

# Bollywood versus Hollywood

## *Battle of the Dream Factories*

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### Introduction

Theorisation around cinema and globalisation has largely been structured in terms of a basic opposition between Western commercial and culturally imperialist cinema, and Third World non-commercial, indigenous, politicised cinema. Much criticism of Hollywood and much support for alternative cinemas have been based on this understood opposition. 'Bollywood', North Indian popular commercial cinema, is an anomalous case which forces us to re-think the global map of cultural consumption and challenge the assumptions generally made concerning world cinema.

While India is not the only non-Western country with a commercial, popular, indigenous cinema – the cinemas of Hong Kong, China, Mexico and Brazil could be similarly described – its film industry is at this time experiencing rapid changes which make it a particularly pertinent subject for examination. "Bollywood" has become widespread [sic] nomenclature for the Indian movie industry in recent times' and amalgamates two names: 'Hollywood', and 'Bombay' (India's commercial hub, now renamed Mumbai). But is Bollywood named in imitation of Hollywood, or as a challenge to it? For many years commentators have assumed the former, but if Bollywood were simply a substitute for Western film while economic barriers prevented the import of the original, once those barriers collapsed it would be expected that Bollywood would collapse too.

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However, Indian film culture has not been undermined or devalued by the recent influx of Western product as some expected, and multinational companies have not succeeded in dominating the prized Indian market. The role and the importance of popular Indian cinema culture has been misinterpreted or underestimated by external commentators, perhaps precisely because it does not fit easily into the theoretical model developed around the dichotomy of First World and Third World cinema.

This chapter will begin by situating Bollywood within and against the theories formulated around Third World film known as Third Cinema theory. I will then go on to relate theory to practice by looking at three aspects of the Bollywood film industry: first, the current volatile period of change in India's film and media culture, as the international film industry attempts to enter the Indian market; second, Bollywood itself as an international film industry, in terms of production, distribution and exhibition; and third, oppositions to Bollywood as a dominant cultural force in India. By focusing on these areas I hope to demonstrate why Bollywood is fertile theoretical ground for Development Studies and Cultural Studies alike, and may force us to rethink how Third World popular culture is read.

## Bollywood and Third Cinema

'Third Cinema' is a term coined originally by Argentine film-makers Fernando Solanas and Octavio Gettino, and generally applied to the theory of cinemas opposed to imperialism and colonialism. Bollywood, as a commercial popular cinema, has a problematic relationship to theories of Third Cinema, which assume a non-commercial, minority cinema as their subject.

In discussions of world cinema, the mainstream is generally taken to be North American and European cinema, with others as oppositional, marginal, and most significantly, non-commercial. Bollywood, the most prolific film industry in the world, and one with an international commercial market, challenges this assumption. Bollywood films are not solely politically motivated, nor are they entirely devoid of nationalist/anti-colonialist content. They are at once 'escapist' and ideologically loaded.

In *Questions of Third Cinema*, Jim Pines and Paul Willemsen (1989) talk about Third World films as 'physical acts of collective self-defence and resistance'. Bollywood can be read both as defending itself and Indian values against the West, and as a dangerous courier of Western values to the Indian audience, and is read in both these ways by the Indian popular film press. A constant process of negotiation between East and West takes place in Bollywood films, operating both in terms of style (narrative continuity, *mise-en-scène*, acting styles), and in terms of content (the values and ideas expressed in the films). Indian cinematic style negotiates the cinematic traditions of Classical Hollywood, while its content addresses the ideological heritage of colonisation; just as, in the 'picturisation' of a single film song, hero and heroine oscillate between Eastern and Western dress in a rapid series of costume swaps as they dance and mime to music which is itself a hybrid of Eastern and Western styles.

But does this negotiation, and its often overt anti-Western agenda, qualify Bollywood as Third Cinema? A cinema does not automatically qualify for the title because it is produced in and for the Third World. Argentine film-makers Fernando Solanas and Octavio Gettino, defined any 'big spectacle cinema' financed by big monopoly capital as First Cinema, 'likely to respond to the aspirations of big capital'. Third Cinema was 'democratic, national, popular cinema'. But both these statements can equally be applied to Bollywood, which, despite its prolific commercial profile, has always been refused industry status by the Indian government, and which, historically, received subsidies from Nehru's government to pursue an explicitly anti-colonial agenda.

Fidel Castro fiercely criticised Hollywood in his closing speech at the 1985 Havana Film Festival:

They are poisoning the human mind in incredible doses through commercial cinematography, grossly commercial. [Third world cinema must be supported, because] if we do not survive culturally we will not survive economically or politically.

Compare this speech with an article by Shah Rukh Khan, India's top film star, in 1996, defending Bollywood's commercial film industry in an introduction to a feature on 100 years of Indian cinema in *Movie International* magazine.

I'd like to stress we are part of world cinema and we are making films – films we like, not for film festivals ... Mark my words one day Indian cinema will rule the world. Once we get the technology we are going to kill them.

Khan's military metaphors are directed explicitly against the West, and not only against Hollywood and commercial cinema, but also against the independent, alternative cinema of 'film festivals' – cinema that could, in many cases, be described as 'Third Cinema'.

Bollywood seems both diametrically opposed to, and fiercely aligned to, Third Cinema. This confusion arises because commercialism has been exclusively identified with the West in cultural criticism, without taking into account a non-Western, even anti-Western commercialism. A cinema which is both commercial and concerned with 'decoding ... the deemed superiority of the West' problematises established theoretical oppositions of East and West. Some of the strategies of Third Cinema can be applied to it, but so can some of the criticisms levelled at Hollywood. Vijay Mishra in his essay *The Texts of 'Mother India'* (1989) argues that Bollywood cannot be seen as Third Cinema, despite its 'defiantly subversive' stance, because it is ultimately conforming: 'popular Indian Cinema is so conservative and culture specific as to make a radical post colonial Indian Cinema impossible'.

Third Cinema is commonly perceived as 'serious' cinema, challenging in an aesthetic as well as a political sense. Bollywood films generally include light-hearted song-and-dance numbers, causing Tim Allen to dismiss them from the Third Cinema equation in his dossier on Third Cinema: 'In India serious films are not generally very popular at all. Most cinemas show jolly musicals ...'

However, as Mira Reym Binford says in her essay *Innovation and Imitation in Indian Cinema*:

the obligatory song-and-dance sequences of the Indian mainstream film are a striking example of indigenously based aesthetic principles [with remote antecedents in the traditional Sanskrit drama] shaping the use of imported technology.

These very song-and-dance sequences are a form of opposition to Western cultural imperialism. Also, Bollywood films are not musicals alone; they are an 'Omnibus' or a 'Masala' form, combining melodrama, action, comedy, social commentary and romance, violently juxtaposing intensely tragic scenes with jolly song and dance numbers, jolting the viewer from one extreme of feeling to another (an aesthetic similarly inherited from Sanskrit theatre).

However, if Bollywood has not developed, stylistically, as 'serious' Third Cinema, neither has its style much connection with Hollywood. Indian cinema has developed a film language which has little or nothing in common with the codes of classical Hollywood cinema and, ironically, this has caused some critics to dismiss Bollywood as escapist. Modes of presentation termed escapist according to the classical Hollywood mode, like the song-and-dance number, are, however, used to play on 'deep tensions – between wealth and poverty, old and new, hope and fear' in Indian films. For example, in the 1996 film *Army*, a song-and-dance routine breaks out in a prison compound, and prisoners sing, while cartwheeling about the exercise yard, that poverty is so extreme in Indian society outside the prison walls that they are better off in jail, under a death sentence, because a death sentence hangs over them even outside prison.

Ironically, while, from the outside, Bollywood is popularly viewed as a more escapist cinema than even Western commercial cinema, it has absorbed within it as successful commercial product a number of challenging and 'serious' films that in the West achieved only a small, independent distribution. Shekhar Kapoor's *Bandit Queen* (1995) was among the top ten grossing films of 1996 in India, over a year after its small-scale, independent release in the UK, and made \$1 million in its first week of Indian release. The harrowing film is based on the life of outlaw Phoolan Devi, and confronts head-on the abuse of women in Indian society: Bollywood's aesthetic evidently cannot be dismissed as 'frivolous' if a film this 'serious' can achieve such enormous commercial success.

### **'Hollywood Raises Hell in Bollywood'**

Hollywood/Bollywood relations are at a moment of crux, as the lifting of the ban on dubbing foreign films into Hindi in 1992 has left Hollywood free to enter the Indian market. However, audiences have shown little interest in Western imported film product; the barriers against the West are revealed as cultural, not simply economic, and 'Hindi films' have, effectively, 'triumphed over Hollywood in India'. Media coverage taken from the British and American film press, of the attempts of Hollywood to dominate the last remaining world market, chart some of the assumptions made, and broken down, before and during the current surprising impasse for Hollywood in India. In comparison, the discourses around East and West, film and culture, that are

used in the Indian press, are just as dismissive, even hostile, towards the West, and believe just as confidently in the greater merit of their own cinema.

The *Guardian's* film critic, Derek Malcolm, warned that 'a giant culture clash [was] looming' in India, as 'Spielberg's *Jurassic Park*, dubbed into Hindi, [had] given a fright to the massive Indian film industry'. An article in *The Sunday Times* in June 1995, 'Hollywood Raises Hell in Bollywood' predicted doom for the Indian film industry following the release of action movies such as Sylvester Stallone's *Cliffhanger* (1993), with its higher production values, and, as Lees quotes Indian sources as saying, 'machine guns instead of rifles'. However, the reception of Stallone's *First Blood* (1982), renamed *Blood* and released in July 1995 in India, was lukewarm. Trade reviews commented that 'the film holds appeal mainly for action film lovers', and judged its publicity and opening 'so so'.

### Bollywood vs. Hollywood

The reasons for Bollywood's resistance to colonisation by Hollywood are aesthetic and cultural as well as political. The formula for Bollywood films has been jokingly summarised as 'A star, six songs, three dances', and these Omnibus or Masala films must have the right mix of a diverse range of ingredients to satisfy their audiences. Without them a film 'lacks in entertainment value'.

However rigid this formula, adherence to it does not guarantee a film's success. Only one in ten films makes a profit, and whether a film is a hit or a flop depends on the unquantifiable judgement of the Bombay audience, who either fill or desert cinema houses in a film's first week of release. Films which imitate the formula of previous hits sink without a trace, while others appear from nowhere to become blockbusters. As Subhash K. Jha remarks in *G magazine*: 'The vagaries of the box-office have flummoxed film-makers and trade watchers forever'. If Indian film-makers are unable to guarantee audiences, Western film product is unlikely to do so.

The market for undubbed Western films in India before 1992 was very small, consisting only of an English speaking middle-class élite, and Western films had far shorter runs than Hindi films. Hollywood first attempted to attract Indian audiences after 1992 by dubbing major American hits into Hindi, but so far only a fraction of the films released have been commercially successful with the Hindi-speaking mass market. *Jurassic Park* (1993), *Speed* (1994) and *Dunston Checks In* (1995) – colloquially translated as 'A Monkey in a Hotel' – have been box office successes, but others, such as *Schindler's List* (1993), *The Flintstones* (1994) and *Casper* (1995), have 'bombed'. Even those films which did not 'bomb' achieved only a fraction of the success of domestic Indian films: in the same year that *Jurassic Park* grossed \$6 million, *Hum Aapke Hain Koun ... !* (1994) grossed \$60 million. Hollywood has not yet discerned a pattern as to which films succeed and which 'flop' in India.

One significant factor in films' successes, which may be too culturally specific for Hollywood to duplicate, is their music. 'Popular music in India is synonymous with film music', and the popular film and music industries in India are interdependent. Not only does Indian popular film depend on music, Indian popular music also depends on film. Peter Manuel (1993), in his book *Cassette Culture*, explains the history

of this symbiosis in economic terms; before the cassette revolution in the 1970s, the cinema was the most accessible way to hear popular music for many Indians. Film music is also culturally important; as Sanjeev Prakash (1984) notes in his article *La musique, la danse et le film populaire* [*Music, Dance and Popular Film*], film music so pervades Indian culture that it is played even at marriages and religious festivals.

The star system too is a formidable force in India, and another factor excluding Western cinema. The earliest Indian films were known as 'mythological', portraying the adventures of Hindu gods such as Krishna, and the equation of actors with gods has remained. Many Indian film stars go on to become politicians and national icons, representing quintessential 'Indianness'. Nargis, 'the woman in white', was the personification of 'Mother India' in the 1950s; Amitabh Bachchan has been India's greatest cinema icon for thirty years, and his face has come to be used as a symbol for India itself (as we shall see later). Western stars cannot compete with such quasi-religious iconography. A recent Hindi film, *Rock Dancer* (1995), starring Samantha Fox, a British glamour model turned pop singer, singing all her own songs in Hindi, received very little press attention and no commercial success. Though the urban middle classes knew her name well enough to merit an aside in one film news column, to the mass Hindi film audience, she was an unknown.

Having largely failed to export Western product to India, Hollywood is now investing in Indian studios – putting money into Bollywood, not attempting to replace it with its own product. The Indian view of this seems to be of a cultural victory; as Shah Rukh Khan (1996) expresses in his piece, 'Soon Hollywood will come to us'; but economically this is no great victory for India over the West, since profits from what appears a quintessentially Indian product will now go back to the West.

The Indian cinema box office was not essentially diminished by the rise of video in the 1970s, but now Bollywood must accommodate satellite and cable expansion. Rupert Murdoch's Star network attempted to sell Western programmes in India, but could only attract élite minority audiences; but when an Indian company set up a Hindi satellite channel, Zee TV, they attracted a far larger market, and were the impetus for a whole industry of Indian satellite and cable channels, which Star have now bought into. As interviews with Zee TV and Star TV spokesmen (they were all men) showed, both Indian and Western companies interpreted this as a victory. The Indian company believed they had beaten Star at their own game and reaped the rewards. Star felt they had finally found a way to infiltrate the Indian market, by using an Indian figurehead company. The successful move of multinational media companies into the Indian market was ultimately demonstrated, however, when the 42nd Annual Filmfare Awards, otherwise known as 'the Indian Oscars', were screened exclusively on Sony Entertainment Television's Hindi Channel in March 1997.

### Popular discourses of Hollywood/Bollywood opposition

Both Hollywood and Bollywood have made their direct opposition explicit in India, and their rivalry has passed into popular cultural vocabulary. The promotion poster for Stallone's *Cliffhanger* (1993) reads 'Hollywood challenges Bollywood'; Hollywood's decision to choose *Cliffhanger* as the vehicle for its challenge was

perhaps based on a superficial reading of contemporary Indian film as high in action content, without taking into consideration its juxtaposition with other elements of the 'Masala' mix, such as song and emotional melodrama. *Cliffhanger's* challenge failed. In contrast, as one Indian trade paper commented, a series of Indian music cassettes entitled 'Bollywood vs Hollywood' have been highly commercially successful.

Within Indian popular culture, the commercial success of Indian cinema has become emblematic of India's resistance to the West, and Bollywood stars have become figureheads in what is viewed as a battle against Westernisation. Actress Madhuri Dixit, known as Bollywood's 'queen bee', 'drew herself up and lectured the guy on patriotism' when a fan 'offered her a Canadian dollar for an autograph'. I have already mentioned the nationalist sentiments expressed by actor Shah Rukh Khan in a *Movie* magazine feature. Another instance is an advert for BPL (an Indian electrical hardware company) which appeared in *G magazine*, a leading Indian English-language film magazine, every month from October 1996 to January 1997. The advert combines a photograph of film star Amitabh Bachchan with discourses around national pride. December's advert concludes:

Who would have guessed a few centuries ago that India would become a poor, Third-World country? And who knows what India will become in the next century? Who knows what may happen if we believe in ourselves?

Hollywood's failure to supersede Bollywood reveals that an existing Third World culture can be a crucial factor in halting Western cultural imperialism, even when political and economic barriers are lifted. Barnouw and Krishnaswamy (1963) describe in *The Indian Film* how Hollywood monopolised the world cinema market during the First World War, while other film producers were handicapped by the loss of resources and labour-power to the war effort, and successfully defined the cinematic experience for the rest of the world according to their product, so that, in effect, politics shaped economics shaped culture. However, Hollywood has not defined what makes a film work in India, where, conversely, cultural disparity, rather than any political or economic factor, has slowed Western commercial expansion. [...]

## Conclusion

Bollywood is a wild-card in the globalisation process of the media. Its position is constantly shifting: influenced by its diasporic audiences, by Western moves into India, by newly emerging cultural dialogues between East and West, and by new technologies and their implications. Its relationship with the West has undergone radical changes in the last four years, which will no doubt change its future, although quite probably on its own terms rather than those of the West. Bollywood does not see itself as a minority cinema, but claims the right to be taken seriously as a commercial popular cinema. It demonstrates, finally, that the use of culture as a global force, and as a hegemonic force, is not confined to the West alone.

The existence of another economically imperialist international cinema outside Hollywood is in itself no cause for celebration simply because that cinema opposes Hollywood. Problematic issues around Bollywood and Hindu nationalism, élitism, censorship and corruption should not be glossed over. It has been my intention instead to suggest a reappraisal of current dichotomies of thought between East and West, between commercial and oppositional cinema, by highlighting how unstable these positions look when viewed from an entirely different perspective, a perspective taken, as far as possible, from within India.

A reappraisal of Indian cinema may challenge our assumptions not only about First World and Third World cultural politics, but also our assumptions about what constitutes commercial, and what oppositional, or 'art' cinema, for, as I have discussed, what has in the West been seen as 'difficult' independent cinema fare, has in India been consumed by mass audiences with greater enthusiasm than what we understand as overtly commercial Hollywood films.

I have left the issue of quality out of my discussion of Bollywood, largely because I do not presume to make value judgements on a cultural product designed for consumption by a culture relatively alien to my own experience. Bollywood films have, historically, been dismissed as formulaic and poor quality, and their audience, by inference, as unsophisticated. However, not only can the Bollywood audience watch a film for longer, generally, than a Western audience (Hindi films are uniformly three hours long), it is tolerant of, in fact hungry for, film which in the West is considered too 'challenging' for mainstream, commercial audiences. Which begs the question: which is, in fact, the more truly 'sophisticated' cinema audience? Hollywood's, or Bollywood's?