

Bollywood/Toronto:
Transnational Spectatorship
in an Era of Globalization

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My study of the exhibition and consumption of Bollywood films in Toronto is inspired by two key theoretical objects. The first has to do with the desire to explore alternatives to thinking globalization as a single integrated or unified conceptual scheme, a particular danger in Canadian studies where the tendency has been to read globalization exclusively as an extension of American cultural and economic imperialism. A more productive line of inquiry has been suggested by Saskia Sassen, who shifts the focus from the conventional global/national axis to a consideration of how globalization is actualized in concrete localized forms at the sub-national level of cities. Of great import to the Canadian experience, Sassen insists that the presence of large diasporic populations in major metropolitan cities attests to the living reality of postcoloniality and uneven development, both historic features of long term global economies. As such, she argues, immigration and ethnicity need to be taken out of the paradigm of “otherness” and situated, precisely, as a fundamental aspect of globalization, “a set of processes whereby global elements are localized, international labour markets are constituted, and cultures from all over the world are de- and reterritorialized.”¹ Introducing sub-national groupings like cities into an analysis of globalization, not only adds concrete specificity but allows for a consideration of the way in which economic globalization impacts on the lives of marginal subjects, “women, immigrants, people of colour,” as she puts it, “whose political sense of self and identities are not necessarily embedded in the nation or the national community.”² Sassen’s reorientation of globalization theory around the lives of marginal subjects, in this instance the lives I will be investigating are those of South Asian immigrants in Toronto, will be productively conjugated with Arjun Appadurai’s insight into how communities are forged transnationally, through, as he writes, “indigenous trajectories of desire and fear with global flows of people and things.”³

My second theoretical object has been formulated in relation to Andrew Higson’s enormously useful and by now decade-old paper “The Concept of National Cinema,”⁴ (1989), where he suggests that the study of national cinema be expanded to include an investigation of:

the range of sociologically specific audiences for different types of film and how these audiences use these films in particular exhibition circumstances... the pleasures they derive from this activity, the specific nature of the shared social and communal experience of cinema going, differentiated according to class, race, gender, age etc.⁵

While American film studies has enthusiastically appropriated ethnographic and sociological methods to explore the metropolitan formation of audiences for early silent cinema within specific ethnic and cultural communities, this particular approach has been underutilized within the field of Canadian film studies. With Higson, however, I'm suggesting that exploring the conjunctural specificity of audience formation, asking how ethnically particular audiences construct their cultural identities in relation to international global film and television products, takes us away from our typical preoccupation with a homogenizing national identity into a complex and sociologically rich territory that opens us to the irreducibly diverse nature of cinema consumption within Canada.

I. The History of Exhibition of Bollywood in Toronto

With respect to my first object then, there is perhaps no more forceful counter example of a globalizing media phenomenon that rivals the American cultural empire than the Bombay film industry, or Bollywood, as it is affectionately known. An unapologetically commercial and mass popular cinema, for the past fifty years it has produced 800 features a year, twice as many as Hollywood. Its revenue surpasses one billion US dollars a year, a modest amount relative to Hollywood, but an enormous amount within the context of a developing economy. Furthermore, in India, cinema-going is not an occasional cultural experience, it is a national mania. There are 13,000 theatres in India, serving an estimated fifteen million spectators a day (Dwyer, 96). Ranging in admission from 10 rupees to 100, the appeal of cinema cuts across caste and class lines. No matter how indigent or hungry, as one of my informants put it, "even rickshaw drivers and beggars," will spend 10 rupees for stall seats to sit in air-conditioned splendour for three hours, watching the antics of their beloved heroes and heroines. Storey-high billboards featuring stars in action poses from the latest release adorn every corner of the metropolitan landscape in India. A proliferating number of fan magazines, gossip columns, television interview shows on cable and satellite fuel an omnivorous obsession with the lives and loves of stars who are endlessly referred to on a first name familiar basis: Amitabh, Rekha, Nargis, Shar Rukh.

Outside of India, the 14 million Indians who live in the diaspora in Saudi Arabia, Africa, the U.K., Trinidad, Canada, Eastern Europe and Latin

America provide an enormously lucrative market for Bollywood product, accounting for more than one-fourth of revenues for some Hindi hits.⁶ In Toronto, the South Asian population in the greater metropolitan area in 2001 represents one of the largest concentrations of the South Asian diaspora with a population of approximately 400,000, which continues to expand as immigration from Pakistan and Sri Lanka represent the second largest ethnic category of contemporary immigration into the Toronto area. It is clear that a very high percentage of these South Asian immigrants and now residents, have imported their national obsession with them. At last summer's "Mega Super Star" show featuring well known Bollywood luminaries lip-synching and dancing to "filmi" songs that every audience member knew by heart, every seat in the 20,000 seat Air Canada Centre was filled.⁷ In Brampton, Cineplex Odeon showed the smash hit, *Hum Saath-Saath Hain* in 1999 which grossed over 400,000 dollars in four weeks and broke into the Top 10 weekend box office in Toronto for two weeks running in November, outdrawing major Hollywood releases like *American Beauty* and *The Bachelor*. Earlier that year, another local distributor brought *Taal* (1999, directed by Subhash Ghai) to Ontario Place as a novelty item, which intriguingly features mountain scenes shot outside of Calgary, the CN tower and a narrative sequence in which the romantic couple go to the MTV awards in Canada. The IMAX theatre sold out almost every show. Bollywood fare is also wildly popular at the AMC Interchange at Highway 400 and 7 in Vaughan, which dedicates one of its thirty screens to exhibiting Hindi films next to *The Good Thief*, *Lord of the Rings* and *How to Lose a Guy in 10 Days*. Two cinemas in Toronto, the Albion in the Shoppers World mall on the airport strip and the Woodside in the Woodside shopping mall in Scarborough are dedicated to the exclusive exhibition of Hindi films, showing three different features three times daily. Both are dedicated to creating a "South Asian atmosphere,"⁸ selling mango juice, samosas and kulfi at the concession booth.

In addition to the video and DVD rental outlets on Gerrard Street and in Mississauga and Brampton which continue to import thousands of vintage and contemporary releases into the area, the South Asian community in Toronto area has extensive access to Bollywood fare on cable and digital television including: the Asian Television Network (ATN), started in 1971, three digital speciality language channels including two regional language channels and one Hindi movie channel, B4U (Bollywood for You) that broadcasts Hindi movies 24 hours a day, Zee TV broadcast direct from India on cable or Bollywood Boulevard on OMNI TV, channel 14 in Toronto, which features a Bollywood double bill every Sunday afternoon at 2 p.m.

In short, the consumption of Bollywood films in the greater Toronto area is a major cultural phenomenon and has been, I will argue, since the late



Top: Mrs. Jafry and spectators at the Parliament Cinema.
Bottom: Mr. Gyan Jafry and Mrs. Jafry in the lobby of the Parliament Cinema.
All photos courtesy Mr. Gyan Jafry.

1960s. The greatest wave of South Asian immigration began at this time, with approximately 20,000 to 40,000 new immigrants arriving in the city every year for the next decade. Canadian immigration in the 1960s encouraged professionals and skilled immigrants who came under the “independent” class as it was assigned under the point system. Canadian industries were actively recruiting trained engineers and technicians from India and the UK to come to Canada and these policies tended to attract immigrants with a high level of educational attainment, although a growing proportion of South Asian immigration was also facilitated through family sponsorship. At that point, the South Asian population was scattered throughout the downtown core (from Bloor to Queen on the north-south axis and Parliament to Dovercourt on the east-west) without any particular residential agglomeration.⁹

Determined to meet the needs of this large and dispersed population, the India Student Association, the India-Canada Association and the Pakistan – Canada Association began organizing cultural events, of which the key events involved the exhibition of Bollywood films. An auditorium or church basement would be rented, flyers distributed in laundromats and temples, a single Bell and Howell 16mm projector would be set up, and spectators would be treated to the latest Bollywood fare. According to Mr. Jafry, owner and manager of the Parliament Theatre, this was done on a rather infrequent basis, although the enthusiasm and size of the crowds convinced both him and Mr. Gyan Naaz, who would go on to open the Naaz Cinema on Gerrard Street East, that the regular exhibition of Bollywood films could be both a lucrative endeavour and an important device in nurturing the culture of the South Asian community. Mr. Naaz had immigrated in 1967 and Mr. Jafry in 1966, and both were typical of the immigration patterns at the time. Mr. Naaz was an engineer, and Mr. Jafry had been recruited by La France Textiles to work as the Director of Development in Woodstock Ontario. After being let go from La France Textiles, Jafry moved to Toronto in search of business opportunities and began renting school auditoriums in 1967: North Toronto Collegiate, Bloor Collegiate, and Brockton High Collegiate for individual screenings. In 1969, he expanded exhibition into Bedford Park Public School and increased the number of screenings to three days a week: Friday, Saturday and Sunday. At the same time, Mr. Naaz began exhibiting 16mm versions of Bollywood films in the east end of Toronto, with screenings in Castle Frank High School, Jarvis Collegiate, and North York Collegiate featuring two or three shows on the weekend, averaging crowds of 500 to 600.¹⁰ At that moment, the chief supplier of films was India Film Overseas in Chicago who distributed exclusively in 16mm. Mr. Naaz originally used Hindustan Films in New York but in 1970, both Naaz and Jafry switched to Gala Films in New York who began importing Bollywood

films in 35mm. Having easy access to 35mm facilitated the transformation of the exhibition context of Bollywood films in Toronto from an amateur, ad hoc basis to a commercial and theatrical one.

In 1971, with a one thousand dollar down payment, Jafry began leasing the College Street Cinema at Bathurst and College that had been exhibiting Chinese films, the first commercial theatre in North America to begin showing Indian films on a regular basis. The College had 320 seats, which would be filled with screenings that continued to be confined to the regular Friday, Saturday and Sunday slots. After six months, Jafry sold the College and bought the Gay Cinema on Parliament and Dundas Street, a very popular neighbourhood theatre with a seat capacity of 420. He renamed the cinema the Parliament, and showed Bollywood features in both 16mm and 35mm. By 1974, the theatre had become so successful that Jafry was running films seven days a week and would continue to do so until he finally sold the theatre in 1984.

Exactly at the same time, Mr. Naaz, convinced that the exhibition of Bollywood films required a more professional mode of exhibition than the Bell and Howell, with its laborious change over and creaky sound, and dreaming, as his son put it, of “building a community,” took over the Eastwood Theatre at 1430 Gerrard Street. The Eastwood, built in 1929, had been one of the top neighbourhood theatres in Toronto with palatial deco interior design and over 1000 seats, which had specialized in Greek and Italian films. When Naaz took it over, the theatre had been closed for a couple of years and the area was an unpromising, run-down, blue-collar neighbourhood whose only business was a few tailors, barbers and corner stores that catered to local residents. The primary ethnic mix of the street was Greek and Anglo Saxon and in fact, as Lisa Oliveira has pointed out, many of Gyan Naaz’s middle class countrymen “berated him for choosing the Gerrard-Coxwell location” (Oliveira, 50). There was no South Asian residential concentration in the area and as she points out: “Many in the East Indian community were convinced that Naaz had made a mistake as the whole area was unsuitable for business. There was a feeling that Naaz somehow let the Indian community down by locating his cinema in such a depressed area” (Oliveira, 50). But the quality of the neighbourhood did nothing to deter Bollywood fans in Toronto. Cut down to 768 seats with an enlarged screen, the Naaz was soon a phenomenal success. While weekly shows featured discount prices and retro black and white older films with modest audiences, on the weekends, it was blockbuster time with Friday evening and Saturday and Sunday screenings bringing in crowds of up to five thousand people to see the latest Bollywood releases. Dressed in their finest saris and bandgala (lounge suit with Nehru collar) or the sherwani pyjama, entire families and

South Asians of all generations would congregate around the theatre, to meet friends and acquire new ones. As noted, with the population dispersed throughout the city, the cinema on Gerrard specifically came to function as a key social context and one that facilitated proliferating networks of friends and acquaintances. For many of the people I interviewed, this was especially true of female South Asians, many of whom did not speak English or work outside of the home. Outside of the temple, the cinema was the primary facilitator of social contact.¹¹

With these kinds of crowds, enterprising South Asian entrepreneurs began setting up restaurants around the Naaz to cater to the cinema-going crowd. As Gyan Naaz himself put it: “one week after the showing of a blockbuster, superhit Hindi film a new Indian store would open its doors.”¹² Real estate prices were low, among the cheapest in Toronto, some selling for as little as \$20,000.¹³ As Oliveira writes, “The first Indian merchants who moved into the area were not particularly concerned about the run-down character of the properties. They did things as cheaply as possible - no renovation, inexpensive merchandise, makeshift displays. Low overhead was their watchword” (Oliveira, 53). The restaurants originally modeled themselves on the fast food “bazaar stalls” of northern India, serving pre-prepared samosas and sweets to standing customers¹⁴ and utilizing the sidewalks for additional display and commercial exchange. At first, businesses clustered around the theatre, but by 1975 shops had begun to open in adjoining blocks on both the north and south side of the street. Little India was launched.

While the Naaz and India Bazaar represented the psychic centrepiece of Bollywood in Toronto, there were a number of other neighbourhood theatres in the city that also began catering to the exclusive exhibition of Hindi films. Another enterprising South Asian entrepreneur, Mr. Sahota, bought the Dominion Theatre further east on Gerrard in 1975 and renamed it the Krishna Theatre. While the Krishna was not particularly successful, and closed after about six months, Sahota soon opened the Donlands (on Donlands and O’Connor), with the hopes of starting another Little India in that community. His success with the Donlands led him to purchase the Paradise Theatre at Bloor and Dovercourt in 1976, and at the height of the Bollywood boom in Toronto in the mid-seventies there were five or six commercial independent cinemas successfully exhibiting Hindi cinema.

Most of these cinemas closed in the mid-1980s, defeated by the expanding video industry and by a range of basement video pirates. When Mr. Naaz sold his theatre in 1984, it was renovated for 1.5 million dollars and renamed the Naaz Centre with a 550 seat cinema hall on the first floor and a small mall on the ground floor. The name changed to “Indian Theatre” in 1988 and in its latter years it primarily exhibited Tamil movies. It closed in

2002, and is now decrepit and abandoned. It wasn't until 1992 that the cineplex-style Woodside and Albion cinemas opened in suburban strip malls, and South Asian audiences, like audiences for mainstream Hollywood were lured back into theatres, hungry for the pleasures of Dolby sound and big screen 35mm resolution. Little India, however, remains a vibrant community. On weekends, in particular, it continues to attract thousands of South Asians and tourists to eat butti (spicy barbequed corn), or to smell the incense wafting out of sari stores filled with a rainbow of organza silk. While many of original store owners have migrated to areas of residential concentration - Brampton, Mississauga, Scarborough and the airport road - where smaller versions of Little India persist, the area, as Lisa Oliveira notes, "is more than a market serving people of Indian origin:

It has become the symbol of the South Asian community in Toronto, and its largest visible public expression. Without its focus, the South Asian community, with its members dispersed throughout the greater Metro area and fragmented into scores of religious and regional associations, would largely be an abstraction, without a collective presence (54).

And it all started because of a cinema theatre.¹⁵

II. Theorizing the Global Spectator

Although we could begin to ask some deeper analytic questions about the nature of the culture that is constructed and purveyed in Bollywood cinema, there is no question that just as Bollywood is the chief purveyor of public culture in India, so too is it within the whole of the South Asian diaspora. As Vijay Mishra writes: "Bollywood or Bombay Cinema – brings the global into the local, presenting people in Main Street Vancouver, as well as Southall, London, with shared 'structures of feeling' that in turn produce a transnational sense of communal solidarity" (238). Produced exclusively in India's putative national language of Hindi, Bollywood proposes a communal imagination inclusive of the many (and recently violently contested) cultural, linguistic and religious differences of the subcontinent. While the Urdu dialect is very close to Hindi, native speakers of Gujarati and Punjabi often learn Hindi exclusively through their cinema-going experience,¹⁶ although the Hindi in Bollywood films, as Rachel Dwyer notes, includes a great deal of "Hinglish-English colloquialisms and turns of phrase" (84). While Lisa Oliveira argued that more upper-middle-class South Asians in Toronto, true to the traditional cultural habitus they occupy in India, disdain Bollywood for its vulgarity and lower class sensibilities,¹⁷ the colloquial memory of cinema managers and spectators was that Bollywood theatres tended to

attract audiences that cut across class differences, something that Mishray sees lying “at the very heart of the diasporic imaginary—that is, the diaspora’s fictive identification with mass culture in contrast with middle class rejection of it back in the homeland” (247).

It is clearly no accident that South Asian filmmakers in Canada from first-time directors Nisha Pahuja, the director of *Bollywood Bound* (2002), a documentary on young South Asian-Canadians trying to break into Bollywood, and Eisha Marjara, of *Desperately Seeking Helen* (1998), which explores the director’s life long obsession with Helen, the notorious vamp of Bollywood musicals in the 1960s and 1970s, to Srinivas Krishna, the director of *Masala* (1992), and Deepa Mehta, director of the recent *Bollywood/Hollywood* (2002), have all, at one point in their career, produced a film that references and is formally conjugated with influences from Bollywood cinema. Nisha Pahuja pointed out that many of the teenagers she interviewed doing her research did not know who Julia Roberts was, and like Nisha who frequented the Paradise Cinema on College Street with her brother for the Saturday double bill matinee all through the 1970s, their childhood experience of the cinema was grounded exclusively in the ethnic particularity of Bollywood.¹⁸

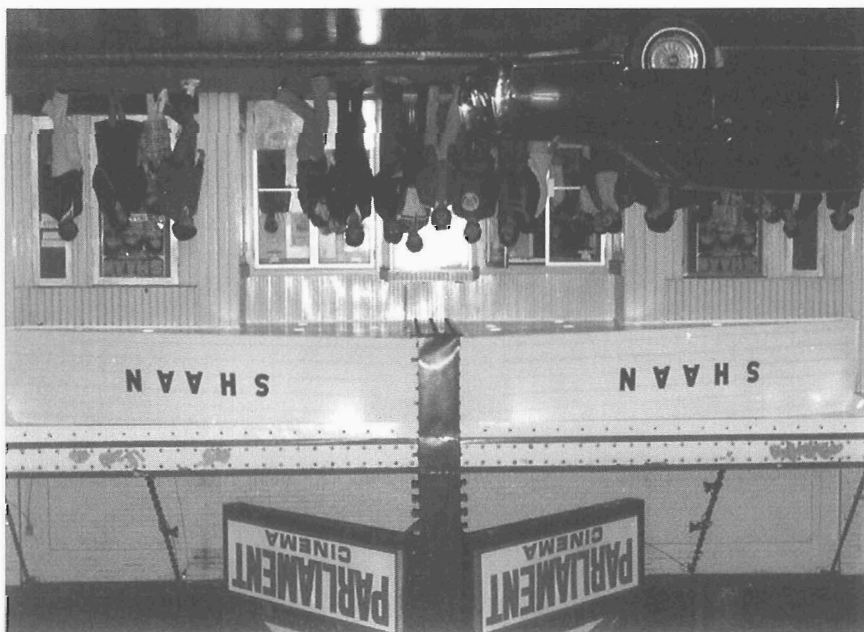
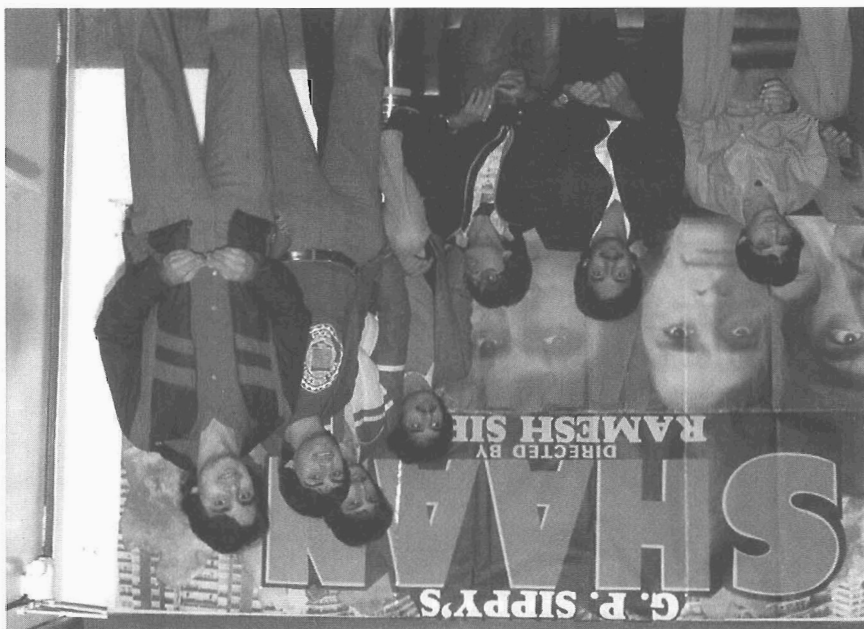
While the scholarship around Bollywood has developed enormously within the last few years, with major studies by Rachel Dwyer, Ashis Nandy, Madhava Prasad and Vijay Mishra,¹⁹ only Mishra has actually devoted a chapter in his book, *Bollywood Cinema: Temples of Desire* to consider the distinctive nature of spectatorship for the 14 million South Asians who live in the diaspora and whose experience of Bombay cinema is overdetermined by their minoritarian status within a foreign country. As the issues raised by this vast and evolving body of cinema are complex and far ranging, I am not proposing to do any extensive textual analysis. My intention is rather, to generalize and extrapolate from a broad body of films produced in the last thirty years in order to touch on four key frames for thinking the complexity of international cinematic transactions.

Mishra points out how, in contrast to the first flow of South Asians as indentured labour to plantations in South Africa, Fiji, Trinidad and Guyana during the late imperial period of classic capitalism, the wave of immigration from South Asia in the late 1960s was distinguished by the upward economic mobility of its participants and by the fact that technological developments such as lower priced international phone rates (only 29 cents an hour to phone Mumbai [Bombay] chirps the ubiquitous advertisement on OMNI television), discount airfare, satellite TV, DVDs, video, email, etc. have facilitated unbroken contact with the homeland. As a recent article in the *Toronto Star* put it:

Not long ago, when immigrants arrived they were, simply, here. News from the old country might come in letters from family and friends, state newspapers and, occasionally, hurried conversations over expensive, static filled phone lines. Trips back home were rare...[Today] geography matters less than it used to, relationships we have with people and events around the world can be as, or more, important than those where we actually live.²⁰

While this transnational imaginary is built around a fantasized and over-idealized relation to the culture of the homeland, fueled by its primordial absence and by nostalgia and homesickness, it is also produced, as Mishra insists, as a reactive formation to the racism and sense of exclusion and marginalization experienced by new immigrants in their everyday lives. In Canada, official governmental discourses of the 1970s articulated ethnic difference in relation to multiculturalism, diversity, and equality, but as Mishra points out “many diasporic people find it difficult, perhaps even impossible, to present their ‘new’ nation-states to consciousness” (237). This fact was reinforced in my conversations with South Asian entrepreneurs and spectators who use the term “Canadian” to refer exclusively to white Anglo-Saxons, rarely seeing themselves, hyphenated citizenship aside, included within that political formation. For the first generation entrepreneurs especially, Canada remains for the most part primarily a site for economic opportunity and a guarantor of political rights. Emotional investments in culture and social life are reserved for what Mishra terms “the sublime otherness” of the homeland whose “key translatable sign” (237), that which mediates and resolves the schism of physical absence, is Bombay cinema. This cinema, as Mishra puts it, is a “crucial determinant in globalizing and deterritorializing the link between the imagination and social life in both negative and positive senses” (237). Living somewhere but identifying with images produced across the divide of geography and time is characteristic of the diasporic consciousness that is crucially formed by the spatial and temporal disjuncture of immigration and is, perhaps, most poignantly embodied by the father in Deepa Mehta’s *Bollywood/Hollywood* who survives the consistent disappointment of Canada by the continuous calling up of images of his “beloved Punjab.” Writing against theories of the diasporic imaginary, in particular those associated with Stuart Hall and Homi Bhabha that stress the fluidity and original syncretic mix of diasporic culture, Mishra cautions that the transnational fascination with Bombay cinema is more inclined to disarticulate the inherent ambiguity and doubled consciousness of the diasporic subject in the interests of a “narrow ethnicity” than it is to promote a “critical internationalism” (237).²¹

Spectators at the Parliament Cinema, circa the late 1970s.



One of the continuous refrains in discussions with South Asian theatre entrepreneurs and spectators in Toronto is their common articulation of Bombay cinema as the repository of authentic Indian values or what Mishra refers to as “timeless dharmik virtue” (23). For many, bringing their children to view Bollywood films is a way of ensuring their inculcation into Indian culture and providing them with a repertoire of idioms and textual references, intended to facilitate intergenerational discussion and bonding through shared cultural experiences. One of my informants, Sabu Quereshi, a thirty-year-old photographer in Toronto, felt that for him, Bollywood films were “like another parent, teaching respect for one’s elders and the importance of sacrifice and duty.” While he watched some Hollywood films on television, his theatrical consumption of cinema was reserved, as was the case with so many of his peers, to Bollywood cinema. As Patricia Uberoi has observed: “Indianness is not so much a question of citizenship as of sharing family values” (167).

But what are these traditions and values which are being purveyed by Hindi commercial cinema? Madhava Prasad, in one of the most brilliant and original studies of Hindi cinema, argues that the dominant form of the cinema from the 1950s up to the early 1970s was the feudal family romance. While other film genres began proliferating in the 1970s, most notably a middle-class realist cinema and a cinema of mobilization or action cinema (starring the ubiquitous Amitabh Bachchan), the feudal romance continues up to the present as a continuously resurrected form that negotiates deep social and political tensions around Indian feudal family values. Prasad does not interpret the family romance, however, as a classical reiteration of the modernity versus tradition binary. Feudal values around honour, the sanctity of marriage, modesty, and the primacy of the family as the arbiter of all social value and fulfillment, he argues, “[f]ar from being a ‘residue’ or a self-regenerating essence... form an active component of a particular modern state form.”²²

Prasad’s point is that, in the case of Indian society, an interpretative framework that relies on linear chronology, or the classic Marxist concept of historical stages, would ultimately misread the fact that in India, capitalist modernity and feudal tradition co-exist in uneasy and constant negotiation. At the heart of this negotiation, the specter of the arranged marriage persists as both anachronism and idealized social formation.²³ How Bollywood resolves this contradiction is the repetitive and time-honoured formula of what Uberoi calls the “arranged love marriage”²⁴ where the romantic couple is eventually blessed with ultimate parental approval, thus preserving the weight and authority of the extended feudal family, which acquires its own legitimization through its role in arbitrating these relations.

Within the family feudal romance, the typical and endlessly repeated narrative formula concerns the thwarted romance between a young man and a young woman who are usually from different socio-economic backgrounds. Sometimes this economic difference overlaps with a rural/urban or even Indian/diasporic distinction, and most often it is the male lead who is affiliated, through his family, to the higher rung of economic privilege and wealth. In *Taal*, for example, the male romantic lead is a diasporic Indian from London who falls in love with Mansi, a “mountain girl” from Kashmir, while visiting his family. His nouveau riche family is resistant to the formation of the couple, particularly his social climbing mother who sees Mansi, the “mountain girl,” as a gold-digger. There are many complications, interrupted by many performance numbers, as Mansi, to while away the time before marriage, has become an incredibly successful MTV singing and dancing superstar. Eventually, however, the couple is sanctioned by the universal approbation of both families.

This approbation, of course, is crucial to the ideological mission of the film, which is to tantalizingly revel in the pleasure and danger of a romance fueled by individual choice and sexual attraction while ensuring, through the universal narrative code of Bollywood cinema, that any sexual consummation will only take place after marriage and with the necessary sanction of the state and patriarchal family. In the narrative sequences in *Taal*, the attraction between the couple is represented in high Victorian fashion by kisses, but only on the chin, by romantic poses in nature with the wind whipping her hair around both of them, and by the oddest flirtation ritual of all, which involves sipping from a shared bottle of Coke, her lips scandalously touching the straw that his lips have just touched.

The sexual prudery of the narrative sequences, however, is radically contradicted by the flamboyant exhibitionism of the ubiquitous dance sequences in Bollywood cinema, which boldly feature physical touching between men and women, close-ups of bodies, and flesh baring fashions on both men and women. In these sequences, the repressive rule of the superego gives way to the ostentatious display of unadulterated, gaudy id, supported by a cast of hundreds of extras dancing to the pounding rhythms of increasingly Westernized versions of Indian “pop.” In the disjunctive and continuously interrupted narrative of Bollywood film, the spectacle of the dance sequences explicitly invites the erotic gaze of the male spectator whose uninhibited sexual viewing is licensed by the fantasy or dream status of the musical numbers. While these sequences are ultimately framed by the moral code of the narrative, which remains loyal to the feudal values concerning the purity of the woman and the absolute devotion to the authority of family, their allure rests in the fact that they are able to act out a liberated version of sexual freedom where open flirtation between the sexes, touching, ritualized

foreplay, and choreographed pelvic thrusting are permitted without the weight of patriarchal prohibition.

One could certainly make the argument, particularly with reference to the Bollywood films produced in the last decade, that the schizophrenia of the text, divided as it is between the sexual licence of the dance numbers and the moral conservatism of the narrative, represents the working through of a very broad cultural phenomena, as relevant to a diasporic South Asian population as it is to a native population confronted with the accelerated effects of capitalist modernity. The task of renegotiating cultural, familial and personal identity in the face of the social and psychic disjunctures brought about both by immigration and by the transformations of industrialization, urbanization and, most recently, the so-called information revolution, is one shared by South Asian spectators in both native and diasporic contexts who are increasingly aligned by the systems of address in contemporary Bollywood films. Bollywood cinema, as many of its critics have pointed out,²⁵ has historically displaced the tension between tradition and capitalist modernity onto recurring narrative binaries that pit East versus West and the purity of the rural against the moral depredations and debased lifestyles of the urban. While this nostalgic pastoralism continues as a pervasive thematic, the perpetual negotiation between tradition and modernity takes on different forms in the contemporary era of globalization where Western influences and the ever more pervasive presence of consumer culture are translated and assimilated into new (and contradictory) configurations of identity.

Contemporary Bollywood films of the romance genre increasingly feature the accoutrements of an idealized bourgeois consumerist lifestyle. In *Taal*, the lead characters drive sports cars and use cell phones, and sport Western fashions of jeans and leather jackets, mini skirts, spandex and high heels. Their homes are palatial models of Western design and they engage in the most revered symbol of bourgeois accomplishment: international travel and tourism. As noted, in *Taal*, in one of those uncanny reterritorializations of globalization, the destination of international travel is Toronto and the exotic and iconic landscapes of Niagara Falls and the CN tower are prominently featured. As stereotyped and clichéd as these images are, they are densely invested, for a diasporic as much as a native South Asian audience, as symbols of leisure activity, disposable income, and international freedom of movement. They are also, and less overtly, images that acknowledge the importance of Toronto as an immigrant destination and as fantasized site of social mobility and economic opportunity.

III. Diasporic Consciousness

Diasporic consciousness is now, as Vijay Mishra points out, “internal to spectatorial desire within India and essential...to Bollywood’s new global aesthetics” (269). On the crudest monetary level, this consciousness recognizes that the NRI (non-resident Indian) population has become crucial to the success of Bombay cinema: as a lucrative secondary market, complete with its own semi-autonomous network of distributors and exhibitors, and as a source of offshore capital for investment purposes. But, perhaps most importantly, the presence of a diasporic consciousness in contemporary Bollywood films is related to the fact that, beginning in the 1970s (i.e., simultaneous to the start of the most massive displacement of South Asian immigrants in history), these films are increasingly incorporating NRI characters and diasporic locations into their narratives. The enormous success of films like *Taal* is clearly bound up with the manner in which the film incorporates and rewrites diasporic fantasies, circulating these, like the iconic tourist images of Canada, as reified fragments of a global imaginary. As Jyotika Viridi argues:

The NRI is Hindi cinema’s new aristocrat. Iconic of new wealth the NRI replaces the *zamindar* (landed wealth) and Kunwar *sahibs*, scions of the princely states from previous decades, who now stand effaced from popular cinema’s social landscape. As new wealth goes, the line between the NRI and the new middle class, spun by ties to an international economy, blurs with their common consumption desires and tastes (202).

While the majority of the population of India continues to live in sprawling urban slums or poverty-stricken villages (more than a third of the population is too poor to be able to afford an adequate diet, and market surveys indicate that fewer than 5% of all households had an annual income equivalent to \$2,300 or more in 1995-96)²⁶ the fictional world represented in contemporary Bollywood product is explicitly addressed to the anxieties and consumerist aspirations of the new middle class. As Rachel Dwyer argues, “it is in the commercial cinema that the new middle classes are establishing their cultural hegemony, their depictions of lifestyle becoming those to which the lower classes aspire” (102). It is this class, which is obviously most directly aligned with a diasporic consciousness through the shared dream of social mobility and conspicuous consumption, one which is increasingly positioned as the ultimate compensation for the social and cultural deficits involved in the emotional and social rupture of immigration and globalization. The fact that symbols of modernity in Bollywood (spandex and paisley shirts, nylons and leather minis) have a vague sense of the retro about them (to a Western

viewer), reveals only that the translation of global idioms of dress and fashion inevitably have a temporal lag about them.

While the majority of Bollywood product is, more often than not, overtly aligned with an ethos of sexual traditionalism and conspicuous consumption, this is not to argue that resistant readings of Bollywood, within the context of a diasporic audience, are not possible or that the texts themselves do not serve a range of complex and sociologically diverse desires. In her detailed ethnographic study of the television viewing habits of South Asians in Southall, England, Marie Gillepsie convincingly demonstrates how South Asian spectators, differentiated by gender and age, produce different readings of Bollywood films. For older women, particularly those who work exclusively inside the home and whose relationship to British culture is mediated through their children or husband, Bollywood films function very much to consolidate nostalgia and continuous linkage to the (simulated) culture of India. However, female-only viewing sessions with three or four generations of women are very common and provide a continuous opportunity to debate the clash of tradition and modernity. For young people torn between the habitus of the ethnic community and family, and the integrative lure of the public school system and Western consumer culture, Bollywood also functions as a mode of legitimating one's own identity, of finding one's own possibility of being "cool" against the public racism of a culturally hostile host country, even while there is an ironic awareness of the limitations of Bollywood as an authentic representation of tradition.

Of course, once Bollywood begins integrating and articulating itself in relation to its diaspora, it cannot be long before the diaspora answers back. The second generation of South Asians in Toronto, the sons and daughters of those who immigrated in the seventies, have generated an enormously vibrant cultural scene of their own. Bollywood may have had a deeply formative impact on their childhood, but their world has expanded to include a range of influences and provocative alliances. If their parents' notion of preserving Indian culture involved the passive consumption of Bollywood films and a certain allegiance to ethnic absolutism, the second generation has frequently insisted on becoming cultural producers in their own right and of exploring the dynamic and hybrid aspects of diasporic realities. Organizations like *Desh Pardesh* or the South Asian Visual Arts Collective (which put on a visual arts exhibit at Harbourfront this summer that playfully decontextualized images of Bollywood) are openly queer, bisexual and left. *Desh Pardesh*, an annual cultural festival which ran from 1988 to 2000, included workshops and panels on a vast range of hybrid cultural production and political activism: bhangra, bisexuality, lesbian flirting,

fighting the immigration backlash, and HIV/AIDS. It featured screenings of films and videos from local practitioners such as Gitanjali, and from British South Asians such as Pratibha Parmar and Hanif Kureishi.

This hybrid cultural ferment was a crucial breeding ground for filmmakers like Srinivas Krishna who produced *Masala* (1992), a film which bears the distinction of not only being the first feature film produced by a South Asian in Canada, but is unparalleled in the vigour with which it set about deconstructing South Asian diasporic fantasies and stereotypes. Showing young South Asians engaging in casual sex, mocking the rituals of the arranged marriage, savaging the consumerist sensibilities of the middle class immigrant family, and, perhaps most provocatively, exposing the kitschiness of Indian traditions mediated through Bombay film and television were guaranteed to cause a commotion among the more traditional sectors of the South Asian population in Toronto and Vancouver, and so they did.²⁷

Masala's acts of textual piracy and mimicry, of course, are sourced by the mother lode of Bollywood. If Bollywood is renown throughout its history for its voracious cannibalizing of Western tropes of fashion, dance and generic convention, *Masala* reverses the trans-Atlantic flow, mining the rich cinematic traditions of Eastern commercial cinema. Fantasy sequences featuring gods in the heavens, musical numbers on kitschy studio sets, stagey romantic encounters in over-lit gardens, and lip-synching actors are all part of the vernacular of Bollywood, but here the naturalized disjunctive style of Bollywood is transcoded into self-reflexive and postmodern textual play. Vijay Mishra argues that “*Masala* is framed by a critical diaspora theory of subjective ambivalences... [which] precludes identification because it functions as a critique” (242). *Masala's* critical frame distinguishes it from latter appropriations of Bollywood textual conventions such as Deepha Mehta's *Bollywood/Hollywood* whose conflicted aspirations are embedded in its title. Like *Masala*, *Bollywood/Hollywood* is intent on transcoding the global of Bollywood cinema into the local idiom of Canadian art cinema and much of the humour of the film involves the uncanny juxtapositions of cultural translation: a cameo by a well known Bollywood star, English-speaking characters who suddenly break into Hindi in lip-synched musical numbers, and the self-assertiveness and feminist spunkiness of the romantic female lead (Lisa Ray). In both films, moreover, a key element of transcoding the global into the local involves explicit geographic and architectural references to the city of Toronto, and in both, the sari shops, jewelry stores, and restaurants of Little India are prominently featured. But unlike *Masala*, which refused the security of a narrative resolution that revolved around the formation of a heterosexual couple, *Bollywood/Hollywood* employs a far less reflective appropriation of the narrative and moral conventions of the feudal

family romance. In fact, the narrative resolution of *Bollywood/Hollywood* comes precariously close to a kind of ethnic absolutism, when the female lead, who has been hired to act the part of a demure South Asian, is revealed, through her uncanny ability to sing and dance in a Bollywood musical number, to be a “true” Indian. In time-honoured Bollywood fashion, the sexual purity of the female lead is affirmed (against allegations of her promiscuity) and the couple, after many trials and tribulations, is officially formed through the promise of marriage and the sanction of familial approval. *Bollywood/Hollywood* was enormously successful among the South Asian diasporic communities in Toronto and Vancouver, a factor no doubt due to its ultimate allegiance to the moral imperatives of the feudal romance. But the generic richness of Bollywood is also being appropriated for more subversive purposes. Ian Iqbal Rashid, one of the original founders of Kush, a gay South Asian men’s collective, and Desh Pardesh has recently completed *That Touch of Pink*, starring Kyle MacLachlan, which “queers” and mixes influences from 1950s sex comedies and Bollywood tropes to produce a unique and deeply campy hybrid. In the end, whether Bollywood registers as a source of timeless dharmic value or as a glorious inspiration for camp, Hindi films will continue to act as a fertile ground of textual inspiration for Canadian diasporic filmmakers, and as a continued source of complex mediations of nostalgia and cultural identity for diasporic communities in Toronto.

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Notes

- 1 Sasskia Sassen, "Whose City Is It? Globalization and the Formation of New Claims," *Public Culture* no. 8 (1996): 218.
- 2 Sassen, 218.
- 3 Arjun Appadurai, "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy," *Theorizing Diaspora*, eds. Jana Evans Braziel and Anita Mannur (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 28.
- 4 Andrew Higson, "The Concept of National Cinema," *Screen* 30, no. 4 (Autumn 1989).
- 5 Higson, 45.
- 6 Indira A.R. Lakshmanan, "Hooray for Bollywood," *The Hamilton Spectator*, 27 March 1999, Section W: 3.
- 7 These shows are put on throughout the year and are a crucial ancillary strategy to promote Bollywood product and keep diasporic fans in touch with beloved stars. According to the former theatre managers that I interviewed, one of the more indelible of these events featured Amitabh Bachchan (the first and most enduring of the Bollywood superstars) at Maple Leaf Gardens in 1973.
- 8 Eddy Dehmoubed, Manager of the Albion and Woodside Theatre, phone interview, 26 May 2003.
- 9 Interview, Mr. Jafry, 12 May 2003.
- 10 Phone Interview, Mr. Ken Naz, 4 March 2003.
- 11 Interview, Pamila Matharu, 12 May 2003.
- 12 Madhavi Acharya, "One in an occasional series on interesting street corners," *Toronto Star*, 21 July 1997, Section A: 7.
- 13 Satish Dhar, "India Bazaar at the crossroads," *Asianadian: An Asian Canadian Magazine* 4, no. 3 quoted in Lisa Oliveira, *Gerrard India Bazaar at the Crossroads*, unpublished B.A., University of Toronto (2000), 50.
- 14 Oliveira, 53.
- 15 The memory of the heyday of Bollywood on Gerrard, however, lives on in urban redevelopment plans such as The Ryerson Planning Consultants Supplementary Report on Urban Design Guidelines, which proposed that the Naaz Theatre be resurrected and the area renamed Planet Bollywood, featuring "whimsical streetscape designs inspired by the Bollywood film industry," namely, the storey-high billboard postings with their unique painted iconography of Bollywood stars, a concept of retro nostalgia that proves once again the lure of cultural difference as a resource for commodification in the era of late capitalism.
- 16 Interview, Malini Guha, 8 May 2003.

- 17 Interview, Lisa Oliveira, 7 May 2003.
- 18 Interview, Nisha Pahuja, 19 May 2003.
- 19 Rachel Dwyer, *All You Want Is Money, All You Need Is Love, Sex and Romance in Modern India* (London: Cassell, 2000). Vijay Mishra, *Bollywood Cinema: Temples of Desire* (London: Routledge, 2001).
- 20 Peter Gorrie, "Global Ties that Bind Expatriates," *Toronto Star*, 19 January 2003, Section A:1-6.
- 21 Mishra's insight is reinforced by Eddy Dehmoubed, manager of the Albion and Woodside Theatres, who was told by several audience members that they prefer his theatres over the AMC where family members, particularly children and teenagers, are more inclined to be tempted by Hollywood cinema or distracted by audiences that are not exclusively South Asian.
- 22 Madhava M. Prasad, *The State and Culture: Hindi Cinema in the Passive Revolution*, PhD thesis, University of Pittsburgh (1994), 15.
- 23 Within the diaspora, tension around arranged marriage persists not only as ideological but as social reality judging by the number of classifieds in the India Times of families looking for a "homely" educated girl for their thirty or even forty-year-old "boy." In this instance homely does not refer to the absence of physical beauty but to domestic skills.
- 24 Patricia Uberoi, "The Diaspora Comes Home: Disciplining Desire in DDLJ," *Tradition, Pluralism and Identity: In Honour of T.N. Madan*, eds. Veena Das, Dipankar Gupta and Patricia Uberoi (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1999), 164.
- 25 Jyotika Virdi, *The Cinematic ImagiNation, Indian Popular Films as Social History* (New Jersey: Rutgers, 2003), 200-03.
- 26 <http://www.west.net/~wwmr/Indiademo.html>
- 27 Sanjay Khanna, "Masala Take Two/Cutting your own Deals," *Take One 4* (1994): 14-16. Khanna quotes Srinivas Krishna on the reception Masala received at the Vancouver Film Festival: "After the film there was a forum at which people ranted at me....It became bizarre. People on one side of the theatre would clap when one person said one thing; people on the other side would clap when another said something else. Arguments broke out. I was screaming and couldn't be heard. The moderator of the event became nervous as if he were wondering whether a riot would break out when you put a bunch of darkies in one room" (15).