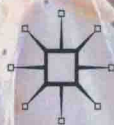# READING 'BOLLYWOOD'

The Young Audience and Hindi Films
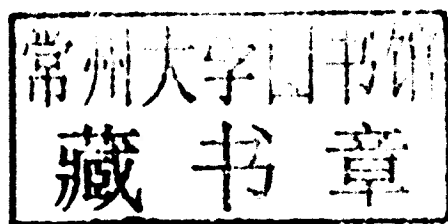
Shakuntala Banaji

Reading 'Bollywood'
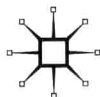
The Young Audience and Hindi Films

Shakuntala Banaji

palgrave
macmillan

For Ammar, Murad, Rohini and Jairus
with love;
and for Zinedine
my darling son

Acknowledgements

Preface

Cinema is one of the most *contested cultural sites* in India today ...
(Bharucha, 1998: 11)

This book is an enquiry into the *meanings* and *pleasures* that various
aspects of Hindi commercial films come to have at various times and in
various places for a sample of young British Asian and Indian viewers. It
seeks to valorise neither audiences at the expense of films nor 'ordinary'
viewers at the expense of critics but to raise questions about the con-
nections between spectatorial pleasure, group identities and ideology, as
well as to contextualise and assess, critically, various claims made about
the politics of Hindi films and those who watch them. Every project has
a personal history that permeates its immediate concerns, and this one
is no exception, with its abiding interest in Hindi cinema, viewing pleas-
ure, social contexts and the politics, experiences and subjectivity of indi-
vidual viewers. Growing up in 1970s Bombay, with no television but a
great delight in Hindi films, I was conscious that adults around me con-
sidered popular Hindi cinema retrograde and troublesome, not as politi-
cally desirable as Art films or even Hollywood cinema. I frequently heard
the Hindi film narratives described as clichéd or mindless, their aesthet-
ics as vulgar or naive and, most damningly, their politics as oppressive
and authoritarian. Obviously accepting this disapproval at some level, as
a child I justified my undeniable enjoyment with the thought that
I would escape the deleterious 'effects' of the ideologies I came to believe
were purveyed by the films. This belief in what has been called 'third
person effects' (Davidson 1983; Schoenbach 2001) is frequently evident
amongst the young viewers in this study; however, while many of them
share this conviction about the vulnerability of 'others' to film influ-
ences, none of them express it in such a comprehensive manner as is
sometimes implicit in the accounts of contemporary Hindi film com-
mentators (cf. Mathur 2002: 64; Vishwanath 2002: 49–50). Indeed, in
the view of many critics (Chatterji 1998; Kazmi 1999; Derné 2000;
Vishwanath 2002) Hindi commercial films either ignore, utilise or sus-
tain oppressive and unjust systems of belief and action.

More specifically, as will be seen in Chapters 1 and 2, various medi-
ated representations – for instance of women or the nation state – have
been and still are accused of inciting, increasing and polarising as well as

of policing and censoring violent debates over Indian and diasporic eth-
nic, sexual and gender politics (Bharucha 1995; Rao 1995; Mecklai
2010). But to what extent are such accusations tenable, particularly in
the new 24/7 news saturated environment of contemporary urban
India? What are the processes by which fictional mediated interventions
are supposed to affect the people who encounter them? Indeed, what do
those who enjoy Hindi films on a regular basis think about the texts and
about their own interactions with them? And what are the repercussions
for one's politics and pedagogy of insisting that almost every instance of
a cultural form such as Hindi commercial cinema is a vehicle for the
delivery of 'messages' that seduce viewers and serve only the interests of
ruling elites? After two decades of discussing literature and media texts
with students of various ages and ethnicities, I am not convinced that
the answers to such questions are as accessible or as monolithic as many
textual critiques might lead one to believe. Surely questions about 'cul-
ture' taken both in its inclusive sense as the values, traditions and prac-
tices of whole communities, and in its more precise articulation as the
musical, artistic, filmic and literary production of given sections of soci-
ety, cannot lead unequivocally to answers about individual human
beings and their politics, beliefs or behaviours?

Of course, in many countries, 'culture' itself is embattled terrain; and
India is no exception. This is due, partly, to the sheer size of the country,
the number of languages, dialects, regions, religions, political parties,
beliefs and caste practices. It is also due, partly, to colonialism and the
national liberation struggle, vicious and unrelenting caste, class and
gender oppression, violent and xenophobic mobilisations of religious,
ethnic and linguistic sentiment, the ways in which the country was par-
titioned and is governed, with all the ensuing material and psychic
repercussions for individuals, communities and the polity. Today the
conflicts going on over culture, while no less clamorous than 60 years
ago, are unquestionably more overt than before due to their expression
across a range of media and, in particular, television news. As a furore
over the potential for mobile phones to be used to download porno-
graphic videos purporting to show the exploits of supposedly demure
Hindi film actresses demonstrates, the ways in which religious, gender
and sexual identities are articulated (or erased) by the press, by televi-
sion and by commercial Hindi cinema, could be said to be in some meas-
ure a reflection of existing discourses and skirmishes over the definition
and control of these arenas in various sections of Indian and diasporic
South-Asian society. Meanwhile, the recent obsessively broadcast 'fast
against corruption' by populist leader Anna Hazare and his followers

demonstrates quite clearly that much of the Indian news media inter-
vene in and co-construct the spectacle of politics in selective and un-
democratic ways.

Initially, reviewing the best-known studies of Hindi films, I came up
against a series of frustratingly simplistic binary oppositions that crys-
tallised around notions of *audience pleasure* versus those of *textual ideol-
ogy*, of *irrational emotional* responses as opposed to *rational critical* ones.
To find a way out of this impasse and with the gaps and absences of cur-
rent research in mind, I formulated three key questions: First, in what
ways are ethnicity, masculinity and femininity, and the relations
between them, constructed and represented in contemporary Hindi
commercial cinema? Second, how do audience members, especially
viewers under 25, interpret the visual and verbal discourses of masculin-
ity, femininity and ethnicity in commercial Hindi films in the light of
their perceptions of their own religious, gender and sexual identities?
And third, to what extent do varying class, religious, geographic,
national, community and home environments alter, influence and/or
counterbalance the conceptions of ethnicity, gender and sexuality that
audiences might read into Hindi films? In the course of answering these
questions, both pleasures in the films and anxieties about their discur-
sive universe are reframed and dissected in the context of meanings
made from, experiences of, and things done with and to Hindi films by
actual viewers in India and the UK.

Both theoretically and methodologically, the study proved challen-
ging. During the participant observation phase of the research, which
took place between August 2000 and April 2003 and encompassed over
80 film showings in Bombay and London, I chose to focus especially on
the immediate verbal responses of younger film-goers – for instance
spontaneous joking comments, mimicry of speeches or expressions of
satisfaction/dissatisfaction within viewing groups, and answers to my
direct questions – as well as on non-verbal behaviour within cinema
halls – movements, gestures, comments, shouts, whistling, clapping,
standing up, crying, covering the eyes, disapproval and laughter – which
accompanied showings of films. Saliently, I found significant differences
between the views expressed during in-depth interviews and the state-
ments or behaviours of young people when in intergenerational or peer
groups at film showings. The very public nature of these 'conversations' –
the fact that friends and/or family members were often listening in amid
the distracting noise of stall-holders, ticket touts, traffic and film music –
militated against the contemplative and self-reflective responses
possible in one-on-one interviews. For this reason, this book is based

principally on the transcripts of extended face-to-face taped interviews with their attendant ability to clarify meaning through negotiation and thus to militate against misunderstanding rather than to render meaning fixed – as might be the case with written testimony such as letters and questionnaires.

After posting notices in local shops, clinics, schools and colleges as well as on Hindi film chat sites on the internet, I chose around three dozen interviewees from amongst those who contacted me to reflect a broad spectrum of religion, class, gender, sexual orientation and family background as well as a range of ages between 16 and 25 within the London South-Asian and Bombay communities selected. My own long-standing knowledge of and love for the two cities, with their culturally vibrant histories, exceptional transport networks, multiplicity of cinema halls, languages and frequent juxtaposition of different race, class and religious communities proved indispensable when selecting and carrying out in-depth interviews; if space permitted, this book would have wished to dwell at far greater length on these aspects of this audience study. In terms of the manner in which I conducted interviews, the fact that I had lived for many years in the same city space as my interviewees was also a metaphor for shared understandings of social codes and practices, possibilities and boundaries.

While the structure of the interviews was loose enough to allow subjects to pursue narratives and ideas that interested them, I provided a framework which directed attention to specific scenes, films or themes of interest to my research wherever this accorded with the topics and films already selected by interviewees. Initial questions usually aimed to establish aspects of subjects' backgrounds and sociocultural experiences, while later ones aimed to pursue, clarify, elaborate and unpick as well as occasionally to challenge the comments made by them about violence, marriage, romance, work, gender, sexuality, sex, class, religion, politics or nation in a range of contemporary Hindi blockbusters. Significantly for the types of issues with which I engage in this book, the notion of 'active interviewing' drawn from Holstein and Gubrium (1998) consistently provided me with a measure of flexibility in terms of my ability to respond to and/or comment on sensitive topics, which arose during the interviews.

This study agrees that, as Judith Mayne (1993: 172) argues: 'spectatorship needs to be treated as one of those ordinary activities, and theorizing this activity can open up spaces between seemingly opposing terms, thus leading us to attend more closely to how stubbornly our pleasures in the movies refuse any rigid dichotomies.' The analysis and theorising

of the *pleasures* or, perhaps, the different kinds of pleasure on offer in commercial Hindi cinema, and a questioning of what such pleasure actually consists of and entails, was ongoing during data collection, and may be seen to inform discussions of both audience and film narratives. A need to transcend the problematic manner in which the terms 'emotion' and 'rationality' are often pitted against each other in textual accounts of cinema (Kazmi 1998; Chatterji 1998), which 'interpellate' audiences, as well as implicitly in viewer accounts, leads this book to question this entire dichotomy. My own analyses of film and interview texts seek to show the *connections* between different types of ideological discourses and social contexts, individual experiences and politics contained therein.

While analyses of data *do* question and probe the discursive perspectives from which interviewees construct their interpretations of films and the world, they do not, at any point, seek to assert that such discourses, choices and interpretations lack concrete material (social, historical) repercussions and psychic implications. As such, interviews are not simply seen as language games; and reality, off-screen, though multifaceted and plural, does not always have to be inserted into 'scarequotes'. Furthermore, I became convinced that although my methods of gathering data were qualitative, there were meaningful ideas that could only be expressed *about the sample* by quantifying aspects of the data (cf. Murdock 1997), analyses put forward in this book, while retaining a commitment to a broader qualitative agenda, do see even a balance of 'four to one' or 'six to sixteen' within sub-groups of the sample as being able to aid hypotheses about the ways in which young viewers' backgrounds and experiences might inflect their spectatorial meaning-making. This should not suggest, however, that any of the interviewees quoted in this book is seen as being *representative* of the social class, religion or other category with which they identify most closely or to which they belong.

The arguments and narratives of viewing in this book gain their validity not by giving voice to the film and life experiences and understandings of all young South-Asian viewers but by providing a detailed picture of the concerns and meanings made by particular viewers that does, potentially, enable a much better and more nuanced understanding of the concerns, interpretative frameworks and life-worlds of other viewers than is available in most text-centric accounts. However, lest it be assumed that the very particularity of the data limits it excessively, it should be recollected that qualitative research describes *processes* – of interpretation, identity formation, psychosocial relations as well as

relations between variables such as pleasure, knowledge, experience and belief – that are not accessible with quantitative methods that might appear to guarantee representativeness. It is my belief that the analyses provided here of the processes outlined are sufficiently rigorous and persuasive to make sense beyond the boundaries of the specific cases outlined, and hence to have a more *general* relevance. The narratives and constructions of self and 'social worlds' (Miller and Glassner 1998: 105) that emerge from *subjective* accounts of media/cultural experience are analysed in the light of forms of Discourse Analysis. Potter and Wetherell's discussion of their method (1987: 168) as being about a search for *patterns* of *variability* and *consistency*, *differences* and *shared features* between accounts, as well as the forming of hypotheses about the patterns observed, proved pertinent for this study.

The chapters in this book are organised thematically around the ideas and concerns raised by critics about films and audiences, and by young audiences about the films, ideas and representations that interest them most. Both audiences' instantaneous and considered reactions to and inflections of film discourses leave one facing perplexing questions regarding Hindi films and one's manner of discussing them. Are these popular texts, as suggested in the accounts of some commentators, merely *escapist fantasies* which are watched to pass the time and leave no impression on the mind or the consciousness; or do the *ideologies* they contain support certain groups in society, interpellating their audiences to maintain a political status quo and the dominance of particular elites? Equally significantly, when young people dismiss or praise them, do they do so because they reject or accept the films as a whole or because they are responding to the episodic and fragmentary structure of commercial Hindi films? Could the films carry viewers along with certain sequences and ideas while alienating them during others? Hence, how informative are studies of Hindi film texts that ignore audience responses, or studies of audiences that generalise about the traditions and social psychology of viewing groups while separating texts from historical and political contexts?

Engaging with salient questions in the work of Hindi film commentators from the 1970s onwards, Chapter 1 discusses a range of theories of ideology as well as of culture, media and social discourse, generated by studies of Hindi commercial film texts. Redressing this imbalance, Chapter 2 considers the findings of the few significant reception studies to date from India, the UK and North America, which involve discussions with audiences of Hindi films. Chapter 3 addresses questions about the social meanings of the act of cinema-going amongst young

Hindi film viewers in Bombay and London, raising questions about the extent to which the immediate context of viewing may alter, shape and/or reinforce individual responses to specific aspects of Hindi films. Telescoping in on representations of courtship, romance, family and marriage Chapter 4 examines critical and 'ordinary' viewer positions on two tremendously popular films: *Hum Aapke Hain Koun…! (Who Am I to You?*, 1994 Dir. Sooraj Barjatya) and *Dilwale Dulhaniya Le Jayenge (The One with the Heart takes the Bride*, 1995 Dir. Aditya Chopra). This leads to a consideration of the implications of the ideological discourses in these films for the psychosocial positions taken up on issues of romance and marriage by young people. Chapter 5 looks closely at the ways in which clothing and the body are regarded by young viewers, both in everyday social practices and in their spectacular metamorphoses on screen. Critical claims about male voyeurism and female prudishness are tested against discussions of young viewers' actual responses. Chapter 6, meanwhile, explores the ways in which a number of mainstream and alternative 'Hindi' films in the last two decades have attempted to construct class-bound ideals of masculinity and femininity on screen; it also gives selective expression to young viewers' responses to these ideas, additionally aiming to give a sense of the actual context of and attitudes towards masculinity, femininity, sex and sexuality in the lives of young viewers in London and Bombay via existing research and testimonies gathered for this book. Via young people's comments as well as through existing critical literature, Chapter 7 articulates some of the controversies surrounding films such as *Bombay* (Mani Rathnam 1994) and *Gadar: Ek Prem Katha (Tempest: A Love Story*, Anil Sharma 2001), which take as their subject matter cross-religious romances set against the backdrop of religious riots in India. While these discussions are carried further elsewhere (Banaji 2007), this chapter looks especially at the way in which issues of social class, national identity, diaspora and religious affiliation in the films resonate differently with Bombay youth and British Asians, Hindus and non-Hindus as well as those who have survived or experienced riots. Chapter 8, examines how young male viewers from contrasting backgrounds find diverse frameworks for action, self-justification or empowerment within films that present tales of anti-state terrorism. Concluding the book, Chapter 9 returns to issues of spectatorship, pleasure and ideology with an emphasis on the findings of this study.

Contents

List of Illustrations

1

Hindi Films: Theoretical Debates and Textual Studies

1.1 Introduction

Although this book is concerned primarily with the significance for and reception by young audiences of contemporary sexual and gender iconography in commercial Hindi films, both during the analyses of film texts and during the interpretation of audience self-representations and emotions, I will of necessity be drawing upon some of the theories and ideas implicit in existing accounts of Hindi film texts. Thus, in this chapter, I delineate some strands of thought that have dominated historical and theoretical scholarship on Indian 'popular' or 'commercial' cinema in the last three decades. Notably, these include debates surrounding the *effects* of Hindi cinema, the connections between *texts* and *contexts*, the *mechanisms* and *ideologies* of the medium, the significance of *realism* for spectatorship and the role of what is characterised by Fareed Kazmi (1999) as the 'tradition-modernity paradigm'.

1.2 Early accounts: from escapist fantasy to textual pleasure

'They aren't realistic!' and 'Escapist fantasy!', are frequent criticisms of Hindi films in educated/elite Indian circles or are self-deprecatingly offered by urban Indian viewers (Derné 2000; Banaji 2005) and a number of South-Asian youth in London (Gillespie 1995). These may be perfectly valid accusations if by 'realistic' one means attempting to seduce or deceive the audience into believing in the perfect correspondence between the text and the world that they inhabit. In *Sholay* (*Embers*, Ramesh Sippy 1975), one of the most widely viewed and influential Hindi blockbusters of the seventies, a virtuous woman dances on broken glass until

1

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