

Diasporic Audiences and Non-Resident Media: The Case of Indian Films

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Abstract

This article seeks to demonstrate how various overlapping claims made by politicians, film producers and academics regarding diasporic audiences have constructed a particular model of cultural transmission emerging from a globalised mediasphere. Taking the case of popular Indian films and their global circulation, this article goes on to challenge the dominant ethnocultural explanations of popular culture and its circulation. Following a consideration of the empirical and epistemological faultlines arising from that paradigm, it is claimed that the tidy equation of media dispersal with migrant ethnicities is not only problematic in this specific case, but also that it provides for misleading conclusions about the relationship between cultural identity and media consumption. On reflection, it is argued that the epistemological foundation of global audience studies must provide for a greater recognition of the subjective and demographic diversity of audiences as well as the inherent hybridity and multiplication of media sources in everyday experience.

Keywords: Globalisation; media audiences; diasporic audiences; Indian films; cultural nationalism; epistemology

The Diasporic Audience

In his influential analysis of the cultural dimensions of globalisation, Arjun Appadurai claimed that the consumption by migrants of media artefacts addressing their own ethnic specificity during the 1990s was providing the catalyst for the imagining of 'diasporic public spheres'. These social bodies are imagined in the form of mobile post-national communities constituted by globally dispersed ethnic networks linked through electronic media (1996: 22). The consolidation the idea of a 'diasporic subject' amid theorisations of a 'diasporic condition' constituted by the mobility of media, capital and human beings has consequently given rise to the paradigm of 'diasporic audiences' denoting global constituencies for ethnically-specific media. As one of the world's major economies with a large and widespread expatriate community and a globally successful film industry, the Indian case

would appear to be a highly suitable terrain for exploring some of these claims concerning the interplay of media and migration; not least, because it is the Indian example that anecdotally informed Appadurai's influential theorisation in the first place. In this article, I will analyse the social life of the contemporary Indian film in terms of its engagement with a diasporic constituency, variously positioned by the over-lapping discourses of government, industry and the academy.

In attempting to provide a suitable theoretical model for the diasporic audience, Stuart Cunningham, extrapolating from the work of both Appadurai and of Todd Gitlin (1998), describes diasporic audiences as inhabiting narrowcast media environments which are 'public sphericules'. That is: they are 'ethno-specific global mediatized communities' which 'display in microcosm elements we would expect to find in the public sphere' (Cunningham 2001:134). From the perspective of their host nations, however, they are 'social fragments that do not have critical mass' (Cunningham 2001:134). Nonetheless, despite being seen as a *fragment* of social space the diasporic media audience is also seen as *globally* connected, representing a site where: 'Sophisticated cosmopolitanism and successful international business dealing sit alongside long-distance nationalism' (Cunningham 2002:273). Elsewhere, John Sinclair along with Cunningham has asserted that the cultural orientation of diasporic communities remains 'toward those they see as their kind in other nations and (often still) in their nation of origin, even while they face the challenges of negotiating a place for themselves in the host culture' (Sinclair and Cunningham 2000:12).

Whether affirmative or defensive in posture, or perhaps both, diasporic cultural practices often continue to be perceived from the perspective of the 'host' nation as indicative of a 'fragmentation' (implicitly, a crisis of assimilation) within the national public sphere, and therefore as an imperative for social science research and public policy. Here, the identification of transnational media practices are often seen *primarily* as a failure in the interaction (or contract) between citizens and the national media. The project of 'multiculturalism' in Western nations has therefore sought, more or less explicitly, to harness the positive potential of a more culturally diverse society in an era of global economic connectivity while simultaneously managing the potentials for what is seen as an undesirable dilution of the existing (and increasingly state-regulated) 'national' culture. In the process of this elaborate dance, a large body of literature has emerged from the Western academies on 'migrant communities', describing their economic structures, cultural practices and social behaviours in terms of their media usage (Carstons 2003, Julian 2003, Panagakos 2003, Karim 2003, Chapman 2004, et al.).

An alternative reading of cultural identity amongst diasporic communities was posited by Stuart Hall, who argued for the inherent hybridity, reinvention and appropriation of various imagined identities forged through their dislocated cultural practices (Hall 1990, 1993, Hall, Morley and Chen 1996). Here the maintenance by migrants of ethno-cultural connections

with 'homeland' cultures is subject to a lack of stability, where aesthetic practices and identities are influenced by complex sets of shifting social referents. Taking this lead, Rajinder Dudrah considers that diasporic social conditions 'can be considered as taking up the interplay of migrant people, their successive settled generations, and their ideas in terms of a triadic relationship. This relationship can be thought of as working between the place of origin, place of settlement, and a diasporic consciousness that shifts between the two' (2002:20). Thus the diasporic media audience can *either* be considered to be engaged primarily with the maintenance of a global ethnic culture, *or* beset by the challenges of combining different cultural streams. In each case, the cultural practices of diasporic communities, whilst described in the literature as exemplary of contemporary global modernity, are also seen primarily as 'a struggle for survival, identity and assertion' (Cunningham 2001:136).

Brand Bollywood

The status of the Indian film within the cultural dimensions of globalisation is compounded by the 'Bollywood' movie becoming a particular object of fashionable interest in the 'Western' world during recent years. Ashish Rajadhyaksha has described the international re-branding of Indian commercial cinema, as a process of 'Bollywoodization' (2003). Thus, while the majority of popular discourse in circulation now seems to present Indian cinema and 'Bollywood' as effectively synonymous, Rajadhyaksha is at pains to maintain a distinction between the two, claiming that: 'the cinema has been in existence as a national industry of sorts for the past fifty years...*Bollywood* has been around for only about a decade now' (2003:28). Rajadhyaksha insists on making this distinction between Indian cinema and Bollywood for two major reasons, firstly because the cultural industry surrounding the 'Bollywood' brand extends far beyond the production and consumption of feature films, and secondly because the high-budget gloss and transnational themes of the major Bollywood films are far from representative of the majority of Indian film production.

Bollywood is *not* the Indian film industry, or at least not the film industry alone. Bollywood admittedly occupies a space analogous to the film industry, but might best be seen as a more diffuse cultural conglomeration involving a range of distribution and consumption activities from websites to music cassettes, from cable to radio. If so, the film industry itself – determined here solely in terms of its box office turnover and sales of print and music rights, all that actually comes back to the producer – can by definition constitute only a part, and perhaps an *alarmingly small* part of the overall culture industry that is currently being created and marketed...While Bollywood exists for, and prominently caters to, a diasporic audience of Indians... the Indian cinema – much as it would wish to tap this 'non-resident' audience – is only occasionally successful in doing so, and is in almost every instance able to do so only when

it, so to say, *Bollywoodizes* itself, a transition that very few films in Hindi, and hardly any in other languages, are actually able to do (2003:27/29).

By Rajadhyaksha's definition, the Bollywood brand denotes something like a broader culture industry in terms of the media mix which it employs, but at the same time Bollywood also denotes a restricted field in industrial and aesthetic terms. Bollywood does not encompass India's small art, or 'parallel', cinema which, in days gone by, were the only products of Indian film making recognised on the global stage through the film festival circuit (Bannerjee 1982). Furthermore, Bollywood does not incorporate the regional-language cinemas which constitute the bulk of film production and consumption in the subcontinent in purely numerical terms. Even as a sector of Hindi cinema which produces some 200 features a year, the Bollywood brand effectively excludes the large stable of low-budget comedies and action exploitation films. Instead, the Bollywood archetype is defined by the high-budget saccharine upper middle-class melodrama which represents a tongue-in-cheek blockbuster repackaging of the *masala* movie of old within an affluent, nostalgic and highly exclusive view of Indian culture and society. It is also notable that the 60 or so productions per year that fall into this category have become increasingly saturated with product placements for global consumer fashions and multinational sponsors. So, if Bollywood is not the Indian cinema per se, as Rajadhyaksha points out, it might be described instead as the 'export lager' of the Indian cinema, since it is Bollywood productions which dominate India's film exports. The high budget Bollywood Hindi-language film generates the vast majority of export returns and has become centrally positioned in the international imagination as the 'trademark' Indian film.

The global profile of Indian cinema has also been a major beneficiary of the processes of remediation occurring with the advent of digital technologies and the new media environment. In search of content and visual styles, India's internet portals have made extensive use of film-related material, promoting themselves with movie gossip and downloads of star images. Whilst the older migrant populations in nations like Burma have little access to the Internet (or indeed much else), the large scale migration of Indian IT professionals to the US since the 1990s has helped to shape one of the most computer literate migrant communities in the world. Internet production skills have been particularly well supported within India by technical colleges and the outsourcing industry. As such, film producers, distributors and film fans in India were well placed to make use of the new medium for promotional purposes. Film magazines, such as *Filmfare*, put out extensive electronic editions and major film projects and film stars have commonly produced websites as part of their promotional strategy for some years now. Arguably, these practices have also been instrumental in developing a global infrastructure for promoting Indian films and film stars. At the same time, it has been argued that the predominance of the English language in all this 'Indian' content, including much of the Bollywood-themed material, has also had the effect of privileging a vision of India that speaks primarily to Indians overseas

and globally-oriented elites at home. The acronym 'NRI' (Non-Resident Indian) is the most common term used in India to describe people of Indian origin living overseas. Thus: 'there is a strong resident elite and NRI alliance that shapes the Internet presence of India and Indians, just as in many other domains' (Gopinath 2009: 303). In this sense, both the Bollywood film and its cross-media presence are seen as consciously addressing the 'non-resident audience' also referenced by Rajadhyaksha (2003: 29).

Non-Resident Subjects

Ronald Inden (1999) and Rajinder Dudrah (2002) have both observed that prior to the mid-1990s 'foreign' Indians were typically villains in film texts, financially enriched and morally corrupted by the west and lacking in the 'Indian values' of humility and integrity. Such characterisations of overseas Indians were an extrapolation of the conflicts between tradition and modernity, often implicitly (or even explicitly) played out in Indian cinema as a contest between Indian and Western values. The turning point commonly identified by commentators in the 1990s was the spectacular success of a Yash Raj film directed by Aditya Chopra (Dwyer 2000, Rajadhyaksha 2004: 114). *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayanega* (1995) marked the transition of the persona of the NRI, from villain to hero. In this film, the British-Indian hero and heroine fall in love on a 'grand European tour' before returning to the Punjab to play out a love triangle against the heroine's father's preferred choice of son-in-law. Ultimately, the non-resident Indian suitor proves himself to display greater integrity than his spoiled and macho Indian counterpart, thus winning the dutiful British-born bride (as the title of the film suggests). This film was one of the most successful Indian films of the decade. Furthermore, it was one of the first features to make full use of its potential in the overseas markets, where it was incredibly popular with migrant audiences – positioning male lead Shah Rukh Khan as the biggest export draw in Indian cinema for the next decade. According to Rajinder Dudrah:

Bollywood of the nineties took note of the NRIs as cosmopolitan in mind, speaking in English or American accents, but with their heart and soul in the right place respecting all things Indian. Nineties film plots spanned several cities across several continents with diasporic characters taking centre stage...characters could be in middle-class India or the urban diaspora of the West thereby opening up affinities with audiences across the globe (Dudrah 2002:29).

The rise of the NRI as the new hero, and the newfound desire to 'open up affinities', had a clear relationship to the growing financial importance of key western markets after the Indian government liberalised film export controls in 1992. The imperatives to cater to the 'NRI market' become obvious when you consider that: 'The financial returns to the producer from distribution in an overseas market of about 20 million people is roughly sixty percent of the volume realised from distribution in the entire Indian market of 1 billion people'

(Deshpande 2005: 191). In India, the NRI, like the Indian film industry, has made a marked transition in recent years from being configured as an errant native seduced by the wealth and glamour of the West, at the expense of Indian values, to being an icon of the desirable cosmopolitan Indian citizen straddling the globe. The NRI brings capital, cosmopolitanism and consumerism to India in exchange for cultural nurturing and validation. He reconnects with his motherland whilst also providing instruction in the transnational consumer literacy that is now aspired to by the Indian middle class (Inden 1999). As Deshpande notes: 'this new, consumable hero wears Gap shirts and Nike sneakers, and when he dances, it is in front of McDonalds outlets in white man's land, or Hollywood studios, or swanky trains, and has white girls – not Indian peasants – dancing with him (Deshpande 2005: 197).

The construction on-screen of these new Indian and Western hybrid subjects symbolises the newfound fashionability of consumerism amongst India's upper middle class, for whom liberalisation and globalisation are credited with the capacity to finally offer retail and leisure for the country at an 'international standard'. The star personas of the film world thus perform a multi-media role as cosmopolitan patriots who step easily across the contradictions of the new India. As such, while operating with great effectiveness as a set of marketing strategies by which the Indian cinema has launched itself into a new era, Bollywood simultaneously operates as a symbolic performance of India in the liberalisation era. As such, Bollywood productions have increasingly been seen as iconic of India's global ambitions, and described as a major source of cultural capital in the mediation of the global (Nye 2005, Tharoor 2008). This paradigm has been supported by various players in the Indian film industry who have used the popularity of Bollywood with migrant audiences in the West to reposition themselves in the global film market. It is with reference to this newfound visibility of the 'diasporic' consumption of Indian films, as well as the increasing characterisation of transnationally located subjects in film narratives, that Vijay Mishra confidently states that 'A study of Bombay cinema will no longer be complete without a theory of diasporic desire because this cinema is now global in a specifically diasporic sense' (2002:269).

The Indian Diaspora

Although there are sizeable populations of Indian origin in Africa, the Caribbean and elsewhere in Asia, research on the media use of Indian diasporic communities has tended to focus on Indians located in Western countries (Gillespie 1995, Ray 2000, Dudrah 2002, Thompson 2003 et. al.). In part, this is a reflection of the relative dominance of Western academia, and its concerns, over the production of 'global' knowledge. A Western-centred notion of the Indian diaspora, however, is not simply a Western or an academic predisposition. It is also a marked feature of official discourses emanating from the Government of India, as well as in the popular discourse of the Indian media, in the print and electronic press, on television, in literature and in movies.

From 1998 to 2004, the BJP-led coalition government made considerable efforts to capitalise on the growing wealth of India's expatriate communities through the promotion of the concept of cultural citizenship. The desire of émigré and ethnic Indians around the world for a cultural connection with the 'homeland' was given emphasis in official discourse, as was their potential as ideal foreign investors (Singhvi 2001). In September 2000, the Government of India commissioned a High Level Committee on Diaspora which produced the Singhvi report in 2001. Amongst its recommendations were a dual-citizenship scheme for Indian residing in 'selected [read Western] countries', a central body for fostering the national-diaspora relationship, and a diaspora day (Pravasi Bharatiya Divas) to promote cultural links with the diaspora including an awards ceremony (Pravasi Bharatiya Samman) for high achievers from Indian communities overseas. Claiming that a 'deep commitment to their cultural identity has manifested itself in every component of the Indian Diaspora', the Singhvi report emphasises the role of the media in fostering the close cultural connections between India and the diaspora (2001). This was a position echoed by Sushma Swaraj, then Union Information & Broadcasting Minister in the NDA government:

The exports of the entertainment industry from India which in 1998 stood at 40 million US dollars have in 2001 crossed more than 180 million US dollars. This entertainment and media explosion has brought India closer to our diaspora. More important is the fact that the diaspora has also majorly contributed in fuelling this growth. Perhaps geographical division between Indians in India and the Indian diaspora is blurring if not disappearing altogether. And with the announcement made by the Hon'ble Prime Minister at the yesterday's inaugural session, the dual citizenship will bring the diaspora closer to us not merely due to our cultural bonds but also by a legal system. Each entertainment and media icon of the Indian diaspora remains our unofficial ambassador abroad. We salute these leaders and assure them of our conducive policies to facilitate their endeavours. (Swaraj 2003)

The function bestowed here by Swaraj on Indian film makers as purveyors of the cultural glue holding together a globally reconfigured Indian-ness represent an explicit recognition of the soft power of the commercial cinema and its capacity to promote India on a global scale. Such a position stands in marked contrast to the early years of postcolonial India when the filmwallahs were decried as peddlers of a morally corrupt and western-derived pastime (Chakravarty 1993: 55-79). This trajectory over forty years from cultural cringe to soft power and newfound status as a hallmark of Brand India has much to do with the longevity of the film industry and its capacity to connect with the popular imagination of the Indian population where, arguably, the state has failed. However, it is also a recognition of the capacity of the Indian film industry to produce a countervailing image of India overseas that disrupts the ubiquitous discourse of backwardness and gender oppression found in Western media accounts. It is important to note, however, that the consistent presence of

Indian films amongst migrant communities for almost a century has been driven by organic demand, not by state-driven cultural policy initiatives. By contrast, official attempts to capitalise upon the reach of Indian films in strategically important countries have been very recent indeed. The rationales on offer from two quite different administrations in the past decade have sought to reverse-engineer explanations for the appeal of Indian films in ways that reflect their own ideological positions. For the BJP-led government of Vajpayee, Bollywood was figured as a transmitter of timeless Hindu values (or *Hindutva*), whilst for the presently governing Congress Party of Manmohan Singh, the contemporary Indian film is a modern avatar of India's rich syncretic culture. In a speech on the 26th September, 2007, Prime Minister Singh noted that:

No other institution has been as successful in achieving the emotional integration of this vast and diverse land of ours as our film industry has been. It is not official Hindi, or Government Hindi, that unites the length and breadth of this country but in fact popular spoken Hindi, as popularized by our Hindi cinema. It is a unique language, a mix of *shudh* Hindi, of spoken dialects like Bhojpuri and Hyderabadi, and of spoken languages like Urdu and Marathi. This unique mix of conversational Hindi from across the country, popularized by the film industry, has become the thread that weaves us all together as Indians. (Singh 2007)

In broad support of the *Hindutva* position, Manas Ray has described participation by ethnic Indians overseas in Bollywood spectatorship as an expression of 'cultural affirmation' by Hindu communities (2000, 2003). From the perspective of a 'host' country, Marie Gillespie also saw the domestic consumption of Indian media products by British Asians as an act of cultural affirmation and communal identification, in this case acting as a response to the inherent racism of the national media in Britain (1995). Gillespie concluded that British broadcasters had failed to address the cultural needs of minority groups; hence their engagement with film and television imported from home was figured as a result of exclusion and as an essentially defensive act. Speaking from the diaspora itself, Rajinder Dudrah also reminds us that the limited representation of South Asians in the British media has to be considered alongside their marginalisation in the wider social sphere, and 'in the context of a racist Britain in which Black settlers had made their home' (2002:27). Here again diasporic cultural practices are seen as being structured by a form of 'cultural resistance' compensating for social exclusion. On the other hand, this engagement with Western spaces can also be figured triumphantly, for example, by Gargi Bhattacharyya who claims that: 'We occupy by force the place that Asian modernity must learn to become, the place between over here and back home, another form of double consciousness for a global age' (2003:10). This is a good example of the sometimes heroic description of diasporas where migrants are both victims (of Western racism) and colonisers (of Western knowledge and capital).

As Miriam Sharma has said, 'Media representations - and self-representations - of Indians in the United States often represent them as a new 'model minority', a 'golden diaspora,' and even as 'the next Jews,' in reference to their economic success in the country' (2002). This is an analogy pursued by the Indian High Level Committee on Diaspora, albeit from a more exterior perspective: 'the Committee felt that the contribution of the Diaspora to Israel in the economic, political and cultural spheres contained important lessons for India. The activities of Jewish lobbies outside Israel, particularly in the US Congress, their extensive fund-raising abilities, large-scale funding for the scientific and technological development of Israel, their global networks which link Jewish associations and organisations worldwide as well as with the State of Israel; could serve as an example' (Singhvi 2001). The example being imagined here is a 'model' diasporic community from the perspective of its erstwhile 'homeland' government (that is, one functioning as an extension of its own 'national interests'). The new hero of Bollywood cinema, then, as he moves between business in New York, shopping in London and endless marriage celebrations in Punjab signifies a new contract between India and the diaspora being articulated by the Indian government. For the BJP and its political partners, the ideology of *Hindutva* espouses a broadly-conceived Hindu faith above formal citizenship as defining Indian-ness, at the expense of Muslim, Christian and other minority communities in India. Thus, the programme to reach out to the diaspora was in concord with a global agenda in Hindu majority politics, as institutionalised in the World Hindu Council (Vishva Hindu Parishad) (VHP 2011). For the Congress Party, sustaining the formal outreach to overseas Indians that they inherited from the BJP in 2004 necessarily entailed a political endorsement of cultural and ethnic formations that had previously been excluded from their own formal, secular definitions of citizenship.

Exposing the Faultlines 1: The Epistemological Paradigm

The term 'non-resident' appears to be a useful one for outlining a particular set of discourses on diaspora that make claims upon Indian cinema and its offshore audiences, seen variously as a relationship with non-resident citizens, markets and subjects. Accordingly, the main purpose of my account thus far has been to illustrate some of the competing claims that are being made upon non-resident Indians in various guises where the consumption of cinema is seen as indicative of an offshore confluence between ethnicity and cultural performance. All of these readings of mediated cultural relations constitute ideological propositions where cultural affiliation is converted discursively into economic or political advantage for some interested party. The state-sponsored programme of non-resident citizenship, for example, mobilises the notion that idealised, affluent offshore subjects will be prepared to divest cash and know-how to the homeland in return for cultural validation, that is, for essentially soft rewards. Implicitly, at least, this also positions the non-resident citizen as a supporter of the ideological shift from secular civic-territorial nationalism to a more explicitly cultural nationalism in India (with a notably chauvinist variant holding sway during the 1990s). With a different agenda, the India

popular film industry has clearly positioned non-resident audiences as a source of hard currency providing an operational foothold in the global cultural economy. The commercial patronage of non-resident viewers has appeared to be similarly available in return for a measure of on-screen recognition, some promotional tours and a dash of 'cinematic nostalgia'. In another context, when we look closely at the on-screen role of the non-resident character in validating the liberalisation era in India itself, we can readily perceive in semiotic terms the symbolic promise of a Cash *and* Culture future overturning the old Cash Vs Culture paradigm of the socialist decades. In this framing, the non-resident hero legitimates a pick-and-choose re-ordering of tradition/modernity for the new zeitgeist.

Similarly, if we position the various claims being made about the cultural identity of the diasporic audience, we can see they also align closely with the logics that inform the mainstream theorisation of Western multiculturalism. This is because, whilst the logic of multiculturalism challenges the idea of a culturally homogenous national audience, it continues to assume 'that there are certain audiences that are commensurate with communities and demographic populations' (Desai 2004: 66). Fundamentally, therefore, the central claims about culture upheld in contemporary accounts of diaspora continue to be structured by their parent discourse, which is a highly particular form of cultural nationalism that seeks to align the foundation of social legitimacy with what Anthony Smith has called the *ethnie* (1999, 2000). Esoteric as this may seem, this trend has profound implications for our understanding of global media audiences, as Ramaswami Harindranath has noted (2005). First and foremost, if culture becomes associated primarily with ethnic affirmation, and ethnicity itself becomes defined largely in performative terms, then our understanding of media audiences becomes significantly racialised. This is because culture in this model is subordinated to ethnicity in ways that inevitably favour a quasi-biological model of cultural transmission. This supports Appadurai's assertion 'that we regard as cultural only those differences that either express, or set the groundwork for, the mobilization of group identities' and that therefore 'we restrict the term culture as a marked term to the subset of these differences that has been mobilized to articulate the boundary of difference' (1996: 13).

From the methodological perception of audience research, I think that there is also a significant additional danger in the transfer of ethnographic models of community from classical anthropological studies to a media-research environment. In the first place, audiences are contingent and voluntary social events, not overarching social systems or enduring biological legacies. In practical terms, however, this line of thinking tends to suggest that audiences are somehow primary and exclusive social groups that can be analysed in isolation from each other. Even worse, this model could easily be taken to imply that members of an audience experience their participation in that way, which makes them conduits of communal socialisation with little in the way of agency, and not much chance of expanding, accommodating diversity or successfully conferring with other taste cultures or

social groups. In this respect, it is worth recalling Philip Schlesinger's observation that there has long been an internalist focus towards the socialising agency of media in modern communications theory at the expense of an emphasis on mediated exchange (2000: 21). Accordingly: 'If this internalist focus is coupled with the use of ethnographic terminology originally developed by anthropologists for the analysis of what were then presumed to be relatively stable and located cultural communities, then there is likely to be a bias towards conceiving of a media audience as a discrete, and culturally similar, population' (Athique 2008a: 32).

If we converge this methodological tendency with the primacy of the *ethnie*, then the notions of ethnoscapas or diasporic public sphericles appear to be plausible models, both theoretically and functionally. Cultural performance can subsequently be read as being both symptomatic and instigative of ethnic identification, making the consumption of ethnically-marked media products central to personal identity construction. This, in turn, makes migrant media usage a germane concern for programmes of social engineering that seek to quantify these putative connections between cultural and political identity. While the political overtones of cultural representations of ethnicity and their consumption have been widely recognised in the academy, and have given weight to the validity of media research, the inevitable corollary is an invitation to manage and assess individuals and populations based upon ethnically-determined readings of a single aspect of social behaviour. Accordingly, the personal media tastes and viewing behaviours of 'ethnic' citizens become legitimate targets for state intervention. Cultural performance subsequently becomes an indisputably political terrain where difference is simultaneously asserted and framed as a problem to be institutionally managed. In many respects, it is the widespread credence given to this particular confluence of logics, and their pervasive influence in the present epoch, that make this article worth writing. Certainly, we have already identified various permutations of exactly this form of thinking in the claims being made upon Bollywood films and their diasporic audience.

However, as we begin looking closer into the case of Indian films, we start to expose some of the fault-lines in the ethno-cultural paradigm. In the first place, it has to be said that Indian popular films are not especially convincing as transmitters of an Indian-ness deployed in the form of a timeless ethnic text. The Bollywood refashioning of Indian film culture is not without its referents to indigeneity at many levels, but it also enacts an overtly 'Westernised' model of cultural consumption, building upon the strong Euro-American influences already at play in the Indian cinema. The influence of MTV on the contemporary song-and-dance sequence for example, has been quite obvious (see Juluri 2003, Asthana 2003). Contemporary 'Bollywood' films provide audiences in India with a diet of free romance and consumer affluence, which continue to be associated substantially in India with Western culture. Simultaneously, the same films also provide a source of cultural consumption that articulate ideas of 'Eastern' and 'Asian' cultures for South Asians who

reside in the West, and for whom its Western influences become less apparent. Therefore, the dual address of Bollywood's 'NRI' films is ridden with powerful contradictions structured around the orientalist binary. In any case, the extent to which non-resident Indians are willing to accept those narratives as indicative of an Indian 'real' also appears to vary considerably (Athique 2005b, Banaji 2006, Bhattacharyya 2004, Kaur 2005). Therefore, as Raminder Kaur observes: 'It is too glib and cursory to say that Bollywood enables a religion-like nostalgia for people of the Indian diaspora; or that it serves some kind of identity orientation in the midst of a West-induced anomie' (Kaur 2005: 313).

Furthermore, any inclination to look at the use of media in identity construction by Indians as a nexus of globalized cultural positioning must be tempered by the recognition that it is inevitably true that there will be many Indians who do not watch Indian films. If we choose to position the consumption of films as constitutive of an act of cultural maintenance or ethnic belonging, we are leaning towards the absurdity of suggesting that those who do not patronize Indian films are, on that basis, relatively lacking in Indian-ness. As Harindranath observes from a personal standpoint:

The popularity of mainstream Indian (Hindi) films among different groups of South Asians in Europe, North America and Australia is indicated by the regular screening of such films in city cinemas. But how far does that interest, leave alone the more intricate and complicated issues of different audience responses to them, characterise South Asian ethnicity? Does my lack of interest in popular Hindi cinema make me an exceptional South Asian as well as a snob? What does it signify in terms of my 'ethnic' identity? It seems to me that promoting my responses to mainstream Hindi films as somehow contributing to my 'Indianness' is clearly wrong (2005).

At the global scale, there are also some significant risks in overstating the overlap between an 'Indian diaspora' and a 'diasporic audience' for Indian films. Not least because this imagined audience becomes positioned as a glamorous off-shore component of the Indian audience, constructed around what is not so much a global but more a spatial extension of the national(ist) model of the media audience. Accordingly:

This inevitably leads to essentialism of the following kind: all Indians are obsessed with Indian movies and this is an essential component, and therefore measure, of their identity (and no-one else's). In such a reading non-Indian fans of Indian movies and Indians who are not movie fans (or are fans of other kinds of movies) become marginalized as agents whose behaviour is anomalous to the normative conditions demanded by the theoretical paradigm (Athique 2008a: 31).

The emergence of much of the theory of the diasporic subject from the realm of literary studies has cast a mould that is probably well suited to an encounter where narrative protagonist and reader are similarly projected in the form of a hypothetical subjectivity. However, in media studies, we should be more wary of conflating the representation of the diasporic hero and the subjective positioning of the diasporic audience, since there is no such epistemological foundation for equating a given characterisation with a set of socially-situated spectators. Nonetheless, discursive attempts to stabilise the diasporic audience via the paradigm of the global Indian are attempts to do just that, and in the process they work to obscure the specificities of the cultural environments occupied by migrant viewers residing in different states and social conditions. There is a strategic imperative for this, where the rise of the NRI as a privileged consumer of Indian cinema has been paralleled by the diegetic appropriation of the non-resident subject as a metaphor for occidental pleasures, but this remains a textual strategy not a social reality (Kaur 2004). Despite statements to the contrary by film makers and critics, the construction on-screen of these new Indian and Western hybrid subjects is not only, or even primarily, about catering to the demands of diasporic audiences for their own representation on screen. More fundamentally, it is about the newfound fashionability of consumerism amongst India's upper middle class where liberalisation and globalisation are claiming the capacity to finally offer retail, travel and leisure at an 'international standard'. The star personas of the film world thus perform a multi-media role as cosmopolitan patriots who step easily across the contradictions of the new India. In that sense, we should not fail to note that urban India remains a core target market for Bollywood's non-resident poetics.

Exposing the Faultlines 2: The Empirical Case

Unfortunately for the ethnocultural paradigm, there is plenty of countervailing evidence to suggest that Indian cinema is not global 'in a specifically diasporic sense', since it also serves significant non-Indian audiences worldwide from Nigeria to Indonesia. Not to mention the fact that the unspoken audience for Indian films in Pakistan dwarfs the diaspora numerically. As such, the global dispersal of Indian films is by no means as readily comparable to the Indian diaspora as is commonly suggested by those seeking to deploy Bollywood as an arm of cultural politics. These other audiences which (following Brian Larkin's lead) I have denoted elsewhere as 'parallel' audiences clearly engage in a mode of reception that cannot be explained under the cultural logics commonly applied to the diasporic audience (Larkin 1997, Athique 2008b). That is, they are obviously not watching those films in order to affirm their cultural identity in any direct causal model of transmission. Further, this engagement of non-Indian audiences with Bollywood cannot even be easily sequestered from a more narrow account of the diasporic audience. In the UK and the Middle East, currently the two largest overseas markets for Indian films, the large proportion of the audience made up by persons whose origins lie elsewhere in South Asia demonstrates that the 'NRI market' there clearly exceeds the political boundaries of

the subcontinent. Simply calling this an 'NRI market' does not make it wholly Indian, even where the expediency of this label is obvious.

We should further note that the globalising effect of diasporic media exchanges is not restricted to the migrant-homeland axis emphasised exclusively by the Indian government. The cultural connections within and between South Asian migrant communities around the world have also multiplied. For example, Hindi film songs are remixed by DJs in Birmingham, England and blasted out at India-themed dance events in Toronto, Suva and Johannesburg. Increasingly they are also, depending on your point of view, either exported or 'returned' to India. The Indian cinema has clearly provided much of the *materiel* for this global subculture, although it is equally clear that these diasporic practices intersect with other media flows in these far flung locations to produce a set of hybridized cultural products which draw upon influences such as Jamaican Dub, Afro-American rap and mainstream urban club cultures. This hybridity does not preclude, or necessarily diminish, the significance of the ideologically-coded offshore subjects envisioned by the Indian state. However, it does suggest that if we are to understand the function of Bollywood in signifying cultural identity at a global scale we need to understand the diasporic audience far beyond the confines of any narrow instrumental *ideal-type* shaped by foreign policy. This gets to the heart of the contradictory nature of diasporas, since the very hybridity and border-spanning subjectivities which have caused them to be posited as the exemplars of globalisation also clearly undermine attempts to examine them effectively under any single classification.

On a broader scale, I would argue that audiences everywhere are increasingly engaged with a pluralised media environment, and this would include not only migrant but also 'majority' citizens. In a putative 'global' post-broadcast media environment such behaviour becomes a relatively logical pattern of consumption, as evidenced by the emergence everywhere of outlets for narrowcast programming of various kinds. As such, it is important to remember film watching remains primarily a choice of entertainment, and must therefore be understood as a source of gratification amongst many. For many people watching Indian movies may be at least as much an act of pleasure as it is of political loyalty or cultural solidarity. Watching an Indian movie is not *only* a personal or social statement of identity or communal affinity. This is the case most obviously for non-Indians, but arguably for a large proportion of Indians too. The role of pleasure, therefore, in the media choices being made by 'ethnic' communities should not be made entirely subservient to explanations which portray ethnic media use as a statement of (either heroic or threatening) social and cultural identification. In an era of resurgent ethno-nationalism this is politically dangerous for obvious reasons, but it is also an empirically suspect claim. In a detailed study of Hindi film reception in both Britain and India between 2000 and 2003, Shakuntala Banaji has noted that the relatively consistent ideological overtones of Hindi films were subject to widely divergent readings not simply amongst different categorisations of South Asian viewers, but also by single subjects in responses articulated at different times and in different contexts

(2006: 21-22, 61-62). Although many of Banaji's respondents identified with an 'Asian' or 'Indian' cultural tradition, they frequently contested many of its constituent values, while continuing to enjoy films whose subjective positioning they consciously rejected. For Banaji, it therefore becomes untenable for scholars to continue casting viewing pleasure and critical reading as inimical forms of spectatorship, another common flaw in audience research (2006: 13-15).

In my own study of Indian film watching in Australia during the same period, by virtue of recruiting through poster advertisements in grocery stores, I found at the outset that the audience formed around Indian movies was 'an inherently transnational affair superseding the political identities of the subcontinent and also drawing in members of other Australian communities who have brought with them to Australia a familiarity with Indian movies' (2005a: 126). This inevitably exceeded any blunt ethnic-transmission reception model, even though the films were again heavily associated by all respondents with an 'Indian' idiom. As such: 'some interviewees saw the cultural particularity, or the 'Indian-ness', of Indian films as a potential bar to those occupying other cultural identities or literacies [but] those same interviewees were also in general agreement with other participants in claiming that such films dealt primarily in matters of universal appeal which were relevant across cultures' (Athique 2005b: 291). Perhaps more critical for our present discussion was my finding that even for viewers falling within the ethnically-determined boundaries of a South Asian diaspora:

participants occupying similar positions in categorical terms within these 'structuring structures' clearly held different beliefs about Indian films and used them differently in their own lives. Since participants provided their explanations of Indian films by positioning those media objects, and themselves, *strategically* in relation to various social collectives of anecdotal 'others', there seems to be little evidence of a shared horizontal perspective amongst this community. (ibid: 292)

These are very different findings from those of Manas Ray who also conducted his own research in the Sydney area. Ray, however, recruited his subjects through locally-based Hindu organisations and *a priori* discounted Muslim viewers as marginal (more interested in 'Arab culture') as well as subsequently dismissing the responses of Bengali professionals who expressed disdain for Hindi films (apparently evidence of a 'cultural fossilisation') (Ray 2000: 144, 169). In practice, however, Ray's dismissal of one set of diasporic practices in favour of another seemed to rest upon his foundational position that the timeless appeal of Indian cinema can be attributed to their perpetuation of the popular and folk traditions associated with the Hindu epics (2000:153-158) and that 'the sway of Indian filmdom on Indians – *wherever they live* – is widely accepted' (Ray 2000:140). Since the former was obviously problematic in relation to the Muslim viewers and the latter was not supported in

the case of the Australian Bengalis, Ray was required to provide a classic 'false-consciousness' argument to exclude these anomalies. The Fijian-Indian migrant community provided more fertile ground for his study of diasporic mediation, since their particular attachment to Hindi movie culture appeared strong enough to underwrite his assessment of their cultural identity. If Ray's sophisticated theoretical arguments about *postcolonial* versus *postcolonial* subjectivities are taken aside, it appears to me that the Fijian Indian story was privileged because it was better fitted to the overall premises of his media ethnography. Ray says as much himself: 'The reason for focusing on the Fiji Indian community is primarily because of its close attachment to Hindi movies' (Ray 2000:140). There is much cause, therefore, to be as sceptical of academic discourses on diasporic audiences as we would be of the political co-option of popular culture in general.

Exploring the Alternatives 1: The Non-Resident Diegesis

All of the epistemological and empirical fault lines in the ethnocultural model serve to indicate the heterogeneity of extra-territorial cultural exchanges enacted around the Indian popular film. In doing so, they undermine the notion of an easy fit between migrant audiences and any essential notion of an Indian diaspora, challenging in turn the notion that the use of ethnically-specific media presents an effective opportunity for examining a diasporic population as a homogenous whole. The implications of this are significant, because it brings into question the notion that their 'social identity' as the inhabitants of a certain 'ethnicity' can be correlated directly, and empirically, to their personal practices of media consumption (see Athique 2008a). At the everyday level of experience, this is most likely a thornier problem for media sociology than it is for those individuals themselves. For academics, the model of the diasporic audience has often been employed to project mediatised minority communities who employ cultural consumption primarily as a method of social and political cohesion. That is, I think, untenable. At the same time, few would deny that the audience for Indian movies in many parts of the world is comprised of Indians in a large part. Similarly, it is a matter of record that the historical growth of the dispersal of Indian films has been shaped by patterns of migration out of the subcontinent during the past century. Nonetheless, this dispersal does not demonstrate an absolute correlation with those movements of people nor their present placement. There are also millions of non-Indians who watch Indian films in various parts of the world, and it would be very rare to find a diasporic subject who consumes Indian media content exclusively. In that sense, focusing on an essential loyalty to India, or to Indian-ness, articulated through film-viewing tends to circumvent discursively both the transnational and multicultural dimensions of migrant populations and the plurality of global media flows.

Due to their global circulation, Indian films are patronized by a large number of what could be called 'non-resident' audiences. The term 'resident' is itself, of course, a variable and contested term; a signifier shaped by the social, cultural, geographic and, typically, bureaucratic territories where it is employed. Nonetheless, there continues to be a broad

unifying context to the term which implies *belonging* in not only a spatial but also a symbolic sense. A media audience might therefore be considered 'resident' under conditions where viewers perceive what is on-screen as somehow coterminous with the society in which they live, an allegorical function served effectively by both fantastic and 'realist' narrative. This was the normative viewing position constructed during the heyday of national media systems and the attendant nationalist constructions of cultural production. The 'non-resident' mode of media consumption, by contrast, is a term intended to identify audiences who fall outside this viewing position. Non-resident audiences inhabit social conditions where the engagement of viewers with a media artefact operates in an environment where the diegetic world cannot reasonably be claimed to present a social imagination 'about here and about us'. In much of the world, where imports make up the bulk of films screened and where television formats address a wide range of transnational territories, it is non-resident experiences of media consumption that are the most common. Given the profusion of these conditions, I believe that greater care must therefore be taken to distinguish between the diaspora of ethnic populations and the global dispersal of media products. Certainly, we should not position the overlaps between the two as archetypal accounts of globalisation at the expense of other phenomena emerging from the mobility of media.

In doing just that, Appadurai's assertion in *Modernity At Large* that we should employ culture primarily to map out the boundaries of human geography in a post-national world remains as fundamentally internalist in orientation as the model of the media audience has been for the past fifty years (1996). As such, it leaves us with little in the way of explanation for media flows that cross social groups, beyond those old-fashioned notions of cultural imperialism that Appadurai himself critiques. In fact, what his theory of culture under globalisation achieves primarily is a re-territorialising of nationalist models of culture onto biological rather than physical terrain. However, the function of media content in policing the boundaries of ethnic difference is most likely to prove no more tenable than the notion that culture smoothly demarcates the geographical and bureaucratic borders of a nation state. In practice, Indian films, like many other cultural forms in Asia, continue to lend and borrow motifs from other cultures, both proximate and exotic. This is indicative, perhaps, of a very different notion of how culture works. That is, primarily through exchange, appropriation and remediation as opposed to maintaining the boundaries of discrete cultural constituencies. This is not to say that Indian films are not ethnically marked in the minds of their audiences, and symbolically associated with the society where they are produced, but it seems equally clear that the degree of ethno-cultural literacy required to enjoy the pleasures of Indian cinema is relatively low in practical terms. In that sense, the global presence of Indian films is just as likely to arise from the conscious mismatch between the Bollywood diegesis and the burden of faithfully representing an Indian social milieu (where the various manifestations of ethnicity and culture are inherently plural in any case). To demand an anthropological schema from cultural representation, therefore, or to assume that this is expected by audiences, is to miss the point of popular culture. Similarly,

contemporary audiences around the world cannot be encapsulated within any single instance of reception. A model for contemporary media reception must therefore deal more explicitly with the 'channel-multiplication' that is inherent to globalisation, and a tidy mosaic of ethnic audiences cannot fulfil this obligation as readily as Appadurai suggests.

Exploring the Alternatives 2: The Social Imagination

The theoretical notion which has been most central to discussions of media reception for the past two decades has been Benedict Anderson's concept of the imagined community (1991). Anderson 'famously posited the effects of media use upon the imagination as a transformative force in the socialization of a modern community...[where]...participation in the new mass audiences facilitated by the emergence of print media encouraged individuals to imagine themselves as part of larger and more abstracted social formations' (Athique 2008a: 26). For textual research, it is this notion of a collective symbolic imagination that has allowed for the reading of cultural artefacts as allegorical renditions of identifiable societies or social groups. For audience research, those articulations are further aligned with an *a priori* social group whose collective subjectivity can be read off a sample of responses to media content. The notion that the social is imagined into being through performance has also been amenable to theories of media effect, where media consumers are considered susceptible to nation-building messages encoded into media artefacts. The theories of globalisation advanced by scholars such as Appadurai and Cunningham make essentially the same claims in reference to the role of media in enabling the affirmation and maintenance of ethnic societies and polities operating at a global scale. Accordingly, the present model of diasporic audiences envisages mediated minority communities whose cultural consumption primarily operates as a transmitter of social and political subjectivity. The media usage of a sample of migrants therefore constitutes a convenient 'identity window' for qualitative researchers and policy makers to extrapolate the worldview of a larger population. Anderson, however, originally claimed that media reception allowed participants in mass culture to imagine social formations as comparable and related. He did not claim that they *necessarily* imagined them all in the same way, or for the same reasons, or in ways that would permit such generalisation.

To illustrate the significance of this to the model of the diasporic audience, it is useful to reference Anderson's less well-known text, 'Nationalism, Identity and the Logic of Seriality', which was re-published in the volume entitled *The Spectre of Comparisons* (1998). Here Anderson forges a distinction between two intrinsically different forms of 'serialisation' which he terms 'bound' and 'unbound' serialities. His intention is 'to reframe the problem of the formation of collective subjectivities in the modern world by consideration of the material, institutional, and discursive bases that necessarily generate two profoundly contrasting types of seriality' (1998:29). By making this distinction between the two forms of imagining communities, Anderson is distinguishing between two imaginative sets of relations. First of all, the 'unbound' series, which emerges on the basis of the symbolic

comparisons made possible by mediated forms of popular representation. Anderson sees these imaginings as, potentially at least, infinite in their membership, indicating the possibility of an inclusive and expansive social imagination based upon universal symbolic comparisons. It is this, for example, that makes the villain in an Indian film instantly recognisable as the villain to any viewer, and comparable to a broader unbound series of cinematic villains. In the second definition, that of 'bound' series, Anderson locates the quantifiable and numerical forms of representation which emerged from the textual institutions of the state, namely statistics. In this case, Anderson sees a very different rendering of the social imagination based upon the arbitrary imposition of an essentially integer-driven and finite rendering of the world predicated upon inimical difference between categories. By this logic, you are either a Trekkie or you are not, and by extension all Trekkies can be considered to be alike. What is most relevant in this distinction to the epistemology of audience research is that although the two forms of series arise upon logics which are seemingly incommensurable, and irreducible to each other, both coding systems are likely to co-exist in any discussion of the wider social context of reception.

How, then, might this theory of seriality inform our understanding of the 'globalised' media audience and its collective imagination? First of all, understanding an audience as an unbound series of 'viewers' allows us to formulate a notion of a collective engaged in a shared social practice which does not require, and may not necessarily be explained through, closed categorical positioning. It thus allows us to refute the bound logic of asserting *a priori* the primacy of any normative categorical basis for audience membership. Critically, the unbound series does not require exclusivity of membership, and therefore allows us to accommodate the recognition that any member will be part of more than one audience. Each participant can then be seen to exist simultaneously within different frames of social reference, without being necessarily plagued with existential angst about the resulting instability of their 'identity'. These are all necessary steps towards understanding a more pluralised, overlapping set of global audiences. Nonetheless, the parallel conception of a bound series of social imagining, whilst most likely a poor measure of human subjectivity, continues to have some real significance for understanding the media audience as a site of cumulative, if not collective, behaviours. It is this numerical imagination that allows us to examine an audience as a quantifiable category through the various bound series of box-office statistics, industry output, export/import exchanges, the supply and demand logic of distribution and exhibition and the targets set by cultural policy. All of these series have demonstrable importance as representations of the social interactions which bring media to their audiences. As long as we avoid the trap of trying to align bound and unbound approaches to understanding audiences within a causal relationship we will not be drawn into imposing unrealistic homogeneity upon audiences or struggling to attribute a singular subjective causation to cultural practices.

Conclusion

Where I am able to fall back into lock step with Appadurai is in the identification of the popular Indian film as a highly suitable artefact for demonstrating the operation of culture across an irregular global terrain. The present academic interest in Indian movies reflects a widespread acceptance that media audiences and industries inhabit a world where commercial and cultural exchange is notably uneven, but is nonetheless multi-polar and diffuse. This recognition has steadily supplanted the notion of American cinema as an overwhelming force of global homogenisation (see Shohat and Stam 1996). In recognition of the 'increasing volume and velocity of multi-directional media flows that emanate from particular cities, such as Bombay, Cairo and Hong Kong', Michael Curtin has proposed that we think of the global media not as an imperial force based in the West operating upon the rest of the world, but as a more complex matrix linking media capitals (2003:202). Whilst valuable in itself, the problem with simply multiplying the number of hegemonic centres is a continuing predilection towards the various quantifiable series of media production. This is only part of the story, since I suspect that the greatest opportunity offered by the turn towards transnational modes of media analysis is the opportunity to interrogate the imaginative social relations being manifested across so many different 'non-resident' contexts.

To date, the debates on Bollywood's engagement with its non-resident audiences represent a complex matrix of 'soft power' effects that play off the competing claims made by the self-marketing strategies of film producers and movie stars, the political agendas of liberals and conservatives in India and in the West, along with the instrumental practices of diplomats, film distributors and academics. Although they arise from a varied set of agendas serving different ends, taken together, all these various claims have a tendency to present a harmonious causal model supporting accounts of Indian media mobility and cultural integrity. They consistently do so in a manner that is more congruent with nationalist conceptualisations of culture than it is with the pluralised cultural fields presently enacted around the offerings of Bollywood. In epistemological terms, they all seek to contain those unbound imaginative encounters within the bound logics of governmentality, an approach that can only be sustained by excluding valuable evidence of the social life of Indian cinema. This tendency is more or less inevitable, but its problematics do not negate the continuing importance of Indian films in the gradual reformulation of global audience research. Indeed, notwithstanding the periodic articulation of nationalist rhetoric, the Indian film has already proved to be more than capable of transcending cultural barriers as well as critical taste and state authority. If anything, the failure to stabilise quantifiable ethnic boundaries through the *masala* film may well imply that the influence of cultural performance is both 'softer' and more powerful than the bare logic of ethno-nationalist politics is capable of recognising. As such, the interplay of discursive forces in the ensuing conversation clearly expresses many of the central symptoms and dichotomies of our present global conditions, and in that respect, warrants a further sustained analysis. If we resist the temptation to use one merely

to quantify the other, the social life of the Indian film and the rich cultural history of the Indian diaspora both provide ample evidence for a more radical reading of the cultural dimensions of globalisation.

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