Introduction: Globalisation, the National-Popular, and Contemporary Indian Cinema

If size does matter, then it is fairly widely known today that India has been the world’s largest manufacturer of feature films for close to four decades. However, it is not its gigantism of scale but what its operations signal about the configurations of political subjectivity within – and possibly beyond – the Indian nation. Recent scholarship has explored the relationship between the coalitional nature of power in postcolonial India and the textual forms that determine the horizon of conflicts and resolutions in Indian film narratives. Ashis Nandy, for instance, characterises popular cinema in India through the arresting metaphor of “a slum’s eye view of Indian politics,” and notes that its focus is on “the key concerns of some of the most articulate, vibrant and volatile sectors of the Indian electorate” (Nandy 1998, 12). Others have pointed to how cinematic discourse is weighted more ambivalently and mediates between elite agendas of modernisation and popular demands for democracy. Ravi Vasudevan’s (1993, 1995) analyses of the “social film” have indicated how Indian commercial cinema articulates contemporary nationalist discourse in ways that overlap with and diverge from the viewpoint of the liberal intelligentsia. Ashish Rajadhyaksha (1998, 2004a, 2004b) has argued that just as the Indian people have translated/vernacularised concepts like democracy and citizenship while acknowledging the state’s sovereignty, cinema too has functioned under the sign of an unwritten ‘narrative contract,’ as a consequence of which the disciplinary realism of the frame is disrupted by the “more complex, locally derived, interpellative and identificatory devices” that function beyond the sphere of civil society and elite modernity (Rajadhyaksha 1998, 193). Similarly, M. Madhava Prasad (1998a, 1998b, 2003) has studied cinema as an institution that is “part of the continuing struggles within India over the form of the state” (Prasad 1998a, 9), since it reproduces the articulated political structure of independent India: power is shared by a coalition of the bourgeoisie, the rural rich and the bureaucratic elite, and the state has until quite recently mostly endorsed the authority of the yet-unexpropriated pre-capitalist/‘traditional’ elite. Prasad maintains that Hindi film narratives incarnate this contingency, and in this sense (contra glib accusations of escapism and melodramatic excess) have “remained faithful to prevailing realities” (Prasad 1998b, 141). More recently, Valentina Vitali (2006) has urged that it is useful to think of Indian cinema in particular...
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not as ‘reflecting’ the dynamics of a constellation, but as ‘staging’ desired trajectories that, irrespective of whether in line or not with the state of affairs dominant at a particular time, are partial (‘incomplete’ and ‘partisan’) rearrangements of simultaneous but differently codified narrativisations of ‘the nation’ as the real and variegated spheres the films address. (Vitali 2006, 271-2)

However, since the 1990s, there has been a rather dramatic transformation in the film narratives as well as the film-industrial practices in India. The Indian masses, whose presence on the cinema screens and in the cinema halls had been a decisive factor in the commercial success of films until the 1980s, seemed to abruptly become irrelevant to the narratives and practices of the new “Bollywood.” Film industries in different parts of the world have benefited from the multiple windows of distribution/exploitation that are now available: worldwide releases, telecast rights, DVD releases, product placement deals, music sales, merchandising spin-offs – to name just the most obvious sources of revenue. This general trend has been boosted considerably in India by a rapidly growing consumer class within the country and the consolidation of new international markets by the Indian entertainment industry, especially in the West. The middle class within India, over 250 million strong, might comprise just 25 per cent of the national population, but it is a rapidly expanding market and by itself almost matches the size of the entire population of the United States; and the 20-25 million relatively affluent members of the South Asian diaspora spread across the world – especially in the US, UK, and Australia – today constitute a formidable and growing market for Indian films. It is widely held that the international markets have played a decisive role in shaping the post-90s Bollywood boom, given that the financial returns for current Hindi blockbusters from distribution in the overseas market are roughly 60 per cent of the revenues earned from the entire Indian market. Indian films are also popular amongst many who are not part of the two segments mentioned above: for example, there are increasing indications that Hindi films have benefited from the anti-Americanism in the Arab world, while dubbed versions continue to be seen by a growing number of European, central Asian and east Asian viewers. The curiosity-value of Bollywood exotica in the West might (or might not) turn out to be short-lived, but in many non-Indian contexts – or, to borrow from the pointed subtitle of Partha Chatterjee’s *The Politics of the Governed*, in “most of the world” (Chatterjee 2004) – these filmic narratives about familial and social relationships, about struggles to keep/move up in societies structured by inequities of tradition as well as of modernity, about the pleasures and anxieties induced by capitalist anomie as well as by neo-traditional identity, are likely to find great resonance.

Within India, questions concerning the ideological provenance of cinema plumb deep. In 1990, Manjunath Pendakur had noted that an estimated 93 per cent of screen-time in Indian movie-halls is taken up by films produced in India (Pendakur 1990, 231). Despite the changes in technology and economic policy that have moved in step with Fund/Bank-driven globalisation, India has remained one of the few national territories where the consumption of indigenously produced films far outweighs that of imports from Hollywood. Pendakur also observes that since the advent of the talkies (in the 1930s) Indian audiences have “desired” films in “their own languages
and dialects," and that this uniquely regional character of Indian cinephilia has “in cultural terms, worked like a shield” against Hollywood (Pendakur 1990, 230). Does this point to the existence of a national cinema in India, or alternatively to a dynamic of cinephiliac subjectivity operating on a terrain determined through non-statist modes of national-popular mobilisation? There are obvious difficulties in looking at cinema in India through familiar lenses of nationalism: unlike European national cinemas, Indian popular cinema has not, by and large, been funded or protected by the government; unlike Hollywood cinema, Indian popular cinema is not produced and promoted by a limited number of vertically integrated corporations that monopolise the national market. There is a growing sense that the popularity of Indian films within the country appears to derive from the appropriateness of their narrative contents and form to structurally significant aspects of national political experience. Therefore, perhaps, the pertinent question is not so much whether India has a national cinema but what kinds of nationalism constitute or impact on cinematic discourse in India? Further, how is this cinematic practice being re-negotiated under conditions of globalisation?

Cinematic Form and the Passive Revolution

Over the last two decades, several writers have drawn upon and re-fashioned the Gramscian notion of “passive revolution” to make sense of postcolonial Indian political history. Partha Chatterjee (1986), most notably, has argued that under conditions of colonial modernity, the bourgeois-led nationalist movement had mobilised the peasant masses in the joint struggle for democracy and self-rule, but with decolonisation the bourgeoisie engages not in a politics of popular initiative (“war of manoeuvre”) but enters into a coalition with the feudal classes to take over and administer a reformist state as an instrument of retarded modernisation-from-above (“war of position”). Drawing on this Gramscian portrayal of a revolution-restoration, Partha Chatterjee has suggested that the passive revolution is “the general form of the transition from colonial to postcolonial nation-states in the 20th century” (Chatterjee 1986, 50). Thus in India, where political power is shared by the urban bourgeoisie, the rural rich peasantry (the landlords), and the bureaucracy, the bourgeoisie “does not attempt to break up or transform in any radical way the institutional structures of ‘rational’ authority set up in the period of colonial rule” nor does it “undertake a full-scale assault on all pre-capitalist dominant classes; rather it seeks to limit their former power, neutralize them where necessary, attack them only selectively, and in general bring them round to a position of subsidiary allies” (Chatterjee 1997, 288). The Indian state is thus a bourgeois democracy in form but it is not bourgeois in the classic sense because the capitalist class does not occupy a hegemonic position. Its rule is not purely repressive but it does not exercise moral-intellectual leadership either: its political will is constantly subject to the claims and requirements of the coalitional partners (the rural landlords and the bureaucracy which play a mediating role).

Madhava Prasad has extended this framework to the study of Indian cinema. Reminding us that for India’s pioneering film-maker Dadasaheb Phalke the screen,
under colonial conditions, was a political site because “the imperative was to make the screen and the figures on the screen represent the spectator, i.e. to be their representative in a cultural, but also, inevitably, political sense” (Prasad 1998b, 124), Prasad argues that the effort at producing an equivalence between the image and the spectator has continued after independence, under the regime of the passive revolution. He argues that this coalitional form of the Indian state is represented/ reproduced through a specific narrative contract in popular film melodrama. Most of these films belong to the genre that Prasad terms the “feudal family romance” (Prasad 1998a, 30), and their pleasures have revolved around narratives that explicitly or implicitly stage the tensions between the hegemonic aspirations of the urban bourgeoisie and their rural non-bourgeois partners whose hold over large sections of the population is immense and based on non-capitalist societal protocols and traditions. A key element of this narrative form is the persona of the hero, who mediates between and embodies the ideological ambitions of both sections of the coalition, and seeks to resolve the narrative conflict through a compromise between the two worldviews. It is precisely this aspect that is under immense pressure with globalisation. We might track some of the most important shifts in direction through a glance at the career of the biggest star of Hindi cinema: Amitabh Bachchan. Bachchan’s carefully constructed screen persona of the angry young man captured the imagination of Hindi film audiences in an unprecedented way. He was seen as giving voice to the anti-establishment frustration and rage felt by subaltern classes, while simultaneously denoting a cultural style and subjectivity acceptable to middle class audiences. Most of Bachchan’s films were about the impotence, inefficiency and corruption of the Indian state, and his screen persona was that of a strong, brooding, and initially law-abiding man forced to become a revenge/justice-seeking vigilante figure who hits back at those who rock the moral order through a spectacular display of violence. His films from the mid-1970s to the late 1980s thematised social and economic conflicts that characterised the postcolonial Indian state, and his screen persona asserted a political vision for the state to uphold. Since the 1990s, with the state increasingly withdrawing from key social sectors/commitments, this dominant form of cinematic masculinity is giving way to newer forms more in tandem with the cleft logic of globalisation. Hindi films can increasingly be placed within the following broad categories: narratives of globalised non-resident Indians designed to offer pleasurable identification with (Western) consumerism, narratives of urban yearning for an upward/global mobility against the backdrop of a spectacularised neo-ethnic Indian culture; narratives that assert a new Hindu nationalism and insist on the need for a tougher state to deal with the political demands or disenchantment of the minorities. Engagement with rural subjects and subjectivities are increasingly rare in Hindi cinema, and most narratives are focalised through the viewpoint of the urban consumer classes within and outside India. There is, as a consequence, a distinct makeover in the persona of Bachchan who continues to be a successful star in the changed context as well: his heroes today are passionate about their personal/familial (rather than social) relationships, and advertising companies seeking to reach wider markets have been most successful in re-deploying his flexible screen image. “The angry young man has mellowed over the years and is to-
day friendly, approachable and trusted – someone you could buy your second hand car from,” writes journalist Sanghamitra Chakraborty (2004, 53). The irony of this new use of Bachchan’s screen persona is perhaps best captured by the explanation offered by the communications head of Reid and Taylor for Bachchan’s success as an advertising supermodel: “He talks to India and Bharat, the masses and the classes with equal ease” (Tarun Joshi, in Chakraborty 2004, 52). Bachchan has also been a key player in the global growth of Hindi cinema, not only as a pre-eminent screen icon but in his role as a pioneer in corporatisation of the industry (through Amitabh Bachchan Corporation Limited) and consolidating a transnational presence/visibility for the Indian film industry (as brand ambassador of the high-profile International Indian Film Academy and through widely publicised stage shows).

The Wages of Globalisation

Although Indian cinema is still estimated to be worth only around $ 3 billion in the global market, it is the steadily expanding home market as well as the steeply rising international market that have forced both investors and film-scholars take notice of the largest film-producing industry in the world.1 True, the global market share of Indian cinema is today a mere 1 per cent, and the revenues earned are currently less than one-tenth of Hollywood’s – last year’s Hollywood blockbuster (the latest Indiana Jones film) made over $ 780 million, while Bollywood’s top grosser Jodhaa Akbar made $ 40 million; it is worth remembering, however, that the former film was made at a cost of $ 185 million and the latter at under $ 10 million. Despite the relatively lower earnings at the moment, it is expected that Bollywood’s 13 per cent annual growth (compared to Hollywood’s 3 per cent) will in the coming decades make a significant difference to film production and consumption worldwide. During the last ten years, Hindi cinema has found an unexpected niche in European markets, most notably Germany where the fifth annual Bollywood festival in 2008 has built on the popularity of Hindi films disseminated through dubbed DVDs, screenings in select cinemas and television slots, stage shows featuring Indian actors and performers, and superstar Shah Rukh Khan’s charismatic flair at the prestigious Berlin Film Festival.

‘Corporatization’ (professional marketing practices) and ‘cross-over cinema’ (addressing foreign viewers) appear to be the current key ideologemes within Indian film industry. What ought to interest us is not just the speed and magnitude of capital accumulation in the Indian film industry, but questions such as the following: what are the

1 The website of India’s Ministry of External Affairs, quoting the report prepared by the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI) and Pricewaterhouse Coopers (PwC), states that the Indian entertainment and media industry is currently “estimated to be worth INR 43,700 crore” [approximately $ 11 billion] and that it is “poised to become INR one trillion (INR 100,000 crore [approximately $ 25 billion]) industry by 2011” [<http://www.indiainbusiness.nic.in/industry-infrastructure/service-sectors/media-entertainment.htm> (September 12 2008)]. The report published by FICCI and PwC is titled The Indian Entertainment and Media Industry: Unravelling the Potential (March 2006), and is available at: <http://www.pwc.com/extweb/pwcpublications.nsf/docid/BE7E56C3FF8E90A6CA257185006A3275/$file/frames.pdf> (September 12 2008).
political consequences of the Hindi film industry shifting its staple film crop from social melodramas (which could be read, following Gramsci, as national-popular narratives) to making a bid for a global mainstream? And conversely, if some analysts are correct in predicting that within the next twenty years 60 per cent of Hollywood’s revenues are going to come from Asia, to what extent would Hollywood films themselves have to change for appealing to new markets outside the West?

These are clearly not questions that anybody could answer at the moment. However, the lineaments of the emerging global film industries as well as of film narratives can be discerned in the transnational collaborations and narrative refurbishments that are currently under way. Jason Overdorf described Ronnie Screwvala, the chairperson of the rising Indian media giant UTV that produced blockbusters such as *Lagaan* and *Jodhaa Akbar*, as “the frontrunner in the race to become Bollywood’s Jack Warner – the man who transformed parochial American cinema into its modern global form” (Overdorf 2007, 1). Screwvala himself appears to think along similar lines when he declares:

*The way that India is looking at the globalization phenomenon is unique. There’s been a massive change in our psyche. We are doing things we couldn’t have done 10 years ago, when the balance of payments situation was bad and the rupee was weak. Most importantly, we did not have the mindset or the confidence that we could go out and represent ourselves in front of the world. But that mindset has changed. It doesn’t really matter now who owns Jaguar or Land Rover – an Indian company can acquire those brands as easily as a company from anywhere else. There is absolutely nothing to stop us.* (Screwvala 2008b)

In another interview he asserts: “We don’t care for films which have songs for the sake of having them. We are looking at the bigger picture. And we are interested in being world players.” Moreover: “We are clear on where we want to go. Our ambition is to be a global Indian entertainment company. And I don’t see any reason why we can’t make big-budget Hollywood films” (Screwvala 2008a). Screwvala may be clear where he wants to go, but there is surely nothing like manifest destiny in the economics and politics of celluloid/digital entertainment. What seems reasonably certain, however, is that many of the key directions in world cinema in the coming decades will no longer be able to bypass the multiple locations of South Asian cinema – within and outside the subcontinent.

This anthology seeks to examine, from a variety of perspectives, how we might come to terms with the rise of Bollywood, especially in Western markets. Although the tag is resisted, even resented, by many within the Indian film industry (partly because it insinuates a demeaning juxtaposition with Hollywood and partly because less than 20 per cent of Indian films are in Hindi and produced in Bombay), others view it as an already established global brand name that ought to be cashed in on. It might be useful to view Bollywood not as merely a derisory/exultant tag but as implicated in complex processes of cultural and political marketing. Rick Altman has convincingly argued that the character of genres depend on the identity and purpose of those using and evaluating them. He asks: “What if genre were not the permanent *product* of a singular origin but the *temporary by-product* of an ongoing *process*?” (Altman 1998, 6; emphasis in original). Is it worth asking whether Bollywood is now (becoming) a
genre? What are its attributes, whence its thematic origins and political economy, where must we trace its lines of formation and orbits of circulation?

The essays collected here, originally contributions to a conference at TU Dresden organised by Thomas Kühn and Satish Poduval, throw up provisional hints regarding some of these exploratory queries. While there is confirmation in several of the essays that it is pointless to ground the inquiry concerning this dynamic industrial cultural form in older or newer forms of cultural essentialism (Hindu civilisation, nationalist patriotism, etc.), and that cinema in India (as elsewhere) draws upon and yokes together diverse transnational influences, we are confronted with a multiplicity of themes and frameworks of analysis. Most of the essays examine Bollywood films as hybrid objects moving through transnational circuits of consumption. Two contributions reveal aspects of how films are made and seen by specific film publics in India. Kastury Dadhe examines the overlaps between Hindu nationalism and the constructions of community in popular Bollywood films. Madhumeeta Sinha describes the emergence of feminist documentary film-making in India, and its narrative and distribution strategies through a discussion of two films on the imaging of women’s bodies/lives. The essay by Gabriele Linke and Hartmut Möller focuses on Bollywood film music: drawing upon postcolonial and musicological discussions of hybridity, the authors make the case that the “complex, unstable and occasionally ambiguous […] representations of hybridity reflect the cultural changes and reconfigurations” that are caused by the Mumbai film industry’s “multiple goals, which are shaped by diasporic as well as Indian longings for both Western and Indian forms.” Further, we have a glimpse of transnational Bollywood through the prism of the feminist rediscovery of Jane Austen and the genre of the heritage film through two essays by Susanne Gruß and Sandra Heinen who focus on Gurinder Chadha’s Bride and Prejudice. Ingrid von Rosenberg presents us with a revealing commentary on the politics of identity in postcolonial contexts through a reading of two important – albeit different – cricket films: the widely-discussed Indian blockbuster Lagaan and the almost-forgotten Caribbean comedy of manners Playing Away. Finally, Gerd Stratmann’s reading of the Bollywood version of Vanity Fair points to the pitfalls that beset transnational filmic adaptations.

Works Cited


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