

This thing called Bollywood

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BOLLYWOOD: what a strange name! But stranger still is the wide acceptance that the term has gained over the last few years in a country where the dominant prevailing view is that Indian popular cinema is an entirely indigenous product. Today, not only the English language media which is probably the term's original habitat, but also the Indian language press, not only journalists but also film scholars employ this term to talk about Indian popular cinema. Is this a name that incorporates a criticism?

Is it meant to suggest that the cinema is imitative and therefore deserves to be rechristened to highlight this derivativeness? Or is it in fact the opposite: an attempt to indicate a difference internal to the dominant idiom, a variation that is related to but distinct from the globally hegemonic Hollywood? Is it Indian cinema's way of signifying its difference or is it (inter)national film journalism and scholarship's way of reinscribing the difference that Indian cinema represents within an articulated model of global hegemony and resistance?

It is natural that those who have invested in earlier models of the Indian popular cinema – the 'so many cinemas' model, the folk culture model, the 'yeh-to-public-hai-yeh-sab-janti-hai' model, the regressive 'pulse of the people' model, the ideological model, art versus popular, and so on, should feel slightly resentful of this development which threatens to absorb their own special areas into its commodious (because ill-defined) purview. Bollywood in that sense is not a term with a specific signified: an empty signifier, it can be applied to any set of signifieds within the realm of Indian cinema.

Contrary to what we might expect, it does not, for instance, explicitly exclude the middle/art genres from its field. It belongs to an order of signifiers that seems to want to 'capture a mood or style', rather than designate a piece of reality. I too, like Ashish Rajadhyaksha in his thoughtful piece on the topic,¹ not to mention Ajay Devgan in a recent interview, have felt resentment and indignation at what seems to be a callous act of symbolic abduction. Here, however, I want to take a deep breath and take another look at the matter.

The term Bollywood has crept into the vocabulary of the

Anglophone national culture slowly and steadily, almost without anybody noticing it. Like certain processes of which we become aware only when they are almost over, we are right now witness to the naturalisation of 'Bollywood' as the designation for what was previously known as Hindi cinema, Bombay cinema, Indian popular cinema, etc. It is tempting to think that this process of near-universal legitimation of 'Bollywood' is a symptom of some other social and cultural processes which have a wider significance. Can linguistic change be an index of social transformations and if so, how do we make sense of them?

That a change of name might indicate some change in the reality to which it refers is now a quite widely accepted idea. Thus we might look at the cinema produced by the Bombay film industry and the other industries too, which, as far as this new will-to-name is concerned, are more of the same. And indeed, we do find, do we not, that this cinema has given us, in the last decade or so, a large number of films which may be said to constitute a new genre of sorts, which has been, moreover, the staple of the new global Bollywood presence.

It is hardly necessary to list them, so widely recognized are these films which, like teachers in Bangalore schools, are known by their initials. They have figured prominently in the emerging new culture of India, where consumer capitalism has finally succeeded in weaning the citizens away from a strongly entrenched culture of thrift towards a system of gratification more firmly in its (capitalism's) own long-term control. They have produced yet another variation of the nationalist ideology of tradition and modernity, and, most interestingly, they have relocated what we might call the seismic centre of Indian national identity somewhere in Anglo-America.

In other words, it has brought the NRI decisively into the centre of the picture, as a more stable figure of Indian identity than anything that can be found indigenously. In this regard, the NRI productions themselves have lately become more important than the indigenous ones which, with a few exceptions like DDLJ, continue to pose the 'return to roots' as the redeeming factor in tales of dislocation. The recent success of *Bend it Like Beckham* is an obvious indicator of how the NRI is once again functioning as a facilitator in the transition to a new mode of self-relation. 'Once again', because the last time it was as television personalities that young NRIs held our hands when we were trying to find our bearings in an MTV world.

While economists continue to be skeptical about NRI patriotism making a difference to FDI, culturally it is indisputable that the NRI is increasingly beginning to look like the sole guarantor of Indian identity. Like the characters in Indo-Persian fables, whose life-source is hidden in a tree guarded by serpents in a dangerous jungle seven seas and many adventures away, the Indian's identity it would seem is, for the first time, safe in the hands of the NRI.²

Could Bollywood be a name for this new cinema, coming from Bombay but also, lately, from London and Canada, which has over the last ten years or so, produced a new self-image for the Indian middle class? It is undeniable that this is at least partly the case. But in fact the term claims a much larger footprint than that: it is used to refer to Indian popular cinema in general, and more particularly the Hindi variety. It is not a name designed to highlight a new reality alone, although that new reality is one of the factors in its success. For naming is not only about the reality that is designated, but about the will of the one who names, the will to reconstitute an existing reality in its own image.

The origin of the term being obscure, there have been many claimants to the credit for coining it, and many theories as to its first usage. But now we may actually be in a position to settle this issue, at the risk of offending some claimants. In 1932, Wilford E. Deming, an American engineer who claims that 'under my supervision was produced India's first sound and talking picture', writing in *American Cinematographer* (12.11, March 1932), mentions a telegram he received as he was leaving India after his assignment: Tollywood sends best wishes happy new year to Lubill film doing wonderfully records broken.³ In explanation, he adds, 'In passing it might be explained that our Calcutta studio was located in the suburb of Tollygunge... Tolly being a proper name and Gunge meaning locality. After studying the advantages of Hollygunge we decided on Tollywood. There being two studios at present in that locality, and several more projected, the name seems appropriate.' Thus it was Hollywood itself, in a manner of speaking, that, with the confidence that comes from global supremacy, renamed a concentration of production facilities to make it look like its own baby.

Deming is renaming the locality, but there is no suggestion here that the name will also serve as an adjective to describe Indian cinema in general (although Calcutta in those days was still a strong centre of production). This gells very well with what I seem to remember from occasionally glancing at a Kolkata based youth magazine called JS (or Junior Statesman, a publication of the Statesman group which, long before satellite television and MTV, was addressed to what must have been a very small elite Indian youth segment) which referred to the Bengali film industry as Tollywood. 'Bollywood' is most likely to have come into existence by this route, because there is no obvious way to get from Bombay to Bollywood directly.

Once Tollywood was made possible by the fortuitous availability of a half-rhyme, it was easy to clone new Hollywood babies by simply replacing the first letter. I suspect (thus adding my own origin story to the many that are in existence) that it was the trendy and smart young JS journalists who first adopted this way of slotting Hindi cinema into their otherwise largely Eurocentric cultural world. It is thus a symptom of the affectionate lampooning that the Anglophone middle class subjected the Hindi cinema to in reviews, articles and private conversations. It is a word that denotes the user's distance from the object, a non-participatory passion for description.

Thus 'Bollywood' bears a relation to the structural bilingualism of the Indian nation state. Structural bilingualism is a state of affairs where the multitude of Indian languages (here counted as one) are held together by a metalanguage in which alone the national ideology can be properly articulated. In this respect Hindi cinema has witnessed a very significant transformation in recent periods: The undisputed role of Urdu as the metalanguage of Hindi cinema's ideological work has now been challenged by English. Of course, it is difficult to conceive of Urdu being replaced by English in a film without it becoming an 'English film', but it is nevertheless the case that English provides the ideological coordinates of the new world of the Hindi film.

Love, rather than *pyar*, *mohabbat* or *ishq* is today the reigning signifier for the privileged affect. English phrases and proverbs are liberally used to construct a web of discourse which the characters inhabit. The charms of Urdu, of course, continue to command a good price, but the language has now been reduced to its accumulated stocks of nostalgic sentiment. The old three language formula of filmi Indian nationalism, for instance, has imperceptibly undergone a change: today, posters and credits no longer carry the title in Urdu script as a matter of routine. But structural

bilingualism has a significance at a different level: today, it is the will of the English speaking classes that prevails in giving a name and an identity to the Hindi cinema.

Ajay Devgan recently told an interviewer that he disapproved of the use of 'Bollywood' to refer to Hindi films. There is a lot of resentment against it, but it cannot be said that the industry has had no role to play in the popularisation of its usage. This brings us to the other means by which the word has been legitimized, of which we will briefly look at two: the discovery of Hindi cinema by some foreign directors, which leads to a reification of its most obvious distinguishing properties as constituting its permanent identity; and the generational changes within the industry, which have brought to the limelight a group of sons of industry magnates and others similarly placed, as well as new generations of stars, most of whom are educated in elite schools, if not abroad.

Recently, much was made of the presence of a Hindi film song on the soundtrack of *Moulin Rouge*, and similar examples are mentioned from various parts of the world. *Moulin Rouge*, for all its novelty, was a straight-forward Hollywood musical, and in spite of the Hindi song, the Indian excitement about it being inspired by Hindi cinema was a bit desperate to say the least. It is not clear what is expected of such pieces of news, what salvation they promise and to whom. Certainly there is a desire to establish Indian cinema as unique and deserving of international acclaim, which no doubt it is. But one suspects that this is one more of those postcolonial fixations which keep us within range of the master's gaze and protect us from the threat of freedom.

One of the consequences of this is that Indian cinema is completely stripped of any possible *historicity*. Any hint of historical change would turn Hindi cinema into something without an innate Indian essence, something that changes with time, thus detracting from the key ideas on which this whole thing rests: that Indian popular cinema is based on epic structures, puranic themes, and Sanskrit dramaturgy – all highly dubious and usually intuitively generated truisms. Interestingly, while 'Bollywood' tries to capture these very enduring qualities of Indian popular cinema, this object itself is now in the process of undergoing a major transformation, as audiences fragment into class specific segments.

While a lot of popular writing reflects such 'Bollywood' sentiment, we should locate the work of NRI directors like Mira Nair, Deepa Mehta, Gurinder Chaddha and Nagesh Kukunoor in this tendency as well. Mehta, of course, has given ample indication of this line of thinking in her latest *Hollywood/Bollywood* but the films of Mira Nair, and Chaddha's *Bend it Like Beckham* are also indicative of a similar proclivity. One can imagine that while these filmmakers would frown upon the regressive ideologies of Bollywood, they would join the chorus of appreciation for its energy and exuberance which they try to reproduce in their films.⁴

Devgan's irritation is a sign that there is a struggle over representation in which the opponents of 'Bollywood' are definitely losing to the combination of industry sons, film magazines (which like the convenience of the term), overseas Indians who have concerns about identity, and other cultural forces that have emerged in tandem with the new global culture. For these latter, 'Bollywood' seems to offer the possibility of a way of accessing the 'home culture' for their own needs in a globalized world.

When we lament this change, we tend to participate in the same fantasy of unchanging essence that sustains the new realities symptomized by Bollywood. As a variant of international melodrama from the early capitalist era, Indian popular cinema did not undergo formal transformations comparable to those that signalled the advent of realism, an aesthetic of immanence cut off from the pre-modern sources of symbolic meaning. Thus it would be a mistake to regard the thematic elements of Indian popular cinema as reflecting the social realities of their time. Most of the thematic elements are variants of the ones popularized by stage melodrama in 19th century Europe. We need to attend to changes at the formal level in order to grasp their relationship to the reality they inhabit. At this level, we do see periodic shifts and modifications of form.

'Bollywood' would be interesting to investigate as the symptom of such a formal transformation, understanding form not only as a dimension of textuality, but also in a larger sense as the set of relations between the elements internal to the text as well as those which constitute its habitat: its audiences, its economic structure, its ideological matrix etc. Approached from this angle, 'Bollywood' may well provide insights into the changing modalities of Indian national identity in a globalizing world.

Related to the above, 'Bollywood' also signals the advent of a certain reflexivity, becoming a cinema for itself as it were,

recognizing its own unique position in the world, the contrastive pleasures and values that it represents vis-à-vis Hollywood. This reflexivity is as much a form of self-awareness as it is a know-how that enables the Hindi film to reproduce itself for a market that demands its perpetuation as a source of cultural identity.

In some recent films we get a distinct feeling that the intelligences involved in their production had bought into the Bollywood theory about songs in films, rather than spontaneously making films with songs which might have been the situation in earlier times. The desire for Bollywood is thus a desire for the reproduction of the difference that it represents on a world platform, which the industry itself, in its current reflexive moment, is responding to. It is this reflexivity and the demand it is responding to that can be said to constitute the very stuff of the new NRI film.

But there are other dynamics at work which are invested in transforming the Indian cinema scene, of getting rid of the old formats and establishing new logics of cultural production. Of course, people will continue to use the same term, Bollywood, even for this trend, since as we have noted above, it does not commit itself to any restrictive meaning. Nevertheless the box office statistics seem to indicate that there is another way of classifying the products of Bombay which will give us another map of the territory, such as the one Rajadhyaksha has tried to delineate, which will reveal objective limits to the scope of the term Bollywood and the fantasy that it embodies.

Footnotes:

1. Ashish Rajadhyaksha, 'The "Bollywoodisation" of the Indian Cinema: Cultural Nationalism in a Global Arena', in Preben Karsholm (ed.), *City Flicks: Cinema, Urban Worlds and Modernities in India and Beyond*. International Development Studies, Roskilde University Occasional Paper # 22, 2002.

2. Not that we don't have our grievances. For it also seems to be the case that NRIs seem to thrive on their ignorance, whereas the rest of us tend to feel crippled by ours. As Salman Rushdie has demonstrated, not only knowledge, but also ignorance can be power, if you know how to use it and if you have a captive market. Did he not show that by knowing nothing about Indian literatures, he in a way knew them better than anyone else? Would he have traded in that felicitous ignorance for all the knowledge in the world? It is doubtful. Sometimes we also feel that they get so preoccupied servicing the Anglo-American demand for Raj nostalgia that they forget about us, making us feel neglected. But in spite of all these grouses, there is a recognition that the NRI, as the figure who sustains one's ideological presence in the world, is indispensable. A lot of the attraction for 'Bollywood', it seems to me, has to do with the same

politics of recognition that is a key animating factor in the Indian English literary economy.

3. I thank Madhuja Mukherjee for drawing my attention to this article.

4. Interestingly, these filmmakers, especially Mehta and Nair, seem unable to escape a developmental approach. Thus in Mehta's *Fire*, the characters lament that there is no word in their language (which they are not speaking at that point) for lesbianism: a statement that could only be generated by and for the classic developmental gaze. Thus getting our government translators to coin a word for lesbianism would be a development project. Similarly, as these directors, for commercial or other reasons, have begun to identify more and more with India, they see themselves as innovators, introducing new elements into Indian culture. Thus Mehta 'introduced' lesbian sexuality as a theme in Indian cinema, and Nair, in a rush job, quickly introduced and resolved the theme of incestuous child abuse, without acknowledging *Celebration*, just so that she could be the first Indian director to have done so. Such pioneering is one of the highlights of this new climate: recently television and the press gave much coverage to the insufferable *Jism* because its directors claimed to have dealt with sex 'in a mature fashion'. What they had done was to camouflage their badly plagiarized thriller with some agreeable angst about the lures of the *jism*: hardly an original topic.

