

VILAYATI BOLLYWOOD: POPULAR HINDI CINEMA- GOING AND DIASPORIC SOUTH ASIAN IDENTITY IN BIRMINGHAM (UK)

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Abstract

Drawing on theoretical developments in the studies of Black British diasporas, combining textual analysis with extended qualitative interviews, and focusing on the citizenry of British South Asians in Birmingham, this paper offers an account of the history of the emergence, fall, and rise again of Bollywood cinema-going in the city as a cultural and leisure activity. This article argues that the localised space of the Asian cinema in which Bollywood films are viewed and made sense of is useful to an understanding of the films' importance as texts and as an engagement with diasporic British South Asian social identities and geographies. As shall be demonstrated in the paper, Bollywood cinema-going in Birmingham, as in other parts of Britain, embodies notions of diasporic belonging and a remaking of post-war urban British landscapes that sustain and develop Black British public spheres.

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Introduction

Bollywood cinema-going in Britain is a cultural and leisure activity that began in the 1960s and 1970s post-war period. To date there has been very little academic work done on the meaning of the Bollywood cinema-going experience for British Asians. Nor has there been a sustained, focused, or systematic survey of this phenomenon. Academic studies that do exist of the Bollywood phenomenon in Britain have focused exclusively on domestic video consumption of Bollywood films (Gillespie 1989; Sehgal 1994). The “larger than life” pre-, on-, and post-screen mediations that occur in relation to Bollywood films in the diasporic British Asian context have been unexplained.

The social act of cinema going has been theorised as a cultural practice that includes and constructs a narrative about audiences themselves through the blurring of the boundaries between the imaginary and the real (Metz 1982). Films at the cinema take on a ritual and performative quality quite different to any other format through which cultural representations are interpreted: for e.g. genre, stars, and the juxtaposition of the audiences’ everyday lived experiences and the diegetic world on the screen (Ellis 1982; Turner 1999). The actual site of the cinema has been considered as a public space growing in tandem with the formation of modernity in the public sphere (Donald and Donald 2000). In this view, cinema, like the press and broadcasting, makes available structures of visibility, modes of conduct, and practices of judgement and taste, which together constitute a culture of public participation (p. 114). Bollywood films in British cinemas adhere to these aforementioned criteria but additionally provide a space for those that partake in this cultural and leisure activity to engage further with their diasporic sense of selfhood.

The concept of diaspora has gained widespread currency in the humanities and social sciences denoting transnational movement and it ties in with arguments around globalisation in the contemporary period as a reconfiguration of “fixed” ethnic and race categories (Appadurai 1990; Robertson 1992). Debates on globalisation have identified the economic and political dismantling of national borders, as well as the growth of transnational cultural formations (Featherstone 1990). Eclectic notions of diaspora identities, experiences, and texts have emerged (in, for example, Bhabha 1990; Brah 1996; Clifford 1994; Cohen 1997; Gilroy 1993; Hall 1990; and Mercer 1994). “Diaspora” is increasingly used as a heuristic concept that also denotes a social condition entailing a particular form of consciousness which is particularly compatible with transnational identities in the current era of late modernity and globalisation (Anthias 1998; Tololyan 1996). The social condition of diaspora can be considered as taking up the interplay of migrant people, their successive settled generations, and their ideas in terms of a triadic relationship. This relationship can be thought of as working between the place of origin, place of settlement, and a diasporic consciousness that shifts among the two and incorporates possibilities for new subjectivity formation.

Contemporary Bollywood films can be usefully seen as diasporic and global cultural texts that transcend national sensibilities both in their production and distribution across numerous nation state boundaries and also in terms of some of their thematic content. For example, contemporary Bollywood movies often engage with representations of South Asians who are differentially experiencing modernisation in the subcontinent and with representations of diasporic South Asians.

Existing studies of Bollywood cinema in India contend that the audio and visual representations of, and in, Bollywood films are made sense of imaginatively through the act of cinema going (Thomas 1985; Dissanayake 1988; Chakravarty 1993; Nandy 1997; Moti Gokulsing and Dissanayake 1998). The imagination has been theorised as a social force connecting different people across different times and places in exciting and equally problematic ways (Anderson 1983; Appadurai 1997).

This article, then, demonstrates how the Bollywood cultural phenomenon is used as an entertainment and leisure activity, as well as a cultural practice for diasporic British Asian cultural identity formation. It offers an analysis of the Bollywood phenomenon in *Vilayat's* (Britain's) second city, Birmingham, and in particular it focuses on the post-war history of the social act of cinema going amongst South Asians in the city as a social construction of urban space in contemporary Britain.

The first part of the article makes a textual analysis that introduces and describes the importance of the Bollywood cultural phenomenon in Britain as well as beyond. It pays attention to some of the aesthetic qualities that constitute this phenomenon. It locates Bollywood in Britain amidst its global spread and appeal outside its primary production and distribution centre in Mumbai (formerly Bombay), India. It also critically examines common sense discourses about Bollywood films in the West that view it simply as a "copy" of Hollywood cinema in derogatory terms.

The second part of the article provides an analysis of the results from a small-scale qualitative study about Bollywood cinema-going and its associated cultural activities in Birmingham. In particular the second section elaborates on understandings made about Bollywood as a cultural phenomenon that are introduced in the first part of the paper drawing on actual audience response in terms of their own perceptions and uses made of Bollywood films and related cultural texts.

What is "Bollywood"?

"Bollywood" has become an important catchword in the vocabulary of British South Asian popular culture. Bollywood not only signifies the large number of films made and viewed in Mumbai (formerly Bombay), estimated at around 200 films annually, but also the distribution, subtitling, dubbing and watching of these motion pictures world wide. Whilst Bollywood is only one of several regional film centres within Indian cinema, given its broad based language appeal, Hindi, and the fact that it has been subtitled and dubbed into several Asiatic and European languages, more than any of India's other cinemas, makes it by far the most popular. Bollywood films are viewed in all of South Asia, Africa (including the Maghreb countries of North Africa), South America, Eastern Europe and Russia (Kasbekar 1996, 366). These films are also imported into all major metropolitan cities with a sizeable diasporic South Asian population. The viewing of Bollywood films also entails the consumption of other related cultural products which are mass produced in demand to the popularity of the Bollywood phenomenon. These include: the ensuing film music albums sold in their hundreds of thousands the world over: readership of several international film magazines such as *Cineblitz*, *Movie* and *Stardust* with film reviews, gossip and star profiles: film posters and postcards: the

countless number of electronic pages on the world wide web with Bollywood pictures and texts which incorporate fanzines for the adoration of favourite films, actors and actresses.

Bollywood film stars, singers and musicians appear together each year in entertainment shows in the metropolitan cities of the South Asian diaspora, such as at the NEC Arena in Birmingham. These shows comprise of actors singing, dancing and re-enacting favourite film scenes and dialogues to packed and excited audiences. During 28-30 August 1999, for example, a few of the current favourite Bollywood stars Ashwariya Rai, Aamir Khan, Rani Mukherjee, Akshaye Khanna, and others appeared in Birmingham, at the Wembley Arena in London, and at the Nynex stadium in Manchester for a weekend of shows. Ticket prices ranged from £15 — £35, and V.I.P tickets (including after show dinner with the stars) at £50 per head! Such shows have elaborately followed in the footsteps of earlier Bollywood stars who visited England for the first Indian Film Festival in 1957. The “legends” of fifties Bollywood — Guru Dutt, Mehboob Khan, Nargis, Nutan, Shammi Kapoor, Waheeda Rehman and others — all came (Bhuchar 1996, 90), arousing excitement that was akin to going to see The Beatles or Elvis in concert. The histories of Bollywood entertainment shows from the fifties to the present day in Britain remain absent in academic accounts of Western popular culture.

Bollywood film songs are also an important part of the scheduling of South Asian radio broadcasting played daily and for several hours over the airwaves on radio stations throughout the diaspora. Bollywood video outlets, popularly known as “Asian video shops,” are abundant in numbers across the diaspora. In Britain alone it was estimated that in 1997 there were over 4,000 video outlets supplying the regular demand for Bollywood films (Network East 1997). Furthermore, Bollywood movie houses like the Picadilly Cinema on Stratford Road in Birmingham run by local South Asian entrepreneurs have mushroomed since the mid-nineties regularly featuring the latest releases on the big screen. The mainstream cinema chains of CineWorld, Odeon, UCI, Virgin, and Warner Brothers in Britain also show Bollywood films, thereby cashing in on the popularity of the movies. For example, the UCI cinema in Solihull, just outside of Birmingham, was the first complex to show Bollywood movies in 1993, and more recently CineWorld in Bentley Bridge, Wolverhampton, has been daily showing one or more of the latest Bollywood movies since its opening in October 1997. However, the history of Bollywood film viewing in Britain dates as far back as 1926, when King George V and Queen Mary held a command performance of *Prem Sanyas* (Light of Asia) at Windsor Castle. This film was made in 1925 and co-directed by the Indo-German team of Himansu Rai and Franz Osten (Bhuchar 1996, 89).

Bollywood Versus Hollywood

The exact origins of the formation of the term “Bollywood” are unknown but as Satvinder Rana, BBC Radio Derby presenter of the *Aaj-Kal* (Today-Tomorrow) show and columnist for *Spice* magazine, speculates: “I’m not sure why it [Bollywood] has become such an acceptably standard word in our language, especially since it was probably conjured up by some cocky white journalist to describe the Indian film industry in a somewhat idiosyncratic and derogatory manner” (*Spice* magazine 1996).

Uncertainties aside, however, Bollywood is more popularly described in relation to, and against, the hegemony of Hollywood. As a recent album sleeve for a compilation tape of contemporary Bollywood film songs announced on the front cover of *Cineblitz* magazine (Summer 1997), "Bollywood Vs Hollywood." The naming and popular usage of the Mumbai film industry as "Bollywood" not only reveals on a literal level an obvious re-working of the appellation of the cinema of Hollywood, but on a more significant level Bollywood is able to serve alternative cultural and social representations away from dominant white and ethnocentric audio-visual possibilities.

Furthermore, outside the film capital of Mumbai, Bollywood is also one signifier, among many others, of the wider Indian film industry as the largest in the world. The total production of films from India is calculated at some 900 annual films (Kasbekar 1996), and in monetary terms it is second only to Hollywood. On a BBC Asian radio show it was announced that throughout India's 800 cinemas, 10 million official ticket sales are exchanged daily, and 5 billion annual visits are made to the theatres (4 times as many than in the USA), generating an estimated income in the region of £500 million. Furthermore, India's combined cinema industries employ over 500,000 full-time workers (BBC Asian Network 1997).

Despite the popularity of Bollywood films they are also a source of derision for some South Asians and non-South Asians alike. Common assumptions labelled at Bollywood films include that they are "unrealistic, emotionally over the top," "formulaic entertainment for the masses," and "a copy of Hollywood films." Bollywood movies are often constructed as an amorphous mass in the uncritical popular imagination that is unable to see and differentiate between the variety of films on offer. Edward Johnson (1987), although more concerned with the art of Indian film posters, captures well the contemptuous attitudes towards Bollywood and other popular commercial Indian films as he writes:

Indian cinema has a reputation in the West founded more on myth than reality. "Art" directors such as Satyajit Ray are given fulsome praise whilst the majority "commercial" cinema receives nothing but ridicule and the entire industry is pilloried as specious dross by people who then often confess to never having seen any of the films in question (Johnson 1987, 2).

Contrary to such common assertion, Bollywood is comprised of several genres of films each with a dynamic of their own. Furthermore, Bollywood movies are not indiscriminately viewed as of the 200 annual films made 20%, at the very best, go on to be successful at the box office in India and only one or two become blockbusters. This 20:80 ratio of successes over failures has continued for the past 10-15 years.

Further still, the movies that flop or make it big in India may perform quite the opposite in box offices across "planet Bollywood." For example, the 1998 film *Dil Se* [From The Heart], a love story between an All India Radio reporter (Shahrukh Khan) and an Assamese freedom fighter (Manisha Koirala) directed by South Indian director Mani Ratnam, became the first-ever officially recorded Bollywood box-office success in the UK, attracting national and international media attention as a result (Chaudhary 1998; Goldenberg and Dodd 1998; Joshi 1998). It earned a remarkable £66,000 from just 8 screens after two weeks of release. Ratnam's film grossed only £10,000 less than *The Avengers* (starring Sean Connery and Uma Thurman), from 152 fewer screens (*Empire* magazine, November 1998, 18). Since

the success of *Dil Se* the film magazine *Screen International* now features the ranking of box-office positions of the latest Bollywood movies alongside mainstream Hollywood in the UK. Interestingly, *Dil Se* failed at the box office in India. The film's overt political agenda of the trials of the Assamese people on the India—China border interwoven with a love story on the eve of India's 50 years of independence celebration was said to have proved too much for Indian audiences. In contrast, Bollywood-goers in Britain were reported to have acclaimed the film's handling of an original politicised plot through a populist convention. Moreover, the fact that current heart-throb Shahrukh Khan was playing the lead, coupled with A.R. Rehman's pulsating music score, meant that *Dil Se* became a "must see movie" in the UK well ahead of its release (see Joshi 1998). In fact, for the first two months after its release in September *Dil Se* was shown on five screens, five times per day at staggered intervals at the 14-screen Cineworld complex in Feltham, West London. Each show was a complete sell out as an average of 3,000 spectators per day watched the film in this one cinema alone (Chaudhary 1998).

The list of aforementioned examples help to briefly illustrate the scope, size and appeal of the Bollywood cultural phenomenon and to indicate further areas of research which need revealing and careful examination. This would involve taking into account, amongst others, questions of cultural industry, high culture versus mass culture debates, culturally specific notions of aesthetics and audience preferences, and the role of popular forms in responding to and constructing global cultural identities.

The textual pleasures and cinematic encodings in Bollywood films can certainly be ascertained through critical and appropriate readings of the film texts themselves. However, the current assertion of Bollywood as a wider cultural phenomenon calls for a much broader repertoire of critical epistemologies and methods than film theory and readings alone. For example, we also need to take into account the actual social and geographical sites that the Bollywood texts are viewed at, i.e. the actual cinemas themselves. The latter section of this article presents the findings of a small-scale study conducted in an attempt to begin to form an understanding of the re-emergence of Bollywood cinema-going and its associated cultural activities *vis à vis* diasporic South Asian identity formation in Birmingham (exact details of the study follow later). Let us frame the research findings in a broader context, that of an examination of the history of Bollywood cinema-going in the city and wider afield as a cultural and leisure activity, from its post-war inception to the present.

Bollywood Cinema-going from 1950s to Present

The histories of Bollywood cinema-going in Birmingham and elsewhere in the UK have yet to be fully charted. Heather Tyrrell (1998, 20-22) in a short magazine article on Bollywood cinema-going in Britain outlines an introductory and useful chronology. Local mainstream cinemas in South Asian areas of settlement were hired on the weekends throughout the late fifties and into the late seventies. The showing of Bollywood movies on the weekend was a family affair where notions of leisure and community politics were being forged. During the fifties and before formal welfare and pressure groups were operational people frequently came to Sunday matinees to converse with influential citizens about help with immigra-

tion problems or court cases (Tyrrell 1998, 21). The weekend get-togethers was also a moment for kith and kin, and friends to meet up and socialise after long weekly hours spent in manual labour that was contributing to the industrial drive sweeping across Britain.

British Asian-run cinemas began to spring up nation-wide in the seventies, taking off from where white-British audiences were deserting the auditoriums. In the major cities of South Asian settlement in the midlands and in the north of the 70s, Birmingham had six cinemas, Leicester four, Bradford four (two showing Pakistani films, two Indian), and Derby two. At the height of Bollywood cinema-going during this period, 120 cinemas in the UK showed Bollywood full or part time. There were at least four companies distributing Indian film, now there are only two main players (Eros Entertainment based in north-west London, and Yash Raj Films which operates from its offices in Mumbai and London simultaneously). Interestingly, hundreds of film prints from the seventies were lost, as Britain then as now has no official Bollywood archive.

With the advent of video in the UK in 1977 Bollywood cinema-going ceased to exist causing many cinemas to shut down. British Asians were amongst the first households in the country to purchase their own VCRs (Gillespie 1989). Whereas in the late seventies a Bollywood cinema ticket cost £1 per person, imported Bollywood and other South Asian video cassettes were also hired at £1 a time allowing all household members to view the latest films. Consequently, a thriving British Asian video shop culture emerged during the 80s that was responding to the lack of cultural and leisure facilities for British Asians. It is estimated that up to 20 video shops existed in most British cities, and in Leicester alone there was 45 outlets during the eighties (Tyrrell 1998, 21). Meanwhile Bollywood film production in Mumbai was suffering a malaise with budget cuts and violent formulas becoming run of the mill. Video culture killed Bollywood cinema-going in Britain but itself suffered a similar fate with the advent of non-terrestrial satellite and cable channels, such as Zee TV, in the early nineties.

The resurrection of Bollywood cinema-going occurred in 1993 with a few late-night screenings that developed into weeklong shows. This led to the reappearance of Asian-run cinemas, followed by the multiplexes. The return to big-screen cinema can be accredited to the revival of the big-budget spectaculars with production costs soaring from £120,000 to £1 million by the mid nineties and also the emergence of movies which appealed not only to Indian urbanites but also to diasporic South Asians in terms of their themes and content (see later). With a return to cinema going more generally throughout the nineties in the UK, British South Asians in particular were partaking in the remaking of their areas of settlement by extending their cultural and leisure facilities to include audio-visual entertainment and by supporting the economies of nearby Indian restaurants as pre- or post-screening activities. Let us now turn to Bollywood cinema-going in Birmingham.

Bollywood in Brum

There are currently two Asian-run cinemas in Birmingham in addition to the multiplexes. They are the Prince's in Smethwick High Street located in the north-west of the city, and the Picadilly in Stratford Road, Sparkbrook to the east of the

city centre. Both cinemas are situated in the inner areas of the city in which Black people more generally and South Asians in particular predominate.

The Prince's was a purpose-built cinema and opened as the Prince's Hall on 19 December 1912 to hold 950 patrons. It closed in April 1930 to undergo modernisation and re-opened in December of the same year accommodating 1500 patrons. In 1966 300 seats were removed from the stalls to make it more spacious, and then the cinema closed again in June 1970 after the showing of two *Carry On...* films. It was bought and re-opened by a Nirmal Singh Sanghera in April 1971. It screened mainly Indian films with some British and Hollywood ones. From the late seventies it was used mainly on the weekends until February 1980 when it closed yet again (Williams 1982, 211). The Prince's Hall re-opened as the Prince's in the summer of 1993 with the advent of Bollywood cinema-going in the city. Currently the Prince's has one large cinema screen with seating for 500 patrons and is considering plans to develop another.

The Picadilly was built on the site of the Picturedrome cinema. The Picturedrome opened in 1912 and closed in 1929 to be demolished. The Picadilly opened in May 1930 and from the 1960s was operated by the ABC chain of cinemas, thereby being renamed as the ABC Sparkbrook showing British and Hollywood movies up until its closure in March 1972. During the seventies it was re-opened as an Asian cinema under the new name of the Dreamland. Throughout the eighties it remained derelict for several years with a short period in between of being used as a bingo hall (Clegg 1984, 51). It finally opened as the "Picadilly" showing Bollywood movies from the mid-nineties and onwards. The Picadilly has been modified and sectioned off into 8 screens and is able to seat 1,000 patrons in total.

The brief histories of both the Prince's and Picadilly cinemas illustrate moments in the making of Black areas of settlement and leisure, taking off where white Britons left as a result of "white flight" (Cashmore 1994, 343-345). White flight discourses often mystify the inner cities as rife with urban squalor and social problems. In particular, Black people are viewed as bringing down "traditional" white areas and are seen to be "taking over" in such discourses. The fact that white people are also residents of the same areas experiencing transformation and can therefore be contributing to the alleged cause of urban decline is conveniently ignored in white flight rhetoric. The view adopted in this article is one to the contrary. It considers the inner city and Black settlement within it as consisting of a number of ongoing social inequalities historically, but which are differentially experienced by its varied residents: for example poor housing stock, high unemployment, police stop-and-search procedures, the success and failures of post-war urban regeneration and so forth. The theoretical premise being put forward here is that it is more useful to pay attention to the social construction and re-versioning of inner city spaces as a haven for the creation and uses of Black popular cultures for and by its Black citizens. It is further argued that a focus on Bollywood cinema-going in Birmingham allows for an elaboration on this theoretical premise.

The inner city areas in which the Prince's and Picadilly cinemas are situated, Smethwick and Sparkbrook respectively, are part of a wider make-up of Birmingham in which a sense of the city's Black settlement and presence can be ascertained. The location of these cinemas in predominantly Black and more specifically South Asian areas of settlement is part and parcel of the ongoing struggles of

marking a sense of space and making a claim to notions of “Britishness” on the terms of minority social groups themselves. Asserting one’s claim to urban space is often tied up with wider experiences of racist and exclusionary discourses from everyday direct and indirect racism on the streets, to wider immigration policies which seek to keep out Black “others” from entry into the nation state.

Bollywood cinema-going itself can be considered as part of the makings of urban social formations in which South Asian residents on the way to becoming movie spectators move through the city as a process of enactment of the self and make visible their presence through actual physical movement across areas of the city. Their journey involves a number of sites ranging from the home to the cinema venue and most often will include pre- and post-cinematic screening activities that can include meeting up with friends and/or kith and kin for a drink or meal. In this way their motion, either through personal or public transport, takes up routes across areas of the city in which a notion of Black public citizenry is continually renewed as part of the rhythms and patterns of everyday city life. Furthermore, at the cinema auditoriums the blurring of the real and the imaginary takes place through a diasporic engagement with the audio-visual content of the Bollywood film texts themselves.

The Content of Contemporary Bollywood Movies

Earlier in the article it was argued that the resurgence of Bollywood cinema-going was due to the return of big screen spectacles. These movies are appealing not only in terms of the big budgets spent on them affording the most renowned directors, producers, music directors, scriptwriters, playback singers, actors and actresses, production teams and so forth, all working together to produce memorable cinema, but also because of the lure of the thematic content of the motion pictures which cross subcontinental and diasporic boundaries.

In 1994 Bollywood cinema-going was marked by the notable success of *1942: A Love Story* (dir. Vidhu Vinod Chopra) which packed in audiences up and down the country. Set in the years leading up to Indian independence from the British Raj, *1942...* tells a romantic tale between the rebel son (Anil Kapoor) of an Indian supporter of the Raj and a freedom fighter’s daughter (Manisha Koirala) amidst the struggles for liberation. The late English actor Brian Glover played the role of the main villain, the wicked General Douglas. In India the film was released at a time when the entry of Western multinational’s into the country was underway. Thus, the film’s attention to Indian patriotism was not only historical but could be read as an aversion to the threat of cultural imperialism in the present. In the UK the film struck a chord in the formation of diasporic South Asian identities that were being created in the context of a constructed colonial past on-screen and were being weighed-up in the formation of the actual present composed of feelings and experiences of the “postcolonial” in the context of a racist Britain in which Black settlers had made their home: *1942...* ends with the freedom fighters triumphant over their British oppressors after much turmoil and many loved-ones lost along the way. In the film’s closing scenes the Union Jack and colonial buildings of the Raj that demarcated white selves and Black others are literally exploded to make way for the task of remaking landscapes anew.

The other big successes that drew in audiences were boy-meets-girl romances set amidst family sagas. The films *Maine Pyar Kiya* [I have Loved, dir. Sooraj Barjatya,

1989], and *Hum Aapke Hain Koun?* [Whom Am I To You? dir. Sooraj Barjatya, 1993] broke box-office records in India and were immensely well received across the diaspora. In fact, four years after its release in Britain *Hum Aapke Hain Koun?* was still showing in Bollywood cinemas and only as recently as 1998 was it released on video to rent and buy. Such films undeniably contained doses of ideological formulations of societal customs and “norms” pertaining to birth, marriage, and death, but these were also highly successful in dealing with the impact of Western globalisation by foregrounding Indian family values and traditions. These films also moved away from much of the violence of eighties’ movies, thereby asserting a communal spirit (see Kazmi 1998, 186-192). Furthermore, some of the conservatism depicted in the movies was not taken on board unproblematically, at least not in India (see Juluri 1999 on readings of *Hum Aapke Hain Koun?* in Hyderabad, India).

Filmmakers in Mumbai soon took note of the themes clicking with audiences at home and overseas and the potential to develop story lines, which could reach across continents. In this way the diaspora, and in particular Britain, became classified as one of Bollywood’s key territories. The distribution of Bollywood films is divided along 13 territories, 10 in Asia and the Middle East, and three which cover Britain and Europe, North America, and Australia. A film is classified as a blockbuster if it makes twice the amount invested in each territory. Britain is now classified as a territory and the Bollywood film industry is keener than ever for maximum exposure of a new film in Britain, knowing it will attract large audiences and revenue, contributing to its status as a blockbuster (Chaudhary 1998). With globalisation and the diaspora very much part of Indian society — from holiday travels to visit kith and kin, business trips for the middle and professional classes, exchange of cultural commodities, and the increasing gap between rich and poor — film makers were apt in capturing these uneven flows and routes on screen.

A quick glance at a few of the movies proving popular with Bollywood-goers in Britain in recent years include: *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* [The Braveheart Will Take the Bride, dir. Aditya Chopra, 1995] in which a rich and spoilt British Asian boy (Shahrukh Khan) falls for a British Asian girl (Kajol) on an inter-rail trek across Europe, and then follows her to India to win over her family in accepting their marriage. In *Pardes* [Foreign Land, dirs. Subhash Ghai 1997] Arjun (Shah Rakh Khan) is the adopted son of billionaire American NRI (Non Resident Indian) Kishori Lal (Amrish Puri) who is sent to India to help arrange the marriage between Gunga (Mahima Chaudhary) and Kishori Lal’s real son Rajiv (Aparna Agnihotri). Rajiv is far from the perfect bridegroom for Gunga and through a series of star-crossed encounters spanning India and the US Arjun and Gunga fall in love. *Pardes’* advertising by-line on album sleeves and film posters reads “American Dreams, Indian Soul.” *Aa Ab Laut Chalen* [Come Let Us Return, dir. Rishi Kapoor, 1998] also set in the states picks up the dreams of a young lower middle-class graduate Rahul (Akshaye Khanna) who finds it hard getting a job in India and migrates to New York in search of a better life. There he finds crass materialism amongst the South Asian bourgeoisie and love and simpleton ways, albeit in clichés, amongst the migrant working classes in New York’s inner cities. To complicate matters he finds his previously thought dead father (played by seventies Bollywood superstar Rajesh Khanna), now a wealthy American businessman who also left India in search of a better life, and meets and falls in love with Pooja (Ashwariya Rai). The film ends by

contemplating what is lost and found on the way to making riches and leaving the motherland behind.

Bollywood films of the nineties with diasporic interests have developed the theme of migrancy and settlement in Hindi cinema from earlier years. Films of the seventies invariably cast those who went abroad in side roles or as villains, depicted as harbingers of the bad ways of the West — a corrupting influence, or counter-reference to Indian values. As Director Govind Nilhani reflecting on the change of diasporic characters in a recent magazine interview put it: “The camera would start from those new shoes and tilt up, the trousers, the face with the cigarette hanging from the mouth. The foreign-returned had an affected manner, the girl had bobbed hair, a mini skirt. They had lost their Indianness and become alien” (*India Today*, 4 August 1997, 21).

This image was perhaps best captured in, and often quoted in other movies after, Manoj Kumar’s version of *Purab Aur Paschim* [East and West, 1970]. In this film Saira Banu plays the wild Western girl, with blonde wig, who is tamed by the hero at the interval and becomes a Hindustani girl. The eighties continued this trend of “the West as bad” amidst angry heroes who were fighting against corruption and coming to terms with social upheavals within India and overseas. In contrast, Bollywood of the nineties took note of the NRIs as cosmopolitan in mind, speaking in English or American accents, but with their heart and soul in the right place respecting all things Indian. Nineties’ film plots spanned several cities across several continents with diasporic characters taking centre stage. Film sets and costumes began to illustrate a look and feel of urban centres (openly displaying the brand names of Coca-Cola, Ralph Lauren, Nike...) in which the characters could be in middle-class India or the urban diaspora of the West thereby opening up affinities with audiences across the globe. However, film critics in India have questioned some of the more city-centric film gloss which has started to appear in some of the big movies of the nineties as ignoring the plight of rural India and its culture (see Chopra 1997).

Bollywood Films in the Lives of British Asians

The final section of this article elaborates on the responses received as part of a small-scale study into Bollywood cinema-going in Birmingham that was undertaken in May and June 1998. Nine British South Asians were selected who were willing to talk about their experiences of the Bollywood cultural phenomenon in the city. They responded to questions about Bollywood as an audio-visual medium and described it as a cultural practice that encompassed notions of entertainment and constructions of selfhood. The following results, then, elaborate on understandings of Bollywood as a diasporic cultural phenomenon in Britain as has been put forward in the article thus far. A total of eight questions were asked and the responses obtained have been sectioned according to three broad themes, and they are “Bollywood as meaning; the frequencies of watching Bollywood films; and responses to Bollywood films in Britain.”

Admittedly, the scale of study is small and may be criticised for a number of limitations. For instance, the age range of the respondents whilst on the whole covers a youth group is not consistent as it includes a 38 year old and an 11 year old. Also, the responses that have been received to each of the questions are brief and in terms of a few sentences at best, rather than abundant replies in a rich

qualitative sense. However, the results of this study should be seen as a starting point for others interested in the Bollywood cultural phenomenon to critique and develop further.

Bollywood as Meaning

The conception of Bollywood as a wider cultural phenomenon than films alone was described by my respondents as playing a part in the formation of their British Asian identity. The different perspectives through which understandings of Bollywood cinema have been cast was also part of this process:

Q: What does Bollywood mean to you?

Zanib: Entertainment, good films, actors, actresses, songs, dances, story line.

Mr Azad: Indian film Industry. Dancing sequences are the first thing that come to mind. Fighting sequence. And then back to the songs again.

Akash: Music, film, entertainment. Finding out about actors/actresses, information about the Bollywood film industry.

Gazalla: It means being an Asian. Being brought up in Britain I find that being surrounded by people from various different backgrounds Bollywood gives me an opportunity to seek and delve into my heritage and it's interesting to see how they portray life in Asian community in India, because I may have a different outlook on various things which may differ from theirs.

Bollywood is the Hindi film capital of India and its various cultural texts (films, music albums, posters, magazines and so forth) are distributed across the globe reaching its audiences in Britain. Bollywood is acknowledged by the respondents as something more than just simple entertainment. Individual components such as genre, songs, actors and actresses, plot, film industry and so forth, which make-up the Bollywood phenomenon are cited. Bollywood is revealed as something more than "mere pleasure" as it is also used in the sense of understanding oneself through an engagement with popular culture. In fact Gazalla uses it as a source of reference for inter-cultural and global dialogues in Britain and across South Asia as a way of making sense of herself and other South Asians. Bollywood incorporates for her a narrative and heritage about herself and others through the portrayal of Asian life on-screen in imaginative ways. She uses Bollywood to read, contest, and construct different outlooks on the world in her way of life of being an Asian. This emphatic view is in stark contrast to those who might wish to position Bollywood as a copy of Hollywood. As another respondent put it:

Q: What does Bollywood mean to you?

Rehman: Asian film industry and also a copy of Hollywood.

Q: Why do you like or hate it?

Rehman: I don't like Asian films. I don't understand them, and they are too long!

Q: How do you respond to people who say Bollywood is a copy of Hollywood, or that it's just terrible?

Rehman: I would agree with them. They could have come up with another name. But the films are different, they are not copies of Hollywood. But the name Bollywood is a rip off!

However, Rehman went on to say, somewhat paradoxically:

Q: What makes Bollywood unique from anything else that you watch?

Rehman: The surroundings are different, like the scenery of small villages, also the atmosphere in the films. I kind of like that because it's different to Hollywood.

Rehman's take on Bollywood as a plagiarism of Hollywood can be seen as revealing the common assumption often hailed at India's popular Hindi cinema. Rehman considers the name of Bollywood as a "rip off" of Hollywood but also argues that the films are different. This reveals, simultaneously, a use of Hollywood as a benchmark for "other" cinemas in terms of its global hegemony but also an implied and contradictory insistence at getting away from Hollywood as a dominant paradigm for understanding non-western films. Bollywood film viewing in Britain is best conceived as a parallel cultural activity for many British Asians who also watch mainstream Hollywood movies but in addition as a way of engaging with the entrenched power relations that ensue from the two film cultures. As other respondents said:

Q: How do you respond to people who say Bollywood is a copy of Hollywood?

Mr Azad: They shouldn't have called it Bollywood because it's too similar to Hollywood. It presents Bollywood as a B-type movie compared to Hollywood's A-type movie. I wouldn't say it's terrible.

Zanib: Tell them it isn't. I get angry and correct them that Bollywood is better than Hollywood.

Musafir: I don't like the reaction of other people who say this, because it may seem similar but it isn't. The messages in Bollywood films is a reality not a fiction, apart from the action scenes. There is good and bad in both, Hollywood and Bollywood, but it's how you take it. I look at the message more than anything else.

Shazarman: They [referring to Bollywood film industry] copy the name but they have their own ideas. They are in their own place and they [Hollywood] are in their place. Only the name is a copy they haven't nicked anything else off them.

Akash: When they copy Hollywood they make it more interesting. I wouldn't say copy I think it's more about using different sources. When they do copy they make it funny. *Criminal* is a good copy of *The Fugitive*, it was a brilliant film and I liked it better than the American original. It was more interesting because you know what was going to happen in *The Fugitive*, but you did not know what was going to happen in *Criminal*.

Bollywood's appellation is undoubtedly an appropriation of Hollywood's and this has seen it being ridiculed by western film commentators (see for e.g. Malcolm 1989), as well as in common sense discourse. However, the ridiculing of Bollywood as a "copy" of Hollywood underlies western signs and meanings of power and difference that are only able to demarcate "other" cultures and audio-visual systems as inferior. My respondents clearly acknowledge and contest such a viewpoint.

Hollywood blockbuster films are able to lay claim as the hegemonic centre of mass film appeal the world over due, in part, to their production and global distribution that arise from the investment of multi-million dollar budgets. Such budgets are part of the neo-colonial order of things in which maximum monetary profit is the order of the day (see Gomery 1998; and Moran 1998). Fortunately, audiences do not easily buy into and make a film successful solely on the basis of production values that are enshrined by big budgets. Those eager to dismiss Bollywood need to engage with its mass appeal as one arising out of complex emotions, feelings, values, and imaginative representations which are unable to be offered by Hollywood alone, and often at a fraction of the cost. There are in operation incomparable economies of scale in terms of the production of Bollywood movies when compared to Hollywood (see Moti Gokulsing and Dissanayake 1998, 102 on Bollywood film production), but this does not detract the pleasures and popularity that Bollywood engages with its audiences.

Furthermore, the idea of a "copy or imitation" of Hollywood is one too easily applied to non-western cinemas when they may adapt or develop an idea taken

from mainstream Hollywood films. Such an approach tends to forget that Hollywood films often appropriate novels or stories that were never intended for the big screen, but this is never viewed as a copy. Also, Hollywood film directors have often been influenced by filmmakers in the developing world but this is rarely appreciated. Quentin Tarrantino's deployment of the action aesthetics of popular Hong Kong cinema would be a case in point.

Further still, the allegations of simply copying story lines or episodes from Hollywood films by Bollywood overlooks the ways in which Bollywood movies have been nuanced for South Asian audiences. They also ignore the elaborate modes of cultural mimicry (Bhabha 1994, Chapter 4) that are used within the films to translate western differences and power hierarchies for Bollywood viewers. Often nineties Bollywood films in their comic scenes will openly acknowledge the exchanges from Hollywood to Bollywood, e.g. "who do you think you are Clint Eastwood?" but will also remind the viewer of the historical legacies of the West and their imperial thefts. This can often include witty remarks that will allude to the increasing, yet disparate, pace of modernisation in South Asia in the context of its changing cultural identity through social and economic interactions with the West. In this way the conventions of mimicry and humour serve to illustrate and dismantle textual and historical power relations as one way from Hollywood to Bollywood, or from the West to the East, and allow viewers a space in which to marvel and mock at their own sense of selves as an eclectic formation.

The Frequencies of Watching Bollywood Films

Responses to questions about how often the respondents watched Bollywood films varied. Apart from Rehman, who claimed to have only ever having watched one film in its entirety, other respondents claimed a frequency of viewing that ranged from "everyday," to "one or two a week," to "at least a couple each month," to "several throughout the year." For instance Gazalla replied. "It can vary over the year, it's not consistent you see," whereas Musafir said "quite often, at least twice a week on TV and video, we have Zee TV, and cinema about 6 or 7 times throughout the year." The different frequencies for watching Bollywood films depended on factors such as the mood respondents were in and the personal leisure time available to watch the movies on TV, video, or at the cinema according to the working week, and due to seasonal and religious holidays throughout the year.

Whilst the frequency of watching Bollywood movies varied amongst the respondents they also indicated that wider aspects of Bollywood popular culture were always part of their homes, adding to their everyday cultural spheres. The viewing of Bollywood films also entailed the consumption of its related products such as the purchasing and listening to of film songs. For example, Bollywood film songs would most often be on in their houses on the radio, cassette and CD player, on satellite TV, and on car stereos in vehicles that belonged to their households. Gazalla claimed to buy "three [film songs] cassettes a month," whilst Musafir claimed to purchase "6 or 7 cassettes a month."

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Despite the varied frequencies of watching Bollywood movies, all respondents, except Rehman, indicated a sense of engagement with the film texts as elaborating

an engagement with themselves. This included the different cultural and social uses made of the films by the respondents, particularly whilst viewing the films in a diasporic British Asian context.

Q: Living in Britain, do you feel that Bollywood offers you something special?

Imran: Yes, it gives me a choice. I think it's great that this sort of quality of entertainment is coming back from the subcontinent, the India side, and that we are now appreciating it. People are more open about Bollywood these days and are willing to talk about it when they socialise.

Shazarman: I get to see how India is improving. For example in the 1980s films you see an older different type of car, now you see cars like Mercedes, Volvo etc. Also I can develop my skills in speaking Hindi and Urdu. ... Bollywood is making improvements on the films they make.

Zanib: Life without them would be boring. Hollywood films are too short, they don't have any songs. *Titanic* only had one song in it. Bollywood is better than Hollywood!

Mr Azad: I wouldn't say Bollywood offers me anything special. I just think it's my love of Bollywood cinema, and the diversity it offers.

Musafir: Yes. Well it brings my culture to me. It helps me with my language. It lets me know what's going on in and around Asia. Religion, including morality and family values, plays an important role in many Bollywood films. Unlike *goreh* [white people] many of them don't seem to believe in God anymore. We take religion importantly, it's always there in Bollywood which shows a commitment. It's always there because people anticipate it and appreciate it being there.

Gazalla: Yes. I think it's the concept of heritage which employs a certain response. It involves inner feelings about the Asian community emotionally. ... The reality of it all because it brings the message home. Hollywood films, right, like *City of Angels* with Nicholas Cage and Meg Ryan in it, there's this caption for the film, "She never believed in Angels until she fell in love with one." That's very unlike Bollywood because firstly they would never do their films like that, angels and that type of stuff as the wholly imagined other world. But what makes them unique is the way they play the imagined other world as part of the real world especially the acting in songs.

The viewing of Bollywood movies in Britain offers a choice to its audiences to partake in a cultural activity that includes signs and cues of "Asianness" not readily available in mainstream British and Hollywood films. Bollywood films include audio and visual representations of the Indian subcontinent and its diasporas and they act as a vehicle for initiating social communication amongst its audiences. Even in the case of Mr Azad who claims that Bollywood does not offer him anything special in the British context, the notion of cultural and social "diversity" that the films open up is important to him.

Almost all respondents felt that Bollywood was a useful cultural and social resource that facilitated their ability to speak in the South Asian languages of Hindi or Urdu. Also, further aspects of the respondents' culture were developed through the films, as in the case of Musafir's brief discussion of religion and morality. Non-European languages have long been considered as dysfunctional in the Western immigration context and non-white customs, beliefs, and religions have been viewed with suspicion and as primitive in the Western imagination (Said 1978).

Bollywood films incorporate a plurality of Asian cultures and representations both in their aesthetics and in their thematic content. Bollywood films gradually articulate such aesthetic and thematic positions that can be ideological and/or open to creative interpretation. The representations of gender and sexuality in Bollywood films and how both "straight" and "camp" audiences might read them would be an interesting example. The point being made is to be aware of Bollywood films as being enjoyed and problematised by Bollywood audiences themselves, rather than through dismissive Western film criticism and common sense understandings. The

act of viewing Bollywood films in Britain, whether in the personal space of the home and/or in the public sphere of the cinema, can be considered as a cultural practice wherein notions of becoming and being “Asian” are able to flourish on the terms of British Asians themselves. Gazalla’s comment about Bollywood films “involving inner feelings about the Asian community emotionally” is well taken. It draws our attention to account for the complex ways in which Bollywood movies as popular cultural texts deploy the conventions of fantasy, pleasure, everyday lived realities, and the imagination to tell stories about its characters with which audiences themselves can identify. As Gazalla outlines, the diegetic world of the characters, the “real” world of the audiences, and their fantastical articulations are often played out through songs and dance in Bollywood (for a more detailed exposition of songs and dance in Bollywood movies see Dudrah and Tyrrell Forthcoming 2002).

Conclusion

This article has introduced and elaborated on the Bollywood cultural phenomenon in Britain and beyond as part of a broader diasporic South Asian popular culture. In particular it has considered the social act of Bollywood cinema-going in Birmingham as a cultural and leisure activity that began in the post-war period, declined during the eighties, and that has revived again since the early-mid nineties. The cultural geographies and histories of British Asian-run Bollywood cinemas in predominantly Black areas of settlement have been introduced as testimony to the remaking of urban British landscapes that are invested with meanings of belonging and feeling at home.

This essay also reported the findings of a small-scale qualitative study about Bollywood film viewing and its associated cultural activities in Birmingham. As described by almost all my respondents, Bollywood films in cinema auditoriums and in people’s homes are filled with sounds, images, and stories that blur the actual audiences’ everyday realities with the diegetic world of the characters on screen. Furthermore, the film representations and sounds offered in contemporary Bollywood movies are increasingly encompassing elements of diasporic South Asian lives through the thematic content of the motion pictures which cross sub-continental and diasporic boundaries.

Bollywood cinema has also borrowed story lines and cultural references from Hollywood. This has been done not in terms of a simple counterfeit but instead as a reworking and mimicry of audio-visual signs and codes as nuanced according to the expectations of its audiences. In fact, Hollywood is acknowledged as a counter-reference point through which understandings of Bollywood cinema have been cast as well as contested by my respondents. In this way, Bollywood films in Britain offers those diasporic South Asians that partake in its activities a means for contemplating a wider set of representations and possible lives than those offered in mainstream cinema.

Bollywood cinema’s visibility in the West has started to increase over the past few years. This is due, in part, to the exposure it has received in the mainstream mass media some of which has been more welcomed than others. As Tyrrell puts it: “In the West, Bollywood is viewed as an alternative to the mainstream, not only by Indians, but increasingly by a wider public, while ironically, in India itself, it has always symbolised adherence to it” (Tyrrell 1999, 269).

Despite the growth of Bollywood in Britain and the West more generally I would like to end this article on a slightly cautionary note. At the start of Bollywood cinema-going in the nineties Asian-run cinemas were often packed to full capacity thereby rejuvenating the economies, geographies, and histories of local Black areas of settlement and leisure up and down the country. However, since the multiplexes have also started showing Bollywood films, primarily to cash in on their popularity, the futures of Bollywood cinema-going in urban British cities remain to be seen.

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