Our conference has been asked to address the question: what specific insights can postcolonial theory bring to the study of popular culture? Equally important, I think is the reciprocal questions: How would an examination of contemporary popular cultural practices influence significant areas of postcolonial theorizing: hybridity, resistance, the politics of representation? How does it alter a textual orientation?

All of these are vital questions. For there is no doubt that we in postcolonial studies have in many ways privileged the study of representations. I do not necessarily think we have been limited to the world of the literary and textual. There was enough of Foucault’s paradigm working through Said for him to make it quite clear that Orientalism obtained its power precisely by linking very diverse fields, from the ‘high’ literary world and the scholastic disciplines of philology to the popular culture of postcards, popular erotica, media. And even if Said himself did not stray too far from the world of high culture, scholars have not been slow to take up the potentiality in his paradigm. We have had a flourishing scholarly tradition over the last two decades that have explored Orientalism from the world of the cinema of the Arab sheik in Valentino, to western tourism.

But, this work does tend to reduce our world to the world of representations. Moreover, these are representations towards which, for the most part, we cultivate a hermeneutics of suspicion.

In Indian postcolonial studies, the problem is in some ways intensified. Said’s work was largely incorporated, with many resistances, into the ongoing
project of historians associated with Ranajit Guha’s Subaltern Studies. The suspicion of representations was treated, therefore with the methodological antidote of historicisation. Representations of India as religious, as defined by caste, were all subjected to the historical treatment which traced them origin back largely to the colonial state, and to the postcolonial nationalist state.

I do not want to argue that we should dispense with this treatment, and you will see the influence of this work writ very large on my own writings. But it does mean that a whole generation has been left curiously unable to credit the possibility that there is a past that reaches beyond the colonial state, or that the problems and strengths of India’s present could be fed by currents and meanings that cannot entirely be subsumed by the dominant discourses of the state, whether colonial or postcolonial. We are left wondering: Is caste more than a colonial category? Can we only talk of responses to caste as responses to colonial discourses and postcolonial nationalist state programs?

The anti-Orientalist array of theoretical armature has consisted of more than history. It has entailed a specific attempt to replace religion with politics, placing the state at the centre of analysis. It is as if by putting the state at the centre of the picture, we were guaranteed of being rescued from the timelessness of Orientalist representations of India, and instead, could claim our rightful place within the same historical temporality as other Occidental modern nations. Everything from Hindu/Muslim violence to yoga and ayurveda has been passed through the theoretical sieve of state centred analysis.

Again, this is not an argument against either state or politics or history, but simply to allow us to reflect a little on what we might have lost in the process. A whole generation of scholars not only operates as if it is impossible to
consider access to a past older than colonialism, but also as if dominant state discourses curiously defined the entire field within which we might debate our lives or even politics.

I suggest that attention to popular culture could shift the terms in which we have – particularly in the context of Indian postcolonial studies – unnecessarily sequestered ourselves.

But this will not happen if we approach popular culture already armed with our historicising and political categories and questions. It will not happen if we restrict our understanding of popular culture to the study of representations. I will suggest that we might be able to open up the study of postcolonial studies more if we allow the much maligned category of lived experience to play a part again. We do not need to resurrect the older understanding of experience in order to do this. It does not have to play the part of an originary category, it need not be regarded as emanating from within an isolated and entirely individuated subject. But, it needs to play a part, reformulated as it must be. And for this we need not only theoretical tools but also a wider array of methodological tools, including the tools I have learned from anthropology, that of participant observation. I have learned also from anthropology, the therapeutic shock value for scholars, especially those from middle and upper classes and castes, to subject themselves to radically different orientations and meanings, meanings which cannot be elicited by directed questions and interviews, but require that far more existentially exacting thing – non directive, unobtrusive, being with people.
If I privilege subaltern meanings in this paper it is for a whole host of reasons, including the way it gives us access to domains of practices and meanings that are not defined entirely by dominant discourses.

Ironically, the Subaltern School of historiography began precisely with attention to this project.

Guha’s project in his Elements of Peasant Insurgency contained a message that read something like this:

Pay attention to the very different semiotic codes of peasantries by reading historical accounts of peasant insurgency against the grain of the official archive.

His message was aimed not only at dominant colonial readings of history, but at postcolonial Indian intelligentsia, at both nationalist and Marxist-nationalist historians. To understand peasant insurgency one had to move beyond the modern categories bequeathed by secularism and rationalism. Read through such codes, peasant insurgency can only ever be constructed as backward, as lagging in consciousness behind the forms that are appropriate to modern society. At stake, especially, was the inability to understand religious codes, where religion was not simply the codes of upper caste Hindu texts, but a magical understanding of the power of the book, of words, of writing.

Guha’s call has only been very sporadically taken up, thanks to the theoretical dominance of the state, not only as the object of attention, but as defining the categories themselves. Possibly, Guha’s engagement with anthropology, born of his belonging to a structuralist moment in theory which brought together linguistics, anthropology of kinship and myth, with psychoanalytically inspired explorations of subjectivity, has never been replicated either in postcolonial theory.

In India, subaltern studies has at best engaged with the codes of bhakti, a movement of religious affectivity which swept the subcontinent from the 8th
century through to the sixteenth, and has left profound marks on elite as well as subaltern sensibilities.

But the codes and meanings I want to concentrate on as a case study fall well outside the limits of bhakti as an alternative to elite Hinduism.

The world of popular religion I stumbled into by staying in rural communities of Dalit agricultural labourers and lower caste fisher people introduced me to meanings of ‘religion’ that are fluid in ways unfamiliar and alien to the upper caste version of Hinduism, especially as this has been re-constituted in the 20th century.

For in this world, the attributes of deities are not sharply distinguishable from those of demons, blessings from the deity are not to be understood as the opposite of illness and misfortune, and the rituals for ecstatically welcoming deities into one’s bodies are not markedly different from the rituals of exorcism to drive unwanted spirits out of the body. The missionaries perceived these village goddesses as demons. They were half right. The distinction between good spirit from evil spirit or pey is particularly blurred in rural Tamil Nadu. The woman who dies in childbirth may be described as "pey" or dire spirit, but her behaviour as pey is not very different from Icakki’s behaviour as goddess.

The goddess or Amman cult I became familiar with, repeatedly foregrounds narratives and experiences to do with disease, sterility, birth and death to highlight the maverick and arbitrary quality of power, leaving human beings no recourse to either dharma or bhakti as a means of securing divine favour. Instead, all that can be done, by someone marked out by the ambiguous attention of such deities, is to acknowledge the uncontrollable nature of this power, to try to cool down the ‘hot’ desires of the deity or spirit, and, in the
case of exceptional individuals, to try and channel that power through their body.

All sorts of categories are shifted by this volatile and ambiguous world: what is disease, what is cure, and, the question I will particularly take up towards the end, what is it to ‘perform’ culture? This blurring of meanings is old in Tamil Nadu But they are thoroughly unfamiliar to the Indian middle class.

The domain of practices of performance I will draw attention to may be grouped under the term attam. Attam is an integral aspect of the history of Tamil constructions of the body, yet is not a figure on the stage of nationalism, either at the regional or at the national level. In his study of the Tamil ritual theatre form called terukkuttu, Frasca describes attam in the following terms:

"Attu (or attam) is a nominal form derived from the Tamil verb meaning ‘perform’ or ‘dance’. The derivatives of this verb have a general sense of ‘performance’ that must be qualified by a descriptive or taxonomic item preceding it. (Frasca1990 :15)"

Thus attam may occur in sadir attam, the polished dance performances of courts and temples that formed the precursor of Bharata Natyam, but it may also occur in very different ritual contexts as veri attam, the dance associated with veri. Veri is described by Frasca as

"... a term that to this day has an important and specific meaning in the context of Tamil culture. It carries the sense of a frenzy, a sudden, often violent fury that can overtake an individual. This frenzy can occur at any time but has a particular application to the possession rituals still extant in Tamilnadu today. In these ritual contexts the onset of veri is understood as a violent, powerful possession by a specific deity or spirit. (Frasca 1990:15)"

In the context of subaltern rituals in Tamil Nadu, ‘dance’ or attam is valued not simply as performance, but as a tangible, material means of
breaking with the everyday forms of bodily comportment, of breaking with or altering the body of habit.

Our everyday psychological and social sense of stability is supported, quite literally, by certain habitual postures. Exploring the work of Merleau-Ponty in relation to Schilder’s work on the body image, Weiss (1999) describes those primary postures which are physiologically most comfortable and maximally effective in achieving perceptual goals, such as an upright posture with the head facing forward in alignment with the rest of the body. Breaking with our everyday ways of relating to the world can therefore be effected by deliberately breaking with these postures, by not allowing the body to stay in a relaxed familiar position.

In attam, the postural schema of the body which is centrally related to the role of gravity and balance becomes singled out for explicit attention. Of particular importance here are two categories of sensations – those associated with exterceptive sensations, which provide a person with information about external objects, and those linked to proprioception, which provides ‘a person with information about the state of her deep tissue, her own movements and activity, and the effects of her own displacement in space’ (Guerts 2002:9). We are dealing with ‘bodily techniques’ in Mauss’ sense of the term (xx), for altering or modifying the sensory modes in which we normally establish and maintain our self/world relations.

Vertigo-inducing movements form a central part of Tamil ritual performances that are used to ‘call’, summon or invoke deities. In his ethnography of the rural Tamil Terukkuttu performance style, Frasca draws our attention to the central use of a spinning movement called the kirickki, which he traces to the onomatopoetic root kiru-kiru, whose primary meanings are ‘to be confounded, disconcerted, confused, giddy.’:

[The kirickki] is considered the male movement par excellence for two important reasons. First, its kinetic focus is not just the feet but
the entire body. Second, and most essential, its nature as a continuous, rapid, almost frenzied spin makes it the terukkuttu step most expressive of power, violence, heroism, and anger... It is particularly important...that the kirikkki be forceful and continuous...During all sequences for which it is used the music and rhythms employed are of a very abstract nature...According to performers, these particular moments of musical and kinetic abstraction when the kirickki is executed are the most directly linked to the occurrence of possession. Possession can manifest itself among performers or audience members, but is most predictable among the former. (Frasca 1990: 103-5)

In this sense, attam is the sign of a wanted presence – as in the culmination of rituals of propitiation. But it is also a sign of an unwanted or undesired presence of a spirit or deity in one’s body. This was particularly brought home to me by living in the villages, away from the spotlight of ‘performance’. Here, I came across many instances of attam as a fundamental feature of the body’s way of evincing the presence of an unwanted, maverick and volatile being.

This move away from ‘performance’ to trying to achieve a broader understanding of everyday experience within which performance is located, also allows us to shift our attention from the sphere of attam in which men predominate – the ritually valued forms of dance and possession that occur at the climax of ritual worship – to the world of women’s attam, which is less valued and a sign of trouble. Women may certainly become possessed as members of the audience in ritual temple performances associated with possession, as we saw in my description of the rituals at Icakki Amman’s temple. However, they seldom take up the central positions of value in these performances.

In the world of the villages, hidden from the gaze of the Indian upper class and from ethnographers who restrict themselves to formal ‘performance’, attam and affliction lodge themselves at the heart of what is
culturally constructed as the embodied ontology of what it is to ‘be a woman’, that is, in the capacity to be a mother. The presence of an unwanted spirit is suspected, typically, through its effects on the body of female fertility, in disasters that overtake the capacity of women to conceive, to give birth and to successfully nurture the child through the critical years of early infancy. To give just one example, a coastal woman called Santi had seen spirits from the time she came as a young bride to her husband’s home, known to have been built on the site of an old Hindu temple. As she matured, the spirits interfered cruelly with her capacity to become a mother:

I lost two more babies to the spirit, one at four months, the other at two. The abortions were cured only after a vaittiyar [doctor] gave me a kotal [charm] with medicine in it. But I lost one of my babies to mulai kachal [brain fever], not because of the spirits. I also had trouble urinating. After the last birth, I had such a bloody and massive flow that it was as if I had given birth to ten babies.

In an effort to find cures, Santi was taken to many Catholic shrines as well as to the temples of Icakki Amman, where the spirits would ‘dance’ her. Such dance – as indeed, the dance of those who ‘seek’ divine presence – can play havoc with the body to which the human subject later ‘returns’. Santi relates the dance of the spirit hurling her against the stone walls of the shrines, or driving her into the surf that pounds right next to many of the shrines of Catholic saints in these villages.

I went to all the shrines of importance: Raja Ur where I stayed for one month, Manlikarai, St. Michael of Trivandrum, where I stayed for three months, the shrine of Amman in Mandaikkadu. Wherever I went there was atam. At Manalikarai [a coastal village], the atam would take me and fling me into the surf [kattle tuki kondu podum].

Finally, at Valiathurai, a healer told me that it was a temple spirit which had me, and that it would take its own time to leave. (Field notes 1991)

Santi eventually reached a kind of accommodation to the presence of the spirits. When I last saw Santi, in 2006, it was one year after the tsunami. The
baby that survived the departure of the spirit and the tsunami that took 200 people from her coastal village, Cinci, was now a young woman.

I have argued earlier that swinging and spinning movements of attam alter the sense of bodily stability which literally supports everyday social relations. The potentialities of de-automatisation in attam also allow women to effect a break with the gendered body of habit. In the shrines of saints and goddesses where the possessing spirit ‘comes out of hiding’ and makes its identity felt, striking transformations take place in the bodily comportment of women. The sari is transformed from a modest garment to its athletic version, ready for the strenuous dancing that will follow. The talapu, normally trailing over the shoulder, is tucked into the waist. The sari is hitched to the waist, occasionally by carers, as the women turn into acrobats. One woman called Sugandhi took matters a step further and wore her husband’s clothes when she danced in the shrines, much to his dismay. Language, which must normally express the restraints of femininity, now expresses coarse and foul abuse. Deference to mothers-in-law, to elders, to saints and to men generally, is transformed into vilification. The female body runs, jumps, leaps in the air, shins up pillars, and makes men afraid. As one man described it to me, women suddenly possess ‘the strength of tigers’. In the shrine at Raja Ur in Kanyakumari groups of young adolescent girls run in packs, shinning up pillars, swinging off them, turning acrobats, allowing the play of young children to re-enter their repertoire at precisely the time when social pressures to mould their bodies into contained forms of speech and comportment are at their most acute.

When men get possessed in the context of affliction, their bodily behaviour and break with the everyday gendered body is less dramatic, precisely because the daily disciplines of containment in movement, gaze and language, the disciplines of how the body inhabits the materiality of place, are less salient in the first place.
What can postcolonial theory offer the study of attam?

When I began to work on dance as a new and subsidiary interest in the 1990s there was not much social science or cultural studies work on Indian dance. But there was in India a vibrant mix of feminist scholarship, Marxist and post-colonial cultural studies which were making incisive interventions into the study of the construction of a gendered middle class respectability that is simultaneously upper caste, Brahmanic, modern and westernised in its sensibility (Sangari and Vaid 1989, Kaviraj 1995, Mrinalini Sinha 1997).

The work in this field has elicited a rich understanding of the relational character of the way in which middle class culture has been constructed – not as an autonomous entity, but through relationships of exclusion and inclusion with other caste communities. As part of this general field of enquiry into the constitution of postcolonial middle class gender norms, there began to be a growing literature on the way this respectability in turn marginalised particular styles of performance which combined eroticism and professional identity for the women who danced for the public sphere of courts, temples and an elite public. Such performances, whether danced by the tawaifs of colonial Lucknow in north India or the devadasis of south India’s temple and court culture, was destined to fall foul of the new morality of a respectable nationalist construction of “Indian culture”.

But when viewed from the perspective of attam and popular religion, the social field in which this historical work has taken shape seems quite limited. The forms of dance that have been the subject of historical and sociological work have, for all their marginalisation, tended to be the province of elite culture. Whereas attam remains, quite simply, so subaltern it is unknown in the canons of both regional and national tradition. If I had not lived in those villages, if anthropology as a discipline had not insisted I live
there for eighteen months, and build up personal relations to which I would return over the years, I would not have known about it.

On the other hand, anthropological observation could not have yielded the kinds of questions I am able to ask because of my training in postcolonial theory.

How has such a situation come about attam lacks a discourse even within the powerful regional nationalist traditions that the south of India has produced in response to the perceived threat of north Indian dominance in the postcolonial era? Through what kinds of discursive division of labour is it possible for the attam of possession to lead such a marginal existence on the modern Indian stage?

The historicising tendencies of postcolonial scholarship makes it possible for me to explore for example, a topic I am particularly interested in: the history of transpositions between upper caste hierarchies of religious practices and evolutionary rationalism. At least one of the key moments in this process can be located in the work of A.K Iyer in the early 20th century. I turn to his work for two reasons. He is one of the earliest Indian anthropologists to write about the south of India. Secondly, he is my maternal great grandfather, and his work therefore is directly a part of my own postcolonial genealogy. Iyer’s work centred on the ‘princely’ states of Cochin, Mysore and Travancore, and spanned the turn of the nineteenth century and into the 1930s. I have explored his work elsewhere (Ram 2007), and will confine myself here to his essay on Religion in the third volumes on the state of Mysore, published in 1935 (vol. 3, 111ff). The essay effortlessly absorbs an evolutionist schema, while maintaining for Brahmanic religion its place on the top of the ‘Indic’ civilisational ladder. But in order to achieve this under modern conditions, Brahmanism is distinguished from the religion of ‘lower castes’ and ‘tribes’ in new ways that draw on specifically anthropological contributions to the colonialist enterprise. Brahmanism is now distinguished
from the provinces of ‘totemism’ ‘magic’, ‘sorcery’ and ‘animism’. The religion of the upper castes consists of named, organised bodies of thought. It includes the hymns and sacrifices of the Rg Veda, the philosophy of the Upanishads, doctrines of karma, as well as the challenge of organised discourses such as Buddhism and Jainism, the advaita philosophy of Sankaracharya. Magic and sorcery on the other hand are nominated as the province of non-elites:

Primitive tribes all over India and other countries of the world believe that magicians and sorcerers can assumed the figure of any animal they like. The Parayan and Panan sorcerers have powers of witchcraft. The Mundas of Chota Nagpur have similar beliefs in transformation...The Todas and Badagas are mortally afraid of the Kurumbas who are believed to possess the power of destroying men, animals and property by witchcraft. Thus, sorcery is a living article of faith among the ignorant and backward people as also among the jungle folk. [1935:275]

With this manoeuvre, the elite re-establish their respectability in colonial terms.

However, with this increase in respectability came a loss, not only the obvious loss to the non-elites who are thereby robbed of cultural capital, but a lesser cost borne by the elites themselves.

As ‘magic’ is exorcised from social practices and projected on to the ‘animism’ and ‘spirit cults’ of the non-elites, Indian elites lose the capacity to acknowledge, at least in official discourse, the patently magical elements in their own Brahmanic practices such as ‘the hymns and sacrifices of the Rg Veda’ or the doctrines of karma, in favour of a purely intellectualist understanding of religion. Henceforth, ‘Hinduism’ can be defended, only in terms of metaphysical doctrines, as true ‘beliefs’, or, as with the discourse on a ‘Hindu science’, as so many pre-figurations of ‘science’ from the time of the Vedas onwards (Prakash 1999).
Most critiques of orientalist nationalism stop with a critique of Brahmanic constructions. What is less often noted is that the sundering of local meanings has also affected the avowedly ‘anti-Brahman’ Dravidianist versions of religion, which in the twentieth century attempted to distance themselves from village practices such as possession and the use of animal sacrifice and liquor in worship (Ramawamy 1997). In an inversion of Sanskritisation, these features have been projected on to the coming of the Aryans to south India. If a Brahman intellectual such as Iyer mapped out an intellectualist history of Hinduism through the Rg Veda, the Upanishads, the advaita philosophy of Sankara etc., then Dravidianist intellectuals mapped out equally intellectualist understandings of south Indian religion based on the metaphysical philosophy of Saiva Siddhanta. One of the earliest ways adopted by Tamil intellectuals to defend ‘Dravidian’ culture from the charge of primitivism was the ‘neo-Saivite’ revivalism, declared by Tamil intellectuals to be the authentic, non-Aryan religion of the Tamil people. It was not only ‘Aryan’ elements that had to be purged from this definition of Tamilness. Along with this essentialist identity came a need to expunge practices that could not be defended as ‘rational’. Popular practices of worship became particularly indefensible.

An instance of this is the way in which middle-class film critics write about Tamil popular religious cinema.

Intellectual representations of possession cults and of the attam that is a central component of them, are to be found scattered, dismembered in various dusty corners reserved for the bypassed and superseded aspects of the past: in collections of ‘folklore’, in anthropological studies of performance and ritual, in religious studies in western universities where there are flourishing scholarly accounts of the myths, legends and textual accounts of ‘demon deities’ of southern
India. At the level of science, it exists as a medicalised discourse on psychiatric disorders. At the level of a popularized elite sociology, this division is translated into an association with sections of the population pre-designated as backward: ie., the poor, the ‘uneducated’ rural masses, women, the lower castes.

What can postcolonial theory learn from a consideration of popular culture?

It will be clear I believe there is a good deal to be learned in turn from a serious engagement with popular culture. But to learn, we have to stop coming to these domains of practices with intellectual questions and frameworks that are so overwhelming that they do not allow an independent enquiry, and therefore remain impervious from being reshaped by the encounter. Such has largely been the fate of the politicised scholarship on performance in India. For all its insights into the political construction of gender and nationhood, this body of work betrays a singular imperviousness to the aesthetics or the embodied experience of dance or performance. The politicised treatment of performance draws on a tradition which, for all its more sophisticated manifestations, has little time for embodied aesthetics, except insofar as it reveals something about power relations between the elite and the subaltern, or allows the researcher to adjudicate between the progressive and the backward tendencies of politics. Yet politics, as the language of manoeuvring, shifting, and taking up of ‘positions’ itself implies, relies implicitly, on having a body and being in a body.

Nor have we sufficiently allowed the practices we examine to inform our epistemology and methodology in the social sciences and humanities. Reflected on carefully, these aesthetics and performance values hold rich
lessons in understanding, and in instructing us on the nature of human subjectivity in more general terms.

Entering into attam’s values and the phenomenology of its practices allows us to reflect back on the language that we use in postmodern, post-structuralist inspired intellectual paradigms. We now speak of culture as being performed, and we talk of nationalism or gender being ‘performed’ and ‘constructed’. A more accurate characterisation of the phenomenology of attam can help to alter the way we speak not only of ‘performance’ but of the various realms of practice to which we have begun to apply the term ‘performance’ in the social sciences and humanities. Attam does not entail subjects who are entirely conscious. The goal of these practices is to lose control and consciousness, and the audience’s reaction to this culminating moment is equally, a loss of control. In attam, bodily movements of spinning, swinging and convulsive twitching movement are valued precisely as the bodily techniques that accompany extreme emotion to produce the excesses of veri and avesam, another Tamil word that describes extreme excitation. Veri and avesam have the capacity to contagiously leap the boundaries between body and body, between performer and spectator, between human body and the deity.

I have taken from this emphasis on the non-conscious aspects of attam, a general methodological orientation to look more closely at the un-conscious elements in the notion of ‘construction’. Even dance forms that have been vaunted as central to the Indian nationalist celebration of its antiquity – forms such as B.Natyam – do not merit the description of ‘constructed tradition’ if only because the re-choreographing that went into its construction was done by men and women whose middle class tastes were not a simple product of twentieth century modernity. Instead, they brought to bear on the needs of the present, certain embodied tastes, forms of disgust as well as delight, which bore the marks of an older habitus, one in which Brahmanism and
upper caste bodily practices of daily life played a key role.

Secondly, attam’s emphasis on the contagious excitement that is generated by performance and has the capacity to leap between body to body, the emotions and affects of ayesam, I have found very useful in thinking about quite another domain of performance, which is that of twentieth century cinematic practices.

In the clip I wish to show you, made by myself and a friend and sociologist Selvaraj Velayutham, - the film was commissioned by the Art gallery of nsw for the blockbuster exhibition Goddess: Divine Energy in 2006, - I began to reflect on the way in which cinema played a pivotal role in modern social movements in India, whether rationalist secular movements, or, as in the clips I am about to show, a nationalist movement that used the affective power of religion and cinema. I will finish then by showing the first part of this film which highlights the way in which the religious devotee becomes the model, in a sense, for the devotee of the nation.

To finish with cinema is in a sense to come full circle back to representations. But the way we can talk about representations has been renewed and fed by an engagement with that which is not purely representational. This I believe is my main message for today: not to eschew politics or history or the study of representations – but to allow these domains to engage with a genuinely heterogeneous set of meanings, experiences and practices.

SHOW CLIP.