genitalia, amorous kissing and embracing, and transgressive sexual desire is accompanied by dance styles that, unlike 'classical' Indian dances, centre on the Bakhtinian lower body realm of the pelvis, and movements on the off-beat. Cross-dressing ures such as the *launda* embody the alternative subjectivities that flourished in this in-between time of indenture.⁴³ These features of a regional embodied culture flourished beneath the radar of high cultural traditions, but they were also disseminated nationally and transnationally through Bollywood's *masala* repertoire (while cross-pollinating with new forms, such as chutney music, that were developed in the diaspora).⁴⁴ The *masala* repertoire smuggles *mazedaar* ways of occupying space and time into the caste- and class-based moral policing of South Asian public spheres. By capitalising on *mazaa*'s semantic connections with taste, evanescence and the collective, and providing a performative mode for *mazedaar* activities that enact those connections, the *masala* repertoire also sets into motion transnational, cross-border communities united through an embodied memory of *mazaa*. *Desi* participation in *mazedaar* activities, including through mimicry of *filmi* dance moves, signals active cultural literacy around what *mazaa* means even if

40. Tejaswini Niranjana, *Mobilising India: Women, Music, and Migration between India and Trinidad* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006); see also Dवेश Soneji, *Unfinished Gestures: Devadasis, Memory, and Modernity in South India* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2011); and Anna Morcom, *Illicit Worlds of Indian Dance: Cultures of Exclusion* (London: Hurst, 2013).

41. See Ashutosh Kumar, *Coolies of the Empire: Indentured Indians in the Sugar Colonies, 1830–1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017); and the work of filmmaker Surabhi Sharma, for example her triptych, 'The Enactment of Exile in the City' (2011).

42. Ananya Jahanara Kabir, 'Calypso and Krishna's Flute: The Indo-Caribbean Woman's Moving Body', in *Caribbean Review of Gender Studies*, Vol. 6 (2013), pp. 1–9.

43. Kabir, 'The Dhantal's Irreverence', pp. 310–1. On time and indenture, see also Sudesh Mishra, 'Time and Girit', in *Social Text*, Vol. 23, no. 1 (82) (2005), pp. 15–36; on the *launda*, see Edward O. Henry, *Chant the Names of God: Music and Culture in Bhojpuri-Speaking India* (San Diego, CA: San Diego State University Press, 1988), p. 196; on sexuality deemed transgressive by the colonial authorities, see Jessica Hinchy, *Governing Gender and Sexuality in Colonial India: The Hijra, c. 1850–1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

44. Catherine Servan-Schreiber, *Histoire d'une musique métisse à l'île Maurice: Chutney indien et séga Bollywood* (Paris: Riveneuve éditions, 2010); and Kabir, 'Calypso and Krishna's Flute'.

continuing assumptions around seemingly and respectable public behaviour have hitherto constrained 'serious' considerations of the term.

'Bada wala mazaa (a big kind of fun)'

It was a hot and humid afternoon in March 2019 when I walked into (literally) 'Catch a Rainbow II', an 'installation with mist fountain and sunlight' by Temsuyanger Longkumer at The Pepper House, one of the venues for the 2018–19 Kochi-Muziris Biennale. The artwork was elegant in its simplicity: a one-dimensional structure erected on the grassy courtyard that intermittently unleashed a spray into the air through which we were meant to spy a rainbow. As the artwork's description at the site elaborated: 'Through a simple, durational manipulation of sunlight and water droplets, the artist reminds us that wonder and beauty are all around us; we just need to learn to keep an eye open for it'. However, no one seemed interested in *looking* for rainbows. Instead, we congregated under the cool spray as long as it lasted. It alighted on our bodies to drench clothes, skin and hair in a delightful mist, uniting us in an experience of communal joy that recalled feelings unleashed by the long-awaited annual return of the monsoon. 'Bada wala mazaa! (A big kind of fun!)', exclaimed a woman in a pink *salwar-kameez* as we revelled in this unexpected act of *mazaa lena* at a 'serious' art event. The accent and unidiomatic use of *mazaa* confirmed that she was a local, a native speaker of Malayalam. We had been conversing in English, but when I asked her to describe her experience, it was *mazaa* that she reached for. This incident set the tone for my Biennale story, which was one of immersive reclaiming of *mazaa* from the rain shower onwards. Dipping calligraphic brushes into pots of water and painting what one liked on a sweeping curve of glass; stepping into ankle-deep water to view an artwork; eating bowls of rare rice varieties lost to modernisation, or simple food cooked by volunteers in a post-caste open kitchen; swinging as in our childhoods from old and shady trees; and seeing South African artist William Kentridge's masterpiece, 'More Sweetly Play the Dance', under the sunlight-dappled, tiled eaves of the bungalow in the Aspinwall site: through such curatorial choices, the 2018–19 Biennale certainly invited us to take *mazaa* in the 'possibilities for a non-alienated life' (its tagline).

This edition of the Biennale offers a useful example of how a reorganisation of the public sphere in South Asia is being slowly attempted through an elite recovery of habits and mores. Possible means for forging new collectivities that cut across persistent social boundaries guarded along caste, class, ethno-linguistic, urban–rural and, of course, religious lines are being road-tested through the strategic recollection of ways of enjoying ourselves founded in relational, symbiotic and synaesthetic acts of eating, drinking, playing and feeling. References to these acts and their affective charge used to be coded in aural mnemonic catalogues such as the Hindustani *baramasi* traditions. Fragmented in the course of colonial and post-colonial modernisation, they have nevertheless been reassembled to circulate through technologies of mechanical reproduction such as the Bollywood song-dance sequence. While the power of mimicry is able to activate these memories on a collective plane, what is remarkable about initiatives such as the 2019 Kochi-Muziris Biennale is their considered reinstating within spaces of public culture that go beyond the expected arena of Bollywood. Embodied

remembering in these spaces involves not just the mimicry of moves, but the actual, interlocked occupation of space and time through the activation of the senses. Fleeting though its taste may be, and arguably because of it, *mazaa* then reveals itself as the radical potential of enjoyment. We move from remembering to *re-membering*, the bringing together of people through solidarities catalysed by collective acts of *mazaa*. In the process, we can chart both existing and emergent vectors for a South Asian alegropolitics.

Embodied philology as method took us back to the colonial archive, not to accept it as the basis of understanding *mazaa*, but a starting point to delve beyond the historical record and retrieve its sensuous and affective charge. This nuanced understanding of *mazaa* is the basis for articulating an alegropolitics of *mazaa* in the present, whereby one can begin asking: to what extent does *mazaa* offer a *desi* alternative to formulations of melancholia, mourning or nostalgia, so that the understanding of the past can be used to work through the present? Being aware of the alegropolitics of *mazaa* helps us restore it as a *modus vivendi*, as a way to have our fun and taste it too. Alegropolitics as a heuristic tool reveals the fleeting taste of *mazaa* as a strategy for a recovery of the South Asian self that reaches beyond the binaries perpetuated by colonialism and the casteist policing of the body and interpersonal community that remains rampant in the post-colonial era.

Disclosure statement

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