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More than Masala: Decolonisation, Identity, and Mainstream Indian Film

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> What makes Bollywood a brand is not the content of cinema—as constituted by film narrative[4]—but a certain kind of allure produced by a characteristic visual excess brought in by spectacle, choreography, costume, and music. It is this visual excess that allows Bollywood to become a "lifestyle statement" and enables it to be employed in areas outside cinema itself. (Raghavendra 31-2)

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> … masala cinema comes into play as an all-encompassing genre. The masala films therefore operate with a sense of plurality that conjoins seemingly disparate elements to provide an exhilaratingly escapist and affective experience for the audience. In addition, this kind of experience projects an aspirational wish-fulfilment. Formulae of masala films are drawn from various facets of Indian performance cultures such as Parsi theatre and Ramlila and are then inculcated into a cohesive whole. (Pateer and Hazra par 20)

Over the first quarter of this century, a significant body of scholarship on popular Indian film is predicated upon a lexicon of problematic descriptors, notably 'Bollywood' and 'masala'. This essay argues that these terms, far from being neutral, are academically irresponsible constructs that have profoundly misrepresented the aesthetic and industrial character of

India's dominant film industry, constrained its global reception and undermined the significant potential for serious scholarly understanding of its vast and varied creative output. In their inability to be inclusive and their use of reductive nomenclature, they prioritise models and ideological premises which have little relevance to the mainstream narrative or cultural practices of the Indian subcontinent. As an alternative step, this essay proposes a revisionary framework based on the framework of academic social responsibility for the scholarly understanding of Indian film based on some of its broader formal, structural, aesthetic and cultural traits.

The term 'Bollywood' gained currency not as an innocent portmanteau but as a pejorative within Indian English language journalism during the 1980s. Its continued and widespread application since the start of this century relegates a vast, unique, and prolific cinematic culture to a derivative, inferior imitation of Hollywood. This framing implicitly suggests a lack of

originality and artistic merit, defining the industry by what it is not, rather than engaging with its distinct narrative modes, production values, and cultural economy. Similarly, the label 'masala', while evoking the blending of spices, reductively implies a chaotic, undisciplined amalgamation of genres—a 'concoction'—rather than acknowledging the deliberate, complex, and culturally-specific narrative architecture that integrates melodrama, romance, action, and music into a coherent whole for its audience. This trend extends to descriptors like 'curry-western' for films such as *Sholay* (1975), a seminal blockbuster whose profound cultural impact and innovative reworking of generic conventions and rich textual interplay is trivialised by reductive epithets.

The consequences of this imprecise vocabulary are primarily twofold. Firstly, it has fostered a pervasive international perception of mainstream Indian cinema as superficial and unsophisticated entertainment, arguably

limiting its appeal beyond established diasporic markets and certain regions including the Arabian Peninsula and the Gulf states. While the non-resident Indian population, estimated at over 18 million and spread across the Gulf states, North America, and Europe, forms a crucial revenue stream, the potential for broader global crossover and understanding remains circumscribed by these preconceptions. Secondly, and as a direct result, much of the serious engagement, both academic and cultural, with these films has been either narrowly formalist, focusing on song sequences or genre hybridity without deeper cultural contextualisation, or outright dismissive of their narrative logic and societal functions.

Critically, the propagation of this terminology cannot be attributed solely to Western academia, as it has been primarily led by Indian-origin scholars, both within India and in the diaspora, who have uncritically adopted and normalised these labels. While non-Indian-origin

scholars have not been unenthusiastic bystanders, the initiative and continued ownership of this discursive practice is largely indigenous, with a vocabulary that now relentlessly normalises descriptors such as 'Tollywood'[2] and 'Kollywood' to describe Indian regional film cultures. This insularity carries tangible implications for Indian cinema's cultural standing as it relegates the creative outputs of the world's largest film industry to stray paragraphs and footnotes of serious cultural commentary.

It follows that a paradigm shift in film scholarship is imperative in order to enable a more accurate global understanding of Indian cinema and to harness its full potential as a soft power asset, and that writing about Indian film, especially mainstream film,

[2] 'Tollywood' increasingly seems to refer to the Telugu film industry, even though, historically, since 1932, it referred to the Bengali mainstream film industry which was based in Kolkata's Tollygunge area. See Madhava Prasad. "This Thing Called Bollywood." *Seminar*, no. 525, May 2003, www.india-seminar.com/2003/525/525%20madhava%20prasad.htm.

demands a decolonised critical framework. This necessitates moving beyond reductive labels towards a precise, respectful, and knowledgeable vocabulary that engages with Indian films on their own terms, acknowledging their unique industrial history, narrative sophistication, and central role within the cultural life of South Asia and its diaspora.

The Western Address of 'Bollywood' and Its Academic Consequences:

> "Compared to longer-established studies of other popular cinemas, such as Hollywood, Bollywood cinema still seems to be in the process of emerging as an area of academic research in the West, and its historical excavation can equally still be considered a relatively young practice. At this stage, the need for Indian film scholars to go back to the beginning of its historical emergence seems logical and essential, so that we may

> chronologically go about constructing Indian cinema's history and explain how it has evolved into its contemporary form." (Wright 21)

Sidhar Wright's concern for the academic standing of 'Bollywood' cinema in Western academia is a telling example of a questionable tradition of academic scholarship which expects Indian scholarship to pursue cues/directions of academic interest initiated by Western scholars. It is not designed to create new knowledge and insights led by the requirements of the Indian academic and social landscape, but is designed rather to follow Western initiatives and fill in gaps posed by questions that originate there. Consequently, despite commanding one of the largest and most diverse audience bases globally, cutting across linguistic, regional, and socio-economic boundaries, the term 'Bollywood' as a convenient shorthand for Indian mainstream film appears to be directed primarily towards Western audiences. As Rajadhyaksha (2003) argues, the widespread use of this

term emerged in the late 20th century as part of a global discourse that sought to brand Hindi cinema for international consumption. This nomenclature is not a neutral descriptor; rather, it carries ideological assumptions that shape both popular and scholarly discourses. While convenient for global branding, the term risks reducing the complexity of Indian cinema to a homogenised, exoticised entity tailored for consumption outside its primary cultural context. In so doing, it creates a new kind of Orientalism that undoes decades of rigorous cultural interrogation following Edward Said's seminal work on the subject.

The proliferation of academic scholarship built around 'Bollywood' exemplifies this tendency. Much of this work originates within Western higher education institutions, where the term functions as a recognisable entry point into discussions of globalisation, diaspora, and cultural hybridity (Dudrah 7). For scholars seeking to establish careers in Film and Media Studies,

'Bollywood' offers a marketable category that aligns with institutional priorities around diversity and transnationalism. However, this convenience comes at a cost. By privileging a term that is neither widely used within India nor reflective of the industry's internal diversity, such scholarship perpetuates a distorted understanding of Indian cinema. It foregrounds narratives of spectacle, song-and-dance sequences, and melodrama—features often highlighted in Western receptions—while marginalising regional cinemas and alternative practices that constitute the mainstream (Gokulsing & Dissanayake 12).

This reliance on 'Bollywood' as an academic construct also raises questions about audience engagement. Texts produced within this framework tend to circulate within scholarly networks, conferences, and journals, finding little resonance beyond academia. Unlike popular criticism or trade journalism, which speak to audiences invested in cinema as a lived cultural

experience, academic writing on 'Bollywood' often remains inaccessible to those outside the university system. Consequently, it inhibits the wider public understanding of Indian mainstream film, reinforcing a gap between scholarly discourse and popular reception. The irony is striking: while Indian cinema thrives on mass appeal, the scholarship that claims to interpret it often addresses a narrow, specialist readership.

Moreover, the uncritical adoption of 'Bollywood' risks legitimising a nomenclature that many practitioners and critics within India view as reductive or even damaging. It positions Hindi cinema as a derivative of Hollywood—an implication embedded in the very portmanteau—thereby obscuring its indigenous histories and aesthetic traditions (Rajadhyaksha 2003). In doing so, it perpetuates a colonial logic of comparison, where non-Western cultural forms are validated through their proximity to Western paradigms. For a discipline

committed to interrogating power and representation, this is a troubling oversight.

The wider consequences of this academic myopia are on full display in volumes of published scholarship on Indian cinema. Sample Garett's observations in the introduction to Garret Fay's *Studying Bollywood* (2011).

> Popular Hindi film has been largely overlooked in the West, since its construction and traditions are so unfamiliar. Our film consumption is influenced by Hollywood styles and the methods of European and far eastern cinema, making Bollywood seem over the top. Including such theorists as James Monaco, Studying Bollywood plumbs the richness and underlying quality of this genre.

Two points are noteworthy. Firstly, that film consumption in the West is not lacking in inclusivity, in that it is influenced by Hollywood and European styles, but also that of far Eastern cinema. This includes

Japanese film and animation, which have had a long and sustained viewership in the West as well as, increasingly, Korean and Chinese film traditions. Hong Kong action film and Taiwanese cinema have made inroads into Western film consciousness, as have Mexican and increasingly Turkish and Israeli screen content. Curiously, Indian mainstream film is the only major film culture that has remained outside the purview of Western film viewing sensibility. While the cultural specificity of the films themselves as well as their distinctive form clearly have a part to play, that is not the entire story, because, as outlined in the second section of this essay, Indian films had been surmounting international cultural and linguistic barriers successfully decades before 'Bollywood' sought to introduce them to international audiences.

The second point is, crucially, that Indian mainstream film, as understood through its sobriquet 'Bollywood' is perceived as a 'genre'. Not as a film

culture, arguably one of the world's most vibrant cinematic traditions, with an output that straddles multiple languages, societiesand narrative forms, but as a 'genre' with a reductive label which directs readers and scholars of film to perceive the industry's heterogeneity as an amorphous mass, a perception legitimised by a scholarship shorn of rigour, detail and specificity. The perception built by this scholarship becomes even more troubling with the following:

> Tejaswini Ganti remarks that "-ollywood" has become a very generative and productive morpheme to refer to the centers of media production (Ganti, 2012a). The morpheme has generated a number of copycat names all over the world, as each cinematic formation aspires to the level of power and glamour of Hollywood. The Nigerian film industry embraces Nollywood in a similar vein, as an aspirational term, vying for visibility and prominence, and to some extent

> claiming it in its own limited sphere. For Bollywood, which comprises only twenty percent of India's total annual film production, its aspirations are to be measured in terms of output, glamour, and influence. In an Indian cultural context, where words themselves have the power of summoning what they represent, the very invocation of the term contains the capacity to align itself with Hollywood. (Deshpande and Mazaj 136)

Here, the ill-conceived sobriquet has clearly reduced the identity of Indian mainstream film as an aspirational fringe, creating the impression of a significantly poorer cousin trying to fit into the margins of American stellar presence. This has little to do with the reality of India's mainstream film industry and its directors and stars, whose stellar presence is difficult to rival (Shah Rukh Khan currently has 49million Instagram followers against Tom Cruise's 15 million) and whose 'aspiration'

is consistently aligned to the needs of their established viewership.

The use of the term 'Bollywood' has been criticised by the more established stalwarts of India's film industry, including actors Om Puri and Naseeruddin Shah, star Amitabh Bachchan and director Govind Nihalani.[3] "It's like being called an idiot all your life and then making it your name," Shah is reported to have said in exasperation.[4] Casting the industry as a Hollywood aspirant also takes away significantly from its unparalleled achievements in finding international audiences since the 1950s, four decades before the onset of 1990s 'Globalisation', with the success of the star actor-director Raj Kapoor's films in Soviet Union, which rivalled the accolades won by director Satyajit Ray in the film festival circuit.

[3] https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/industry/media/entertainment/bollywood-makes-it-to-another-lexicon/articleshow/2243563.cms?from=mdr
[4] https://www.news18.com/news/india/calling-us-bollywood-is-derogatory-naseeruddin-om-268290.html

The Socialist Tramp: Raj Kapoor's Cinematic Diplomacy and the Construction of Post-Colonial Identity in the Soviet Bloc:

Contrary to the lack of academic responsibility in the scholarship trends identified before, Indian mainstream film has more often than not, accurately read the pulse of its audience groups, and made socially responsible films for their audiences cutting across geographical and cultural boundaries. The remarkable popularity of Raj Kapoor's films in the Soviet Union and Central and Eastern Europe during the 1950s and 1960s constitutes a unique cultural phenomenon. More significantly, their transnational reception offers a potent lens through which to examine geopolitical alliances, cultural diplomacy, and the shared imaginaries of nations undergoing profound transformation. It was not merely a case of cinematic import but a complex dialogue between two socialist-aligned worlds, revealing much about the construction of post-colonial Indian

nationhood and its ideological affinities with societies and cultures in the erstwhile Eastern Bloc. The reception of seminal works like *Awaara* (1951) and *Shri 420* (1955), illuminates how Kapoor's melodramatic social realism resonated with audiences grappling with their own narratives of progress, identity, and social justice in the postwar period.

The early cinema of Raj Kapoor explores the contours of emerging Indian nationhood after the 1947 Partition. His films, produced in the nascent years of the republic, actively participated in the project of defining a generalised but inclusive pan-Indian identity. This was a nationhood consciously framed in secular, socialist, and democratic terms in alignment with Indian's Constitution and the programme for its implementation led by Jawaharlal Nehru's government. Kapoor's narratives, while set within an urban, often Bombay (now Mumbai) -centric milieu, universalised the narratives of common people struggling together against the structural

inequities perpetuated by the rich and powerful in the big city. His iconic tramp figure, Raj, was an Everyman for the new India: orphaned by circumstance (literally in *Awaara*, symbolically in *Shri 420*), navigating a society caught between tradition and modernity, feudal corruption and egalitarian promise, this character embodied the anxieties and aspirations of a citizenry forging a new collective identity from the rubble of colonialism and the promises of independence. The nationhood projected was not one of martial glory or ancient purity, but of moral resilience, where integrity and love ultimately triumphed over cynical materialism, inherited privilege or political expediency.

This vision aligned seamlessly with India's foreign policy direction as a leading Non-Aligned Movement state with pronounced socialist sympathies and a strategic partnership with the Soviet Union. Under Nehru, India pursued a state-led developmental model and professed a socialist pattern of society, creating a

clear ideological and cultural alignment with the USSR and Eastern Europe. This political framework facilitated the cultural exchange that brought Indian cinema to Soviet screens. The 1953 Indo-Soviet trade agreement was pivotal,[5] but the reception was more than state-mandated; it was wildly popular.

> The de-Stalinizing 'Khrushchev thaw' gifted much-craved relaxations on cultural imports, including cinema, to the Soviet republics. The resultant spike in demand encouraged Raj Kapoor to distribute *Awara* to the newfound socialist market in 1954. Translated as *Bradgaya*, the film's Russian release instantly captivated audiences, catapulting Kapoor as a relatable underdog's idol and a 'sex-symbol' across the Soviet sphere (Fedotova 2013). His impassioned

[5] This agreement, signed on 2 December 1953, included a clause on "payments for the distribution of films" (VII-c) and export and import of 'cinematographic films (exposed)' (schedules A-38 and B38).

> performance and narration profoundly impacted the Russian cinephile quite like DW Griffith had much earlier. *Awara* sold around 64 million tickets as the third-most viewed foreign film in Soviet history (Fedotova 2013). The Soviet state ensured its translated prints reached the farthest corners, including its expedition camps at the North Pole. Between their two promotional visits to Moscow in 1954 and 1956, Raj Kapoor and Nargis, *Awara*'s star protagonist pair, became celebrities for Russians (Bose 2008, ch. 10). Russian parents chose to name their newborns after their screen names (Reuben 1995, p. 89). Even a decade after its Russian release, *Awara* found a local remake – titled *Avare* (dir.: Semih Evin) – in the Soviet Union's pro-NATO neighbor, Turkey. (Roy 3)

While Kapoor had no assurances of an export market while making Awara, the film's success resulted in

successive filmmakers, Kapoor included, deliberately including 'proletarian angles' into films to tailor the Soviet market. (Gopal and Moorti 31) Kapoor's films provided a humanistic, emotionally charged representation of socialism that complemented, and at times softened, the harder edges of Soviet propaganda. They depicted class struggle not through doctrinal lectures, but through the personal anguish of the vulnerable, making socialist ideals accessible and deeply sentimental. For audiences in Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, and beyond—regions themselves integrated into the Soviet project of modernisation—the films presented a relatable narrative of building a just society amidst scarcity and social dislocation. The shared vocabulary of anti-imperialism, collective uplift, and the critique of unbridled capitalism created a powerful bridge, making Indian films a rare Western-friendly cultural product that passed ideological muster.

An analysis of *Awaara* and *Shri 420* reveals how Kapoor ingeniously packaged these themes of nationhood, identity, and culture. *Awaara*, with its Oedipal drama and courtroom framing, is a profound meditation on nature versus nurture, and the social construction of criminality. The hero Raj's descent into crime is explicitly linked to his unjust expulsion from respectable society by a judge bound by rigid class prejudice. The famous dream sequence, a Freudian ballet, visualises this class anxiety. For Soviet and Eastern European audiences, the film's critique of a legal and social system that perpetuates inequality resonated with official critiques of bourgeois justice, while its emotional core transcended political dogma. Similarly, *Shri 420* tracks the journey of the innocent Raj from rural poverty to metropolitan temptation. The title itself, denoting a "gentleman cheat" under the Indian Penal Code, frames the narrative as a battle for the soul of the new nation. The iconic song "Mera Joota Hai Japani" encapsulates the hybrid, non-aligned identity:

"My shoes are Japanese, my trousers English, my red Russian hat… but my heart is Indian." This was a perfect allegory for Non-Aligned India, selectively engaging with global blocs while retaining its core identity. The film's climax, where Raj rejects the corrupt city elite to return to his urban poor community, is a powerful allegory for socialist solidarity.

To fully appreciate Kapoor's unique synthesis, a comparison with other socio-realist classics of the period is instructive. Guru Dutt's *Pyaasa* (1957) offers a more bleakly poetic and disillusioned critique of a society that commodifies art and ignores human suffering. Its cynicism is profound, its resolution bittersweet. Bimal Roy's *Do Bigha Zameen* (1953), a landmark of Indian neo-realism, presents a grittier, more documentarian portrayal of peasant exploitation and urban dehumanisation, directly influenced by Italian neo-realism and Soviet cinema itself. While these films were also appreciated by critics in the Eastern Bloc, Kapoor's

work achieved mass adulation because he fused socio-political critique with the irresistible apparatus of mainstream entertainment: slapstick comedy, lavish melodies, romantic triangles, and the charismatic, Chaplinesque appeal of his own persona. He did not show the unrelenting hardship of *Do Bigha Zameen* nor the artistic despair of *Pyaasa*; instead, he offered a redemptive, emotionally satisfying narrative where socialist values were vindicated through personal sacrifice and love. This formula proved uniquely translatable, making his films a conduit for a soft, affective socialism that audiences from Moscow to Tashkent could embrace.

The phenomenal reception of Raj Kapoor's films in the Soviet sphere was a historical confluence of political alignment, cultural diplomacy, and resonant narrative, with few parallels in the history of film in their ability to transcend transcontinental boundaries of language and culture. His cinema served as a vibrant,

popular expression of India's post-independence project, articulating a nationhood centred on secular socialism and the moral integrity of the marginalised. This vision found a receptive home in societies undergoing their own versions of socialist modernisation, where audiences saw their struggles mirrored in the triumphs and tribulations of the Indian tramp. Kapoor's success was predicated on his articulationof the ideological underpinnings of the Nehruvian state—and, by extension, the shared values of the Eastern Bloc—within the compelling, universal language of melodrama and song. Consequently, this transnational phenomenon moved beyond mere film history into a revelation of popular culture's ability to become a central terrain for negotiating political identity, forging international solidarity, and imagining alternative modernities during the Cold War.

Within this context, the career of Romanian singer Maria Armarghioalei, known professionally as

Naarghita, offers a compelling case study. Her deep association with the music of Raj Kapoor's films illustrates a unique transnational cultural flow, wherein Indian cinematic melodies became a vessel for shared emotional expression within the socialist bloc, resonating profoundly with the Romanian experience of the 1950s.

Naarghita's familiarity with Raj Kapoor stemmed from the widespread dissemination of his films, particularly *Awara* (1951) and *Shree 420* (1955), within the Soviet Union and its satellite states. For audiences in 1950s Romania, living under a repressive Stalinist regime, Kapoor's cinematic narratives of the charming, proletarian "tramp" challenging social injustice and bourgeois hypocrisy held potent symbolic power. The core themes of their songs—romantic longing, social idealism, and critiques of inequality—transcended linguistic barriers and resonated with the everyday struggles and subdued hopes of Romanians. Naarghita,

with her powerful, emotive voice, absorbed these soundtracks, recognising in them a universal language of sentiment that aligned with the Romanian folk and *muzicăușoară* (easy listening) traditions of melodic, heart-felt performance.

Capitalising on this shared cultural currency, Naarghita's artistry became intrinsically linked to Kapoor's oeuvre. She performed both Romanian-language versions as well as original Hindi versions of his hits, embedding them into the national consciousness. Her stage name, a clear homage to Kapoor's legendary co-star Nargis, signalled a deep, personal identification with this Indian cinematic world. This connection culminated in a remarkable journey to India in the early 1970s, a pilgrimage to the source of the music that had defined her career. Her meeting with Raj Kapoor and Nargis was not merely a celebrity encounter but a symbolic convergence of two artistic streams. Furthermore, her audience with Prime Minister Indira

Gandhi underscored the political dimension of this cultural diplomacy; Gandhi, a key architect of the Indo-Soviet friendship, recognised Naarghita as a cultural ambassador who had fostered popular affection for India within the Eastern bloc.

Naarghita's career provides a unique case study ofthe reception of cultural products circumventing ideological borders to forge unexpected affinities. Her embodiment of Raj Kapoor's music was no mere imitation but a process of cultural translation, whereby Indian filmi melodies were imbued with a Romanian emotional depth, speaking directly to the experiences of her compatriots. Her journey from interpreting these songs in Bucharest to meeting their creators in Mumbai underscores the reciprocal nature of this exchange.

The Cinematic Diaspora: Indian Film and Cultural Reconnection in the Post-War Caribbean:

The 1940s and 1950s represented a pivotal era for the Indo-Caribbean diaspora, particularly within the working-class communities of Trinidad, Guyana, Suriname, and to a lesser extent, Barbados and Antigua. For the descendants of indentured labourers who arrived between 1838 and 1917, Indian cinema emerged as a potent medium of cultural reaffirmation, providing a vivid, auditory and visual link to a homeland known largely through ancestral memory. The appeal of these films, predominantly from the Bombay studio system, transcended mere entertainment; it functioned as a crucial mechanism for cultural preservation and re-familiarisation within a post-indenture, yet still often marginalised, social context. As Peter Manuel outlines, 'the advent of commercial Hindi films to the Caribbean in the mid- 1930s added a new dimension of Indian cultural presence in the diaspora. By the early 1940s

Hindi cinema had become widely popular among Indo-Caribbeans, providing what many have perceived as a direct link to the cherished but otherwise remote homeland.' (Manuel 17)

The narratives and aesthetics of 1940s and 1950s Indian cinema resonated deeply with Indo-Caribbean audiences. Mythologicals and social dramas, featuring stars like Raj Kapoor, Nargis, and Dilip Kumar, presented archetypal stories of virtue, sacrifice, familial duty, and romantic idealism that echoed the values sustained within Caribbean culture. Crucially, however, it was the film songs—the playback-sung musical numbers—that formed the core of their appeal. Music and language were the primary vessels of cultural continuity. Hearing Hindi or Hindustani lyrics, set to melodies that blended classical Indian *ragas* with accessible folk tunes, provided an auditory anchor to a linguistic heritage that was gradually eroding under the pressures of Creolisation and English education. The

songs of Lata Mangeshkar, Mohammed Rafi, and particularly the singer-actor K.L. Saigal, became the soundtrack of diaspora life, played in homes, shops, and at community gatherings, emerging as an Indian sonic reference point within the Caribbean landscape.

Much of this reception transcends language. Manuel makes the point due to the cultural distance and fragility of linguistic transfer and memory, 'that broad essentials of plot may be lost on the many viewers who, while understanding little Hindi, nevertheless enjoy films as cultural icons. Similarly, Hindi film music itself has for several decades been the single most popular kind of music among Indo-Trinidadians and Guyanese, despite their limited ability to understand the songs' lyrics. … For Indo-Caribbean viewers, Hindi films have established a new connection with India itself, presenting an image that is at once colorful, alluring, idiosyncratically modern, and distinctly Indian.' (ibid.)

For Indo-Caribbean communities navigating their place in nascent nationalist Caribbean societies, these films provided a symbolic repertoire—of dress, gesture, ethical dilemmas, and spiritual ethos—that helped refamiliarise them with a curated version of Indian culture. It was not a simple recreation of a lost past, but a selective engagement that allowed them to negotiate their hybrid present. The films and the attendant tours of star actors and singers served to reinforce a distinct socio-cultural identity, affirming that their ancestral heritage held a glamour, modernity, and emotional depth worthy of celebration, thus fortifying their cultural confidence within the plural, and often fractious, Caribbean social mosaic.

The Embodied Tradition: Aesthetic Lineages in Indian Cinema:

From its inception, the raison d'être of mainstream Indian cinema has been its communication with

audiences across the Indian subcontinent, imparting it a self-assurance about its identity and its purpose. Defying the reductionist labels conceived and freely applied by 'Bollywood' scholars, the distinctive characteristics of Indian film have withstood the test of time. These include its elaborate mise-en-scène, its integration of music and dance, and its stylised modes of performance—, far from being arbitrary inventions, were complex and sometimes elaborate, modern continuations of pre-existing artistic and cultural practices. These elements find their lineage in the pictorial traditions of Indian painting, the narrative structures of folk and classical drama, and the sonic landscapes of devotional and regional music, creating a cinematic form that is uniquely and intrinsically Indian. To perceive its formal and aesthetic qualities merely as idiosyncratic industrial conventions is to overlook their profound embeddedness within a longer, deeply rooted Indian aesthetic tradition within a vast and complex cinematic ecosystem.

The visual composition of early mainstream Indian cinema, particularly its mise-en-scène, bears a direct inheritance from the evolution of Indian painting, with the work of Raja Ravi Varma serving as a pivotal bridge. Prior to the colonial era, Indian painting, such as the Mughal and Rajput miniatures, operated on principles distinct from Western perspectival realism. These traditions favoured a flatter picture plane, a syncretic narrative where multiple moments could coexist within a single frame, and a highly decorative, symbolic use of colour and detail. The arrival of European traders introduced techniques of single-point perspective and oil painting, leading to the emergence of a "Company style" that hybridised Western naturalism with Indian subjects. Ravi Varma's paintings, which masterfully synthesised these influences, combining dramatic realism and use of chiaroscuro style to depict Hindu mythological figures and Indian archetypes with a newfound tactile physicality and emotional depth. His paintings, such as *Damayanti Talking to a Swan* or his

various renditions of Shakuntala, presented the gods and heroes of Indian lore not as abstract icons but as relatable, yet idealised, human beings in recognisably South Asian settings.

This "Ravi Varma aesthetic" became the foundational visual grammar for Indian cinema. Early filmmakers like Dadasaheb Phalke, who began his career as an employee of Ravi Varma, directly looked to these popular oleographs for their visual and character references. The proscenium-bound framing, the dramatic, tableau-like staging of actors, and the carefully orchestrated, often melodramatic, expressions all mirror the composition of a Ravi Varma painting. This legacy extends beyond mythologicals into social and romantic genres. The opulent, palace-like sets, the lavish costumes, and the carefully diffused, painterly lighting in the historical dramas of Sohrab Modi or the golden-era romantic fantasies of directors like Raj Kapoor and Kamal Amrohi continue this tradition. In South Indian

cinema, the Telugu and Tamil mythological and historical films, such as those by S. S. Rajamouli (*Baahubali*, *RRR*), are explicit modern manifestations of this aesthetic. Their grandeur is a cultural invocation of a pictorial tradition where the visual field is meant to be saturated, spectacular, and evocative of a mythic, rather than a strictly realistic, realm. The mise-en-scène is thus not a neutral container for action but a participant in the narrative, designed to elicit a specific emotional response (*rasa*) from the viewer, much like the classical Indian arts.

Parallel to its visual strategies, Indian cinema's most globally recognised feature, the integrated musical sequence, is similarly derived from ancient performance traditions. The concept of a unified art form, or *Gesamtkunstwerk*, where story, music, dance, and poetry are interwoven, is central to Sanskrit dramaturgy as outlined in the *NāṭyaŚāstra*. Classical Sanskrit theatre, such as the plays of Kālidāsa, seamlessly blended

dialogue with verse and dance.[6] This synthesis was preserved and evolved in various regional folk traditions, such as the *Jatra* of Bengal, the *Tamasha* of Maharashtra, the *Nautanki* of North India, and the *Theyyam* and *Kathakali* performances of Kerala. These forms were inherently musical, episodic, and presentational, directly engaging the audience through song, stylised movement, and heightened emotion.

Indian cinema absorbed this presentational DNA, in which the song-and-dance sequence is not an

[6] Ananda Lal writes in his introduction to Kalidasa (2017) "There was no attempt at creating an illusion, picture-frame or otherwise. Although commentators emphasize the equal importance of the visual and audible portions, the visual spectacle did not depend on sets or scenery, but on costumes, makeup, and the art of acting, which relied on a codified system of stylized gestures and movements to represent everything: gods and goddesses, natural objects, human actions, abstract ideas, and subtle feelings. Not the least important among the audible elements was the poetry, which amply sufficed to suggest the settings of the various scenes. The Sanskrit drama was also a Gesamtkunstwerk synthesizing all the performing arts—music and dance commonly accompanied the play, act 2 of Mālavikāgnimitra and act 4 of Vikrama and Urvaéī providing typical examples." Lal, Ananda. "Kalidasa." *Critical Survey of Drama*, 3rd ed., ed. Carl Rollyson, Salem Press, 2017 pp. 2334.

interruption but a core narrative and expressive device, a non-realistic mode for externalising interior emotional states of love, despair, joy, or conflict. The influence of specific regional traditions is palpable. In Bengali cinema, the legacy of Rabindranath Tagore's songs (Rabindra Sangeet) and the poetic realism of directors like Satyajit Ray provide a more subdued, lyrical integration of music. Conversely, the Marathi theatre tradition, with its emphasis on musical drama and social narratives, directly influenced the early talkies in Bombay and continues to inform the structure of many contemporary Hindi films. In the Southern industries, the relationship is even more pronounced. Tamil cinema's deep connection with Carnatic music and classical dance (as seen in the films of A. V. Meiyappan or modern directors like Mani Ratnam) and Malayalam cinema's nuanced use of background scores rooted in Kerala's folk music, demonstrate a regional specificity in their musical aesthetic. The song sequence becomes a cinematic utterance that transcends the plot and

characters and evokes evokes a set of bhavas underpinning the film's narrative.

This reliance on non-naturalistic performance extends to acting styles. Derived from the *NāṭyaŚāstra's* codification of nine primary emotions or *rasa*s and their corresponding physical expressions, acting in much of Indian popular cinema is presentational and codified. The exaggerated expressions of anguish, the stylised postures of romance, and the broad gestures of comedy find their roots in folk drama like Jatra and Tamasha, where actors needed to project emotion to large, open-air audiences without the aid of close-ups. While parallel and art house cinemas, developed a more method-based approach influenced by Western realism and IPTA (Indian People's Theatre Association), mainstream films retained the heightened style of performative language familiar to their domestic audience, whose cultural memories enabled them to unerringly interpret the specific cadence of dialogue

delivery or the symbolic meaning of a particular glance or gesture.

The cinematic landscape of the Indian subcontinent, particularly the prolific output of its Hindi and regional language industries, functions as a vast and dynamic cultural repository. Reductive epithets such as 'Bollywood' and 'Masala' dilute their cultural importance and the quality of serious scholarship about them, compromising both academic integrity and social responsibility. They actively devalue mainstream Indian film's role as a crucial archive of millennia of creative practice, a pedagogical tool, and a living canvas for the region's profound classical and folk traditions. Through a symbiotic relationship between the popular and the traditional, Indian mainstream film has documented, popularised, and re-contextualised the intricate arts of Indian classical music, dance, painting, and architecture for a mass audience. Indian cinema, encompassing both documentary and feature films, has acted as a custodian

of this cultural heritage, and equally, of engaging with artistic practices from different parts of the world, while reimagining its own identity following its experience of centuries of colonial rule. Its greatest achievement, however, has arguably been its ability to find audiences across continents and its ability to evoke resonances with their social, political and cultural contexts without compromising its own self-identity.

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