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□ Banaji, Shakuntala:

*Reading 'Bollywood': The Young Audience and Hinhi Films*

Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan (2006). ISBN 0-230-00172-6 (pbk), pp. xix + 208

□ Dudrah, Rajinder Kumar:

*Bollywood: Sociology goes to the Movies*

New Delhi: Sage Publications (2006). ISBN: 0-77619-346-8, pp. 210

**Particip@tions Volume 4, Issue 1 (May 2007)**

## Reviews by Shehina Fazal

Bollywood (Hindi cinema) has had an amazing impact upon cinema audiences as well as scholars of film studies outside of India. Arguably, Hindi cinema has always provided a nostalgic link to the Indian diaspora scattered around the world (Manas Ray, 2000), but it is only recently that Western audiences, film studies scholars and film critics, (who until recently described the genre somewhat negatively, and in some ways looked down upon the Hindi cinema industry), have turned their attention to Bollywood. Until this period, it was predominantly films from the 'parallel cinema' in India, (screened in art-house cinemas in Western Europe and north America) that received attention and in some cases awards in the West. A noteworthy development occurred in 2001 when Bollywood was recognised as an industry in India. The campaigning groups were the Film Federation and lobby groups who demanded legal status for the film industry under the Industrial Dispute Act of 1947. This meant that the film industry that was previously privately funded could now be funded by national banks. This period marked the new era in Hindi cinema. (Bose, 2006).

The two books chosen for this review provide new perspectives on Bollywood film audiences, adding dimensions that the field has not previously engaged with. Both books also explain the links between Bollywood and the current trends in the global industry. Further, both books provide perspectives from the South Asian diaspora and their readings of Bollywood cinema. Key themes that both books discuss are: the theoretical and textual studies on Hindi films; the relationship between audiences and Hindi films in a contemporary context; and issues of gender, sexuality and the reception of Bollywood among young people in London (Banaji), Bombay (Banaji) and Birmingham (Dudrah).

Dudrah's book is a departure from 'traditional' film analyses, which have tended to offer a somewhat reductive analysis of Bollywood, to one that is advancing a path that he rightly claims to be underdeveloped: an exploration of the interaction between cinema, culture and society. Dudrah's book follows the new ground of the "sociological imagination" and how it relates to "private and public issues of the day, writ large through the silver screen

and popular cultures of Bollywood cinema". (p.16) Giving reasons for his approach, Dudrah writes:

> From the outset I want to be clear, I am less interested in offering a systematic and exhaustive interpretation of Bollywood cinema through the canon of founding figures of the discipline and their classical sociological theories and methods alone. This would lead to a reductive registering of the cinema through a list of 'he said, he said' (the founding figures of sociology are often referred to as the founding fathers), which might usefully disprove further, certain aspects of traditional sociology as it is put to use in the analysis of popular cinema such as Bollywood. Rather, I am more concerned with resurrecting and extending an exciting aspect of sociological analysis and discussion that has been largely left undeveloped, that of the study of cinema and its possible relationships in culture and society. (p.15)

Dudrah's book also explores the multiple facets of Bollywood, such as: Bollywood as a global industry; the films themselves as texts of popular culture; and the relationships of these texts with the audience. Dudrah encapsulates the objectives of his work when he writes:

> What emerges then is a dialogic engagement with different yet related spheres of intellectual modes of enquiry that do not pretend to create a single linear or uniform sociological understanding of cinema, and instead work by illustrating the intersections where sociology, film, media and cultural studies can be usefully put together. (p.16)

Banaji's book is a brilliant integration of a review of the theoretical literature on Hindi cinema and the results from her audience studies. The result is a multifaceted exploration of Bollywood that draws upon a range of discussions and theories concerning Hindi films, as well as audience studies. Banaji weaves these theories into an analysis of the film texts and the responses of young film viewers in London and Bombay.

The multidisciplinary approach of both books is essential in contemporary times, where globalisation and the mobility of people is taking place at an unprecedented pace. Therefore, in order to understand the interactions of the audiences with Bollywood, it is necessary that we do not assume uniformity and singularity in our interpretations. Our understanding has to take on board the multi-layered cultural and linguistic experiences of the viewers and therefore, interpretations have to extend beyond the binary frameworks of film analysis. For this reason, both books provide strong arguments for the necessity of understanding the Bollywood industry and the reception of Hindi cinema among its transnational audiences. In my view, three broad themes emerge from these two books. Each theme is briefly discussed below.

**Sociological and psycho-social investigation of Hindi cinema**

Banaji's book, particularly in chapter 1, notes that some scholars presume Hindi films to be formulaic and this analysis is based around the idea of manipulation by the mass media in the 'media effects' tradition, which "tend to privilege classical notions of 'realism' and to label Hindi films either as 'escapism' or as uncomplicated vehicles for deleterious ideologies". (p.18) These notions of reality are juxtaposed against 'fantasy,' where critics have tended to favour classical ideas of 'reality' rather than 'emotion'. Within this approach 'emotion' is perceived to be a hindrance as well as discouraging direct engagement. In contrast, Banaji's book is an attempt to examine the 'meanings' and 'pleasures' of Hindi cinema among a sample of young British Asian and Indian viewers, where the interpretations are extended beyond the formulaic analysis described above (realism versus emotion). Instead, Banaji enters into the realms of psycho-social investigation of audience responses to Hindi films.

Dudrah makes a somewhat similar point about the readings of Hindi films. In advocating the sociology of the Bollywood cinema, Dudrah argues that the public perception of Hindi cinema is that it produces "fluffy masala" movies, and this is based around populist conceptions of popular cinema in general and Bollywood cinema in particular. Dudrah also argues that within sociology, the sociological imagination is currently unable to extend to Bollywood cinema as a topic for socio-cultural research. Thus Dudrah's book is an attempt to counter such views and to place Hindi cinema within the frame of sociological and cultural inquiry. The book's aim is to provide interdisciplinary analysis of theoretical and methodological frames and to use Bollywood as a case study to expand upon our understanding of some of the relationships between cinema, culture and society. Therefore, the fundamental issues that such an analysis draws upon are the idea of cinema as a global industry together with the notion of films as texts of popular culture, and the relationship of these texts with its (global) audiences.

**Reading Popular, Contemporary Hindi Films**

Banaji's book sets out to examine the ways in which ethnicity, masculinity, and femininity are constructed and represented in contemporary Bollywood cinema. Chapters 4-8 cover these issues comprehensively. Banaji's book then moves on to address the way that young audiences, (particularly those aged under 25) interpret both the visual and verbal discourses within Hindi cinema in relation to the issues of masculinity, femininity and ethnicity and their own experiences of sexuality, gender and religion. This challenging study is conducted through participant observation of screenings in London and Bombay. Additionally, in-depth interviews were conducted among people aged between 16 and 25 in London's South Asian and Bombay communities. The focus of Banaji's study is the analysis and theorising of pleasure in the Hindi cinema. The intention here is to weave together the discourses and social contexts of cinema as well as embedding issues of individual experiences and politics in response to Hindi film, thereby challenging the binary opposition between 'emotion' and 'rationality'.

As Banaji writes:

> The arguments and narratives of viewing in this book gain their validity not by giving voice to the film and life experiences and understandings of all South Asian viewers, but by providing a detailed picture of the concerns and meanings made by particular viewers that does, potentially, enable a better understanding of the concerns, interpretative frameworks and life-worlds of other viewers. (p. xvii)

Both authors selected the film *Hum Apke Hain Koun…!* (*HAHK*) (*Who Am I To You?*, 1994, Dir. Sooraj Barjatya) to discuss. *HAHK* was one of the most successful films in Hindi cinema in the 1990s. In the UK, *HAHK* ran for many weeks in cinemas in London, and "the high quality of production, family values and no violence were cited by numerous Indian film commentators as contributing to its huge success" (Dudrah, p.55). Banaji provides a very interesting interpretation of her respondents' reading of *HAHK*, whereas Dudrah gives an account of the role of the music and songs in the film.

The predominant theme in Banaji's commentary of *HAHK* is that it advocates the notion of 'family values' that are centred around the Hindu joint family structure, the necessity of getting parental approval for marriage and the promotion of the values where the women in the family often have to sacrifice their own wishes over the needs of the family. When *HAHK* was released, it did receive critical attention, quite rightly, in that the film engaged with the Hinduisation project of the then government in power and contributed to the creation of the Hindu national space where women are encouraged to return the domestic duties in the household, rather than seek employment and become economically independent. A young female respondent in Banaji's sample explains when asked a general question about the role of women in Hindi films, stating that women are expected to make sacrifices to conform to the 'traditional' values and what emerges is frustration when such issues are articulated. Another respondent talks about the 'more fundamentalist' and 'Hindu ways' in *HAHK*. Dudrah on the other hand discusses *HAHK*'s music and songs in great detail, which he proposes, "move the film's narrative forward". (p.60) However, he also critically comments that Bollywood films promote Hindu, middle class identities and construct "an imagined community in the urban centres of India and also through the representation of the diaspora". (p.170) Both writers echo the positive reception of the film among Indian and diaspora audiences. On a positive note, Banaji says that several of the respondents in her sample claimed that the *HAHK* was the first film that they really enjoyed watching with members of the extended family.

Both books also discuss issues of sexuality in Hindi cinema. Banaji discusses responses to sex, love and sexuality among young viewers in Bombay and London, while Dudrah explores the 'queer audience', where the song and dance sequences in Hindi films are given 'new cultural translations' in clubs. This process questions not only the relationships of the diaspora with the homeland, but also questions issues concerning gender and sexuality as well. The result of such developments is, as Dudrah says, that Bollywood cinema has increasingly begun to include 'queer representations', thereby making the South Asian audience not just consumers of these texts, but able to use them to

formulate certain aspects of their lives. The representations of homosexuality is a positive development, however, it sits uncomfortably with the politics of gender where there is an increasing emphasis on re-domesticating women. As one of the respondents in Banaji's sample states:

> If women should do it, then men should do it as well!…..But I don't like all this recent preaching. I just want to see a real Indian woman who is strong and who asserts themself……the way I see it, you marry a girl for what she is, not for what she's going to be after marriage. (JAT.1 p.83)

**South Asian Diaspora and Bollywood**

Since the early 1990s, Bollywood producers have taken note of Non-Resident Indians (NRIs) who are supposed to have cosmopolitan outlook, and speak English with a British, American or Australian accent, and are generally respectful of Indian culture and traditions. The Bollywood film plots have adapted to this 'new' market by including diasporic characters and using some of the major cities of the world as locations. This urban focus caters to the middle-classes in India as well as the urban South Asian diaspora.

In this context, Dudrah, in chapter 3 of his book, offers insights into the role and representation of the South Asian diaspora communities in Bollywood, through an analysis of the film *Pardes* (Foreign Land, dir. Subhash Ghai, 1997). He extends his analysis beyond film theory's reductivist account of the film's production and reception. Here particular attention is given to the film's visual and aural styles, and the collective input of the music director, the playback singers and of course, the stars. This qualitative reading of the film forms the basis of the social and cultural transformations, that are given meaning. In addition, Dudrah, provides his respondents' readings of the film *Pardes*, and by doing this he attempts to "open up a dialogic assessment of Pardes by amalgamating text-based readings with audience response". Dudrah's respondents appreciated representations of South Asians in the film as they were shown as "complex and multi-faceted". For example one of the respondents in Dudrah's sample states:

> Like when I watched *Pardes* I asked my mum is this how it is in India, how it's shown in the film. Sometimes she agrees with the film, at other times she doesn't. If she doesn't then I'll just take it in for myself and it's interesting to see how they portray India and Indian things. (p.73)

Banaji on the other hand is quite critical of the lumping together of overseas Hindi cinema audiences into a single category – the NRIs. She argues, quite rightly, that the overseas Hindi cinema audience is quite diverse and that they read the films in many different ways and sometimes these readings are contradictory for a variety of reasons. Films like *Pardes* and *Dilwale Dulhaniya Le Jayenge* (*The One with the Heart Takes the Bride*, Dir.Aditya Chopra, 1955) are examples where commentators have constructed an

understanding of the diasporic audiences "in a manner which made them all appear to be obsessed with patriarchal tradition and a nostalgic desire to be embraced by and worthy of belonging to their homeland".(p.21) However, Banaji's respondents read these films with the awareness of the use of nationalistic/patriotic content, and this impacts in their viewing choice. Additionally, Banaji found that young viewers respond to fragments of films rather than entire texts. Importantly, Banaji raises the issue of the 'contested cultural and political terrains' in the conceptualisation of diaspora and questions the significance of Hindi films in the consciousness of South Asians in Britain. Indeed, she poses the question more generally about the role of the Bollywood films in the contested landscape that constitutes the South Asian diaspora and suggests that "… little attempt is made to unpick the problematic manner in which diaspora itself is often deliberately constructed as more open to the potentials of 'performative' identity and hybridity, than anywhere 'back home'."

My one criticism of Dudrah's otherwise excellent book is in his attempt to provide insights into the engagement of diaspora audiences in New York City, in Chapter 4, where he provides an analysis of "cinematic assemblages" of two cinema houses – the Eagle in Jackson Heights and the Loews in Times Square. I found his conclusions unclear. Indeed, he suggests himself that the act of going to watch a Bollywood movie and how the text impacts upon the local and global need to be mapped further.

Both books are welcome interventions into the understanding of contemporary Bollywood cinema and the relationship of the medium with its audiences – both at home and abroad. Both explore the relationships between Hindi cinema and its audiences as well as providing theoretical accounts and textual readings of some of the most popular Hindi films. The Hindi cinema is a global industry that is continuing to expand and is more and more looking outwards to increase its viewers, while continuing to cater for the urban middle classes at home. And yet within this development, the rural Indian audiences, previously a significant part of the Hindi cinema audiences, are being ignored.

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