Indian Cinema: The World’s Biggest And Most Diverse Film Industry

Written by Roy Stafford
What is ‘Indian Cinema’?

It ought to be straightforward to present a description of the ‘world’s biggest film industry’, but even Indian film scholars find it difficult to come to terms with its diversity and seeming contradictions. The biggest single mistake that non-Indian commentators (and some Indians) make is to assume that ‘Bollywood’ is the same thing as Indian Cinema. It isn’t.

Consider the sheer size of India. Roughly as big as Western Europe (but with four times the population), it includes two major ethnic groups, two large and several smaller religious communities (including the world’s third largest Muslim population) and an enormous range of languages (several hundred).
The size of the country is matched by a longstanding love affair with cinema which creates the world’s biggest film audience. Even though India was controlled by the British until 1947, this did not prevent the development of ‘industrial’ film production in several Indian cities, so that by the late 1930s an Indian ‘studio system’ was in place. By the late 1990s, India had overtaken Japan and America as the producer of the largest number of feature films per year (800-1,000) and with an annual audience of over 3 billion at home and millions more overseas, it can also claim to be the most popular.

All of this is not disputed, but when we come to look at the films themselves and who watches them, it gets more complicated. India is now famous for its computer software engineers and it has always been known for its bureaucracies (needed to organise the world’s largest democracy), but the film industry in India is only slowly beginning to deliver the detailed box office information on a regular basis that business commentators and film scholars in the UK and North America have come to expect from their own industries. There are rapid changes taking place in the Indian entertainment business with modern multiplexes appearing in big cities – but also many traditional cinemas in small towns in rural areas which do not have the industry infrastructure to make data collection straightforward. So, we must be circumspect in trying to describe the industry as it exists now – and we must recognise that it is changing all the time.

Four cinemas

One way to think about Indian Cinema is to distinguish four categories (but note that these all overlap and the boundaries between them are not fixed):

- Popular Hindi Cinema
- Regional cinemas
- ‘Art’ or ‘specialised’ cinema
- Diaspora cinema (films made by Indian filmmakers based overseas)

We can best understand the importance of these classifications by making two simple distinctions. The first is between ‘popular’ and ‘art’ cinema. The massive popular audience in India is hungry for cheap entertainment and this is what cinema has provided. This audience, which includes a significant proportion of people with limited access to education, enjoys universal genres such as action, comedy and melodrama and more specifically ‘Indian’ stories with spiritual/mythological themes. The typical Indian film as viewed from outside the country may well be a three hour spectacular ‘multi-genre’ film with six or seven extended elaborately choreographed and costumed musical sequences.

But there is also an Indian audience for more ‘serious’ film narratives, akin to European, Japanese and American ‘art’ cinema and indeed to more adventurous Hollywood films. This audience is relatively small, but because the overall audience is so large, even a small proportion means significant numbers. It tends to be an audience concentrated in the major cities, especially in the two states with the greatest cultural traditions, West Bengal and Kerala, and in the centres for higher education and new technologies in Delhi, Mumbai, Bangalore, Hyderabad etc. For many years from the 1950s to the 1980s, it was the Bengali art film director Satyajit Ray who represented Indian Cinema to the outside world. In the 1970s Indian Cinema developed a more socially aware and more politically orientated form of cinema, partly subsidised by public funding, which was known as Parallel Cinema – running alongside but clearly distinguished from mainstream cinema. Since the 1990s and the opening up of the Indian market to private investors at home and overseas, this political cinema has gone into decline, but to some extent the tradition of ‘socially aware’ films has been supported by Indian filmmakers such as Mira Nair and Deepa Mehta who have returned to India to make films using their training and experience gained in North America (respectively the US and Canada). This ‘diaspora cinema’, often, but not always, means art cinema.
The second distinction (which cuts across the first) is between Hindi Cinema and Regional Cinemas. Hindi is the official language of the Union of India. However only around 40% of Indians actually speak Hindi. In the North of India, variations of Hindi are spoken as a first language by the population of several states around Delhi. Other North Indians whose first language might be Gujarati, Punjabi, Bengali etc. can also access Hindi films, as can Urdu speakers in Pakistan. All these languages are part of the same Indo-European group. But in the South of India, the language family is completely different and Tamils in particular have in the past objected very strongly to the suggestion that Hindi should be the only official language of the country. As a result, English has been retained as India's second official language and in the South, the different regional language cinemas have the support of the mass of the population. Hindi Cinema in the South is only accessible by the more educated part of the population and Hindi films are distributed in a similar way to Hollywood films – i.e. available only in a minority of cinemas.

To give you a sense of the range of films made in India, here is a breakdown of films in different languages for 2003 (the latest date available) taken from the website of the Central Board of Film Certification (the Indian equivalent of the BBFC).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language</th>
<th>Films</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hindi</td>
<td>222</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tamil</td>
<td>151</td>
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<tr>
<td>Telugu</td>
<td>155</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kannada</td>
<td>109</td>
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<tr>
<td>Malayalam</td>
<td>64</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bengali</td>
<td>49</td>
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<tr>
<td>Assamese</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>877</strong></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

The four Southern film industries in Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh (Telugu), Karnataka (Kannada) and Kerala (Malayalam) produce more than half the total number of Indian films. This isn't surprising because the South has more cinemas and a higher per capita cinema attendance than the North.

**Bollywood**

So, where is Bollywood in all this? The term ‘Bollywood’, which is often taken to be a contraction of ‘Bombay Hollywood’, is a fairly recent term as used by film scholars and film industry commentators. It is still criticised as meaningless by some, but it began to circulate from the 1980s onwards and is now widely used in India and across the world.

Bollywood is much like Hollywood in the number of films it produces – around 200 per year (i.e. the main component in the Hindi total above). It is also like Hollywood in that its films tend to have the highest media profiles, sometimes the biggest budgets and stars and a reputation for ‘modern’ entertainment values. The crucial difference between Bollywood and its regional competitors is that Bollywood has created an artificial culture that appeals to a specific audience found across India – whereas the regional cinemas are firmly rooted in their own language and culture. It wasn’t always the case that the big budget Hindi films (originally produced in studios in Calcutta and Pune as well as Bombay) were divorced from...
social reality. Indeed, the ‘social film’ was once an important genre. It was the success of big action pictures such as *Sholay* (1975) that started the trend towards multi-genre pictures, which increasingly began to draw on Western modes of presentation. In 1998 the very successful *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* was described by some critics as being influenced by MTV and Western youth culture references. This trend towards a less social realistic cinema and one more associated with consumerist fantasy was also associated with the rise of the NRI (Non-Resident Indian) audience in the UK and North America. This audience is able to pay much higher ticket prices than those in India (where some tickets are still below 50p) and this income from exports helps Bollywood producers to offset box-office flops at home.

The export of films has been a feature of Indian Cinema for a long time. Indian films have been shown in the UK since the late 1940s and by the 1970s there was a circuit of cinemas regularly showing Hindi films in the UK to eager audiences (see Tyrrell 1998). This market then transferred to video until the return of Hindi films in UK multiplexes in the 1990s. In Africa, the Middle East and many other territories, Hindi films have long competed with Hollywood and Hong Kong for popular audiences. This has usually meant low ticket prices, but here too there is a move towards higher prices in newer cinemas where an NRI audience might exist (e.g. in Kenya, South Africa and the Gulf States).

The ‘artificiality’ of Bollywood is partly to do with its production practices. Its films are made in Hindi in Mumbai where the local language is Marathi and where there is also a Marathi regional cinema industry. Spectacular dance sequences are often filmed in ‘exotic’ locations that are beautiful or famous, rather than because the location has any relevance in the narrative. So the locations may be in any part of India, the pyramids in Egypt, Mauritius, Switzerland, Scotland and, increasingly now, London. NRI audiences are now coming to terms with representations of London that appear strange to UK audiences. More importantly perhaps Bollywood films have tended not to specify where a story is set or to refer directly to Indian politics or religious/cultural differences. This way they are more escapist and less potentially disturbing.

### Regional cinemas

In the South, popular films are more recognisably ‘about’ local culture. For a long time, audiences in the states of Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu have been aware of a very close relationship between film and politics – but in a uniquely Indian way. Some of the biggest film stars in these states have also been politicians and film fan clubs have often been political organisations as well. The popularity of some regional films is such that they can sometimes bypass Bollywood films at the box office, just by selling tickets in their home state. In 2005, the biggest box office film in India was *Chandramukhi* made in Tamil and featuring Rajnikanth, India’s biggest star. Rajnikanth is now 57 and he has decided to work on only one film at a time. His 2007 film *Shivaji* looks likely to be India’s biggest box office title of the year again. It was the first non-Bollywood Indian film to make the UK Top Ten, even though it only played on 12 screens. Although Tamil films do find an audience overseas, this is mostly in countries like Malaysia and Singapore, but DVD has made it easier to reach the Tamil diaspora across the world (around 12 million with a home market of around 65 million -- larger than the UK market).

Tamil films are made in Chennai (formerly Madras), which is also a location for some of the films made in Telugu, Kannada and Malayalam. Chennai plays a major role in post-production, including services used by Bollywood and it can make a claim to be the real Indian film capital, ahead of Mumbai. Much as in Europe in the 1920s, South Indian films are often made in two language versions (i.e. Tamil and Telugu).
there are over 75 million Telugu speakers). This relationship also extends to Bollywood, so that Tamil/Telugu films may be dubbed into Hindi for distribution in North India and Hindi films may be dubbed into the Southern languages. Remakes are also common between the regional cinemas themselves and with Bollywood. Chandramukhi (described by IMDB as a Comedy/Fantasy/ Horror/Musical/Romance) was a bigger budget remake of a Malayalam film.

The four South Indian regional cinemas together constitute a major film industry which can compete with Bollywood. Regional cinemas outside the South tend to be smaller and not to have such a large production base. In cultural terms, Bengali cinema is still important and films made in Bhojpuri, a variation of Hindi (its linguistic roots are contested) widely spoken in Bihar and surrounding states, have sometimes proved to be very popular.

The Indian film industry is always changing and as traditional cinemas close in the South and more multiplexes open, there may be a shift towards Bollywood. But the South is building multiplexes too and it is worth noting that Hollywood distributors have started to release films in India dubbed into several languages. In 2007, Spider Man 3 did very well in Chennai (opening on a digital print in a new multiplex) and the narration for the film March of the Penguins was dubbed into Telugu and Tamil as well as Hindi.

Case Studies

The Career Of Mani Ratnam

For many commentators, and many Indian film fans, the most interesting filmmaker in India is Mani Ratnam. He began writing and directing in 1983, making films in Kannada and Malayalam as well as Tamil, his native language. He mostly produces his own films and in 1987 Nayakan, a 'Godfather-like' take on Tamil crime and celebrity was a big regional hit. But it was in 1992 with Roja, the first of a trilogy of romance films firmly rooted in political issues, that Mani Ratnam became a national figure with a film that has since been seen as marking a turning point in Indian Cinema.

Roja

was a Tamil film, dubbed into Telugu, Malayalam and Marathi as well as Hindi. The Hindi version was a big hit and changed Ratnam's career. Roja contradicted assumptions about regional films and their appeal to Bollywood audiences. The title refers to a young village woman in Tamil Nadu, who finds herself married to a middle-class man working in military software. (The man was supposed to marry her sister, but recognising that the older sister was in love with someone else, chose the younger.) When the husband is sent on a mission to help the Indian Army in Kashmir fighting separatists, the young wife insists on going with him and when her husband is kidnapped, she does everything she can to goad the authorities into getting him back alive.

Roja takes Tamil cinema out of the South and shows a national audience a real 'national issue', presented in the universal story of a young, uneducated village woman up against political and military authorities.
and ‘human’ ‘freedom fighters’ dealing with a captive who is by no means prepared to lie low. The film is exciting with high quality widescreen photography by Santosh Sivan from Kerala, one of the most distinguished cinematographers (and directors) in India, and music by A. R. Rahman, another Southerner who has since become internationally famous.

After Roja and its focus on Kashmiri separatism, Ratnam turned to the equally contentious issue of ‘communalism’ – the conflict between Hindus and Muslims in India. Bombay (1995) sees a Hindu man and a Muslim woman marrying and because of hostility in their village, moving to Mumbai where two children are born and the family is happy in a more secular atmosphere. But after the attack on a mosque in Ayodhya (a real event with repercussions across India), the family are torn apart during communal riots. Although structured as a traditional melodrama/romance, the social issue is paramount. As one contributor to the IMDB entry on the film puts it: “An underlying moral of thinking of oneself as an Indian rather than a Hindu or a Muslim is prevalent throughout the latter part of the film”.

Bombay was still a Tamil film, subsequently dubbed into Hindi and again a national success. In 1998 Mani Ratnam made his first Hindi film, still with his South Indian creative team of A. R. Rahman and Santosh Sivan, but this time with Bollywood superstar Sharukh Khan in the lead. Dil Se is in some ways the reverse of Roja, featuring a romance between an All-India Radio reporter (Sharukh Khan) and a young woman (Manisha Koirala) he meets fleetingly on a railway platform. The reporter follows the woman to Assam in North East India where she is revealed as a ‘freedom fighter’ – and where the couple fall in love. In the final section of the film, the action moves to New Delhi where the reporter faces an arranged marriage and the freedom fighter plans to disrupt the celebrations on India's National Day (in 1997, the 50th anniversary of India's independence).

Sharukh Khan’s presence should have guaranteed a box office hit, but the film did poorly in India, despite being dubbed into Telugu and Tamil. However, overseas it was a big hit with NRI audiences, becoming the first Bollywood film to make the UK Top 10. Its breathtaking musical sequences included the song ‘Chai Chaiyya, Chaiyya’, performed on top of a moving train and perhaps the Indian film song sequence that is best known outside India. (Andrew Lloyd Weber recruited Rahman to work on Bombay Dreams after seeing this sequence and the song was used by Spike Lee in his 2006 film Inside Man.) The income from the NRI audience compensated for the Indian failure and Mani Ratnam has gone on to make further hits in both Tamil Cinema and Bollywood. In 2004 he made the same film twice, once in Tamil and again in Hindi (as Yuva) using separate casts of leading stars. In 2007 his Hindi film Guru, a fictionalised biopic of an Indian entrepreneur has been a big hit. The casting of this film points to the national and global impact of Ratnam’s work. The leads are played by Abhisheik Bachchan, (the new star who is the son of Bollywood superstar Amitabh Bachchan) and his real-life partner, the South Indian Aishwarya Rai, the former Miss India and global icon of L’Oréal. The third lead is played by Ratnam's own discovery, the former Tamil TV star Madhavan. Guru opened worldwide on the same day, led by a big North American premiere in Toronto.
Deepa Mehta’s Trilogy

Women have found it difficult to get the chance to direct in most film industries but Mira Nair, Gurinder Chadha in the UK and Deepa Mehta have all made headlines with films set in India, which have in different ways created a dialogue with Indian cinema. Chadha’s *Bride and Prejudice* (2004) is perhaps closest to Bollywood popular cinema whilst Nair’s films such as *Salaam Bombay*, *Monsoon Wedding* and *The Namesake* offer a range of approaches to more serious but still mainstream filmmaking. Deepa Mehta is arguably closer to the concept of Indian parallel cinema in her ‘elemental trilogy’ of *Fire*, *Earth* and *Water*. Mehta was born and educated in India but learned her filmmaking in Canada and her films are Canadian/Indian co-productions.

*Fire* (1996) introduced Mehta’s controversial approach, dealing with a marriage going wrong and a subsequent lesbian affair between sisters-in-law played by Nandita Das and Shabana Azmi (an iconic figure in the parallel cinema of the 1970s and 80s). The film struck out against traditional Hindu ideas about marriage and family and the provocative presentation of sexual relationships was made worse for some audiences by references to Hindu mythology. *Earth* (1998) focuses on the communal violence at the time of partition and independence in 1947. Although this film stirred up strong emotions about a period of history that some would prefer not to re-visit, the controversy promoted by the third film in the trilogy, *Water*, was much greater.

Filming on *Water* began in India in 2000, but was abandoned when the shoot was attacked by fundamentalist Hindus outraged by its subject matter. The story concerns a child bride (aged about eight) in the 1930s, who is suddenly widowed. Local custom sees her sent to a ‘house of widows’ where she will be expected to remain for the rest of her life. Again, the film was seen as attacking traditional Hindu beliefs (although, of course, it had yet to be completed). Mehta lost some of her funding and her cast (Das and Azmi again), who were committed to other films. She herself made a different film, *Bollywood/Hollywood* (2002), before returning to *Water* in 2005, now with a shoot located in (Buddhist) Sri Lanka. At the centre of *Water* is a romance between a beautiful young widow in the same house as the girl and a law student from a wealthy family. The student is prepared to fight tradition because he is a supporter of the progressive views of Mahatma Gandhi. Much like *Roja*, *Water* offers a romance/melodrama set against the background of a real social issue – the treatment of widows in the 1930s. The casting for the second version saw Mehta turn to a Canadian-based star, Lisa Ray, and one of the new Bollywood heartthrobs, ex ‘supermodel’ John Abraham, as the young couple. This attracted the attention of younger audiences in India, but alienated some of the arthouse audiences who questioned Lisa Ray’s Hindi accent and John Abraham’s acting skills.

*Water* received a nomination for the Foreign Language Oscar in 2007 and was supported by many Indian film fans, even though it was the Canadian entry. Ironically, it was nominated ahead of the official Indian entry, the very popular *Rang De Basanti*. 
The success of Mani Ratnam’s films and the limited, but noticeable, impact of the films of Mira Nair and Deepa Mehta and others has had an effect on Bollywood. *Rang De Basanti* (2006) is one sense a traditional Bollywood film. It has several spectacular musical sequences (composed by A R Rahman, who also composed music for *Water*) and a familiar mix of action and romance. Like many Bollywood films it borrows from Hollywood. One scene refers to the 1955 film *Rebel Without A Cause* which introduced James Dean, the great rebel figure of late Classical Hollywood. *Rang De Basanti* is a ‘youth’ film, even if its star Aamir Khan was already over 40 when he played an ageing university student. (This kind of casting also figures in *Yuva* and in *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai*.)

But *Rang De Basanti* is also something new. The plot sees a young English woman travelling to India to make a documentary drama about a group of young Indians who fought against the British in the 1930s. She has the diaries of her grandfather (a British officer responsible for the capture and execution of the rebels) but no budget to speak of. Her (female) friend in India finds her a group of mainly rich middle class students who could play the lead roles. These young men are prepared to help, but have little interest in the characters. They can’t see why anyone would be prepared to die for India. Eventually they do become involved with their characters, but the narrative takes a major turn when the group become personally involved in the controversy surrounding the death of a young Indian Air Force pilot in a flying accident. They know the pilot and two of them have fathers implicated in a scandal about maintenance contracts in the Air Force. Suddenly, they find themselves fighting the government and military authorities for real.

Made by Rakesh Omprakash Mehra, better known as a director of (internationally acclaimed) advertising films, *Rang De Basanti* is exciting and entertaining. As a ‘political film’ it is perhaps rather far-fetched, even silly, but even so it prompted popular audiences to think about important issues such as corruption in government and to learn something about their nation’s history. Although not ‘realist’ in its setting, it does focus on real social issues and in this sense offers a kind of response to both Mani Ratnam and Deepa Mehta. *Rang De Basanti* was funded by UTV, one of the newer Bollywood companies with ideas much more in tune with Hollywood and at the forefront of joint ventures with Hollywood companies, including M. Night Shayamalan’s 2008 blockbuster *The Happening*, made with 20th Century Fox.
Suggestions For Study

It would be productive to compare and contrast a Bollywood film like *Rang De Basanti* with a Tamil film like *Roja* or *Bombay* and with a diaspora or parallel film such as *Water*. Some possible discussion topics or essay questions might be:

1. What is the difference between the films in the ways in which they engage with social and/or political issues? (This is really a question about the ‘tone’ of the films and the ways in which they attempt to mix entertainment with social comment.)

2. Do some research and you’ll discover that the same stars sometimes appear in different kinds of Indian Cinema – are they used in the same way in Bollywood, regional and parallel cinema?

3. In the same way, think about the dance and song sequences in the different types of film. (Look at A.R. Rahman’s work in all three categories.) Do these sequences always serve the same purpose in the narrative?

4. Find out what Indian and NRI audiences say about the films. Is there a difference between Indian and NRI reactions? To what extent are Bollywood audiences interested in ‘national issues’? Are Tamil audiences interested in the same things as Bollywood audiences? (You should find plenty of websites using a Google search for ‘Tamil Cinema’ – or other regional cinemas.)

5. Explore the assumptions that Bollywood creates an artificial India and regional cinemas are ‘grounded in the local’ by studying *Rang De Basanti* and *Roja*.

6. *Water* is made by a Canadian filmmaker and *Rang De Basanti* has some Hollywood influences. What do you think Indian Cinema could take from Europe and Hollywood and what can it offer in return?

Availability/Accessibility

All the films listed above are available in the UK on subtitled DVDs.

If you want to take your studies further, there is no problem in finding Hindi DVDs in the UK and there are other titles that cover similar ground to *Rang De Basanti*. Try *The Rising: Ballad of Mangal Pandey* (2005) or *Lagaan* (2001) (both starring Aamir Khan) or *The Legend of Bhagat Singh* (2002) (based on the same true story as *Rang De Basanti*). All these films were shown in UK multiplexes and should now be available via UK DVD stores, especially online.

Finding DVDs of Indian Regional Cinema subtitled in English is more difficult. Occasionally Tamil films are shown on Channel 4 and there is a specialist supplier of subtitled Tamil DVDs in the UK, Ayngaran, with an online service at [http://e-sales.ac/ayngaran](http://e-sales.ac/ayngaran). A useful Mani Ratnam film is *Kannathil Muthamittal* (*A Peck on the Cheek*) (2002) which has an idea taken from an American news story and deals with a refugee child from Sri Lanka being adopted in India and then looking for her birth parents.

Diaspora and parallel cinema films are often shown in specialised cinemas in the UK and the Indian films of Mira Nair and Deepa Mehta are available on DVD. Bengali films from the great Indian art cinema filmmakers Satyajit Ray and Ritwik Ghatak are available on DVD.

DVDs with subtitles can also be rented from Love Film and other rental services.
References And Further Reading

Comprehensive, but expensive and now slightly dated

This book is recommended as a clear overview of Indian Cinema. Many of the other books on the market deal only with Bollywood or sometimes with parallel/diaspora cinema. Others are intended for postgraduate study.

A brief history of Indian Cinema as seen in the UK.

Internet research is recommended as there is much more material easily accessible online from India than available from UK publishers.
Resource written for Cornerhouse by Roy Stafford

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