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TRAVELS OF BOLLYWOOD CINEMA

From Bombay to LA

edited by Anjali Gera Roy and Chua Beng Huat

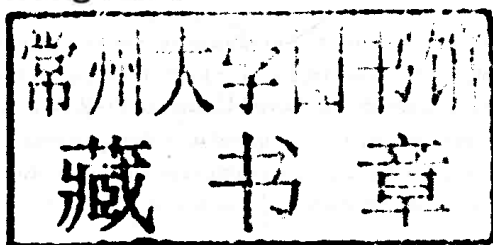
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The Bollywood Turn in South Asian Cinema

National, Transnational, or Global?

ANJALI GERA ROY AND CHUA BENG HUAT

Bollywood, Tollywood, Kollywood

Bollywood, a portmanteau of Bombay and Hollywood, coined by the English language media in India to define 'India's popular film industry based in Mumbai—a blend of Bombay (Mumbai was earlier known as Bombay) and Hollywood', has been almost universally adopted as a convenient label to refer to films produced by filmmakers from the Indian subcontinent, despite the industry's vociferous objections to the use of the term to describe a cinema that evolved independent of and is 'supremely' indifferent to the American popular film.¹ The shadow of Hollywood has undeniably loomed large over Bollywood as the original benchmark and competition since the silent era. But the name 'Bollywood' not only reinforces Hollywood's continuing dominance in the global cultural space, but also conceals the hegemonizing hold of Hindi commercial cinema, produced in Mumbai, over other production centres in Chennai, Kolkata, and Hyderabad which are as old, if not as big, as Mumbai. Film scholars have expressed their concern

over the indiscriminate use of the term that dissolves the differences between art house and commercial; regional, national, and diasporic; the National Film Development Corporation (NFDC) film and the *masala*² film (Rajadhyaksha 2003; Prasad 2003). In the ultimate analysis, the fine calibrations through which distinctions between different kinds of films are made by film theorists and critics of cinema become redundant in the perception of the consumers of these films, raising important questions about the conceptualization of national cinemas. The boundaries between mainstream Hindi filmmakers, who according to Derek Bose, 'intelligently *design* films that are viable both locally and internationally', and the diaspora films of Gurinder Chadha, Deepa Mehta, or Mira Nair, 'with an Indian soul in a foreign body' appear to be increasingly blurred (Bose 2006: 13). If Bollywood can be viewed as 'a space unto itself, a *pure* space so to say' (Ray 2001: 136–84), waiting to be appropriated from Australia and Japan to Ethiopia, even British director Danny Boyle's Oscar winning *Slumdog Millionaire* (2009) could legitimately qualify as a Bollywood film.

This book seeks to examine the historical and spatial flows of Indian popular cinema from Bombay (Mumbai) and other production centres in the Indian subcontinent to different spaces of consumption for nearly a century, culminating in the Bollywood-inspired-Oscar-winning film *Slumdog Millionaire*. Bollywood's crossovers in the new millennium, while bringing in greater visibility in the global north, have also raised anxieties about the appropriation of 'resistant' local cultures by the global culture industry. Arguing that the global consumer's enthusiastic 'discovery' of Bollywood's pleasures in the mid-1990s erases nearly a century-long history of Indian cinematic travels to British Malaya, Fiji, Guyana, Trinidad, Mauritius, East and South Africa with the old diasporas, and with and without the new diasporas to the former USSR, Middle East, the UK, the US, Canada, and Australia, this volume brings together essays by new and established scholars in anthropology, history, literary, cultural, media, communication, and film studies to show that Indian cinema has always crossed borders and boundaries. Through tracing its multidirectional flows before and in the present global process, this book also seeks to unpack the relationship of the global culture industry to nation states, global capitalist networks, and transnational formations to rethink the nation as a category.

Origins and Travels of Bollywood Cinema

Historians of cinema have produced evidence to convincingly demonstrate that Hollywood did not ever pose a serious threat to the producers of Indian cinema in the domestic market (Chowdhry 2000; Bose 2006). Notwithstanding allegations of unoriginality, plagiarism, and technical rawness, new findings by Vijay Mishra, Manas Ray, Brian Larkin, and others also confirm that it was the disavowed Hindi masala film, which interrogated Hollywood's planetary dominance throughout the twentieth century and has emerged as a sole contender to Hollywood in its global reach in the new millennium (Mishra 2002; Ray 2001: 136–84; Larkin 1997: 46–62, 2002: 739–62). However, whether Bollywood will take over Hollywood in the future, as a euphoric Indian media, intoxicated by the box-office ratings of Bollywood blockbusters like *Singh is Kinng* (2008) and *Ghajini* (2009) or the critical acclaim of Bollywood-based films prophesies, is another question in view of its paltry 2 per cent global market share.³ Almost a decade ago, Rajadhyaksha had sounded a sobering note by pointing out the problems of confusing Bollywood with Indian cinema and the dangers of indulging in the kind of cultural nationalism that implicates us in a global culture industry, which appropriates an ensemble of Indian popular cultural forms for Western voyeuristic pleasures (2003). Following Rajadhyaksha's cautionary reminder, the claims of Bollywood to being a global culture, despite its ubiquity since he published his essay, need to be assessed more rationally than through uncritical cheerleading. We need to deliberate on a number of questions such as: has Bollywood really invaded the global popular space as the Indian media claims or is it still locked up in South Asian ghettos in global cities? Derek Bose responds to those who dismiss Bollywood going global as being 'just a lot of hype and hope' by taking an objective look at the exciting possibilities of looking at the bigger picture of Bollywood emerging as a major global brand in the future, which has been confirmed by the branding of *Slumdog Millionaire* as Bolly-wood (2006). Similarly, Haseenah Ebrahim, in her ethnographic study of Bollywood's visibility in mainstream cinema halls in South Africa, produces data to prove that Bollywood has indeed moved from the ghetto to the mainstream (2008: 63–76). However, in New York City, as in other global cities, Bollywood films are screened only in a few dilapidated theatres in neighbourhoods with strong South Asian

concentration and frequented by disparate diasporic groups from the subcontinent.

Where does Bollywood originate and in which directions does it flow? How do Bollywood's travels in the new global process differ from those of popular Hindi or Tamil films in the past? Do Bollywood's travels still follow the old trade and migration routes from South and South-east Asia across the Middle East to Africa, or does it circulate across new superhighways to Europe, North and South America, Canada, and Australia in addition to the new electronic media in a blink? Is Bollywood global, transnational, national, or regional? Finally, what is global culture, if there be any, how does it relate to the local, and can Bollywood be considered a culture of globalization? A distinction must be made between colonial productions and exchanges of the 1930s, international flows of the Raj Kapoor, M.G. Ramachandran, or Satyajit Ray films in the 1950s and 1960s, the Rajesh Khanna and Amitabh Bachchan starrers of the 1970s and 1980s, and the cultural economy of circulation in which the Karan Johar, Mani Ratnam, or Sanjay Leela Bhansali films have been travelling in the mediascapes produced after the mid-1990s.

How serious are the claims to Indian cinema's globalization? Does the presence of a few 'alternative' whites, usually academics, old hippies, or new converts to 'Asian Kool', signify the mainstreaming of Indian cinema? While Hindi films have always been a prime example of 'identification in disidentification', with Hindi films and filmstars conquering the hearts of even enemy dictators, the new forms of identification produced by Bollywood may be ascribed to cultural difference rather than cultural proximity. If a former Pakistani prime minister's serenading a Mumbai film star's pretty sister with an old Hindi film melody that raised many eyebrows in the 1980s is the function of proximity, a British-Australian pre-teen reciting the lyrics of '*Jind Mahi*' is the consequence of exoticization. While the 'Bollyliterate' honourable head of state was following established sub-continental courtship conventions, audiences of *Slumdog Millionaire*, 'whether lured by exoticism or curiosity', have been introduced to India within the stereotyped conventions of Hollywood.⁴

Limits of the National Cinema

Discussions of Indian cinema in the popular media and the academia emerging in the 1980s have been largely framed under the rubric of

national cinema while problematizing notions of the national in engaging a cross-border text, and the growing interest, particularly in the South Asian diaspora, in its transnational or global flows. Formal studies of Indian cinema, which borrowed the frame of national cinema to elucidate a cultural artefact with subcontinental antecedents, attempted to resolve the problem by defining their temporal or spatial coordinates and by tidying up its pre-national history in the service of Indian nationalistic discourse (Rajadhyaksha 1999; Chakravarty 1996; Vasudevan 2000). These studies offer extremely sophisticated analyses of Indian films, employing the Gellnerian and Andersonian theories of the nation to investigate the extent to which Indian cinematic texts are complicit in the imagining of the national community before and after Independence. At their most effective, they explore tensions within national cinematic texts by engaging with the co-option of Hindi cinema in the ideological discourse of nationalism and the occlusions and erasures of the nationalist project. They retain the category largely to problematize the idea of the nation through focusing on contestations around its meanings, using films as the locus of debates over the history, aspirations, and meanings of the nation to a diverse group of subjects. In the process of critiquing the formation of the nation through the erasure of gender, caste, and regional and sectarian differences in what Chidananda Dasgupta had defined as the 'All-India film' (1968), these studies initiate a rethinking on the nation. However, Manas Ray contends that the globality of such a concept, such as 'Indian' needs be contested and highlights the fact that for Indians (both inside India and outside) such 'Indianness'—as 'a matter of *positioning* and not essence' varies 'with different communities, is used at times for contradictory purposes and quite often gives rise to unintended consequences' (2001).

The rubric of national cinema, under which Indian cinema has been examined, is problematized by the transnationalized production, distribution, and consumption of South Asian cinematic texts in the present and its failure to account for cinematic flows including:

- cross-border movements;
- diasporic flows and contra flows;
- subnational disjunctures that are frequently and increasingly transnational;
- movements to the West and non-West.⁵

CROSS-BORDER MOVEMENTS

The notion of a homogenized, unified, and coherent national cinema can be entertained only through the amnesiac erasure of the hoary legends of Al-Hind and Tamil Eelam that were suppressed under the myth of the Indian nation. The concept of national cinema on the Indian subcontinent requires the overwriting of both undivided memories and post-modern geographies with national histories, which reveal the gaps and erasures necessitated by the appropriation of particular memories and myths in the construction of national identities. However, as the history of the subcontinent imbricates the origins of Indian cinema with those of Pakistan and Bangladesh, the conception of national cinema as a seamless continuity that embraces the concerns and totality of the Indian, Pakistani, or Bangladeshi nations is extremely reductive. The cross-border migration of directorial, lyrical, musical, and acting talent between Lahore and Mumbai, from the 1930s to the present, hints at an umbilical cord connecting the twin cultural capitals more than sixty years after the violent birth of the two nation states. If the failure of the nascent Lahore film industry to emerge as a strong contender to Mumbai is to be attributed as much to the rupture in the Hindi/Urdu cultural memory as to Islamic fundamentalism, Dhaka had to wait for several decades before evolving its version of the Muslim social that could be back-translated in the caste hierarchies of a Hindu West Bengal.

The difference in perception of pre-Independence Mumbai filmmakers with post-Independence filmmakers in Kolkata or Chennai is an education in the implication of cultural artefacts in the production of different forms of nationalisms and nation states. In contrast to the films produced after Independence, the films of the 1930s and 1940s, even in Bengali, Marathi, or Tamil, exhibit a multi-ethnic, if not multi-national collaboration and the disengagement of space with language. The internationalism of the pioneers of Indian cinema is epitomized by the original *Devdas* (1936)—a bilingual Bengali/Hindi film produced in Kolkata by a Bengali director starring a Punjabi singer-actor whose untimely death, Vijay Mishra informs us, was mourned in faraway Fiji. Similarly, *Achhoot Kanya* (1936) was designed as a cross-cultural product by a Lahore-based Gujarati financier, who invited a British-educated Bengali producer to collaborate with a German director in a film starring a Eurasian actor. It is now common knowledge that the inspiration for the

first silent film *Raja Harishchandra* (1913) came to Dada Saheb Phalke, considered as the father of Indian cinema, after his viewing of *The Life of Christ* (1911). Considering that the history of cinema in India began due to the happy accident of the first screening held at the Watson Hotel in Mumbai in 1896, a year after cinema was born, Indian cinema cannot be placed in a time-space discontinuum with European cinemas like other Third World cinemas. Despite the distribution of production centres in Kolkata, Mumbai, Chennai, and Lahore, films in the colonial era exhibit not only the contamination of *swadeshi* (indigenous) with *pardesi* (alien), but also unusual collaborations between producers, directors, actors, and screenwriters from diverse socioeconomic and linguistic groups that produced the eclectic, autotelic space of Hindi cinema, which Mumbai scriptwriter and lyricist Javed Akhtar described as a different state in an interview (2005). It is more pertinent to inquire how texts of the pre-Independence era, produced through the cross-linguistic, cross-regional, and cross-sectarian collaborations, were appropriated in the construction of the nation and a national cinema. To what extent do these national cinemas constitute postcolonial responses to Empire cinema and how were they produced in conjunction with other national cinemas?

DIASPORIC DESIRES

Vijay Mishra marks a shift in the formal study of Hindi films, extending the imagined community of the nation beyond the borders of the nation state by throwing light on the mediation of the myths of the homeland among the Indian diaspora in Fiji using the visual medium of the film through which the diasporic community was inserted in the nation (2002). Without contesting the formation of a pan-Indian identity through the medium of the Hindi film, Mishra compels a rethinking on the idea of the nation that is disengaged from territory, echoing Salman Rushdie's deconstruction of the attachment of nation to spatiality in the 1980s. Mishra's assertions about the role of Indian cinema in Indian diasporic identity construction are supported by Ray (2001: 136–84), Velayutham and Devadas (2008), and Ebrahim's (2008) accounts from other places of Indian settlement where Hindi films remained the South Asian migrants' sole link with the homeland in the absence of communication networks. Mishra's incorporation of the diasporic viewer and critic in the cultural economy of Mumbai cinema

has set a new direction to South Asian film studies with an increasing number of second- and third-generation British, American, Canadian, and Australian scholars of Indian origin stepping in to fill the lacunae in the India-centric approach to the study of Indian cinema. The academic recognition of the media-invented name for Indian popular film by the title of Mishra's book has made it enter South Asian cinematic vocabulary, particularly in the work of diaspora scholars in which 'Bolly' becomes a convenient prefix for the synchronic and diachronic difference of the 1990s' films from those discussed in earlier studies, including Mishra's own book that concludes with a chapter on the diaspora film. Raminder Kaur's enthusiastic heralding of a 'Bollyworld' in which she locates the new Hindi films makes a strong case for the transnational circulation of popular cultural products among the South Asian diasporas across the world (2005: 309–29). Kaur and Sinha's neologism, Bollyworld, 'to refer to Indian cinema through a transnational lens, at once located in the nation, but also out of the nation in its provenance, orientation, and outreach' (2005) fits the perspective of many of the new works. Rajinder Dudrah (2006) looks at Bollywood film-viewing practices from the perspective of South Asians in UK; Shakuntala Banaji (2006) adopts a comparative perspective to examine Bollywood audience in India and UK; and Jigna Desai (2004) and Tejaswini Ganti (2004) engage with the North American reception of Indian films (Banaji 2006). Another interesting development in South Asian film studies is the examination of the diaspora films and their relationship with mainstream Bollywood cinema (Desai 2004).

SUBNATIONAL TERRAINS

The debates over the nation state grew increasingly intense in the early 1990s following the release of a bilingual film in Hindi and Tamil called *Roja* made by a Mumbai-based filmmaker who inserted the region into the nation and interrogated the boundaries of the nation from the perspective of region, gender, and religion (Niranjana 1994: 1299; Vasudevan 2000). These films and the debates surrounding them not only called attention to the hegemonizing Hindi narrative that elides regional cultural expressions, but also paved the way for sustained explorations of the representations of regional, ethnic, religious, gender, caste, and sexual others in Hindi cinema through which the Hindi/Hindu

citizen subject has been normalized. While these studies reflected and contributed to a trend in 1980s film studies that worked with the concept of national cinema, despite the political and economic global transformations that came at the end of the 1980s raising apprehensions about the future of the nation state, their engagement with the conflicts and tensions within the nation inspired the articulation of subnational resistance and transnational revisions in the following decade.

If diasporic scholars have ushered in a new phase in the study of Hindi cinema by framing South Asian cinema within a transnational lens, the inclusion of film studies in south Indian languages in definitive texts on Indian cinema reflects a new thinking within India in which gestures such as these call to attention the Hindi film's textual, discursive, and economic hegemony over the rest of the Indian languages that is mirrored in academic discourse. These differ in their methodical approach and ideological thrust from earlier examinations of non-Hindi cinemas, primarily Bengali, that are inscribed with a different cultural politics in which the Bengali films of Ritwik Ghatak or Satyajit Ray are viewed as providing the template for a meta-discourse on Indian cinema. The essays on Tamil cinema included in Ravi Vasudevan's *Making Meaning in Indian Cinema*, the work of S.V. Srinivas (2000) on Telugu fan cultures, and Sara Dickey's (2000) on MGR films have made way for a book-length work on Tamil cinema edited by Selvaraj Velayutham (2008) that scrutinizes the cultural politics of India's 'other film industry'. Velayutham's book makes a modest beginning in removing the South Asian film from the Hindi, Tamil, or north Indian-south Indian dialectic to an emerging transnational Tamil formation that reverberates with the concerns of the Tamil nation across India, Sri Lanka, Singapore, Malaysia, Middle East, Europe, America, and Canada. Though formal studies of films in other Indian languages have not begun, media reports and articles reveal a parallel transnational economy of films in regional languages that connect the local with the global in a circuit of production and reception quite different from that projected in the Bollywood film industry. If the regional films inscribe a rural, local space that is preserved in the global city on one hand, they mirror the Bollywoodization of the Hindi film on the other through transnationalization of their locales, production, and address. One of the films that emerged as a top grosser globally in 2006 was not one from the more established film industries in Bengali, Tamil, or Telugu, but a launchpad for the newly revived Punjabi

film industry called *Mitti Vajaan Mardi* (2006) starring a Canadian-Sikh singer-actor. Despite their weak storylines and histrionic limitations of the lead singer-actors, Punjabi films have not only been playing a major role in mobilizing a global *Panjabiyat*, but have also forged new transnational connections. *Yaariyan* (2008), a recent Punjabi hit, proposes a unique transnational brotherhood through its theme focusing on the relationship between a rural Punjabi with a Punjabi and black Kenyan migrant in Canada symbolically enacted in its *Bhangra* title song. The narrative space of films such as *Jee Aaya Nu* (2003), *Dil Apna Punjabi* (2006), *Mitti Vajaan Mardi* (2006), and *Mera Pind* (2008), though very different, intersects with the diaspora productions of Gurinder Chadha in inscribing the region, or even a city like Amritsar, in the local-global binary. But the most important local global connection is visible in the phenomenal rise of the Bhojpuri film industry in the last decade in which clichéd narratives, 'crude' lyrics, and B-grade Hindi stars do not diminish the films' appeal for their rural Bhojpuri speakers in India and the Bhojpuri diasporas in Trinidad, Guyana, Fiji, Mauritius, and so on.

GLOBAL YEARNINGS

The most significant addition to the body of literature on South Asian cinema is that which brings to light Indian cinema's impact among non-South Asian communities not only in places of South Asian migration, but even in distant regions where South Asian presence is negligible. Brian Larkin's fieldwork in Nigeria on Hausa viewers' preference for Indian melodramas over Hollywood products and their incorporation of Indian cinema in the construction of an Islamic modernity provides a coherent explanation for the popularity of Indian films over their Hollywood counterparts in parts of the world where the sentimental family dramas represented in the film become the signifiers either of tradition through which modernity can be resisted or means of constructing an alternative modernity (Larkin 1997: 46–62). If Larkin's piece in Kaur and Sinha's *Bollyworld* reveals the penetration of the profane world of Hindi film song into the sacred *bandiri* music in Kano with *bandiri* singers borrowing Indian film songs for singing *bandiri* praise songs; Dana Rush's essay (2008) on the vodun image makers in Benin unveils a fascinating narrative of the incursion of the Hindi film into the African sacred through the co-option of Hindu imagery by the

image makers in vodun art (Larkin in Kaur and Sinha 2005; Rush in Hawley 2008: 155). The popularity of live performances by Indian film stars in Southeast Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and many parts of the Western world was common knowledge. But the extent to which they had invaded the non-South Asian psyche has come to media attention only recently with reports commenting on Egyptian and Ghanaian cabdrivers playing Hindi film songs from the 1970s in New York or Kazakhs, Turk, and even Chinese fans of Raj Kapoor singing the theme song from *Awaara*. As cultures of the Third World become visible to the rest of the world only when they receive visibility, recognition, and acclaim in the first, Indian cinema that has stoked desires in different corners of the globe for nearly a century, attracted media and academic attention only when it caught the fancy of the cynical white viewer sometime in the 1990s. Perhaps the confusion of the diaspora films, particularly *Monsoon Wedding* (2001), *Bend it Like Beckham* (2002), and *Bollywood/Hollywood* (2002), with Indian cinema, familiarized the Western viewer with the space of its ethnic other, thus preparing the grounds for the Bollywood film of the Karan Johar or even Priyadarshan variety. As suspicions about the high ratings enjoyed by Bollywood films at the box office in global cities are confirmed by their predominantly South Asian viewership, the much celebrated Bollyphilia of Andrew Lloyd Webber, Baz Luhrmann, or Danny Boyle must be juxtaposed against the Bollyphobia of the majority of white viewers turned off by the length and non-linearity of the Indian film, notwithstanding the spirited support for 'the cinema of interruptions' by film scholars (Gopalan 2003).

REVISITING THE NATION IN THE ERA OF GLOBALIZATION

Yet theorists of South Asian cinema have made a compelling case for the retention of the category of the nation despite the challenges to the nation state from within and without by showing that the homogenizing drive of globalization is disrupted by the affirmation of national identities. Once again, Rajadhyaksha takes the lead in addressing the issues raised by the 'Bollywoodization' of Indian cinema by deconstructing taxonomies to embed them in the new politics of global capitalism in which the film and other cultural industries are implicated at the end of the twentieth century (1999). The question we need to ask is whether

the category of the nation can be sustained in the face of transnational flows of goods, people, and images, or do the global flows of Bollywood require a new vocabulary for imagining the nation that is not rooted in the nation state. With the impending demise of the nation state being thrown in our face by the rise of sub-nationalist separatisms and formation of larger unions and the interdependence of the world that has repercussions in the political, economic, or ecological spheres, the question can no longer be overlooked in the cultural. With all these spheres integrated in global networks of production, markets, and consumption so intricately, can the state-centric division of space of modernity function as a reliable basis for imagined community and forming identities, and can cultures still be construed as discontinuous as the notion of national cultures implies? Rajadhyaksha (2003) and Trivedi (2008) argue for the retention of nation as a political entity that engenders and requires the idea of a national culture through explaining the resurgence of cultural nationalism as traditional cultures' defense mechanism against homogenized identities and globalized economies. Others like Mishra (2002) propose a compromise in which a revision of the idea of the nation by disengaging it from territory can make it serve as a convenient term for imagining collectivity because, as Arjun Appadurai pointed out, the present global process is dominated by the image and the imagination (1996). However, the emergence of new collectivities and identifications in the global era converging on language, religion, ethnicity, gender, caste, and so on point to a redefinition of the idea of the nation rather than cultural homogenization. While Rajadhyaksha and Trivedi's argument about cultural nationalist revivals following the perceived threat of the erosion of local identities are worth serious consideration, localities may be produced in cinematic texts through the consolidation of regional, ethnolinguistic, caste, or village identities. Cultural forms appear to reflect these 'tribal returns' that reflect the counter-movement of globalization towards greater fragmentation in which the desire for locality is translated in particularized narratives of region, ethnicity, or caste, and in which the facelessness of the global village is resisted through the small-place identity of specific neighbourhoods or villages. For this reason, the transnationalization of the Indian film is complemented by the re-emergence of the local through localisms of speech, dress, behaviour, and mores that fragment the homogeneous space of the 'All-India film' in myriad ways. The dream merchants of