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The Indian Film Industry and Popular Cinema
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The centre of the Indian film industry in Bombay was dubbed Bollywood by a Western news reporter. Follywood would probably be more appropriate for an industry that is perpetually in a state of crisis even when it produces more cinema features than any other film industry in the world. It was 958 last year. On an average 80% of all films fail at the box office annually and forecasts are made of its imminent collapse. Yet not only does the industry continue to survive but has actually grown at the rate of 4 to 6% in the last few years. Frequently the film industry is in the eye of a storm. Two years ago, when a series of bomb blasts shook Bombay, a tirade was raised against the film industry by some political parties. The immediate provocation was the implication of a couple of film producers in the blasts and a well known film star was alleged to have received an AK56 assault rifle from one of them. The release of a film starring the young actor was temporarily blocked. Ironically, the title of the film was "The Villain", which seemed appropriate under the circumstances. The reaction of the political parties was based on the perception that the production sector of the film industry was being infiltrated by organised crime syndicates.

The Indian film industry is not an industry in the conventional sense. It is not officially recognised as one by the government and is therefore, not entitled to raise finances from nationalized banks and other financial institutions.

When films began to be produced on a commercial scale eighty-two years ago, the Indian film industry followed the Hollywood pattern. The production sector was linked to distribution and exhibition of films; each studio having its own captive exhibition outlets. Film production was financed from within the industry, with the revenues being ploughed back into production and when losses occurred they were shared by all three sectors of the industry, production, distribution and exhibition.

Over the years, with the decline of the studio system, which happened at the same time as in Hollywood, and for much the same reasons, the film industry in India lost its cohesiveness, with distributors and exhibitors showing less and less inclination to share the risk on investments in film production. The revenues earned from films no longer made their way back into film production.

But, unlike Hollywood, where large corporation and media conglomerates have taken over studios and exhibition outlets, the industry in India has remained fragmented. As a result, film making has become the highest risk venture in Indian industry. The rates of interest on film finance are usurious and practically outside any kind of mandatory control. Professionalism, which characterises most industries, is almost absent. It is a veritable minefield. Only the most daring venture into it hoping to make a financial killing. There are few rules that govern financial conduct. This has affected the making of films in a fundamental way. Since films have to succeed at the box office, the compulsion of film makers to cater to a wide range of entertainment expectations is even greater. The variety of demands of the marketplace in a diverse society like India can well be imagined. Film producers are constantly looking for common-denominators that would succeed in appealing to the largest number of people. Most films tend to be bottom line ventures and when a film succeeds, it is sure to have scores of clones in its wake. All this makes the popular cinema stick to tried and tested formula, conservative in terms of ideas and status quo-ist in attitudes. Common denominators are more easily found in the sensory areas of human experience. Small wonder that most films seek to create new sensations.

I mentioned earlier that the rate of box office failures is very much higher than the rate of successes. But unlike the other businesses, success in the film industry can be very dramatic. One successful film can cover the loss of ten failures. This is one of several reasons that contributes to the film industry from going bust. Among the other reasons is the anticipation of a possible windfall which draws new capital like a magnet to keep the film business afloat.

In the last few years, the film industry has come in for a great deal of criticism from the establishment. Popular films have been blamed for any number of social ills; growing incidents of crime in urban areas, crimes against women, erosion of social values, frequent breakdown of law and order, and for crimes among the young.

Just about a year ago, the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting of the Government of India convened a meeting of the official Film Censor Board, together with parliamentarians, members of the National Commission for Women, film critics and scholars, representatives of the film industry and cable television operators. The main subject on the agenda was to find means to curb the increasing incidents of obscenity and violence in the cinema. Even the Supreme Court in India has often indicted popular cinema as having been at least partially responsible in many cases of individual and social crimes. Several law courts in different states have to deal with cases relating to the influence of films on social misdemeanours and crime. It is not unusual for defence lawyers to quote scenes from films as having influenced their clients to commit crimes. This ploy is often used in order to get reduced sentences for the accused.

Most participants, other than those belonging to the film industry, contested the view that the film industry was engaged in producing pure entertainment. One member of parliament said that the cinema cannot be viewed as purely entertainment as it perpetuated its own reality on a captive audience and presented a persuasive world view that was not only against commonly accepted values of right and wrong, but tended to perpetuate the prejudices of a male oriented society.

On the contention of the film industry that films took their shape based on the demands of the audience, a sociologist suggested that this was necessarily a myth since the articulation of an audience depended on what it had become accustomed to seeing and generically accepting as the cinema. He added that what interests people may not always be in the people's interest.

The reason for bringing this up is because the social influence of films and now of television, has exercised the minds of people in power and the establishment since the very beginning of cinema.

A code for the pre-censorship of films meant for public exhibition goes back a long time in India. The colonial government established a censor board in the 1920's mainly to prevent those films from being shown that seemingly encouraged nationalism and anti-colonial thinking. This code was revised by independent India in 1952 and was once again revised at the end of 1991 when the word censorship was deleted and the organisation for film certification was named The Board of Film Certification. The basic guidelines of the Board are:

1   The medium of film should remain responsible and sensitive to the values and standards of society.
2   Certification should be responsive to social change.
3   Artistic expression and creative freedom are not to be unduly curbed.
4   The medium of film should provide clean and healthy entertainment.

5	Films should have aesthetic value and be of good standard cinematically.

In pursuance of the above objectives, the Board would ensure that anti-social activities such as violence are not glorified or justified, etc. There are nineteen such strictures against violence: child abuse, violence against women, racism, religious sectarianism and communalism, anti-scientific, anti-national and anti-constitutional attitudes, and so on. These guidelines came up for revision once again last year, making for explicit codes for defining vulgarity and violence. As the sociologist, Veena Das, remarked, "The (present) set of guidelines is based on the premise that the human body can be territorialized by being divided into presentable and non-presentable parts." For good measure the new guidelines have a clause to prevent the depiction of politicians and public officials in a bad light.

In spite of all these provisions, film censorship in India has never really been successful. Practically no film has suffered an outright ban except for some foreign films that were considered inimical to India's foreign policy interests. The reason is simple. None of the guidelines can be interpreted with any degree of objectivity. And the use of precedence to censor films makes it frequently absurd in its application. Some years ago, my film, "The Role" (Bhumika), was given an adult certificate, not because there was anything unsuitable for an audience under the age of 18, but because it had a theme that would interest only adults. The main appeal of the film was to women and an adult censor certificate in India effectively prevented women from seeing the film. Films with an adult certificate normally attract only an all male audience in India. Recently, a film called "Bandit Queen", which takes an unambiguous look at caste oppression was treated in much the same way by the censors as a film called "Anjaam" , a vastly sadistic and gratuitously manipulative film. There is an amusing case in which a sequence from a film called "Drohkaal" was asked to be deleted by the censors because it was so well done it was convincing. The censor board has several and intractable limitations. Sensibility can never be censored nor can the guidelines be interpreted with any degree of objectivity. The uneasy relationship between the censor board and the film industry frequently causes upheavals in the industry. On the other hand, legislators, sociologists, women's groups and members of the judiciary continue to express their concern from time to time. Considering the nature of Indian society, none of the groups that decide on the fate of films are actually their audience.

To understand the nature of this concern it is necessary to look at popular cinema in the Indian context and find out why popular films are so popular.

Indian cinema essentially caters to what is probably the most pluralistic and diverse, multi-cultural, multi-lingual and multi-religious population group in the whole world. The India film industry produces films in more than twelve languages. Most of these never travel beyond the regions where the language is spoken. And when we talk of Indian films, we tend to mean films made in Hindi which cater to the national market. It is the Hindi film that we consider as representative of Indian films as it has dictated the form and style of other regional language films in India. The form of popular Hindi cinema is unique in the sense that it is different from the form that films have taken in other parts of the world.

Before I describe the form of popular Indian cinema, I should define entertainment in the Indian tradition. Entertainment has been traditionally quantified as a combination of the essence of nine basic emotions. In traditional Indian dramaturgy and the performing arts, complete entertainment is possible only when the nine emotions of love, hate, joy, sorrow, pity, disgust, fear, anger and compassion are blended in different ways around a predominant emotion. The main emotion could be love or joy, but without being complemented by others, neither are they defined nor experienced. Indian cinema could be considered an heir to this tradition.

India has a vast oral tradition. In a country that has had a low level of literacy and where literacy was the privilege of a small community of people, the reservoir of orally preserved information has been enormous. Mythological and historical epics, long balladic narratives, poetry and music, have been handed down the generations for three millennia or more. Elaborate rituals, festivals and public entertainments have come down to us preserved in this way. Each generation adding new material and subtracting others depending on the dominant influences prevailing at the time. In this way a whole tradition of public entertainment forms had survived.

In the 19th century when India became a colony of the British, the ruling elite imported entertainments from Europe. Victorian plays and operettas were brought by travelling players. The Indian tradition has always been quick to absorb new elements and make them its own. Elements from these theatrical forms with Indian subject matter, both literary and oral, made for the new Indian urban theatre. This was to become a major form of entertainment for large numbers of newly urbanised Indians. It was called the Parsi Urdu theatre. The emphasis was largely on song, music and flowery rhetoric. This was the theatre which existed when cinema found its way to India. Recording this for the screen seemed like a natural thing to do with some cosmetic changes, since the cinema allowed for multiple view points. Indian cinema at the dawn of the sound era was in many ways filmed theatre, complete with all the theatrical conventions and performing techniques. Many of these conventions continue to be part of the Indian cinema to this day. Indian cinema had found its unique form. The plots and story lines are used as pegs to hang various emotional ingredients that make up for entertainment. The cinematic form of popular Indian cinema is difficult to explain in post-renaissance western aesthetic terms or even in terms of international cinema.

The eminent Indian social thinker, Ashis Nandy, describes the Hindi film as a spectacle and not necessarily as an artistic endeavour. I will quote him at some length:

"In a spectacle, black is black and white is white – emotionally, motivationally and morally, all shades of grey are scrupulously avoided … since they detract from the logic and charm of the spectacle. This, in the popular Hindi film when somebody has a change of heart, the change is dramatic and total. Such a person cannot be allowed to linger in a normative limbo, and the clues to such a change must be clear and well defined. If the storyline chooses to depict the hero as an apparent mixture of good and evil he must eventually be shown as essentially good, whose badness is thereby reduced to the status of temporary aberration. It does not allow for residuals in a character, it has to be split between good and evil. A spectacle has to be an overstatement.

"It does not generally have an unexpected conclusion, it only has a predictable climax. It bases its appeal not on the linear development of the storyline but on the social configuration which the film presents of many known elements or themes derived from other movies or traditional tales. The viewer is actually expected to know these elements by heart and to experience in the films a feeling of "déjà vu". Indeed the issue of plagiarism in such films has been wrongly posed. The film makers operate within a consensual system which rejects the idea that the elements of a story are personal property or individual creation. A popular Hindi film aims at presenting a not-so-unique combination of themes that have been witnessed hundred of times before. The successful film is different from the unsuccessful film in that it presents a more popular or efficient combination of themes arrived at by design or sheer luck.

"The storyline in these films have to be synchronic (known) and ahistorical. The stress is not on a linear unfolding of the story. There is only a diachronic façade that is designed to be pierced by the viewer. The viewers know from the very beginning that the villain will, however good his behaviour, bare his true self sometime or the other and that he will ultimately be humiliated, jailed or killed. The hero, too, even if he has mortgaged his soul in the first few reels, is bound to recover his ethical moorings later in the film. Since both heroes and villains are typecast with well known actors and stars and their roles tailor-made for them, there is a conformity to the viewers expectation. The popular Hindi film is not concerned with the inner lives of the characters on the screen; it is concerned with the inner life of the viewer. It actually reverses a major tenet of modern fiction and films; the characters do not develop through situations, rather, the situations develop through the character. The story is told through a series of incidents which are woven through means such as coincidences, accidents and through songs and dances. Judged by the logic of the structure, such films are anti-psychological. This follows directly from their nature as spectacles. Spectacles have to be anti-psychological in their context, they can only be psychological in the impact.

"Perhaps, the most important social function of the Hindi film is its ability to act as an interface between the traditions of Indian society and the disturbing modern or western intrusions into it.

"On this plane, the Hindi film is a means of a) giving cultural meaning to western structures superimposed on society, b) demystifying some of the culturally unacceptable modern structures which are increasingly in vogue in India, and c) ritually neutralizing those elements of the modern world which have to be accepted for reasons of survival.

"Once again the emphasis is not on the inner struggle between modernity and tradition or any deep ambivalence towards the west. In fact, the Hindi film's function is to externalise an inner psychological conflict and handle the inner passion generated by social and political processes as problems created by events and persons outside. These events and persons are both ideal types and representative of different aspects of a fragmented self. These fragments are only separately manageable and one of the main functions of the Hindi film is to keep them separate, the hero and the anti-hero, the heroine and the anti-heroine, the virtuous mother and her brutal mother-in-law and the vicious middle-aged smuggler, etc. The moment you combine these fragments into single figures they cease being ideal types; they become psychological descriptions of conflict-states in the Indian mind." (Unquote)

Audiences in India are most comfortable and totally accustomed to this cinematic form. The Indian psychoanalyst, Sudhir Kakar, says, "Hindi cinema represents a collective fantasy – a group daydream, containing unconscious material and hidden wishes of a vast number of people. It is not overly complex – the producers and directors, etc are strongly motivated by the very reasonable goal of making a lot of money. The daydream they develop is not idiosyncratic. They must appeal to those concerns of the audience which are shared; if they do not, the film's appeal is bound to be disastrously limited. Like other high fantasy products, Hindi films emphasise the central features of fantasy; fulfilment of wishes, the humbling of competitors and the destruction of enemies. The stereotyped twists and turns of a film plot ensure the repetition of the very message that makes a fairy tale so deeply satisfying to children. Hindi films may be unreal in a rational sense, but they are certainly not untrue.

"The depiction of the external world may be flawed; their relevance to the external life of the viewer remote, yet the Hindi film demonstrates a confident and sure-footed grasp of the topography of desire and its vicissitudes. Desire and fantasy are inexorably linked. Fantasy

is the *mise-en-scene* of desire – it is the world of imagination fuelled by desire. The relationship between collective fantasy of Hindi films and Indian culture is complex. Though itself a cultural product, Hindi film has shaped popular culture in an unprecedented way." ((Unquote).

Values projected in popular cinema have determined the visual style of other forms of visual communication; calendar pictures, magazine illustration, schemes of interior décor and architecture; even traditional iconography of statues and objects of worship have accepted the visual values of the cinema: gods and goddesses look more and more like film stars. The one single dominant musical form in urban India is the film song. Most popular music is imitative of film songs. Popular theatre imitates cinema. Classical dance in most public performances has been shaped by the values of film dances. And today, television entertainment not only is an extension of the popular cinema, but also tends to cannibalise on it.

Hindi films, through the vehicle of fantasy and the process of identification temporarily heal for the audience the principal stresses arising out of Indian family relationships and everyday life. Many of these films echo ancient myths; in other words Hindi films are modern versions of certain old and familiar myths. Films are known to create contemporary myths as well. A film called "Jai Santoshi Ma", brought to the Indian pantheon a new goddess, who offered solutions to conflicts generated by new political, economic and social processes.

During the colonial period, most Indian films tended to deal with the confrontation of western culture with Indian tradition. Westernisation was seen as an aspect of colonialism. Western values were considered inimical and threatening to Indian familial social tradition. Villains tended to wear western clothes; westernised women were seen as vamps.

In the hero versus villain situation, it was always the villain who was westernised and therefore, depraved and perverse. The Indian tradition was seen as being liberating and also the sole repository of moral and social values.

In 1931 Indian cinema began to talk and sing. This was also the time when the political life of the country got a new fillip with the Indian National Congress having spelt out the objectives of the nationalist movement with a call for complete independence. The Congress, under Mahatma Gandhi, stressed non-violent action as the right means to achieve this end. The Indian Nation was defined as a unity in diversity by Congress leaders such as Jawaharlal Nehru. It seemed natural for Hindi cinema to see itself as representing this unity. Although nationalism may not have played as great a part in the development and growth of Hindi cinema as much as its need for acceptance throughout the country, it tended to reflect these views on a popular level more than any other regional cinema in India. Cinema at the time was far more urban and had primarily an urban middle class audience. Cinema halls, in any case, were restricted to cities and towns. And it was the urban middle class that was also the most influenced by nationalist ideals.

Again this was the same class of people most susceptible to westernisation. The popular cinema of the 1930s and later in the 40s reflected many of the social attitudes of the time. A few films tended to take up themes of social reform suggesting that these could be contained within the traditional, although many of the social iniquities were the result of their sanction by that very tradition.

Traditional culture as presented in popular cinema then and even now is not what exists in reality as much as it represents the ideal.

Indian cinema was the creation of the urban middle classes. It is their attitudes, dilemmas and fantasies that dominated popular cinema from the 1930s into the 1950s. Although not in this context, Ashis Nandy has an interesting observation to make about the duality of the rational self and the secret self in contemporary Indian literature and films. He suggests that the secret self represents the deep-seated traditional attitudes that constantly appear as subtexts in these works. I would like to think that this duality, often paradoxical, exists in all of popular Indian cinema.

With rapid industrialization after Independence and the burgeoning growth of urban centres, the relationship between Western and Indian traditions has become more blurred. The nationalist movement had projected a view that stressed traditional Indian values of simple living, with non-materialist goals as the ideal. The growth of the urban middle classes, now estimated at 250 million in a population of over 900 million has made for a paradigmatic change. Materialist goals have increasingly become the desired objective. Rapid urbanization has also accelerated the break up of joint and extended families. Family as a primary unit of Indian society is slowly atomising to the individual as the basic unit. Popular cinema has not remained unaffected. The complexion of the cinema itself has changed considerably. The urban middle classes are steadily moving away from the cinema to television. The working class and the urban poor of the fast growing cities of India, have become the most significant audience for films. The audiences themselves are now very much younger than in the past. High urban unemployment and the increasing marginalization of the city poor has given the mass audience a lumpenized character.

There are many other forces at work. Cinema has lost at least 30 percent of its market to television. Video piracy cuts into the revenues of the cinema. The film industry is making a desperate bid to hold on to its audiences. In order to ensure this, several strategies are at work.

Apart from blatant plagiarization of successful films, both Indian and American, film songs have started to resemble Western rock and pop music. A great deal of reliance is placed on engaging audience attention with sensation and spectacle. Their narration moves at a frenetic pace to hold on to audiences whose attention span is progressively becoming shorter with the coming of television. Obviously, in all this, sex and violence plays a very important part. In the process, traditional cinematic form has remained more or less a ritual. Without the normative elements of commonly accepted social morality, the social effects of these films are unpredictable.

Today most films are in this genre. They deal with personal vengeance as the only means to meet the ends of justice. This projection is not without logic. The machinery of law and justice in India has been sorely pressed with the enormous socio-political and economic changes taking place since Independence and the common feeling among large sections of the urban population is that the system does not have adequate safeguards to ensure social justice. The appeal of taking the law into one's own hands is great. This is the main reason why so much concern is being expressed recently about the effects of popular cinema on Indian society.

The second reason is the fear that films play an important part in legitimising socially unacceptable attitudes and in breaking down social restraints that are considered necessary for civil society. The role of films in legitimising public behaviour and attitudes is well known. It is also well known that films preach to the converted and strengthen already existing social attitudes and views. In recent years, one can notice a subtle shift in characterisation in popular Indian films. The fragmentation of the good self from the bad making for heroes and villains, is not so simple any more. Villains are no longer all bad;

they have a residual good in their make up. A very successful film released recently entitled "Daar", or "Fear", has the villain obsessed with love for the heroine, an obsession which he is unable to express openly. This makes him terrorize her and her family until he is eventually destroyed. The actor who played this part has now become a leading star of the Indian cinema. The film itself has been adapted from a Hollywood film, "Cape Fear".

Many recent Hindi films have created attractive villains. This would not have been possible in the past. Today, they overshadow the heroes who are seen as respectable and ineffective. Villains appear to lead privileged lives, enjoying power without social and moral restraints. If they fail it is only because they find themselves on the wrong side of the fence. The popular Indian cinema has gradually evolved from the Gandhian concept of using the right means to achieve just ends to using any means to achieve personal ends. The parallels with the Indian political scene are obvious.

The last two decades have seen several changes in the Indian polity. Electoral politics have led to the creation of vote banks based on community and caste affiliations. Politics is no longer entirely free of criminalisation. There are numerous cases of a nexus between politicians and organised crime coupled with the inability of the law to deal with this adequately. All this has found its way into popular cinema which deals with these issues as problems of character and background in the person of the heroes and the villains. And to prove that life imitates the cinema, film star heroes have become successful politicians. N T Rama Rao, a very successful film start of Telugu films, who had an outstanding career by playing Hindu gods on the screen became the epitome of the good and just based on his screen persona. He was elected to the State Legislature in his home state of Andhra Pradesh and twice became the Chief Minister. And much in the same way, almost like a plot from one of his own films, was recently unseated by his sons-in-law and children. Before him, M G Ramachandran, a matinee idol of popular Tamil cinema had become Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu. The roles he played were usually that of a hero who fights for the rights of the poor, dispossessed and the exploited. However, the equation was not as simplistic as it might sound. In the context of Indian politics, it was seen as a crusade against the centuries old cultural domination of Brahminism and the upper castes in Tamil society. Today, another film star, Jayalalitha, heads the government of Tamil Nadu.   Equally interestingly, it appears that the present superstar of Tamil cinema, Rajnikant, will soon emerge as her most powerful rival.

I have always believed that individual creative expression is difficult in the conventional form of popular Indian films. Their undue stress on mass entertainment makes them operate in a standardized culture that is very much their own. Yet, how many forms of great artistic merit have the kind of influence on society that popular cinema has had over years? Great films have often reflected that extraordinary insight into the human condition and extended the horizons of cinematic experience, but rarely have they had the social, cultural and political impact of popular cinema. It is in the nature of popular cinema to be manipulative. Its based on enhancing and strengthening deep seated collective beliefs and prejudices. It generally trivialises social and political processes by reducing these equations to good and bad. Its greatest success lies in making the audience a willing participant in its own manipulation.

Finally, I would like to touch upon the influence of Hollywood films on popular cinema in India. American films have been in India from the very beginning. In all these years their market share never exceeded beyond ten percent. There are obvious cultural reasons for this which I have already discussed. However, the influence of Hollywood films has been incalculable on the Indian film industry. They have been plagiarised and borrowed from and adapted to suit Indian cinematic forms. Even the present day theme of vengeance in Indian

films can be traced back to American originals. During the last two decades only a limited number of Hollywood films were allowed into the country. With economic liberalization a larger number are expected to make their entry into the Indian market.   With the promise of a huge potential market opening up, Hollywood has started to release their films dubbed in Indian languages. "Jurassic Park" broke all previous box office successes in its dubbed form. Other films have not been that successful. What has yet to be properly tested is whether there is still a cultural barrier to the success of Hollywood films in India. There is also the talk of co-production between Hollywood and the Indian film industry to produce films specially for the South Asian market. Of even greater interest would be to see if popular Indian films that have so far successfully appropriated elements from Hollywood films, would themselves be appropriated in the present climate.

Of the many crises that the India film industry faces, this will probably be the greatest.