

# **Bollywood Cinema: A Critical Genealogy**

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# Bollywood Cinema: A Critical Genealogy

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“Bollywood” has finally made it to the *Oxford English Dictionary*. The 2005 edition defines it as: “a name for the Indian popular film industry, based in Bombay. Origin 1970s. Blend of Bombay and Hollywood.” The incorporation of the word in the *OED* acknowledges the strength of a film industry which, with the coming of sound in 1931, has produced some 9,000 films. (This must not be confused with the output of Indian cinema generally, which would be four times more). What is less evident from the *OED* definition is the way in which the word has acquired its current meaning and has displaced its earlier descriptors (Bombay Cinema, Indian Popular Cinema, Hindi Cinema), functioning, perhaps even horrifyingly, as an “empty signifier” (Prasad) that may be variously used for a reading of popular Indian cinema. The triumph of the term (over the others) is nothing less than spectacular and indicates, furthermore, the growing global sweep of this cinema not just as cinema qua cinema but as cinema qua social effects and national cultural coding. Although Indian film producers in particular, and pockets of Indian spectators generally, continue to feel uneasy with it (the vernacular press came around to using “Bollywood” only reluctantly), its ascendancy has been such that *Bombay Dreams* (the Andrew Lloyd Weber musical) and the homegrown *Merchants of Bollywood* both become signifiers of a cultural logic which transcends cinema and is a global marker of Indian modernity. As the Melbourne (March 2006) closing ceremony of the Commonwealth Games showed, Bollywood will be the cultural practice through

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which Indian national culture will be projected when the games are held in Delhi in 2010. International games (the Olympics, World Cup Soccer, Asian Games, Commonwealth Games, and so on) are often expressions of a nation's own emerging modernity. For India that modernity, in the realm of culture, is increasingly being interpellated by Bollywood.

### Bollywood, the Word, Modernity and Diaspora

What the *OED* does not tell us – not yet at any rate – is that “Bollywood” is a very Indian neologism. The best, and arguably the most influential, critic of Indian cinema, Ashish Rajadhyaksha has tracked the word more intelligently than most and I want to begin with his 2003 essay as our starting point. In this essay Rajadhyaksha (2003: 29) suggests that the word appeared, as a joke, in the journal *Screen* (India) on its “Bollywood Beat” page with the “companion words Tollywood for the Calcutta film industry based in Tollygunge and even, for a while Mollywood for the Madras industry.” The reference to “Tollygunge”/“Tollywood” holds the key to the word's history, as it points to a local origin of the term “Bollywood” that gives it a meaning different from its vulgar usage as the sign of second-hand borrowing or uncritical copying. Delving further into its etymology, film critic Madhava Prasad has located the first use of “Tollywood” in a telegram that Wilford E. Deming, an American working on films, received as he was about to leave India: “Tollywood sends best wishes happy new year to Lubill film....”<sup>1</sup> We may want to quote Madhava Prasad's discovery at length here:

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.’ 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 obviously returned to India, for we know that he directed *Gaibi Sitara* (“The Hidden Star”) in 1935. By then one of the best-known production houses, Madan Theatres, occasionally styled itself Tollywood Studio under which name it produced films such as *Miss Manorama* (1935).<sup>2</sup>

“Tollywood,” the neologism, thus anticipates Bollywood which we may now, in a clear echo of Fredric Jameson (1991), declare as the cultural logic of Indian late modernity. To make the latter conjunction clearer, Ashish Rajadhyaksha, to whose essay I now return, distinguishes between the reality of the Indian popular cinema based in Mumbai and the hype around it. The two – the hype and the reality – explains the varied meanings of the word “Bollywood,” which is at once a fad, a taste, an Indian exotica, and a global phenomenon growing out of the cultural and political economy of a film industry based primarily in Mumbai. Some precision is clearly in order because, presented as hype, the claims made by both Indians and the Indian diaspora often do not tally with the evidence. Is Bollywood truly global? Does it mean more than a film industry? Is it a style that transcends its cultural origins, making cultural specificity inconsequential? A sense of the confusion may be grasped through an examination of a piece titled “Welcome to Bollywood” in the February 2005 issue of *National Geographic*.

This *National Geographic* article by Suketu Mehta, who grew up in New York and is the author of *Maximum City: Bombay Lost and Found* (2004), begins with a rider: “Most Westerners have never seen a Bollywood film. Yet India’s film industry is the largest in the world, offering millions of fans something Hollywood doesn’t deliver.” There is much enthusiasm here, and not a little exaggeration and confusion (Mehta conflates “Bollywood” and “India’s film industry”) as Mehta (2005: 57) adds, “Bollywood has become a globally recognized brand; like Darjeeling tea or the Taj Mahal, it has become an emblem of India. Its films are popular in the Middle East, Central Asia, Africa, Latin America – and now the U.S. and Europe, where immigrants from Bollywood-loving countries make up most of the audiences and provide more than 60 percent of overseas revenues.” The *National Geographic* account then tracks the making of the film *Veer-Zaara* (2004), a film that deals with a Pakistani girl falling in love with an Indian man.

Two issues hit us immediately in this essay: first, the enthusiasm with which Mehta declares Bollywood’s popularity without specifying who exactly are the spectators of the film in these regions. Second, in tracking this production Mehta discovers that films made with a strong diasporic content (lives of people in London or in New York) no longer tend to do well in India itself and possibly not in the diaspora either. If we bring these two observations together, the fact of diaspora strikes us immediately and we may begin to see that the specific inflection given to Bollywood now reflects new kinds of global migration and links to homeland. In this respect I want to suggest that while the Bombay/Mumbai film industry has been read both as film and as artefact producing specific cultural effects, the present reception reflects a late modern entry of India into global capital most notably via the IT and outsourcing industries, and the accumulation of vast amounts of capital in the hands of diaspora Indians. When Mehta then explains the return of the father-and-son filmmaking duo (Yash and Aditya

Chopra) to village India in *Veer-Zaara* in the hope that this is what the diaspora wants, we reach the heart of the problematic we explore here. It is interesting, though, that a year later the duo returned to diaspora with *Salaam Namaste* (2005), filmed almost exclusively in Melbourne, in which many of the usual Indian absolutist values (no pre-marital sex, let alone pregnancy) and the non-negotiable idea of Mother India itself are virtually non-existent.

Still, if we return to Mehta's analysis of Yash and Aditya Chopra's agenda in making *Veer-Zaara*, we find evidence that supports the filmmakers' reading of diasporic consumption of cinema. The Radio Sargam Bollywood portal of December 2004 presents us with some valuable statistics on the box office takings for this film.<sup>3</sup> In the UK the film opened at number 4 and raked in £484,993 in its opening weekend, making it the most successful debut of a Bollywood film to date. The success of the film did not wane significantly over the next two weekends as it collected £323,905 and £199,848 respectively. By December 2004, the film had collected £1,467,180. In the US its successes were equally spectacular. It debuted at number 15 on the box office charts and raked in \$903,010 on its first weekend, giving it the second biggest debut for a Bollywood film in US history for an opening weekend, after *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham* (2001).<sup>4</sup> In the first week the film grossed \$1,200,000. By the end of the third the total stood at \$2,400,000. Like the UK, Australia too recorded the highest ever opening for *Veer-Zaara* and, as in the US, the film was number 15 on the national box office



chart that weekend. The total collection in the third week in Australia stood at AUD\$255,691. Although no figures are available for Canada, it stands to reason that given Canada's relatively large Indian diaspora, the take there would have been close to a million Canadian dollars, if not more.

Before examining the implications of these figures further, we need to take a look at the reception of the film in India where it was also immensely successful. By the end of December it had collected some 30 crore rupees (roughly US\$6 million).

The figures given are startling and indicate the amount of money that the diaspora can return to Bollywood. If we add to the figures for the UK, the US, Australia and Canada the collections from the locations of the earlier Indian diaspora and the older markets for this cinema, one may suggest that the primarily diasporic overseas market tends to contribute as much to Bollywood, at least in a film's first few weeks of release, as the home market. Of course, there are not too many films in which the returns are as symmetrical, for the taste of the diaspora

may be different from the homeland, and the case of *Veer-Zaara* at any rate suggests that the diaspora does not necessarily respond enthusiastically only to Bollywood films with a diaspora theme. *Salaam Namaste* (2005), totally set in Melbourne, Australia, made some US\$7 million in India but no more than \$4 million in the diaspora.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, what remains clear are the returns to Bollywood from the diaspora, especially given the vastly smaller size of the latter against a billion homeland Indians. But the enthusiasm for Bollywood is not to be located at any specific moment or a given year (although the figures given above are primarily from the early years of the new millennium), for a little earlier, film producer Subhash Ghai had claimed that his 1999 film *Taal* would be noted by the “whole world” (Rajadhyaksha (2003: 26). Released in America over the weekend of August 13-15 (1999) with ticket sales of \$591,280 in its first three days of release, it was for these few days among the top 10 films in the American market. Similarly, Rachel Dwyer (2006: 233) notes that *Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gam* (“Sometimes Happy, Sometimes Sad,” 2001) in its first weekend “reached number 3 in the UK charts, taking £475, 355.”

In terms of money earned, diaspora is now one of the largest markets for Indian cinema (Bollywood as well as regional cinemas) to the extent that, for film entrepreneurs, what Jigna Desai has called the “Brown Atlantic” now constitutes a separate “distribution territory.” Indeed, if the internet figures gathered by Dwyer (2006: 231-32) are a guide, the diaspora collects almost as much money as India itself. By the end of July 2001 the gross intake for *Lagaan* (“Land Tax,” 2001) in India was \$2,427, 510, while the combined intake in the US and UK was \$1,546, 734. If we add to this figure box office receipts from the old Indian diaspora and the other markets for Bollywood, the overall intake for the film outside India would have equalled that within India. Indeed, the film *Asoka* (2001) earned more money overseas in the first few months after its release than in India: \$900,000 against \$1,430,000 in the US and the UK. In the UK it is not unusual to come across figures which indicate that Bollywood cinema productions are often among the nation’s top grossing foreign films.

The hype mentioned by Rajadhyaksha, taken up by Suketu Mehta’s account in the *National Geographic*, and manifest in box office receipts was seen in the phenomenal success (and aftermath) of what has been referred to as the “Indian Summer of 2002.” That year Bollywood was celebrated in London department stores (notably Selfridges’ “23 and a Half Days of Bollywood”), in museums (Victoria and Albert Museum’s “Cinema India: the Art of Bollywood”), at film institutes (the British Film Institute’s “Imagine Asia”), in musicals such as Tamasha’s *Fourteen Songs, Two Weddings and a Funeral*, and so on. To these Andrew Lloyd Weber’s *Bombay Dreams* may be added, although the production itself had been in the making for some years.

It is clear, then, that against the *OED* definition, Bollywood functions as

something more than popular Indian cinema produced in Mumbai.<sup>6</sup> Although cinema is central to its definition, it is, as Rajadhyaksha (2003: 27) says, “a more diffuse cultural conglomeration involving a range of distribution and consumption activities from websites to music cassettes, from cable to radio.” The film industry may well be a small part of this larger culture industry which, as an industry, gained official recognition only in 2000 and has had bank finance only recently made available to it. The Bollywood industry is therefore something apart, as Bombay cinema itself, in Rajadhyaksha’s argument, is much older than Bollywood, going back as it does to the 1930s, and, if one wishes to be fastidious, even to Phalke’s first silent movie in Hindi (*Raja Harishchandra*, 1913). Against Bombay/Hindi Cinema, Bollywood is read very much as an early ’90s phenomenon and hence just over a decade old. “The term today refers to a reasonably specific narrative and a mode of representation,” writes Rajadhyaksha (2003: 28). Its features, some of which are not as new as they are made out to be, include: love stories couched in traditional values (2005’s *Viruddh* carried the subtitle on screen of “family comes first”) and presented as staged musicals; stories that do not unsettle cultural presumptions (although inter-religious marriages are condoned, provided a Muslim is not involved); representations that are framed within Hindu iconography; form that fetishizes high tech values; and cinema whose target audience is increasingly the Indian diaspora. As a word, Bollywood is used to catch the flavour of the Indian popular. In the pages of Sydney’s *The Sun Herald* (September 11 2005: S34) we find pop culture journalist Clara Laccarino using Bollywood as an adjective in a number of phrases: Bollywood industry, Bollywood bonanza, a Bollywood fix, Bollywood Shakedown, Bollywood romp, Bollywood breaks, Bollywood dancing, Bollywood calendar and “hot’n’spicy Bollywood fever.” And then there is Planet Bollywood, the restaurant.

Rajadhyaksha clearly defines Bollywood in these late modern terms since he separates the film industry from the culture industry, and, quoting Sandhya Shukla’s words (Rajadhyaksha 2003: 30), suggests that Bollywood has been around for no more than a decade as a consequence of the “synchronous developments of international capital and diasporic nationalism.”

A classic case of the crossover into cinema of “the Bollywood thematic” referred to by Rajadhyaksha (and an instance of a diasporic nationalism based on homeland fantasies made possible through computer technology) is the film *Swades* (“We the People,” 2004), in which a highly successful NRI NASA scientist returns to an Indian village to generate hydro-electricity.<sup>8</sup> The kind of techno-nationalism undertaken in this act implies addressing the nation’s own pre-modernity and its age-old traditions and prejudices by embracing, “instrumentally,” western technology. The two, the values of an ancient people synthesised with western technological reason, are what brings Mohan Bhargava, the scientist, back yet again to India after he’d left upon constructing a rudimentary



hydro-electric machine. It is in America, in the diaspora, that the call of Mother India remains urgent; it is there that a word heard, a box full of Indian seeds and soil opened confirm the eternal verities of the homeland and Mohan Bhargava “returns” home for good. In other words, Mother India resonates only in the diaspora. There is, then, a strange form of cultural authentication taking shape, one that has been at the heart of the problem of cinematic representation all along. As part of the nationalist ethos, cinema has had to display civic virtues. Now Bollywood displays the same urge towards cultural authentication mediated via diaspora. Writes Rajadhyaksha (2003:37): “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.’” The question posed by Rajadhyaksha (2003: 38) is: how is it that a sense of cultural insiderism (emphasizing *indigenism*), which once existed in the Indian heartland, is now



being energized by its transference elsewhere, in the diaspora? Culture then goes elsewhere and returns (like the letter in Lacan) to its origins. In a double take, Baz Lurhmann’s use of Bollywood songs in *Moulin Rouge* returns to Calcutta’s Moulin Rouge with an ageing but still glamorous Rekha taking on Nicole Kidman’s dance in *Parineeta* (2005). What Bollywood exports comes back Bollywoodized! To theorize Bollywood now implies reading it off against diaspora, because it is the latter that now charges Bollywood with meanings it never had. These meanings, of course, cannot be decoupled from the march of technology itself.

If not exactly Bollywood with websites and computer technology, Bombay fever is a lot older. Hence one has to trace its genealogy and, *contra* Rajadhyaksha, suggest that while a “techno-nationalism” is presented now “as *the* Bollywood thematic” in response to the new Indian diasporic and nationalist modernity driven by non-resident Indians (NRI) and the IT industry, Bombay cinema has always generated its “Bollywood” hype (though not named as such). Rushdie’s use of this hype provides one piece of supporting evidence.<sup>7</sup> Another comes from Bollywood’s niche market. There has been an overseas market for Indian popular cinema from at least the early ’30s, largely in the old Indian diaspora, but also in the Middle East, parts of Africa, Southeast Asia and the Soviet Union. In the western world, including white settler states, it is safe to say that Indian cinema for a long while did not exist and that the market for it was absent. Nor was there a “Western” spectator within colonial India itself, as there is little if any evidence

that the country's colonial masters watched Indian films. The present situation, at least in settler states and in the metropolitan centres of Europe, is rather different and in the end has to be linked to the new global Indian diaspora of late capital, which, one could argue, has effectively produced Bollywood the cultural phenomenon as we now understand it in response to a dislocated diaspora youth culture's need for an accessible, unproblematic and sanitized India.

The transition from Bombay/Hindi cinema to Bollywood in terms of cultural production and reproduction may be narrated through shifts in the kinds of texts produced in the popular media. Even before cable, satellite TV (which appeared in India only in 1992) and the internet, there was, of course, popular print media. I want to take up two particular sets of such texts here: film posters and fanzines. For posters, Divia Patel's chapters in her jointly authored work, *Cinema India*, are a valuable source. In these fascinating chapters – in themselves a rare contribution to our understanding of a (proto-)Bollywood – Patel establishes a direct link between poster art and, in the broadest sense, a national ethos. Patel begins (Dwyer and Patel 2002: 105) with a discussion of the impact of the work of Raja Ravi Varma (1848-1906), arguably colonial India's finest Indian artist, whose use of western techniques to represent deeply-felt and sensuously achieved representations of people led to film art posters that glorified the physicality of the gods. Patel then shows how other film poster painters, such as Baburao Painter, G B Walh, and D G Pradhan, who followed in Varma's footsteps, mapped a vision of modernity corresponding to the avowedly modern themes of cinema. The posters demonstrate the use of modern European styles, including Art Deco and even psychedelia, as in the remarkable poster for *Bobby* (1973), to capture this Indian modernity. The art of posters takes a new turn with computer technology (India's entry into late modernity), which extends the link between cinema and modernist "expressionism," as photographs are directly fed into a computer and edited. Websites such as Yash Raj Films and Vinod Chopra Films create immediately accessible global advertising.<sup>9</sup> Patel (Dwyer and Patel 2002: 180-81) cites the following passage from the Yash Raj site for the film *Mohabbatein* (2000), in which the publicity is created in-house:

The countdown begins! The shooting is over.... The publicity material has begun to take shape and we have decided to use the internet to give the first glimpses into *Mohabbatein* at the Yash Raj Film website. So we are gearing up for an extensive web-peek into the film – everything from the making of the film, behind the scenes, previews of the music to the first introduction of the characters and stars who play them and a chance to chat on-line!

Although "Bollywood" reflects a dramatically altered scene informed by the internet and the cultural needs of the diaspora, the claim I make about Bollywood as the cultural logic of Indian modernity may be supported by going back in time: as we have seen, posters, handbills, programmes, and, latterly, magazines

mediated a culture of engagement with Bombay Cinema. Film magazines in English and in the vernacular languages began to appear from the moment of the talkies in the early '30s (Dwyer 2001: 251). The important film monthly, *Filmindia*, edited, written and produced by the acerbic Baburao Patel between 1935 and 1961, marks this new engagement. Patel's film magazine was not simply about the Hindi cinema: it carried large amounts of critical commentary on politics (in later years Patel's magazine was a leading critic of Nehru's Five-year plans); it also established the art of serious film journalism.<sup>10</sup> Another important fanzine is *Filmfare* ([www.filmfare.com](http://www.filmfare.com)) which began in 1952 and is owned by the *Times of India* newspaper group. Although *Filmfare* has become a glossy monthly and the Filmfare Awards (Bollywood's Oscars) have now gone international as the Manikchand Filmfare Awards (Singapore, Dubai, and the Netherlands have been recent venues), the magazine has kept its format of interview, previews, and glossy, stylised photographs.

However, the magazine which changed the nature of film discourse was *Stardust*, founded by Bombay entrepreneur Nari Hira in 1971. Known as the "most foul of the bitch fanzines," (Mishra 2002: 129), its first editor was the popular writer and Bombay socialite Shobha De. Under her editorship both the language and content of *Stardust* changed. Glamour, gossip, sexual innuendo, star rivalry and stories that titillated the imagination soon made it the fanzine with the largest circulation in India.<sup>11</sup> The international edition sells a further 40,000 copies in the Indian diaspora (UK, USA, Canada, South Africa, the Gulf States) (Dwyer 2001: 253). *Stardust* was not so much a departure from established fanzines as an extension of their journalism. Younger, ambitious reporters were given specific duties, not uncommonly aimed at discovering salacious details about actors. In one notable instance in the mid-'70s, superstar Amitabh Bachchan refused to give interviews because *Stardust* had exposed his extra-marital affairs, in particular with Zeenat Aman. With strong support from advertisers (in 1996 a colour page cost \$2,500) it could keep its cover price below one dollar, less than half the cost of production. And what the fans consumed, apart from advertised product, was gossip and scandal at a level hitherto unknown in mainstream popular media. The representation of stars too changed from the costumed figures of early *Filmfare* and *Filmindia* to modern dress, and men, it seems, were consciously rendered in poses with strong homoerotic overtones (see, for example, Hrithik Roshan in the August 2004 cover of *Filmfare*). Rachel Dwyer refers to the pleasure of consumerism, the pleasure of the new, middle class urban society in India. What is less clearly stated by Dwyer is the extent to which members of the diaspora, who make up a good third of the magazine's English readership, consume and enjoy these texts "otherwise." In the construction of Bollywood, *Stardust* was, in many ways, quite pivotal, as it established new ways in which popular cinema was consumed. The evidence of the fanzine suggests that Bombay Cinema as

proto-Bollywood was already heterogeneous, in that it always included both films and its own apparatus of consumption. Advances in technology (DVDs, internet, etc) simply relocate Bollywood in a late or post-modern mode of artistic consumption.<sup>12</sup>

As adumbrated above, the Indian diaspora constitutes a huge market for Indian cinema, and Bollywood is the major cultural form in the everyday life of its members. I have suggested that many of the new meanings given to Bollywood, and perhaps even its global usage, are consequences of the ways in which the diaspora has interacted with this cinema. Two instances of cultural translation, which itself feeds into the heterogeneous nature of Bollywood, may be taken up here to establish this interaction. The first instance is a musical adaptation of the well-known Bollywood film *Hum Aap ke Hain Koun* (“Who am I to you,” 1994), while the second is Andrew Lloyd Weber’s *Bombay Dreams*: both refer to the British South Asian (Indian) diaspora and are phenomena of the ’90s, reinforcing Rajadhyaksha’s case that by this point Bollywood Cinema had become an indispensable cultural form in the lives of the Indian diaspora.<sup>13</sup> UK mainstream weeklies, for one, began to include news about Bollywood cinema. *TimeOut* (October 10-17, 2001) in fact carried a feature essay “Hooray for Bollywood,” which referred to its growing public while the year before Moushumi Biswas’s thoroughly engaging essay on the decline of the Bollywood superstar appeared in the *Sunday Pioneer*.<sup>14</sup> It should be added that in Britain, where the “new” Indian diaspora has a long history and where film and television have invested significantly in British representations of India, it was easier for Bollywood to enter, albeit slowly, into mainstream cultural consciousness. And so, when the Indian diaspora began to intervene in British cultural productions with an eye to its own distinctive artistic traditions, Bollywood became the indispensable form to imitate (Mira Nair’s *Monsoon Wedding*), parody (Kaizad Gustad’s *Bombay Boys*) deconstruct (Gurinder Chadha’s *Bhaji on the Beach*) or creatively re-write (Gurinder Chadha’s *Bride and Prejudice*). Even when the texts are self-evidently realist and explore diasporic life worlds with considerable intensity and critical self-awareness, as in Andy De Emmony’s TV version (2005) of the Meera Syal novel *Life Isn’t All Ha Ha Hee Hee*, the music of Norwell and Green has its strings arranged by Chandru of Bollywood Strings, which gives the production’s non-diegetic musical score a distinctly Bollywood feel.

This shift to Bollywood as the intertextual genre that informs popular cultural productions in the diaspora has been particularly evident since the final decade of the twentieth century. In the past, Indian diasporic artistic productions engaged with classical forms, be it music, dance or theatre. Thus the Sanskrit play *The Little Clay Cart* would be performed by an aspiring British Asian cast, but only in small, insignificant university venues.<sup>15</sup> The impact of Bollywood Cinema has meant a decisive shift to the Bollywood-derived popular musical, which is why

*Fourteen Songs, Two Weddings and a Funeral*, based on *Hum Aap ke Hain Koun* (1994) and echoing in its English title *Three Weddings and a Funeral*, is so important. Presented by the Tamasha Theatre Company (with the Birmingham Repertory Company), the musical, after a brief set of performances in the studio of the Lyric Theatre Hammersmith, opened formally in September 2001 for a season in the main auditorium of the Lyric.<sup>16</sup> *Fourteen Songs, Two Weddings and a Funeral* adapts a popular genre (Bollywood melodrama) and retains the characteristics of that genre to the extent that the songs, although rendered in English, are sung to the tunes of the Hindi original from which they are adapted. What is created is not the hybridity of British “fusion” music but a different kind of aesthetic assertiveness in that, in adapting Bollywood, the diaspora has connected with a popular form and made it its own. Thus in Tamasha’s adaptation of the film, the language is English, but the bodies are (diasporic) Indian. If one listens to the musical with the original Bollywood film in mind, parallel texts emerge, but so do echoes of a slight dissonance, reflecting a nostalgia, a failure, in Rushdie’s words, to reclaim “precisely the thing that was lost” (Rushdie 1991: 10). *Fourteen Songs*, however, in spite of its diasporic specificity and dislocation, is part of the Bollywood cultural system. Any study of Bollywood must examine the form seriously. Even Andrew Lloyd Weber’s *Bombay Dreams*, which began at Apollo Victoria in 2002 after *Starlight Express* ended its 18-year run there, repackages an art form that has the highest currency in the Indian diaspora – the Bollywood film – for a much wider audience because the form itself has come to be seen as another element in Western aesthetic modernity. Here Bollywood enters the West End musical and liberates it from its own inherently quotidian tendencies.

And this heterogeneity, to me, is the essence of the phenomenon called Bollywood. In 2001 Madame Tussaud’s installs a waxwork of Bachchan, the first Indian star to be given this honour, and, a little later, Gurinder Chadha is happy to make *Bride and Prejudice*, a Bollywood version of the Jane Austen classic, the Hindi-dubbed version of which is *Balle Balle! Amritsar to L.A.* In *Lagaan*, Aamir Khan returns to the very colonial game of cricket and offers a sly postcolonial take upon it: its gentlemanly virtues are used to disrupt the seamless narrative of empire, as the film reworks C R L James’s astute observation (cited in Lazarus 1999: 147) that “the cricket field was a stage on which selected individuals played representative roles which were charged with social significance.”<sup>17</sup>

*Lagaan* is located in that creative use of sly mimicry of an establishment game and is in this respect a more fully articulated postcolonial text. Indeed, the film uses the aesthetics of the popular to insert the silenced subaltern back into reconstructed (even if historically quirky) evidence. The thematic

itself, though, is not peculiar to *Lagaan* (although the postcolonial resonance is), as the mode of inserting the local, the indigenous, the homeland into the Other, the diaspora, has become the dominant narrative of many recent films. We may want to refer to the paradigmatic instance of *Kal Ho Na Ho* (“Even if Tomorrow Never Comes,” 2003) to make this clear. Set in New York, the central family is inter-religious (Sikh father, now dead; Christian mother), its past not a little murky with the memory of the father’s suicide, and the presence of an adopted girl, Gia (who, as it turns out, is the father’s illegitimate child), making extended family life (the husband’s mother is part of the family) difficult. For the eldest daughter Naina Catherine Kapur (Preity Zinta), only some form of supernatural intervention can bring sanity to her home: “*Angel kab ayega?*” – “When will the angel come?” – is her question to Christ. She does have a very close friend Rohit Patel (Saif Ali Khan) who loves her, but he is not quite the helper she needs. Enter into this New York neighbourhood the Indian diaspora’s favourite actor, Shah Rukh Khan, as the angelic Aman Mathur. This angelic figure not only sets up the family’s restaurant business (Indian food, it seems, is what New Yorkers want from Indians, not Italian coffee!) but also gives new meaning to love and laughter to Naina. But there is a dark shadow: Aman is dying and has only a few months to live. So he makes the usual sacrifice and persuades Rohit to marry Naina but not without leaving him his dying wish: “In future lives, though, Naina will be mine.” Despite the New York setting, the narrative is pure Bollywood, the story not too different from films from *Anmol Ghadi* (“A Priceless Watch,” 1946) to *Anand* (1970) with their melancholic, sacrificial, angelic heroes.

*Kal Ho Na Ho*’s formal pattern (which again strengthens the argument for Bollywood as an interconnected grand syntagm) is, however, less interesting for us than Bollywood’s reading of the Indian diaspora and the latter’s considerable influence on the new Bollywood product. We may wish to isolate three significant items and critique them quickly. The three are: intercommunal, non-sectarian Indian diaspora (where the Indian Muslim only exists as the “real” actors Shah Rukh Khan and Saif Ali Khan); a largely entrepreneurial society unmarked by class difference; and a culturally hybrid community comfortable with both India and the West. On all three counts the reading is patently false, so what is the payoff here for us as readers/spectators, and how do we address it? Recalling the title of one of Slavoj Žižek’s best known books, we can say that the father-and-son production team of this film (Yash Johar and Karan Johar) and Bollywood producers generally “know not what they do.” In his lengthy foreword to the second edition of his work, Žižek (2002: cvii, fn 124) referred to the art of inventing “objects which are sublime” (sublime objects we must note are, after all, practically useless) and made a distinction between Western and Eastern sublimines:

The Western Sublime offers a practical solution to a problem which does not arise; while the Eastern Sublime offers a useless solution to a real problem. The underlying motto of the Eastern Sublime is: “Why do it simply, when you can complicate it?”

Žižek has a tendency to go for the overkill, and is often captivated by the force of rhetoric over content, but even so, as in the quotation given above, a startling problematic is addressed. In the case of *Kal Ho Na Ho* and its diasporic take, the useless solution to the real problems of the diaspora (which are linked to larger questions of distributive justice, tolerance, recognition – issues central to multiculturalism generally) is an ingratiatingly excessive techno-realism in which felt-life is transformed into a spectacle. Thus Bollywood filmmakers “know what they do,” without actually knowing what they do. In other words, they know that the subject of diaspora (invariably the “new” diaspora of late capital) conveniently locates Bollywood in the grand narrative of globalization and market forces and generates enough money to cover the cost of producing a Bollywood film. But, unknown to Bollywood filmmakers, the diasporic spectator also knows that Bollywood creates an ideal rather than a realist image of diaspora. A growing body of opinion now believes that diasporas are being weaned away from narratives of return and fantasies of homeland as the realities of living as minorities in nation-states not necessarily sympathetic towards them become pressing issues. It is true that Bollywood carries, to some extent, but often as parody, the successes and traumas of the Indian diaspora. But this representation of diaspora life requires critical self-awareness. That sense of critical self-awareness is missing from *Kal Ho Na Ho* where Aman, the “knight in shining armour,” is a “patriarchal purveyor” from the ancient homeland whose presence reinforces a particular order: it is the homeland that can set the dharmic order right. Or, in Gayatri Gopinath’s (2005: 189) insightful observation, a film such as *Kal Ho Na Ho* simply “repackages [diasporic] Indianness as a valuable commodity that can be ‘modernized’ into a sure-fire recipe for success and upward mobility in capitalist America.” In these terms Bollywood, at the level of lived experience, depicts the older version of diasporas as contaminated collectivities in need of redemption from homeland values. Aman Mathur, the angelic miracle worker, affirms this reading in a rather fulsome manner as does Mohan Bhargava (also played by Shah Rukh Khan), who returns to retrieve the purity of his *ayah* Kaveramma in *Swades*. In both films, made primarily for a diaspora audience, “Mother India” in all its ancient glory remains the sign that defines a traumatic loss in the diaspora.

How and why Bollywood with its paradoxical claims to and endorsement of Indian modernity<sup>18</sup> arrived here requires a return to the genealogy of Bombay cinema which remains, in spite of the open-ended heterogeneous definition of “Bollywood,” its central text. I shall speak of this genealogy selectively (as I must) with reference to the legacy of Parsi theatre, Muslim courtesan drama, the legacy of the genre of the melodramatic novel, and the impossibility of Mother India in the age of late capital.

### Parsi Theatre

The great epic texts, the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, founders of a particular kind of discursivity (a discursivity of cross-generic capaciousness) shadow Indian popular culture. This much is a pre-given, an article of faith. Yet the manner in which the epic texts get transformed in cinema is indebted to Parsi theatre, a dramatic form with a far-reaching impact on Bollywood. In an exceptionally informative essay (to which I am indebted for this part of my argument), Kathryn Hansen argues that the second half of the nineteenth century saw the growth of a theatre in metropolitan centres of India in which “disparate, localized performance practices” were used to create a pan-Indian theatrical style. Hansen (2001: 76) continues, writing a passage that is crucial to any genealogy of Bollywood:

With its emphasis on spectacle and song, it fostered modes of visual and aural discrimination that were linked to pre-existing forms, yet afforded new pleasures by means of technological innovations that conveyed the feel of modernity. This performative grammar together with an evolved typology of narrative later infused into Indian cinema the character of a national idiom. The early modern theatre, both as a temporal link to deep sources of cultural authority, and as a spatial connector mediating scattered genres of poetry, music, and dance, laid the ground for a shared expressive life, playing a critical role in the history of public culture in India.

Parsi theatre was clearly the dominant form of urban entertainment until the arrival of talkies in 1931, its influence going well beyond the metropolitan centres of Bombay and Calcutta and affecting performances such as the Maharashtrian Sangeet Natak and the North Indian Nautanki, both significant folk dramas. The impact on the latter was important, as an urban form (Parsi theatre) influenced and was in turn influenced by a form (Nautanki) whose audience was not primarily town people but included “agricultural and artisan groups” (Hansen 2001: 90) as well.

The proscenium arch with its heavy curtains and furniture and painted backdrop became an important part of its production, notably in the elaborate Grant Road Theatre (opened in 1846), where, in the early years, productions of Shakespeare were popular. Women’s roles were played by cross-dressed men, and when women did gain some sort of acceptance (in the early twentieth century), the lightness of skin (the *gori* look) was preferred. Cast were drawn from Hindu, Muslim, Anglo-Indian, Parsi and Baghdadi Jewish communities. And, from the very beginning, this seemingly heterogeneous but in fact very “Indian cast challenged the theatrical culture of British Bombay, articulating their presence through Gujarati and Hindustani in place of the English language” (Hansen 2003: 387). Still, English cultural references made their way into the performances without unduly affecting its key structures. The language Urdu engendered other



plays like *Laila Majnun*, *Gul Bakavali*, *Hatimtai* and *Khudabuksh*, the first three made into both silent and sound films.<sup>19</sup> These productions had a strong Indo-Persian bias, with importance placed on the Persian *Shahnama* stories (given the late nineteenth-century identity crisis of the Parsi, this is to be expected), but later stories from the great Indian epics were included in the repertoire, encouraging too a consciousness of aesthetic *rasas*, notably that of wonderment, *adbhuta*. Recordings of songs from Parsi theatre were made and these circulated independently of the plays, prefiguring too their later use in cinema.

The 1850s and '60s interest in the *Shahnama* should also be placed against the rise of a specifically "Hindu theatre" in Bombay, which seems to have acquired over time something of the status of a national theatre. But this theatre too worked in the shadow of Parsi theatre and, like the latter, it too used Urdu/Hindustani as its language. For both theatres, Urdu not only gave them a larger audience, it also connected theatre to pan-Indian traditions and forms, attracted writers from other parts of India, and helped touring companies, since Urdu/Hindustani was the closest India had to a lingua franca. The language was also rich in song, poetry and dialogue. More specifically, for Parsi theatre, new plays based on Persian narratives as well as the Hindu epics were written, and a more North Indian flavour was introduced as Urdu playwrights began to come from Uttar Pradesh. They also brought to Bombay elements of their own courtly theatrical tradition, none more important than the performance around Agha Hasan Amanat's classic *Indar Sabha* composed in 1853 at the court of Wajid Ali Shah of Lucknow. Urdu, along with Hindi, in the plays written for Parsi theatre by the likes of Betab and Radheshyam, then, takes over the theatrical medium, and the scene is set for it to become the language of cinema when sound reaches Indian cinema in 1931.

It was inevitable that when cinema came to India, entrepreneurs such as J F Madan would make the transition from Parsi theatre to cinema halls, and from producing drama to producing films. In fact, the first talkie version of *Indar Sabha*, the definitive play of Parsi theatre, was made by J F Madan's third son J J Madan in 1932. Another version was made in 1956 by the Parsi producer Nanubhai Vakil. In *Teesri Kasam* ("The Third Vow," 1966), based on the Hindi novelist Phanishwar Nath Renu's *Mare Gaye Gulfam* (Gulfam is a character in *Indar Sabha*), the connection with Parsi theatre is reworked to show cinema's indebtedness to that art form. Apart from the narrative of an impossible love between a buffoon (played by Raj Kapoor) and a courtesan (played by Waheeda Rehman), the film's diegesis is gathered around performances (by Hirabai, the courtesan) on the Nautanki/Parsi stage. The courtesan, the dancer, the desirable but ungraspable figure of the alluring seductress, finds its source in the Parsi theatre, and although *Teesri Kasam* captures that theme in the modern film, the theme itself also finds expression in a little addressed type of Bollywood film.

This form is the essentially Muslim film, centred around the courtesan as the ultimate figure of love and sacrifice, a figure at once tragic, fragile, poetic and desirable. This figure remains the same, if under erasure, in all Bollywood cinema; it is only in the decidedly “Muslim films” that the figure is given a precise ontology and uncensored expression.

### The Dance of the Tragic Courtesan

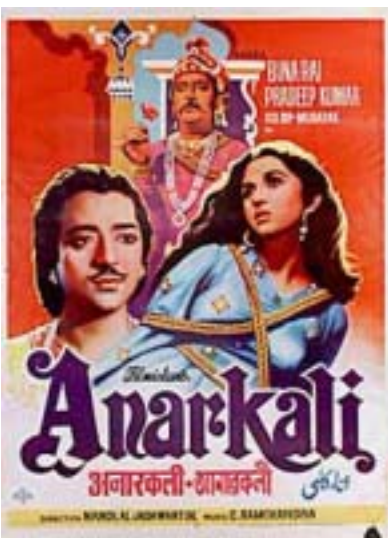
We have noted in passing Urdu plays performed in Parsi theatre, none perhaps more influential than *Laila Majnun*, a play derived from the Persian Sufi poet Nizami’s poetic rewriting of an Arab tragic romance. The Arabic tale seems to have originated in the late seventh century and was reputedly based on a *Romeo and Juliet*-style tragic love of one Qays ibn al Mulawwaht for his beloved Layla. In Nizami’s version, the story gets overlaid with strong mystical symbology and the relationship of the lovers is also rendered as an allegory of human love for the divine. Parsi theatre used the story in its more secular “Shakespearian” form and Bollywood too emphasized its secularity. The story, though, has deeper significance in that its narrative was often presented as the quintessentially Muslim story around which the tale of the tragic Muslim courtesan unfolded. This figure of the “Muslim courtesan” remains pivotal to the Bollywood conception of the heroine but also suggestively points to the at once central and marginalised Muslim in Bollywood.

Without the power of Urdu and Muslim culture, the distinctiveness of Bollywood cannot be fully grasped. Yet this power, pervasive and aesthetically dominant as it is, is nevertheless captured in a figure of cultural exclusion and erasure. A quick look at four films – *Anarkali*, *Mughal-e-Azam*, *Pakeezah* and *Umrao Jaan* – should make this ambivalence clear.

The establishing shots of *Anarkali* (1953) juxtapose a tomb and a song, one signifying death, the other transcendence over it. As a film of the Muslim courtesan, *Anarkali* lays claim to the soul of Bollywood cinema as a “Muslim” soul of love and longing, of poetry and self-denial. It also lays claims to a central tension between law, justice, cultural norms and love. In this battle, love triumphs even if tragically. But the Muslim theme and the film’s historical location also lay claim to a syncretic Indo-Muslim heritage and argue that the Muslim is crucial to Indian cultural identity, especially for those people who speak Hindi/Urdu, the language of Bollywood. In a much grander version of the *Anarkali* theme, K Asif’s *Mughal-e-Azam* (1960), the centrality of the Muslim is given a retrospective legitimacy through the recasting of Akbar, the great Indian emperor, in the codes of ancient Hindu dharma, so that justice is not simply a matter of jurisprudence, a philosophy of what is just and right, but relies on codes that predate the arrival of Muslims and into which the Muslim establishment also reinserts itself. So in this epic remake K Asif distorts the myth by letting *Anarkali* escape death because

Emperor Akbar has given his word to Anarkali's mother, who had brought good tidings to the King on the birth of his son, that if and when she asked for a favour of the king, her wish would be granted.<sup>20</sup> But what neither of the films erase is the centrality of the *mujra*, the dance of the courtesan in Bollywood whose definite form is the *pyar kiya to darna kya* ("Why be afraid when in love?") dance of Anarkali in *Mughal-e-Azam*. At the same time the endorsement isolates the form, confines it within a specific genre so that in effect there is no type of recognisable Muslim film other than a version of *Anarkali*.

"Anarkali," sign as well as theme, is the antecedent of two key courtesan filmic dramas: *Pakeezah* ("The Pure One," 1972) and *Umrao Jaan* (1981). The first of these takes the figure of the *tavayaff* courtesan but presents it not so much as a sign of absolute exclusion (which in reality it is: a figure of illicit desire, but a threat to normative family values) as a symbol (precisely because of its otherness)



through whom values of high aestheticism and love may be expressed. The courtesan thus becomes for Muslim culture emblematic of an elusive but aesthetically pure and culturally pivotal formation without which the culture itself is emaciated and forlorn. At the same time, though, the culture cannot endorse or celebrate the courtesan in social practice: no courtesan can become a mother or a wife; she can only be the desirable Other through whom love, often absent in arranged marriages, can be given felt expression. Indeed, the courtesan

affirms a fact of Indo-Muslim culture generally (where cousin marriages are the norm): only in the courtesan outsider (who by definition cannot be part of a family) is desire fulfilled.

In *Umrao Jaan* the courtesan is part of patriarchal violence towards women, as the young girl Amiran is forcibly taken from her village by men seeking revenge of wrongs done to them by her father to the city of Lucknow to be sold. Poet Muzaffar Ali, the director of this film, however, uses the tragic history of rape, abduction, and sexual slavery to extend the link between the aesthetic and the courtesan. It may be that Muslim poetic forms derive much of their strength from the figure of the courtesan whose *khota* (brothel) provides a space where dance and song, where desire and passion, where sex and poetry can fuse into one, uninhibited by either religion or family. The *khota* is a space of romantic transformation, where reality is changed into fantasy.

Muslim courtesan films demonstrate both the centrality of Muslim culture in Bollywood and at the same time their exclusiveness. For that culture can only

exist as a source for poetry and dance, for expressions of that elusive desire that cinema, as the art of the imaginary, always endorses. Without that cultural input Bollywood cannot be what it is; and yet the texts through which that culture is signified also exhaust that very culture, confining it in expressive terms, to just one form. For a genealogy of Bollywood the Muslim is pivotal, for it is the Muslim and his language and culture that has mediated what has come to be known as Bollywood.

### Melodrama: The Texts of *Devdas*

If Parsi theatre provided Bollywood with a narrative structure, a mode of representation, songs, dialogues, and a repertoire of cast, and Muslim culture provided poetry, a courtly language, and the figure of the dancer-courtesan, it was English/colonial melodrama, suitably indigenised with *rasas* (notably of love-longing and the tragic) that gave Bollywood its distinctive content. We can follow this through the singular achievement of *Devdas* (1935) and its later remakes. The person who was instrumental in creating the figure of the melodramatic hero was Pramathesh Chandra Barua (1903-1951), often referred to as Prince P C Barua, the son of a ruler of a tiny native state in Bengal-Assam. However, given that his father was, in fact, nothing more than a large landowner (Nandy 2001: 140), the title of prince was not a little misplaced. His life, though, was anything but simple, expressing a mixture of oedipal longings (he had his first solid food at the age of nine – one imagines he survived on nothing but milk up to this time!) and guilt. He married a girl of 11 (Madhurilata) at age 14, had many unhappy affairs, married four times in all (the last remained secret to the end) and was struck by tuberculosis (seen then as very much the disease that affected artists, rich in a kind of Bloomsbury cultural excess). All these items added to his melodramatic persona and mystique. His visit to England in 1926 after his mother's death a year earlier was clearly a defining moment in sharpening his sense of exile, and released his nascent nationalism. A key motif in his films therefore became the idea of the journey, and here Saratchandra Chattopadhyay's (Chatterjee's) 1917 novel *Devdas*, the film's source, was the perfect text.<sup>21</sup>

The novel's success lay in the manner in which Chattopadhyay adapted the English/European "men of feeling" novels so popular in colonial Bengal to local conditions. In this rewriting the sentimentalist *Devdas* is a man who cannot translate love into action, who cannot come to terms with the nature of commitment and passion, and, when his beloved, Paro, against all feudal decorum, seeks him out, in his own bedroom, in the quiet of the night, he can only respond like a helpless victim of the social order, alternating between a fear of what people would say and his own unease at the strength of this forthright woman. But here is the Indian melodramatic sublime: denial of love does not lead to its transfer to another; nor does it lead to an alternative act of compensation; rather it leads to

a defiant death-wish, the oceanic feeling, as if the world order itself would come to an end in this act of self-sacrifice.

In the original Bengali version of the film Barua himself played the role of the doomed lover Devdas – indecisive, sentimental, flooded with a death-wish. As an actor Barua fitted the post-Parsi theatre idea of the hero – handsome, seemingly androgynous, romantic, and extremely fair; he was the sort of actor who could cross-dress as a woman in Parsi *dastans* (which were often *dard bhari dastans*, tales imbued with sentimentality). Barua's *Devdas* was immensely popular and quickly reached a pan-Indian audience through the almost simultaneous production of the Hindi version (1935) in which the great singer K L Saigal replaced Barua as Devdas – unsatisfactorily, according to some. The foundational Indian film critic Chidananda Dasgupta said that anyone who knew the Bengali version couldn't possibly take to the Hindi version. "Barua was not only the creator of Devdas, he was Devdas," wrote Dasgupta and added, "Apart from being handsome... Barua had a tragic, if rather solemn intensity" (Nandy 2001: 145). It is not necessary here to examine Barua's life or Bengali cinema in any great detail; it is sufficient to relate the extent to which the Devdas figure, as rendered in the seminal version and in its Hindi avatar established the figure of the sentimental hero who also negotiated, as Ashis Nandy (2001: 146) says, "the anguish of the first generation of rural elite entering the pre-war colonial city." There is a direct link between the Bombay auteur Guru Dutt and Barua, for in Guru Dutt's films too, sensibility is rendered impotent by urban modernity, from which escape is often sought in the arms of the courtesan-cum-mother figure, as in *Pyaasa* ("The Thirsty One," 1957). In artistic terms Guru Dutt's films may be seen as primal India entering the Parsi theatre, as selves are refashioned in response to new demands, consolidating cinema "as a form of self-expression in Indian society" (Nandy 2001: 148). But the country subject cannot return home, as is so painfully made clear in *Devdas* and its later versions, as well as in Raj Kapoor's original version of *Aah* (1954), the latter a private narrative for me since I recall seeing the original version in the Empire Theatre, Nausori, Fiji in 1954.

There are three pertinent versions of *Devdas* in any construction of a Bollywood genealogy. First, and as we have already indicated, there is the Barua Hindi version of *Devdas*, in which the lead role is played by K L Saigal and Barua himself has a minor role as Paro's stepson. Second, there is Bimal Roy's classic 1955 version which is presented, like David Selznick's 1944 *Jane Eyre*, as a film copy of the novel. With the great Bollywood sentimentalist Dilip Kumar as Devdas, it is, arguably, the most accomplished version of all *Devdas* films, including Barua's original.<sup>22</sup> And then there is Sanjay Leela Bhansali's *Devdas* (2002), a film which may be read as pure "Bollywood" in terms of Rajadhyaksha's definition.

In the last of these versions (Bhansali's *Devdas*), visual splendour overtakes a poetics of suggestiveness, of *vyangya*; dialogue displaces the glance (of the 1935

and the 1955 versions). As it happens, Bhansali defers to Bollywood, and the homage is not so much to *Devdas* (and to Saratchandra Chattopadhyay, P C Barua and Bimal Roy, as the credits declare) but to Bollywood, to what is circulating now as *Bombay Dreams*. This is the film's success: contemporary Bollywood comes to *Devdas* and takes it over, modeling it in its own image.

The 1955 Bimal Roy version demonstrated cinematic fidelity to the original. This fidelity was necessary given the politics of representing the Barua original of which Bimal Roy was the cameraman. For Bollywood, however, the fidelity is not to an earlier form but to its own postmodern, simulacral modes of representation. Nevertheless, the case of Bhansali's *Devdas* shows that even as Bollywood grows out of the new cultural logic of late modernity, and its diasporic investments, the old Bombay Cinema still stalks it, its grand syntagm casts a long shadow, its foundational narratives are never forgotten.

There is much else to tell in any discussion of the genealogy of Bollywood – mythologies, the epic tradition, theories of aesthetic response (especially *rasa*), the rise of the spectacle (films like *Aan* and *Mughal-e-Azam*), the *A Thousand and One Night* inspired fantasies of Homi Wadia, the links between ideology and cinema, especially cinema's construction of the Indian nation – which I shall pass over. I want to comment, though, on an ideological impossibility in Bollywood even as we concede the power of tradition. I have suggested that the “feel-good-about-the-nation” message of Bollywood is directed primarily towards diaspora. In India itself the contradictions that capital has brought into the social renders that message ambiguous. Even as Bollywood endorses the diasporic myths of uncontaminated homelands, it also situates the impossibility of one of its central motifs, the motif of Mother India. I want to conclude, hurriedly, with this problematic.

### **Bollywood and the Death of Mother India: *Chandni Bar***

The great text of Bollywood cinema is Mehboob Khan's *Mother India* (1957) which is really a text not in the singular but in the plural as, in any retrospective reading of it, one is conscious of the director's original version *Aurat* (“Woman,” 1940) and, marginally, his *Son of India* (1962) too. But we must also consider the iconic sign of Mother India, which is endlessly reprised in culture. We recall Salman Rushdie's narrator in *The Moor's Last Sigh* who says (1995: 138-9): “In *Mother India*, a piece of Hindu myth-making directed by a Muslim socialist, Mehboob Khan, the Indian peasant woman is idealised as bride, mother, and producer of sons; as long-suffering, stoical, loving, redemptive, and conservatively wedded to the maintenance of the status quo.” The triumph is not so straightforward, as any deconstruction of the film shows. Even without such a deconstruction, a contradiction is implicit in the text from the outset, as the Marxist logo of the Mehboob Khan film is framed by a voiceover that affirms the

power of destiny: *vohi hota hai jo manzur-e-khuda hota hai* (“In the end only that which is destined by God happens”). Nevertheless, the central dharmik ideology of the film as suggested by Rushdie’s narrator has remained the centrepiece of popular Indian cinema and the figure of the Mother looms large.

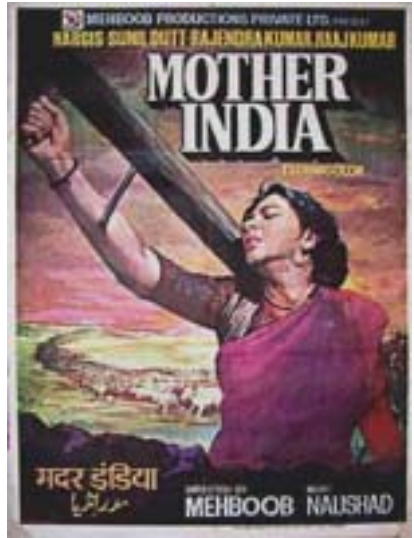
Late modernity in postcolonial India, though, tells a different story as it blasts open the contradictions that were glossed over in *Mother India*, its precursors and avatars. Mehboob Khan himself alludes to them in the film he made five years after *Mother India*. This film, *Son of India* (1962), has a contemporary setting. The congruence – missing from *Mother India*, which comes into the present only at the end – led Mehboob to rethink many of the fixed categories of social behaviour at the heart of *Mother India* and its precursor *Aurat*. In *Son of India* the “Mother India” figure is Kamla, daughter of an extremely rich industrialist, who manages to combine tradition with modernity (*bharat natyam* plus rock n’ roll), and marries for love Kishore, a modern man who is rejected by her father. Kishore has a shady background, but the power of love transforms



him and he becomes a devoted father and husband. But the world is no longer ideal, as political chicanery and the power of Bombay underworld dons separate Kishore from Kamla and their child Gopal. The narrative then shifts its centre from husband-wife domestic problems to the function of a child in

society. As the title of the film indicates it is the “son of India,” the young child Gopal, who becomes the figure around whom Mehboob Khan creates his new narrative of Indian modernity: the child carries the consciousness of the new nation in the interface of tradition and modernity. The child actor (now a little older) is none other than the boy of five who played the role of rebellious Birju in *Mother India*. At ten he is now the promise of the future, and the film moves away from the centrality of Mother in culture to the political and social role of the child in India. But to use the actor, Master Sajjid, who played the role of the adolescent Birju (who grows up to become the anti-dharmik revolutionary) overcodes the narrative, as the spectator (who had taken the side of Birju in *Mother India* against his dharmik mother) now reads the erstwhile rebellious son as the sign of redemption. The claim is tenuously maintained as the historical time of *Son of India* does not lend itself to an absolutist representation of Mother India.

The film I wish to examine as an instance of the impossibility of “Mother India” in terms of Bollywood is *Chandni Bar* (“Moonlit Bar,” 2001), a film which takes on two narratives of redemption found in *Mother India* and *Son of India*. In both, the acts of the mother and the child, respectively, are presented as national allegories, the former declaring one kind of eternal dharma (which required a mother to shoot her rebellious son), the latter declaring, through the figure of a judge, the necessity of a just and democratic society built around children, albeit children who believe in the dharmik order as sanctioned by God. That these narratives remain illusions in capitalist India is shown with unusual force in the quite remarkable film *Chandni Bar*. This film too has its origins in peasant India and is presented, as *Mother India* was, as a memorial reconstruction. The voiceover here is that of Mumtaz (Tabu), who has seen her family slaughtered in the communal Hindu-Muslim riots in Sitapur (Uttar Pradesh) in 1985. The film traces her history from that year to 2000, some sixteen years in all. Mumtaz and her uncle (her *mamu*) leave for Bombay and take shelter in one of the Muslim *bastis* thanks to a relative, Iqbal Chamdi. In Bombay she is persuaded by her uncle to work as a dancing girl in Chandni Bar, an uninspiring drinking hole for shady money changers, and one frequented by the thugs of underworld bosses. Raped by her uncle, Mumtaz gradually accepts her lot as a prostitute, ending up marrying Potya, an underworld functionary with a violent temper. Within a year or two of their marriage, just before the birth of their second child, Potya is killed by the police as part of a deal Potya’s underworld boss cuts with them. Mumtaz is determined to ensure that her children, Abhay and Payal, grow up to be respectable citizens, but they don’t. Social pressures and Mumtaz’s prior history give her no escape; indeed her boss at Chandni Bar, Anna, warns her against crossing class boundaries and reminds her that there can be neither return to the certainties of the village nor to a life of respectability. But Mumtaz, like the erstwhile Mother India, persists in her efforts in spite of hints all round her. Early in the film after she had joined Chandni Bar, one of the dancing girls, who is married and wishes to have a child, is told by her pimp-husband, *mother india bhasan mat de; sali ma banna chahati hai* (“Don’t give me the Mother India shit; the bitch wants to be a mother”). Mumtaz survives, her illusions remaining intact until 2000 by which time her son is 15, her daughter, 13. Abhay is charged by police with extortion, and he is raped by two other juveniles while in custody. Although Abhay is innocent, the police have not forgiven his father Potya for killing one of their informants. Mumtaz has to bribe





the police and must raise 75,000 rupees, a third of which is beyond her capacity. She sleeps with her former customers in an effort to do so, while her barely adolescent daughter raises the difference by selling her virginity at Chandni Bar. Abhay is released but recent events have traumatized him. With gun in hand and Mumtaz running after him, Abhay guns down his two rapists as the mother watches. And without pausing, the gun still in his hand, he walks away as his mother cries, a long unbroken cry of death, a primal scream. Payal becomes Mumtaz the dancer/call girl of Chandni Bar; Abhay, the son, his father Potya. There can be no return to “Mother India.”

The film has enormous power, the intensity is unrelieved, the narrative uncompromising; like *Othello*, it has no subplot as such. The spectator undergoes an experience that is cathartic, for no theory of Sanskrit poetics (not even the *rasa* of *karuna*) provides an adequate theory for this kind of emotional reception. Apart from the obvious reference to the impossibility of recovering the past of *Mother India*, the diegesis in the film focuses on phallic power and the abuse of women’s bodies. The call girls have their own solidarity, but it is an ineffectual solidarity against the combined power of police brutality and the underworld. But the discourse of both patriarchy and police is no different from the discourse of India generally: the defiled woman cannot gain respectability, a call girl is never a wife (*patni*); she is always a *rakhel* (a concubine), the woman of the *kotha*, the Muslim courtesan; her children too must follow in the footsteps of their parents. At one point a movie being shown at the Minerva Cinema is mentioned: Raj Kapoor’s last film *Ram Teri Ganga Maili* (“Lord Rama, Your Ganges is Polluted,” 1985), an obsessive study of purity defiled by modernity but a telling critique, in its title, of the Indian world-order. The popular Bombay film is present in other ways too, principally as background songs to which the call girls in Chandni Bar dance.

What takes me to *Chandni Bar* is the end of the myth of Mother India, which now functions as myth only in the diaspora; but it is a myth without a text, for if there are Bollywood texts of it (a theme that Bollywood eschews), they will have to take the form of *Chandni Bar*. Given its uncompromising portrayal of the end of the myth – Nargis’s songs in *Mother India*, from *duniya me ham aaye hain to jina hi parega* to *dharti pukarti hai laut ke aa* (“In this world one has to live” to “This earth calls you back”), once so redeeming and optimistic, can only exist as a narrative of loss and as a primal cry with which the film ends – *Chandni Bar* effectively plays out the impossibility of the originary myth of the mother. So Bollywood can either make the anti-myth (as it does in *Chandni Bar*), or reformulate it as an absence in diaspora to be remembered but without a (contemporary) text.

### In the beginning was my end

In the beginning were the mythologicals, which carried the narratives of the epics and puranas mediated through Parsi theatre. The codes of dharma that underpinned these myths persisted as cinema entered modernity and began to define the nation state. Even texts that throw up the contradictions of the making of the nation within capitalism (*Awara* locating itself uncomfortably between Indian geneticism and socialist determinism, *Gumrah* trying to confront modernist sexual politics while keeping traditional family values intact) carried the idioms of the dharmik tradition and upheld its time honoured values. The latter informed the spectacles too (*Aan*, *Mughal-e-Azam*). Now there is Bollywood, which clearly cannot exist outside of the genealogy I have outlined; neither, however, can it replicate the essence of its early forms as the 1955 *Devdas* had repeated Barua's 1935 rendition. Rajadhyaksha is correct in locating Bollywood as an industry which has grown out of the logic of the forces of late capital. In other words it is postmodern in its aims. My point in a sentence or two is that Bollywood is both the earlier cinema and its impossibility; it cannot exist without the prior syntagm; but it cannot replicate it either. It cannot reproduce *Mother India* (except as *Chandni Bar*) even as it memorializes India via a diasporic eye. It is a contradiction that Bollywood cannot resolve largely because it is now becoming pure form (we recall *Swades*, *Kal Ho Na Ho*, *Parineeta* or more narrowly Aishwarya Rai's modernist *kajara re* dance of the courtesan in *Bunty Aur Babli*) emptied of its contents. The computer image (the simulacral absolute) takes over from the image as ideology. To resolve that contradiction, Bollywood has to create its own impossibility in the shape of *Chandni Bar*, a film that both blasts open Bollywood's outward show of dharmik ideals and demonstrates fractures inherent in its form.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Madhava Prasad, "The Name of a Desire: Why They Call It Bollywood," *Unsettling Cinema. A Symposium on the place of cinema in India*. Issue 525 (May 2003). <http://www.india-seminar.com/2003/525>
- <sup>2</sup> Tollywood Studio is also cited as the producer of *Aflatoon* ("Boastful," 1937). The Rajendra Ojha catalogue does not show if here too Madan Theatres was involved.
- <sup>3</sup> <http://www.radiosargam.com/news/boxoffice/>
- <sup>4</sup> Karan Johar's *Kabhi Alvida Na Kehna* ("Never Say Goodbye, My Love" 2006) may have established an even bigger box office record. Its first weekend take in the US was US\$1.4 million (*The Times of India* 19 August 2006).
- <sup>5</sup> <http://bosnetwork.com/filmbodetails.asp?id=Salaam+Namaste>
- <sup>6</sup> It should be noted that whereas Bombay can be re-named Mumbai, no one has made the suggestion that Bollywood (Bombay + Hollywood) should now be renamed Mollywood (Mumbai + Hollywood). In defence it may be argued that Tamil cinema styles itself "Mollywood" anyway (Madras + Hollywood), but here again the city's name has also been changed to Chennai.
- <sup>7</sup> Ian Hamilton (1996: 93) writes, "It [the consumption of popular cultural texts] seems to have been much the same with films, if we can judge from Rushdie's habit of peppering books with allusions to American B movies and to local 'Bollywood' extravaganzas."
- <sup>8</sup> An internet entry for this film tells us that the early scenes of this film were shot at Launch Pad 39A, Kennedy Centre, Florida, a first for an Indian film.
- <sup>9</sup> <http://www1.yashrajfilms.com>; <http://www.vinodchopra.com/chrono1.htm>
- <sup>10</sup> Patel's own 1940 commentary on V Shantaram's classic socialist-realist *Aadmi*, in which he drew connections between the film and Robert Sherwood's *Waterloo Bridge* (1931) and another, written in 1957, on Mehboob Khan's *Mother India* are exemplary in this regard.
- <sup>11</sup> In English 125,000; in Gujarati (1987-), 75,000; in Hindi (1985-), 30,000.
- <sup>12</sup> In films such as *Viruddh* (2005) global labels (Pepsi, for instance) are prominently displayed.
- <sup>13</sup> See Vijay Mishra, *Bollywood Cinema: Temples of Desire*, chapter 8.
- <sup>14</sup> The *TimeOut* essay also mentions that the film *Asoka* was released in mainstream cinema houses. The transformation of old cinema halls into multiple cinema complexes devoted exclusively to Bollywood cinema (Southall's 1920's *Liberty Cinema* into *Himalaya Palace*, is an example) is now a not uncommon feature of the British cinemascape. Inter alia, *Asian Woman* (UK) claims to be the "biggest Asian Magazine in the world." For the Moushumi Biswas essay see the *Sunday Pioneer* 8 October 2000.
- <sup>15</sup> The performance of *The Little Clay Cart* at St Catherine's College, Oxford, in 1985 is a case in point here.
- <sup>16</sup> Formed in 1989 by Kristine Landon-Smith and Sudha Bhuchar the Tamasha Theatre Company has produced a number of plays. Perhaps best known among them is their 1997 production *East is East* which was made into a film three years later.
- <sup>17</sup> It is the sort of challenge that the great Gary Sobers took when he declared on the final afternoon of the Fourth Test against England in the 1967-68 test series. Sobers knew that there was no way his team could dismiss England in 165 minutes, and miscalculated England's ability to make the required 215 runs to win, which they did. But the point is that the declaration was an act of defiance against conventional establishment logic; Sobers used cricket to make a counterstatement about West Indian postcolonial difference and self-confidence. He uncoupled cricket from its colonialist practices. He also brought life back into what had been until then three very dull and drawn-out test matches.
- <sup>18</sup> A paradox most profoundly explored in many of Guru Dutt's masterpieces in which a colonial modernity is inscribed within the body of postcolonial difference as in *Aar Paar* ("Heads or Tails," 1954) and *Mr and Mrs 55* (1955)).
- <sup>19</sup> Urdu, written in the *nastaliq* (or Persian) script, is a language in which primarily Persian (and often Arabic) words have been incorporated into the syntax of Hindi (which is written in the Devanagari or Sanskrit script). The vernacular of most North Indian Muslims (and of the

Muhajir Indian Muslims in Pakistan) Urdu became the dominant language both of Parsi theatre and of Bollywood cinema. It is renowned for its gentility and poetic turn of phrase.

<sup>20</sup> The granting of a boon, even at the expense of great personal loss, has its textual antecedent in the *Ramayana* where King Dasaratha gives his kingdom to Prince Bharata and banishes his eldest son and heir to the throne because Keikēyi, mother of Prince Bharata and the king's youngest wife, demanded that boons given her by the King must be honoured.

<sup>21</sup> Saratchandra Chattopadhyay (1876-1938) was alive when P C Barua made both the Bengali and Hindi versions in 1935. But the moment of *Devdas* also signals Bollywood's debt to the realist-sentimental novel. Indeed what Barua did was bring Sarachandra Chattopadhyay's novel, a colonial literary form, self-evidently bourgeois, and different from the texts of Parsi theatre, into cinema.

<sup>22</sup> Most Bengalis, however, have never accepted any version as being equal to the Barua original, since Barua himself came to be seen as the character Devdas, which in fact meant that no one could play that role except Barua himself. It is said that Bengali actors (Uttam Kumar, for one) have refused to act the part.

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