

The 'Bollywoodization' of the Indian cinema: cultural nationalism in a global arena

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1. Rajnikant in Japan

The West may have the biggest stalls in the world's media bazaar, but it is not the only player. Globalization isn't merely another word for Americanization — and the recent expansion of the Indian entertainment industry proves it. For hundreds of millions of fans around the world, it is Bollywood — India's film industry — not Hollywood, that spins their screen fantasies. Bollywood, based in Mumbai, has become a global industry. India's entertainment moguls don't merely target the billion South Asians, or desis, at home: they make slick movies, songs and TV shows for export. Attracted by a growing middle class and a more welcoming investment environment, foreign companies are flocking to Bollywood, funding films and musicians. The foreign money is already helping India's pop culture to reach even greater audiences. And it may have a benign side-effect in cleaning up an Indian movie industry business long haunted by links to the underworld.

(‘Bollywood Goes International’, *Newsweek International*, February 28, 2000)

Let us keep aside for a moment the gross misrepresentations in *Newsweek*: that the Indian film industry is not solely based in Mumbai, that ‘foreign money’ is still hardly available for film productions even though it would like to cream off non-local *distribution* profits; that such money is not necessarily distinguishable from the ‘underworld’ and is, therefore, not exactly what you would describe as ‘benign’; that *Newsweek's* assumptions about good and bad money are unsustainable and pernicious.

Let us concentrate instead on just what this literature claims is happening. For something like the past decade, leading up to *Newsweek's* final consecration, a range of print and television media have been claiming some rather dramatic developments in the Indian cinema. Practically every newspaper has commented, usually in the same breathless prose as *Newsweek*, on the phenomenon: there is a craze for ‘Bollywood’ masala that quite exceeds anything we've ever seen before; from Tokyo to Timbuktu people are dancing to Indipop, names such as Shah Rukh Khan are circulating in places where people may never have heard of Indira Gandhi, and there seems to be an opportunity, there is apparently money to be made. Everyone, it seems, is scrambling — new Bollywood websites continue to emerge, new distributors and intermediaries rise with new ideas of how to exploit this development, new television channels are seen, satellite technology is projected with an unprecedented ability to overcome distribution inefficiencies — and every one of these is powered by entrepreneurs and their venture-capitalist backers, and their unique idea about what will earn money.

On what is this hype based? Interestingly, in the past year, the box office of an Indian cinema made indigenously was itself less central to the phenomenon than a range of ancillary industries, mostly based in London, including theatre (the much-hyped London stage musical *Bombay Dreams*, a collaboration between Indian composer A. R. Rehman and Andrew Lloyd Webber), the music industry, advertising¹ and even fashion (the month-long ‘Bollywood’

festival of food, furniture and fashion marketing in Selfridges, London), all of which culminated in the extraordinary marketing exercise known as *Indian Summer*, in July 2002 (see <http://www.bbc.co.uk/asianlife/film/indiansummer/index.shtml>).

All of this began, it is usually said, with the four films that *Newsweek* also mentions as having made distribution history, three of them directly or indirectly Yash Chopra productions: *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (DDLJ, 1995), the film which in some ways started it all, *Dil To Pagal Hai* (DTPH, 1997) and Karan Johar's *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* (KKHH, 1998), and Subhash Ghai's *Taal* (1998). Before all these, there is of course the original box-office hit *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun?* (1994). Of *Taal*, for example, producer and noted 'showman' of Hindi cinema Ghai said,

There'll be 125 prints of *Taal* only for the foreign market. This is almost a three-fold increase since *Pardes*, for which I'd made 45 prints, and five times that of *Khalnayak*. Hindi films now have a significant market in the US, Canada, UK and the Middle East. It is making inroads into South Africa and Australia. And it is also popular in Japan, Hong Kong, South East Asia and, of course, Mauritius. In most if not all these countries, Hindi films are no longer weekend events, they are showing three shows everyday wherever they're released. Now, beginning with *Taal*, there will be vinyl banner hoardings advertising the films on the roads of the Western cities. Everybody, including the Westerners, will now see what films are on! The whole world will take note, because we will also be on the net.

(Ratnottama Sengupta, 'Taal for the Showman', *The Times of India*, 8 July 1999)

How much did these films collectively earn? That's difficult to say, but *The Economic Times* reported that 'The first big success of the new Bollywood is *Who Am I to You?* (*Hum Aapke Hain Kaun?* dubbed), a musical that focuses on two weddings. Thanks to its untraditional [sic] plot and effective marketing, it's India's biggest hit ever. Playing for nearly a year, the film grossed more than \$30 million, a phenomenal amount in a country where the average moviegoer pays 65 per cent admission and the average movie makes about \$3 million — barely what an arthouse film makes in the U.S.' (Sharon Moshavi, 'Bollywood breaks into the big time', *The Economic Times*, 3 October 1995). Of *Taal*, the same paper reports that it was

released around the world on August 13 (and) grossed the highest average collection per cinema hall (per screen average) for movies released in North America on the August 13–15 weekend. According to Weekend Box-Office figures, the first three-day collections were \$591,280. Released simultaneously on 44 theatres in North America, *Taal* has set a record for Bollywood releases abroad by notching the highest first three-day collections with \$13,438 per screen. Though there is no independent verification, a press release by Eros Entertainment Inc, the distributor of the film abroad, claimed that *Taal's* initial collections have even surpassed that of Hollywood blockbusters like *Haunting*, *The Blair Witch Project* and *Eyes Wide Shut*.

('US Box Office Sways to the Rhythm of *Taal*', *The Economic Times*, 21 August 1999)

All these are undoubted marketing successes, and the releases — in particular of *Kuch Kuch* in South Africa, *Dil to Pagal Hai* in Israel and the brief weekend when *Taal* made it to the top 10 in the US domestic market — are now the stuff of marketing legend. On the other hand, here is a salutary fact: *Newsweek* claims that 'India's movie exports jumped from \$10 million a decade ago to \$100 million last year, and may top \$250 million in 2000'.

Contrast these figures with the brief dotcom boom when every Indian internet portal, such as satyam online, rediff-on-the-net and planetasia, marketed itself with Bollywood paraphernalia. Following the unprecedented sale of just one portal, *indiainfo.com*, for Rs 500 crore (or over \$100 million), it would have been a safe argument that just ten of the top websites of the time (as computed by a *Businessworld* issue, 'Hot New Dot.coms', 24 January 2000) were, in that period, collectively worth more than the total box-office earnings of the Indian film industry.

There was, and continues to be, a real discrepancy involved. Contrary to *Newsweek's* statement that Bollywood is 'India's film industry ... based in Mumbai', perhaps we could argue instead precisely that, at least in one sense, this is not so: that Bollywood is *not* the Indian film industry, or at least not the film industry alone. Bollywood admittedly occupies a space analogous to the film industry, but might best be seen as a more diffuse cultural conglomeration involving a range of distribution and consumption activities from websites to music cassettes, from cable to radio. If so, the film industry itself — determined here solely in terms of its box office turnover and sales of print and music rights, all that actually comes back to the producer — can by definition constitute only a part, and perhaps even an *alarmingly small* part, of the overall culture industry that is currently being created and marketed.

If this is so, then at the back of it all is a real difficulty, one that, for all its unprecedentedness, has a disarmingly familiar tone. The fact is that nobody responsible for the production of the film narrative, if we include in this the producers, directors and stars responsible for the nuts-and-bolts assembly of the cinematic product that goes into these markets, actually knows what is going on. How do they make sense of these developments? Why is *Dil To Pagal Hai* popular in Tel Aviv, and why now? How would they convert all this hoopla into a stable market that would guarantee their next product an audience? Nobody quite knows the overall picture, and it is worth exploring some of the literature that's emerged on these developments to speculate on just why that is so.

Amitabh Bachchan, for example, was one of the iconic stars of the 1970s and early 1980s, before his career nosedived following the 'first-ever' effort to corporatize the film industry with the lame-duck ABCL, which most critics say was 'an idea before its time'. Despite not having a substantial hit for over a decade, Bachchan is India's most famous 'film personality', mainly through a Bollywoodized makeover that owes itself to television (he hosted the Hindi version of *Who Wants to be a Millionaire* for Star TV), and he has this to say:

Evidently, our film personalities have begun to matter in world fora. Hindi cinema is gaining worldwide recognition and I don't mean only those films which make it to Berlin or Cannes. Once, I was walking down London's Piccadilly Circus and I saw this group of Kurds running towards me. (Laughs) I thought they wanted to assassinate me. But they stopped right there and started singing songs from *Amar Akbar Anthony* and *Muqaddar Ka Sikandar*. Rajnikant is tremendously popular in Japan. And I'm told that our stars are known even in Fiji, Bali and Chile. Amazing! But we're not marketing ourselves properly. Someone out there is making pots of money at our expense.

(Interview, 'Netvamsham!', *The Times of India*, 18 July 1999)

Who is this mysterious 'someone' making money and how come Bachchan doesn't know? Let us explore this further with the instance that Bachchan himself provides, perhaps the most bizarre instance in this whole new development: the sudden, inexplicable, popularity of Rajnikant in Japan.

Rajnikant is, of course, well known as perhaps the biggest Tamil film star ever, after the legendary M. G. Ramachandran, but it is also important to say that his career has largely been restricted to that language, despite several efforts to get into Hindi film, where he has often played subsidiary parts in Bachchan films (*Andha Kanoon*, 1983, *Girafaar*, 1985, *Hum*, 1991) and one marginal effort in a Hollywood production (*Bloodstone*, 1989). Within Tamil Nadu where he reigns supreme, on the other hand, he has demonstrated all the hallmarks of a major star who knows his audience and his market: he has carefully constructed his screen persona, built a team around him that understands how to work it, has even tested out his popularity politically when he campaigned on behalf of the DMK and was at least partially responsible for its victory in the 1996 elections.

And then came his Japanese success. Here is the *New Indian Express* on this phenomenon:

An entire generation of recession-hit Japanese have discovered a new hero: Rajnikant. Jayalalitha's bête noire and the man with that unflagging swagger and oh-so-cool wrist flicks has emerged there as the hippest craze after Leonardo DiCaprio and *Muthu*, his 150th film, is the biggest grosser in Japan after *Titanic*. So far the film has been seen by over 1,27,000 Japanese in a 23-week run at Tokyo's Cinema Rise alone, netting as much as \$1.7 million and premieres on satellite television in June.

(‘Rajnikant bowls over Japanese youth’, *The New Indian Express*, 10 June 1999)

So how does one explain this success? B. Kandaswamy Bharathan, executive producer at Kavithalaya, credited with having masterminded the Japanese marketing of this film, offers a typically ‘Bollywoodist-culturalist’ explanation:

The movie carries an important message — that money is not everything in life. Instead, it propagates human values, highlighted in the first song itself — and this philosophy appealed to the Japanese audience. This is especially significant for a youth that’s been talked down about for not being as hardworking as the post-war generation.

(‘Rajnikant bowls over Japanese youth’, *The New Indian Express*, 10 June 1999)

Indeed. Keeping aside the distortions by which the producer of *Muthu* represents his own production, in fact a violent feudal drama addressing caste differences, I am reasonably sure that if one were to ask Bharathan why this film proved a hit and no other, and how he suggests that Rajnikant capitalize on this sudden popularity to stabilize a Japanese market for his next film and his future career, we may perhaps get an honest answer, that he has no idea why *Muthu* did well in Tokyo.

2. Cinema versus the Bollywood culture industry

Says Ft. Lauderdale housewife Sameera Biswas, ‘We go to the movies to keep our culture alive’.

(‘Bollywood Goes International’, *Newsweek International*, 28 February 2000)

‘Kids in Bombay go to night clubs to become Western. Here (i.e. in Brisbane) we go to assert our Eastern identity. The basic difference lies there’ — Fiji Indian enthusiast of Indipop.

(Ray 2000)

The main contention of this paper seeks to separate out the Bollywood industry from the Indian cinema. It suggests that while the cinema has been in existence as a national industry of sorts for the past 50 years (the Indian cinema, of course, has celebrated its centenary, but the industry, in the current sense of the term, might be most usefully traced to the post-Second World War boom in production), *Bollywood* has been around for only about a decade now. The term today refers to a reasonably specific narrative and a mode of presentation: the *Newsweek* essay, for example quotes Plus Channel’s Amit Khanna as saying that ‘Indian movies are feel-good, all-happy-in-the-end, tender love stories with lots of songs and dances ... That’s what attracts non-Indian audiences across the world.’ and to this we could add ‘family values’ and their palpable, if not entirely self-evident, investment in ‘our culture’. To such content we would need also to add a distinctive mode of presentation, couched in the post-Information Technology claims that Indian enterprise has been making in the past few years of global competitiveness, and by language such as:

Spurred by competition from dubbed versions of such flashy Western hits as *Jurassic Park* and *Speed*, Bollywood is rushing to enter the era of high tech films. Producers are founding new companies, boosting their marketing, and seeking new sources of financing... [C]ameras are rolling for the first Bollywood high-tech films. CMM Ltd, an

18-month-old special-effects company backed by such stalwarts as State Bank of India, has bought more than \$1 million worth of software and hardware from Silicon Graphics Inc, the Mountain View (California) computer company whose special-effects equipment is used by nearly every Hollywood studio. The technology is key to a still untitled film featuring Indian megastar Shah Rukh Khan in a double role, allowing him to appear with himself in the same scene. Silicon Graphics is lining up other clients in India as well.

(Sharon Moshavi 'Bollywood breaks into the big time', *The Economic Times*, 3 October 1995).

There are further distinctions to be made: while Bollywood exists for, and prominently caters to, a diasporic audience of Indians, and sometimes (as, for example, with Bhangra-rap) exports *into* India, the Indian cinema — much as it would wish to tap this 'non-resident' audience — is only occasionally successful in doing so, and is in almost every instance able to do so only when it, so to say, *Bollywoodizes* itself, a transition that very few films in Hindi, and hardly any in other languages, are actually able to do.

Speaking historically, ever since the film industry in India assumed something like its current form — the period roughly between 1946 and 1975 — the export market of films has been a relatively minor, disorganized and chaotic, but at the same time familiar, field. Few films were made with a non-Indian audience in mind, and the 'foreign market' (usually a single territory) remained small, and entirely controlled by the government of India's Indian Motion Picture Export Corporation, which in its initial years was accountable to the Reserve Bank of India and later merged with the National Film Development Corporation. Film was dominated by State policy on export and remained, until 1992 when the area was de-controlled and opened out to private enterprise, subsidiary to the policy of exporting 'art' films within the film festival circuit. It was generally assumed in this time that Indian mainstream films, to the extent to which they had an offshore audience at all, addressed émigré Indians or their descendants. In 1975–77, for example, statistics show that Indian films were exported to Africa, the Arab states, Trinidad, Guyana and Barbados, Burma, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Iran, Malaysia, Singapore, Sri Lanka and Thailand.² Perhaps the most visible form of export in this time was the 'gulf boom', of workers (domestic, industrial, white-collar) exported to the Middle East becoming an audience for Malayalam films through the 1970s. Apart from this kind of market, the only other that existed was the one related to bilateral trade arrangements with the Socialist bloc, as part of what came to be called Nehruite internationalism, but which nevertheless did yield some spectacular marketing successes, such as Raj Kapoor's films, and later Mithun Chakraborty's, in the former USSR.

Such audiences, and such modes of marketing, could hardly resemble what we are trying here to identify as the Bollywood culture industry of the 1990s. The term itself, Bollywood, has been around most notably in film trade journals — it was probably invented in a slightly jokey self-deprecating way by the journal *Screen* in Bombay and by its page 'Bollywood Beat', with the companion words Tollywood for the Calcutta film industry based in Tollygunge and even, for a while, Mollywood for the Madras industry, neither of which are of course used these days. It is probable that its current usage is a British one, associated with Channel-4's ethnic programming as we see in Kabir (2001), and came into circulation via literary speculations on film as mass culture by writers such as Shashi Tharoor or Farrukh Dhondy on Indian film to mean what it does today: an expression of the outsider's fascination with a slightly surreal practice that nevertheless appears to possess the claim to be a genuine popular art form. So Tharoor, for example, says:

The way in which different communities have come together for simply secular ends whether in ecological movements like the Himalayan agitations against deforestation, or in the social work of Baba Amte, or in the cinema industry of Bollywood — points to

the potential for co-operative rather than divisive mobilisation. It is when groups have stayed apart, and failed to interact in secular activities, that their communal identities prevail; the lack of brotherhood guarantees their 'other' hood. And then conflict, hatred and violence can erupt.

Not surprisingly, this idea of India is one that is sustained by our popular culture. Some readers might think my reference to Bollywood out of place. One of my novels deals with the trashy world of commercial cinema — because to me, Indian films, with all their limitations and outright idiocies, represent part of the hope for India's future. In a country that is still 50 per cent illiterate, films represent the prime vehicle for the transmission of popular culture and values.

(‘Make Bollywood’s India a Reality’, *The Indian Express*, 19 April 1998)

Today, as Tharoor shows (or rather unwittingly demonstrates), the term comes with its own narrative, one that we could perhaps call techno-nostalgia, and is clearly not restricted any more solely to the cinema but informs a range of products and practices. It would certainly have informed the displays around the Swaminarayan Sanstha’s Cultural Festival of India in Edison, New Jersey, in 1991, when one apparently entered through large gates signifying traditional temple entrances which were named Mayur Dwar (Peacock Gate) and Gaja Dwar (Elephant Gate), and saw traditional artisans making handicrafts sharing their space with entrepreneurs from Jackson Heights selling electronic products, with sponsorship from AT&T. Of this form, most directly demonstrated in recent cinematic memory by the foreign-returned Rani Mukherjee in *KKHH* suddenly bursting into the bhajan *Om jai jagdish hare*, Sandhya Shukla has this to say:

Emerging as it did out of a constellation of interests — Indian, Indian-American and otherwise American — the Cultural Festival generated questions about common ground: where was it and how did it function? [T]he Cultural Festival deliberately intertwined culture, nation and identity in its production of metaphors and myths. *With the synchronous developments of international capital and diasporic nationalism, we see infinitely complex realms of cultural production.*

(Shukla 1997)

The ‘our culture’ argument, of which Bollywood forms an admittedly prime exemplar, clearly then also informs a range of productions, all combining the insatiable taste for nostalgia with the felt need to keep ‘our (national) culture alive’: from websites to chat shows, from Ismail Merchant and Madhur Jaffrey cookery programmes to advertising, soap operas to music video, niche marketing of various products, satellite channels, journalism, the Indipop ‘remix’ audio cassette and CD industry.

If then, we see Bollywood as a culture industry, and see the Indian cinema as only a part, even if culturally a significant one, of that industry, then it is also likely that we are speaking of an industry whose financial turnover could be many times larger than what the cinema itself can claim. This would be almost certainly true of the export market, but — if we include the extraordinary ‘dotcom’ boom being witnessed in India right now — it may even be already true within India itself.

The transition, or crossover in marketing terms, from a domestic film product that has comparatively fewer options for merchandising its products to one that more successfully gears itself for exploiting the new marketing opportunities that Bollywood now presents, are now palpably evident, certainly to any clued-in filmgoer. The difference between the ‘Bollywood’ movie and the rest of the Hindi and other language films being made would be, say, the difference between Karan Johar and David Dhawan, between Shah Rukh Khan and Govinda, between *Phir Bhi Dil Hai Hindustani* and *Anari Number 1* (see for example, Banker 2001). While *Hum Aapke Hain Koun?* was perhaps the first Indian film to recognize and then systematically

exploit a marketing opportunity here, it has since been most visibly Shah Rukh Khan who has been committed to the Bollywood mode, mainly as an actor (*DDLJ*, *Pardes*, *DTPH*, *KKHH*) but this year with *Phir Bhi Dil Hai Hindustani* having personally taken charge over its global marketing.

I want to drive a further wedge into the difference, by pointing to two crucial consequences of making this a distinction between the cinema and the more generalised Bollywood culture industry. In one obvious sense, Bollywood is of course identical to the Hindi (if not Indian) cinema: film continues to remain the most prominent presence figureheading the global 'Indian' culture industry. However, in ironic contrast, whereas practically every other ancillary industry seems to have by now defined an audience, a market, and a means of sustained production for that market, the cinema continues to suffer from its old difficulties of defining a generic production line and thus of defining a stable channel of capital inflow.

Let us see the problem as one of *defining culture economically*. If one were to extrapolate a larger theoretical question from all this, it would be: what are the circumstances under which cultural self-definitions *resist* economic or (we could now add) political resolution? And why does the cinema suffer from this problem in India, when other forms from television to radio to the music industry and, of course these days, the internet, seem to have no problem here?

To ask the question in these terms is, I suggest, to get to the very basis of why the Indian cinema exists at all. It is the further contention of this paper that since the Second World War, when the Indian cinema first defined itself as a mass-culture industry, the very reason for why it occupied so crucial and prominent a space in the emerging post-war and — more crucially, post-Partition — public sphere has actively forced it to resist capitalist organization. The globalization of this duality in the past decade under the aegis of Bollywood, I finally suggest, leads us to important insights into the phenomenon that I shall argue is also, and among other things, the globalization of a crucial set of conflicts bred into Indian *nationalism*.

3. The resistance to industrialization

On 10 May 1998, the former Information & Broadcasting Minister, Sushma Swaraj, declared, at a national conference on 'Challenges before Indian Cinema' that she would shortly pass a Government Order declaring 'industry status' to the film industry in India. This was a direct response to perhaps the most intense lobbying the film industry had yet done to achieve what Hollywood, for instance, achieved in the 1930s and what the Indian cinema has been denied since its inception. K. D. Shorey, the General Secretary of the Film Federation of India had already, in 1996, sought to include this declaration into the Ninth Five-Year Economic Plan, saying that

the situation in the film industry is very alarming. While the cost of production is on the increase, the revenue at the box-office is dwindling because of the rampant piracy of feature films on the cable and satellite networks. India should have more than a lakh of theatres, considering its population and according to an UNESCO report. But unfortunately, there is a declining trend in cinema houses from 13,000 and odd to 12,000 ... What is worrying us, producers, is that the entertainment tax, which was started by the British as a war-time measure, has been increased to such large proportions by various state governments that it is eating into the revenue of films. Nowhere in the world is entertainment tax levied, barring in countries like India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka... What is Rs800 crore to the Government? The Planning Commission can ask state govts to abolish the entertainment tax and the Central Govt can easily allocate that much of reimbursement. As far as the other central duties are concerned, they hardly work out to Rs35 crore ... If only financial institutions lend money for the construction of theatres and institutional finance for film production (is

made available) as it is prevalent in western countries ... the film industry can survive in a healthy atmosphere.

(*The Indian Express*, 3 October 1996)

Shorey was of course not talking about Bollywood here: the problems to which *he* refers are the old ones, the ones that the film industry still continues to face on the ground, problems we have heard since at least the 1960s. However, for independent and more contemporary reasons, this seemed an appropriate time for the government to make the move of declaring film as an industry capable of attracting institutional finance.

By the early 1990s, the growing economic power of the non-resident Indian or NRI, people of Indian origin who were domiciled abroad — whom the Indian government was actively wooing with attractive investment schemes that already formed a substantial part of the Reserve Bank of India's foreign exchange reserves — had already announced the arrival of a new culture industry that we have here named Bollywood. The failure of the Broadcast Bill by the previous government had placed growing pressure upon the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led coalition to come up with some kind of consolidated media bill that would address in an integrated fashion the merger of satellite communications with cable, television and the internet, all of which featured film prominently in their output, and all of which stood at the threshold of attracting serious financial investment from a range of international investors. Already, Rupert Murdoch's entry into the satellite television market with his STAR-TV had transformed the field, and it appeared as though film production would be the next target as Murdoch's 20th Century-Fox acquired a majority stake in the Bombay-based UTI-TV production house.

This was then not merely a matter of abolishing entertainment tax or making local institutional finance available for production alone, as K. D. Shorey seemed to think. The reform of the film industry through corporatization — signalled most directly by the formation of the Amitabh Bachchan Corporation and indirectly by a range of films, from Shekhar Kapur's *Mr. India* (1987), Mani Rathnam's *Roja* (1992) or Vinod Chopra's *1942 A Love Story* (1994), all addressing the theme of techno-nationalism that was on its way to being incarnated as *the* Bollywood thematic — had made it a prime candidate for international, including NRI, investor support.³

At the back of it all there was also the more complex political issue involved, of the Indian state itself negotiating a transition from an earlier era of decolonization and 'high nationalism' and into the newer times of globalization and finance capital. The BJP's own investment into the concept of a 'cultural nationalism' — a rather freer form of civilizational belonging explicitly delinked from the political rights of citizenship, indeed delinked even from the State itself, replaced by the rampant proliferation of phrases like 'Phir Bhi Dil Hai Hindustani' and 'Yeh mera India/I love my India' — has clearly taken the lead in resuscitating the concept of nation from the very real threats that the State faces as an institution of legitimation, particularly following its policy of widespread disinvestment in a range of functions. The significance of the cultural turn has been well documented, as has the unexpected support that such a brand of cultural definition — and the ensuing industry that, to quote the Fort Lauderdale housewife mentioned earlier, functions to keep 'our culture alive' — extended to the form of 1990s Hindutva governance in which Sushma Swaraj has been, of course, a prominent presence.

It was for both economic as well as political reasons that the cinema had to feature prominently in all this, if for no other reason than simply by virtue of its presence as *the* most prominent culture industry in modern India. There are however deeper issues involved, as well as a few problems, which involve an investigation into just why the cinema occupies such a prominent location in India in the first place. We may need to digress here slightly, to revisit a situation in the late 1940s, which I want to suggest bears both direct relevance to, and helps illuminate, the 'Indian cinema versus Bollywood' divide that I am trying to map.

The period to which I refer is between 1945 and 1951, when film production in India suddenly more than doubled (from 99 films in 1945 to 221 in 1951). This is usually seen as a low moment in Indian film history, when a whole range of independent financiers and producers jumped into the fray, effectively ending the more stable studio systems of the pre-war period, whom the Film Enquiry Committee Report of 1951 — the most elaborate and authentic record of this crucial time — castigates in no uncertain language as 'leading stars, exacting financiers and calculating distributors' who 'forged ahead' at the 'cost of the industry and the taste of the public'.⁴

It was nevertheless an extraordinary achievement, perhaps unparalleled in the history of world cinema, that in this period the film industry set itself up as a national industry in the sense of assembling a national market, even devising a narrative mode that since been extensively analysed as nationalist melodrama⁵ in ways that actually *precede* and even anticipate institutionalized State functioning in this field. Film theory has repeatedly demonstrated the crucial role that nationalist-political constructions play in determining narrative and spectatorial practices. Even in the instance of American film, it has been demonstrated that it was only around 1939 when the notion of 'American unity', informed by the pre-war situation that 'both necessitated and enabled national cohesion', and that saw the 'unified, national subject — the paradigmatic American viewer' — being put in place, did Hollywood actually deploy several of the technical and narrative conventions for which it is today renowned (Cormack 1994: 140–142) and for which *Gone With The Wind* (1939) remains so crucial an event in American film history.

This departure from the more usual condition of a decolonizing nation-state was a source of some embarrassment to the Nehru government, as the Film Enquiry Committee report consistently shows. Unlike any other comparable instance — where, much more conventionally, newly formed 'third world' nations established national film industries from scratch, usually by reducing or eliminating their financial and infrastructural dependence on the erstwhile colonial power, and where, from North Africa to Latin America to large parts of East Asia, the founding of a local film industry has almost always been a culturally prominent part of national reconstruction — India in contrast inherited an already established, even if chaotic, production and exhibition infrastructure for a cinema industry that was poised, even then, to become the largest in the world.

The Enquiry Committee Report's main thrust is in startling contrast to the stand taken by film organizations in other countries with whom India, in fact, had exchange links, like FEPACI (the Federation of Pan-African Cineastes, affiliated to the Organization of African Unity, OAU), who believed their 'prophetic mission was to unite and to use film as a tool for the liberation of the colonized countries' (Diawara 1992: 39). The Indian government wanted to keep the film industry in check, to regulate it in some way, to reform its dubious credentials as a national form and also thereby to address cultural nationalism's discomfort at having to depend on such inauthentic resources; eventually to replace it with something better, something that more authentically represented the modernist aspirations of India's newly enfranchised civil society (Rajadhyaksha 1993).

Some of these perceptions of the industry would seem quaint today, and were even then controversial. Critic Chidananda Das Gupta, India's leading theorist of precisely the kind of cinema that the government of India tried to launch after the 1950s with the direct involvement of State agencies, for instance tried to re-integrate the difficulties posed by the typically modernist divide between 'good' and 'bad' culture. He attributed to the mainstream cinema a specifically, even consciously, nationalist function. Coining the term 'All India film', he suggested that India had evolved an idiom, and industry, that appropriated aspects both from indigenous popular film and theatre genres and from Hollywood, subordinating them to an all-encompassing entertainment formula designed to overcome regional and linguistic boundaries, providing in the process 'cultural leadership [that reinforces] some of the unifying

tendencies in our social and economic changes [a]nd provides an inferior alternative [to a leadership that] has not emerged because of the hiatus between the intelligentsia, to which the leaders belong, and the masses' (Das Gupta 1968). The contention that the All-India film performed by default an integrating nationalist function similar to the consciously stated aim of, say, All India Radio (whose name Das Gupta clearly evokes in his term All India Film) and, more recently, Doordarshan, went on to have an important influence on India's national film industry policies after the Enquiry Committee Report. The industry's inability to be financially self-sustaining thereafter often came to be counterbalanced by its alleged ability to foster a unified contemporary 'indigenous' culture.

The claim of the mainstream cinema as a repository of national-cultural value in one sense has its origin in these times. The claim by itself does not, however, explain how the cinema industry pulled together a national market or national audience even before national independence, and consequently without state support. How, to return to our earlier question, did the cinema pull this off and how did it come to occupy its crucial presence as a 'cultural unifier' and a keeper of the flame in the sense in which that Fort Lauderdale housewife sees the ritual of cultural bonding involved in going to the movies?

I suggest that the answer would need to be sought in the very categories of national culture that India invoked in the 1940s and early 1950s, and identify something of a zone, a domain of some sort, a blind spot, in the role that this *national culture* had to play *politically*, a zone into which the cinema came to ensconce itself. Partha Chatterjee offers here a larger argument around the 'hiatus' that contextualizes Das Gupta's move, for what was going on at the time.

[W]hereas the legal-bureaucratic apparatus of the state had been able, by the late colonial and certainly in the post-colonial period, to reach as the target of many of its activities virtually all of the population that inhabits its territory, the domain of civil social institutions as conceived above is still restricted to a fairly small section of 'citizens'. The hiatus is extremely significant because it is the mark of non-Western modernity as an always-incomplete project of modernisation[.]

(Chatterjee 1997)

Given a corresponding analytical problem posed by the usual ways of working through this hiatus — that we either 'regard the domain of the civil as a depoliticized domain in contrast with the political domain of the state' or blur all distinctions by claiming that everything is political, neither of which helps us get very far — Chatterjee posits the existence of an intermediary domain of some kind: a 'domain of *mediating institutions between civil society and the state*' (emphases added). He names this 'political society'.

It is not the purpose of this essay to go into the complex nature of the political manoeuvres that ensued within State functioning and within the domain of private capital at this time (the late 1940s–1950s) in India. Suffice it to say that if part of Indian nationalism defined itself in terms of a modern 'national' culture, and instituted a whole paraphernalia of activities defining the identity of the 'modern citizen', then there was another part of the national State functioning at another level altogether, the level for example of population control, welfarism, democracy, and finally, there was a 'domain' of something in between, something that enabled the protagonists of national culture, its civil society, to talk to, negotiate with, the State, something that we more commonly refer to as the sphere of 'politics'.

It is mainly the concept of 'mediating institutions' that I shall briefly explore here, and their relevance to the cinema of this time. Let me trace back into this era yet another familiar characteristic of the 1990s Bollywood movie, one incarnated by its first big manifestation *Hum Aapke Hai Kaun?*, that this cinema addresses a 'family' audience and deals with 'family values', as against another kind of film, the non-Bollywood variety, that did not and maybe still does not know how to do this. In this time, says Chatterjee, there was a move by the dominant State to name its people as 'citizens' of some kind, and this move was a displacement away 'from

the idea of society as constituted by the elementary units of homogeneous families to that of a population, differentiated but classifiable, describable and enumerable'.

It is possible to see the cinema as the suturing agency par excellence of such displacement and mediation. The cultural role of the neighbourhood movie theatre as a prominent institution of the new public sphere in this time is crucially accounted for by the fact that a ticket-buying spectator automatically assumed certain rights that were symbolically pretty crucial to the emerging State of the 1940s–1950s. (In some ways the contentious aspect of 'entertainment tax' — effectively equating the spectator with the price of his ticket, extended into equating the film solely with its box office income, all the problems to which K. D. Shorey refers above — is a legacy of these times.) These rights — the right to enter a movie theatre, to act as its privileged addressee, to further assert that right through, for example, various kinds of fan activity both inside and outside the movie theatre (Srinivas 1996) went alongside a host of political rights that defined the 'describable and enumerable' aspects of the population, like, for example, the right to vote, the right to receive welfare, the right to have a postal address and a bank account. Film historians through this period repeatedly assert how, for example, in many parts of India the cinema was perhaps the first instance in Indian civilization where the 'national public' could gather in one place that was not divided along caste difference (Sivathamby 1981).

It is not important that these rights were not necessarily enforced on the ground. It is important instead to recognize that spectators were, and continue to be, *symbolically* and *narratively* aware of these rights, aware of their political underpinnings, and do various things — things that constitute the famous 'active' and vocal Indian film spectator — that we must understand as a further assertion of these rights in the movie theatre. I am suggesting here that, first, the many characteristics of film viewing in India — as well known as its masala and songs — of vocal audiences, throwing money at the screen, going into trances during devotional films and so forth, were in turn characteristic of *spectators identifying themselves* through identifying the film's address. And secondly, that this entire process of identification and counter-identification narratively spans precisely the divide that Chatterjee's 'domain of mediating institutions' would play in the world outside the movie theatre. It now appears that the aspect of 'identification' that film theorist Christian Metz, for instance, once defined when he answered the question, who does the film spectator 'identify' with?, by suggesting that the spectator identifies with '*himself* ... as a pure act of perception' (Metz 1982) this reasonably well known aspect of film theory developed a distinctly political meaning in the India of the 1940s and early 1950s.

There now developed a serious contradiction, from which the Indian cinema never really recovered: one as glaring today in the Bollywood versus film industry divide as it has ever been. In one sense, the film industry was able to manoeuvre itself into a certain position that made it indispensable to the State. As, in many ways, the most prominent independent cultural exemplar of the national market and the provider of leisure activity to the 'people' in the larger populational sense to which Chatterjee gestures in his more encompassing definition of the citizen, the cinema demanded the right to exist and receive some kind of industrial sustenance. It did, for example, win certain regulatory concessions in the form of the various State Film Chambers of Commerce, a certain limited amount of infrastructural support, such as a subsidy for imported film stock (via the public sector Hindustan Photo Film); and in turn it also chose to view disciplinary institutions such as the Censor Board as not merely capable of punitive action, but also, and more positively, as agencies underscoring and validating the objects of its spectatorial address.

On the other hand, the very space that the film industry came to occupy disqualified it by definition from the range of *new* concessions and supports that the Film Enquiry Committee recommended, including, most crucially, institutional finance. Indeed, all these concessions, then and ever since, were meant for precisely a kind of cinema that the film industry was *not*.

They were meant for a different cinema that the State hoped to encourage, one that would fit better into what Chatterjee calls the 'pedagogical mission' of civil society and its agendas of modernization: a 'different' cinema that we could today see as the direct ancestor of the Bollywood mode.

Indeed, in the barely concealed claims to some sort of reformism that Bollywood so often presents these days in its biggest successes — the claims of commitment to family values, to the 'feel-good-happy-ending' romance that carries the tag of 'our culture' — one can see the ghosts of past trends going pretty far back into time. The problem of the cinema's legitimacy has, since the pre-war years, consistently produced version after version of what was claimed as culturally authentic cinema: authentic because it was *authenticated* by the national culture. One long distance ancestor to, say *HAHK*, would be the pre-war 'Swadeshi' movie: the devotionals and socials emphasizing *indigenism* of story and production. Post-war and in the early years of Independence, there was the first descendant of this indigenism: the cinema that the State repeatedly anointed as 'authentically national'. The process of authentication in this time was more palpable than the films that benefited by various declarations of recommended viewing — and continues to be so, if we see, for example, the extraordinary premium that the film industry continues to place upon the government's national film awards and its tax exemption criteria. One could safely say, however, that among the candidates vying for this kind of accreditation were Devika Rani and Ashok Kumar socials from the Bombay Talkies studios, reformist musicals such as some of Raj Kapoor's work or some of Dev Anand's Navketan production house (both of which often hired ex-practitioners from the Indian People's Theatre Association movements of the 1940s) and realist-internationalist films by directors from Satyajit Ray to Bimal Roy to the early Merchant-Ivory (Rajadhyaksha 1993).

This then was the situation. The film industry had won for itself a distinct, even unique, space of spectatorial address and spectatorial attention that is even today not shared by any of its other ancillary industries — not, for example, by television, despite all the many programmes seeking to evoke the excitement of the filmgoing experience with its coverage of the industry, its 'behind the scenes' programmes and its efforts to get stars to endorse televised versions of the Indian cinema. It has extended this spectatorial space into some kind of peripheral, perennially unstable and yet functioning economy with a rough-and-ready system of funding for its productions. It has also weathered a divide within its production processes, between those who control infrastructure — licensed stockists of film stock, lab owners and owners of dubbing theatres, editing suites, sound studios and other post-production facilities, all of whom routinely get banking and corporate-institutional support — and those who invest in *production*, bear the entrepreneurial risks of a film doing well or badly, and *never* receive institutionalised funding support. They do not receive support because they cannot, for to do so would be to certainly threaten the very *raison d'être* of why the cinema is so popular, the space the industry occupies.

This is the situation — an evidently backdated, relentlessly modernist, even Statist, situation, wedded to governmental support while at the same time aware of its peculiar illegitimacy — to which K. D. Shorey refers, when he enumerates the problems that film producers continue to face. This is self-evidently not the situation that Bollywood faces. The old movie spectator, the member of Chatterjee's political society, would — and does — feel distinctly uncomfortable in plush new foyers with Pepsi soda fountains. And Bollywood, in its turn, quite explicitly qualifies for a range of corporate funding support systems.

Bollywood does however manage something else in its turn, it seems, something that none of its cinematic predecessors could quite achieve. It succeeds, on the whole, in mediating the transition into the new category of citizen-as-family-member while maintaining intact the cultural insiderism of film spectatorship. Few films being locally made in Bombay, Chennai or Calcutta can aspire to such a transition. Few films, ergo, can claim international venture capital support.

4. Exporting the spectator: new sites for modernism

'There is a near unanimity that the right kind of recognition would eventually lower the cost of an industry, where expenses and price of funds are mindboggling. Thanks to the well accepted practice of tapping undisclosed money, particularly the mega-budget ones, the string of financiers (mostly operating through fronts) extract a rate of return which is three to four times the interest a commercial bank would possibly charge... This unpredictability has become inseparable with films. Immediately, I can't think of an evaluation procedure by which I can call a production viable,' said a senior PSU bank official. Bringing the activity within the banking parlance of 'productive purpose' appears to the crux of the matter. 'Is it an income generating asset? This is neither manufacturing nor trading nor agriculture nor self-employment,' said a private bank official ... 'We may consider the track record of a producer, personal investments and net worth and ability to repay if the production flops and then take a short-term loan backed by sound collaterals. But will this attract the filmwallas? They might get a better deal from sources they have been tapping so far,' said an official of one of the older private banks''.

(*Industry status: Cinema may find itself going round trees*, Sugata Ghosh, *The Economic Times*, 12 May 1998).

Sushma Swaraj, then, was clearly making an intervention more complex than what the Film Federation of India necessarily saw as the issues, when she offered 'industry status' to the cinema. The problem was old, even tediously familiar; the circumstances however brand new.

There is one crucially important sense, perhaps, in which the new international market opening up for Indian film could be continuing its old symbolic-political adherences. It is possible that the Indian cinema's modes of address have opened up a new category for spectatorial address that appears not to be accounted for by, say, the American cinema after it discovered the storytelling mode for itself and after numerous critics and theorists went on to assume that this mode was globally relevant and that 'we all internalize at an early age as a *reading competence* thanks to an exposure of films ... which is universal among the young in industrial societies' (Burch 1990). If this is so, then in several places, like Nigeria, whose distinctive reception of Indian cinema has been analysed so remarkably by Brian Larkin (2001) or among the Fijian Indians in Australia who even make their own Hindi films on video, as examined by Manas Ray (Ray 2000), or for that matter among audiences who still flock to Indian films in Trinidad and South Africa, there could be people still going to these films precisely for what Hollywood cannot be seen to offer. It is possible that the cinema's addresses are entering complex realms of identification in these places, which would definitely further argument around the nature of the cultural-political mediation that the Indian, or possibly the Hong Kong, cinemas continue to allow.

Evidently, *this* was not the market that was pressuring Swaraj to define a law offering industrial status to film. Nor was this the market that has film distributors and producers in Bombay in a tizzy, wondering how they can rake in their megabucks or go corporate. In fact, a recent news item about Burma and how popular Hindi films are there, speaks of print rights of *Taal* being sold for \$10,000, a 'relatively high amount by Burmese standards' ('Mania for Hindi movies sweeps Myanmar', Lalit K. Jha, *The Hindu*, 29 February 2000).

In the Bollywood sense of the export of the Indian spectator to distant lands, I want to suggest another kind of export: the export of Indian nationalism itself, now commodified and globalized into a 'feel good' version of 'our culture'. If so, then what we are also seeing is a globalization of the conflict, the divide, central to nationalism itself: the divide of *democracy* versus *modernity*, now playing itself out on a wider, more surreal, canvas than ever before.⁶

We do not know too much about this right now, but in conclusion, I would like to state the following issues that could be of relevance.

First, the question of *modernism*. If the civil- and political-society divide means anything at all, it shows how prevalent, foundational, and indeed how virtually unbridgeable the divides in India have been across the chasm of modernity. It is true that *something* has happened recently, which seemingly wipes them away as though they have never existed, and different people have tried to explain this erasure differently. Arjun Appadurai's famous formulation of 'modernity at large', modernity cleansed of the mechanics of geographical belonging by the diaspora and the cyber-neighbourhood, certainly offers the *terrain* on which this insiderism is acted out (Appadurai 1997). There do nevertheless seem to be larger, and still unanswered questions, which might be asked both of the theorist but even more directly of the practitioner of Bollywood culture. For example, why now? The transition of cultural insiderism away from its heartland, away then from its historic political function of creating a certain category of citizen, and into something that informs the feelings of the visitor to the Brisbane night club, quoted earlier, who wants to go there to 'assert her Eastern identity' — this transition would clearly have something basic to offer in its rewriting the *very trajectories of modernism* that have historically linked places such as India to the 'West'. Why does it seem so simple to pull off today when the Indian cinema has sought this transition to national legitimacy since at least the 1960s, without success?

A second question deals with the area of cultures resisting economic and political resolution. Bollywood clearly is reconfiguring the field of the cinema in important ways. What does it pick as translatable into the new corporate economy, what is it that this economy leaves behind? This would be as important a cultural question as an economic one.

For example, I believe it is demonstrable that practically all the new money flowing into the cinema right now is concentrating on the ancillary sector of film production. On one side, software giants such as Pentafour and Silicon Graphics use film in order to demonstrate their products, so that it is unclear as to whether, say Shankar's *Jeans* (1998), noted for all its digitized camerawork and produced by Hollywood's Ashok Amritraj, was more an independent feature film surviving on a pay-per-view basis or more a three-hour demo for Pentafour's special effects. On the other hand, the range of consumables increasingly visible on film screens — Stroh's beer in *DDLJ*, Coca-Cola in *Taal*, Swatch watches in *Phir Bhi Dil Hai Hindustani* — are symptomatic of the nature of funding that the cinema increasingly depends upon.

If so, it would be the final irony of the Bollywoodization of the Indian cinema that the very demand that the industry has sought for from the government for so many decades could be the reason for its demise. The arrival of corporate-industrial-finance capital could reasonably lead to the final triumph of Bollywood, even as the cinema itself gets reduced only to a memory, a part of the nostalgia industry.

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Notes

1. So *The New Indian Express* (29 October 1999) reports that 'The opening titles of Sooraj Barjatya's forthcoming film *Hum Saath Saath Hain*, billed as the most cracking release this Diwali, will feature an important new player in Bollywood: Coca-Cola. The cola giant, in its bid to scramble to the very top of

the Rs3500 crore soft drinks market, has spent a comparatively smaller amount, Rs1.5 crore, on branding Barjatya's family film and ensuring its release as *Coca-Cola Hum Saath Saath Hain*.

2. *Statistics on Film and Cinema 1975-77*, Paris: Office of Statistics, Unesco, 1981.
3. Tejaswini Niranjana defines this newly forged relationship, in *Roja*, of a 'techno-aesthetic' with a new category of the 'national' subject: see Niranjana (1994).
4. Report of the Film Enquiry Committee (S. K. Patil, Chairman), New Delhi, Government of India Press, 1951.
5. See especially Prasad (1998) and Chakravarty (1993).
6. Chatterjee elaborates his 'civil' versus 'political' society argument by suggesting that while modernity was the main agenda for the former, democracy could be seen as the main issue addressing the latter. So, in effect, the entire debate around modernism, around high and low art, around a religious secularism versus theories of caste and religion, could be mapped around this often unbridgeable divide between modernity and democracy (Chatterjee 1997).

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