



An Idiom for India

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AN IDIOM FOR INDIA

Hindustani and the Limits of the Language Concept

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Bollywood

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speech genre

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This essay explores the cultural legacy of Hindustani, which names the intimate overlap between two South Asian languages, Hindi and Urdu. Hindi and Urdu have distinct religious identities, national associations and scripts, yet they are nearly identical in syntax, diverging to some extent in their vocabulary. Hindi and Urdu speakers, consequently, understand each other most of the time, but not all of the time, though they can never read each other's texts. Their shared space, Hindustani, finds no official recognition in India or in Pakistan, but it denotes, particularly in the early twentieth century, an aspiration for Hindu-Muslim unity: the dream of a shared, syncretic culture, crafted from the speech genres of everyday life. Beginning with the colonial project of Hindustani, the essay focuses on a discussion of the works of early twentieth-century writers like Nehru, Premchand and Sa'adat Hasan Manto. I argue that the aesthetic project of Hindustani attempted to produce, not a common language, but a common idiom: a set of shared conventions, phrases and forms of address, which would be legible to Indians from all religions and all regions. By theorizing Hindustani as an idiom, and not a language, I explain its persistence in Bollywood cinema well after its abandonment in all literary and official registers. Bollywood, I argue, is Hindustani cinema, not only because of its use of a mixed

Hindi–Urdu language in its dialogues, but also because of its development of a set of clearly recognizable, easily repeatable conventions that can surmount linguistic differences.

In a 2005 interview the celebrated author Salman Rushdie stumbled over a seemingly simple question. When asked, simply, ‘What is your mother tongue?’ Rushdie replied in an abundance of confusion, though his answer began confidently in a single word:

Urdu. Urdu is literally my mother’s tongue. It’s my father’s tongue, too. But in northern India one also spoke Hindi. Actually, what we spoke was neither of them, or rather more like both. I mean, what people in northern India actually speak is not a real language. It’s a colloquial mixture of Hindi and Urdu called Hindustani. It isn’t written. It’s the language of Bollywood movies. (Rushdie 2005)

Rushdie asserts perfect biological inheritance – Urdu is ‘literally’ his mother’s tongue and his father’s as well. His response, however, is immediately undone by a series of hesitations, shifting both the subject of his sentences and the actuality to which they refer. Rushdie cannot speak of familial language without speaking of regional or national language, moving from what is spoken by his father and mother to what is spoken ‘in northern India’ by a series of vaguely defined actors: ‘one’, ‘we’, ‘people’. That which is spoken also rapidly shifts, from the names of two defined languages, to the claim of speaking ‘neither of them, or rather more like both’, and finally to the clarification that what is spoken ‘is not a real language’. The question of one’s ‘mother tongue’ must, for Rushdie, be answered only against the backdrop of the ‘colloquial mixture’ of the ‘people of northern India’, which he names Hindustani. This unreal language, according to Rushdie, lacks a written existence, yet it possesses an extensive cinematic presence: in Bollywood.

Rushdie’s confused answer is a surprisingly accurate one. The two languages he first mentions, Urdu and Hindi, are officially distinct from yet uncomfortably close to each other, much like ‘identical twins [who] have chosen to dress as differently as possible’ (Shackle and Snell 1990, 1). They have different national and identitarian associations – Urdu, with Pakistan and Muslims, and Hindi, with India and Hindus – and distinct scripts – Nastaliq for Urdu, which is shared with Arabic and Persian; and Nagari for Hindi, shared with Sanskrit and other Indo-Aryan languages. They are, however, almost identical in syntax, diverging somewhat in lexemes and phonemes. Hindi and Urdu speakers will understand each other much of the time, but not all of the time. The term that Rushdie proffers, Hindustani, to describe that which ‘people in northern India actually speak’, can be used as

the name for this problem. Hindustani, essentially, is what happens when Hindi and Urdu speakers talk to one another.

In the existing scholarship on Hindi and Urdu literature and language, Hindustani is variously defined as the single language of which Urdu and Hindi are two specialized styles (Grierson 1903; Tarachand 1944; Rai 2000; McGregor 2003); an ideological fiction invented to bridge the distinct languages of Hindi and Urdu (Russell 1996; Faruqi 2001; Trivedi 2003; Mishra 2012); and as the common space between the two distinct languages of Hindi and Urdu (Dalmia 2003; University of Texas at Austin 2012). This problem of definition, I suggest, arises because of the insufficiency of the concept of ‘language’ in the subcontinental context, where multiple languages intimately coexist even as many have claimed distinct and divisive politics. Languages are commonly defined by their grammar and vocabulary, and secondarily in relation to their literary traditions. Hindustani, in contrast, is inevitably invoked in terms of its popularity among the common people, a geographical descriptor of what is commonly said and (usually) understood. The historical articulation of Hindi and Urdu as distinct languages is inextricable from the violent politics of Hindu and Muslim differentiation, and the existence of a common colloquial register of Hindi-and-Urdu has then been mobilized, under the name of Hindustani, as evidence of a syncretic subcontinental civilization. I will argue that the term ‘Hindustani’ names a theoretical problem in subcontinental cultural practice: the creation of an idiom of common understanding out of the multilingual and *ad hoc* texture of colloquial interactions. A political commitment to Hindustani, consequently, means the attempted codification of the colloquial that makes it transportable as a set of conventions, whether in literature, in politics or in film.

In the sections that follow, I will use the problem of Hindustani to trace the status of the colloquial in north Indian cultural practice, and the access to the common people it is imagined to promise. I define Hindustani as a colloquial register of language commonly used across the northern part of South Asia, both in India and in Pakistan, and I follow Christopher Shackle and Rupert Snell (1990) in understanding ‘a triangular pattern’ of language usage, defined ‘by the three extreme points of deliberately down-to-earth Hindustani, highly Persianized Urdu and highly Sanskritised Hindi’ (1990, 17). Most speakers will know, at least passively, all the vertices of this triangle (even if their own expression is located firmly on just one node): they will know two words for many common terms, and will be familiar, if vaguely, with multiple options for word formation, syntax and emphasis, drawn from the rich traditions of both Persian and Sanskrit. The impress of this triangular pattern is particularly marked among skilled language users, as when authors and orators draw strategically on both Sanskritic and Perso-Arabic inheritances.

Terms like ‘Hindi’, ‘Hindui’ and ‘Hindavi’ begin to appear from the thirteenth century onwards, used as vague referents for the language spoken in the Delhi and Agra region. Such terms were found necessary to distinguish this speech from Persian, and it was defined in geographical, not ethnic, terms, and as the Other to the esteemed administrative and literary language. In the late eighteenth century the term *urdu e-mualla* (‘the exalted camp’), appeared which was later shortened to ‘Urdu’, as the descriptor of the speech of elite men close to the Mughal courts in Delhi and Agra. Hindui continued to be used as a general category for local speech, particularly in rural areas (Dalmia 1997, 152–156). The political pressures of the nineteenth century, and the intensification of colonial rule (and anticolonial sentiments), led to the emergence of ‘Urdu’ and ‘Hindi’ as terms of linguistic self-description, ostensibly correlating to two organic, national, subcontinental communities. By the end of the nineteenth century, Hindi was claimed as the authentic language of middle-class Hindus, particularly by upper-caste groups desirous of government employment, whereas Urdu was applauded as the sophisticated language of a syncretic culture, particularly by Muslims and by some Persian-educated Hindu groups. Their increased bifurcation, fuelled by religious differentiation, was enhanced through a growing body of written work in each language, beginning with administrative usage, then prose writing, and then finally the most hallowed of literary genres, poetry. What was frequently indistinguishable in spoken form became immediately discernable when written: Nastaliq, running right to left in cursive, came to signify Urdu, while Nagari, running left to right in thick blocks, indicated Hindi. This split, however, also rendered Hindustani illegible: lacking a distinct script or a single literature, and hence, as Rushdie (2005) suggested, ‘not a real language’.

I will begin, accordingly, with the first efforts to write down Hindustani, which arose in the context of the British colonial administration. I will then attend to Hindustani as an anticolonial idiom, focusing on the Marxist writers and intellectuals in the Progressive Writers’ Association and the position of Congress Party leaders like Jawaharlal Nehru. Both the colonial and anticolonial projects of Hindustani’s inscription emphasized the significance of colloquial life, in which various improvisatory forms of communication exist in the context of widespread multilingualism, and both projects enshrined these above the existing models of literary tradition. Both projects, however, also required something more organized than the ephemera of colloquial conversation for their unfolding: they committed, as a consequence, to the project of producing Hindustani as an idiom.

I argue this conceptual project is inherited, in the postcolonial period, by the commercial filmmaking industry known as Bollywood, whose emergence as a highly conventionalized form creates an idiom of subcontinental commonality where literary texts could not. The dominant conventions of

sound cinema in India were consolidated during a period of heated linguistic debate, and one of these conventions, more striking than it is sometimes acknowledged, is the usage, in Bollywood films, of the mixed argot called Hindustani. The cinematic apparatus was understood, from its earliest decades in India, to create equality of access – before the camera, and before the screen – to those who participate in its representational project, whether as directors, actors or audience members. The emergence of Bollywood as a highly conventionalized form, complete with easily recognizable narrative structures, discrete and transposable songs, and the hybrid speech of its dialogues, can be understood, I will argue, as the emergence of a Hindustani cinema.

A Colonial Vernacular

The project of the inscription of Hindustani began with the British establishment of Fort William College in Calcutta in 1800, under the leadership of the Scottish linguist John Gilchrist. Closely paralleled by missionary activities in Serampore, which translated proselytizing texts into vernacular languages, Fort William challenged the emphasis of written activity in the subcontinent, by subordinating the greatness modelled by literary tradition to the functionality of colloquial speech. This investment conflicted with an earlier and long-standing relationship to the colloquial, in which what was ordinarily spoken was considered less valuable than the illustrious classical languages of Sanskrit, Persian and Arabic. As a consequence, when Gilchrist asked his native experts for Hindustani equivalents of English words, they would seek to inscribe an improved version of ordinary conversation, refined through the incorporation of these higher languages. As he bemoaned:

instead of adverting to the most familiar, easy, common words ... my learned associates were some of them with their minds eye roaming for far-fetched expressions, on the deserts of Arabia, others were beating every bush and scampering over every mountain of Persia, while the rest were groping in the dark intricate mines and caverns of Sanskrit lexicography, totally overlooking in these pedantic excursions, the most essential reflections, that my operations were awowedly directed to, and calculated for, the open, accessible plains of Hindoostan. (Gilchrist 1788, xiv)

Gilchrist's understanding of language is not only topological but also geographical: much as Arabic is defined by its deserts, Persian by its mountains and Sanskrit by its intricate mines and caverns, the language

that he is bringing into textual existence will be appropriate ‘for the open, accessible plains’. This metaphorical landscape is paired with his lived experience of the Indian subcontinent, for he only understands that his experts have misled him, to deserts and caverns, when he overhears two peasants arguing in a nearby field (1788, xiv).

Whereas today’s advocates of ordinary, colloquial speech as a scholarly topic might understand their aims as democratic or at least populist, the impetus of the first inscription projects in Hindustani was resolutely imperial, a project of colonial knowledge-making animated in part by racist distrust. Gilchrist describes the speakers of Hindustani as ‘the most unprincipled race existing on the face of the earth’ (1788, xxviii) and his desire to produce a *written* guide to the language aims to free the means of communication from those who use it most. His recommended study course of Hindustani, for instance, is designed to proceed as long as possible ‘without the help of any black teacher, who might rather mar, than mend the learners’ pace’, because he would ‘affect to show his erudition, by defiling the mother tongue, in which nevertheless, he thinks, lives, moves, and has a being, both in Persian and Arabic’ (1788, xliii, xlvi). Gilchrist’s educated native defiles not *his* mother tongue, but *the* mother tongue: a biologically inherited language, but one not owned by its inheritors. Gilchrist’s castigation of his native ‘learned associates’ both marks his racial superiority and obscures the criticism of many of his compatriots, who still thought that the best way to learn the current speech of Hindoostan would be to study the classical languages they understood to undergird it (Cohn 1996, 33).

Gilchrist aimed to extract an ordered, written logic for this colloquial world, one that would facilitate the order of British rule. In his understanding, Hindustani is circularly arranged, with ‘a true centre point’ at which these peasants might be located and a ‘circumference’ where, ‘on one hand, the learned Moosulman glories in his Arabic and Persian; and, on the other, the Hindoo is no less attached to his Sanscrit and Hinduwee’ (Gilchrist, 1788, xli). These two ‘extremes’ constitute the poles at which modern Hindi and modern Urdu emerge following the end of Persian as the language of administration in the 1830s and the increase in vernacular publishing after the 1857 Revolt. The desire for British patronage, and particularly for government employment, informed the vociferousness of this bifurcation (King 1994; Dalmia 1997), but it would be incorrect to claim, as Aamir Mufti has, that the British ‘invent[ed]’ two languages ‘for the purpose of colonial governance’ (2010, 487). The British involvement in the nineteenth-century emergence of Hindi and Urdu as distinct languages was not a directed project of colonial partition; rather, the British engaged inconsistently, and confusedly, upon a shifting linguistic landscape.

An Anticolonial Idiom

By the start of the twentieth century, when Hindi and Urdu were mostly understood as distinct languages, Hindustani emerged as a term of politicized *self*-description, an assertion of the everyday overlap between Hindi and Urdu speakers, between Hindus and Muslims, in the colloquial register of urban life. Hindustani as a political commitment challenged not only the increasing assertion of Hindu and Muslim national-cultural difference, but also the elite insistence upon the proper use of language, whether that be Persianized Urdu or Sanskritized Hindi.

Early twentieth-century pressure, both political and commercial, for literary language to approach the language of everyday life would, by extension, impress much of the period's literature in Hindi and Urdu with the influences of a shared colloquial life. This approach to the analysis of Hindi and Urdu texts enables us to revisit the decline of Urdu and the ascendancy of Hindi, as for instance in Christopher King's (1994) impressive mapping of the decline in Islamic-language publishing after 1857. Considered from another perspective, however, the displacement of Urdu in its most explicit signification – that is, in its inscription through its characteristic Arabic-style script – need not be understood as a situation of its erasure. For example, Devaki Nandan Khatri's *Chandrakanta* (1887), which is written in Nagari script and widely described as the first Hindi bestseller, is replete with vocabulary more commonly associated with Urdu (i.e. Arabic and Persian cognates) and draws heavily, in both form and content, on the Persian genre of the *dastan*. Here, the continuation of Urdu under another guise, paired with the overwhelming trend towards the convergence of everyday and literary languages, suggests that, when one writes Urdu in Nagari, as Khatri arguably does, one inscribes not Hindi but Hindustani. Khatri's novel presages the kind of commercial Hindustani – both applauded and decried as the language of the bazaar – that will find greatest success in the postcolonial period.

In 1925 the Indian National Congress declared Hindustani alone to be the lingua franca of India, the name now for a language of national, and anticolonial, unity. This position was strongly associated with Gandhi, whose conceptualization leaned heavily towards equivalence between Hindi and Hindustani, with a strong preference for Nagari script (Mishra 2012; Lelyveld 2001). Jawaharlal Nehru, closely guided by Gandhi, spelled out this Congress position in a 1937 pamphlet entitled 'The Question of Language'. Nehru attempted to define Hindustani as the 'only possible all-India language':

What is Hindustani? Vaguely we say this word includes both Hindi and Urdu, as spoken and as written in the two scripts, and we endeavour to strike a golden mean

between the two, and call this idea of ours Hindustani. Is this just an idea with no reality for its basis, or is it something more? (Nehru 1937, 5–6)

According to Nehru's historical account, although the terms were interchangeable for most of the Mughal period, Urdu was more associated with 'the mixed camps' near the courts, 'merging' in the countryside into 'purer Hindi' (1937, 10). Consequently, the 'real difference' is not religion but urbanity:

Urdu is the language of the towns and Hindi the language of the villages ... The problem of bringing Urdu and Hindi nearer to each other thus becomes the much vaster problem of bringing the town and the village nearer to each other. (Nehru 1937, 10)

Whereas Gilchrist's 'open, accessible plains' invoked a linguistic reality autonomous from its speakers, Nehru's towns and villages are here both metaphorical and referential: both images for the assumed values of rural and urban lives, and descriptors of a lived political project that sought to knit the sites of India closer together. His insistence on the Indianness of Urdu depends, as well, on a spatial claim: Urdu, he says, is not merely a Muslim language, because it is 'of the very soil of India and has no place outside of India' (Nehru 1937, 8). Nehru describes any 'living language' as having 'its roots in the masses', 'ever growing and mirroring the people who speak and write it' (1937, 2). Nehru's image here mirrors both the geographical and the biological forms of thinking about language, but here transforms the people who speak the language into the soil in which that language is rooted.

Nehru's answer to 'the question of language' is a Basic Hindustani modelled on Basic English. Basic Hindustani would have a vocabulary of about a thousand words, with a grammar that 'should be as simple as possible, almost non-existent ... yet it must not do violence to the existing grammar of the language'. This Basic Hindustani should 'form a complete whole' and serve as an accessible medium for communication across regions, not because of existing commonalities but because of constructed ones. The vocabulary must be chosen in view of the comprehensive expression of important ideas – 'not chosen at random because they are common words in the Indian languages'. This language would be ruled by exigency: we should, for instance, 'lift boldly foreign technical words which have become current coin in many parts of the world, and adopt them as Hindustani words' (Nehru 1937, 16–17).

Nehru's project of Basic Hindustani never gained much traction, yet his rhetorical strategies in the assertion of Hindustani do seem to be shared across the period. The linguist Tarachand (1944), for example, repeatedly invokes 'the facts' and the imperatives of 'natural growth'. Whereas groups

advocating Hindi and Urdu might claim the intimacy of one's own home, as in the powerful rhetoric of Hindi as *nij bhasha* ('own language'), Tarachand asserts Hindustani is 'redolent of the soil from which it sprang' (1944, 8–9), much like the Indian soil of Nehru's Urdu. Both Indian intellectuals echo Gilchrist's ecological tendencies, but whereas Gilchrist's colonial Hindustani was autonomous from those who spoke it, Tarachand and Nehru's Hindustani 'has its roots in the masses' themselves (Nehru 1937, 2). This shifting discourse of space and language suggests, in part, the subcontinent's transition to a racial–biological conception of language, as opposed to earlier, primarily regional modes of linguistic attachment (Pollock 2000, 613). Hindustani might be understood to belong to this older, geographical and ecological, model, whereas Hindi and Urdu emphasize racial and cultural ownership by two increasingly national communities.

The literary project of Hindustani was also enthusiastically, if unsuccessfully, championed by the Progressive Writers' Association (PWA). The PWA was part of a Left project that promoted national rejuvenation as part of an international communist revolution. Progressive fiction challenged 'fixed ideas and old beliefs' about both the content and the language of literature, famously depicting topics such as violence and non-normative sexuality in language that was both celebrated and condemned. Their point of departure was not a literary problem, but a social one, as the first version of their manifesto, published in the *Left Review* in 1936, declared:

It is the duty of Indian writers to give expression to the changes taking place in Indian life and to assist in the spirit of progress in the country ... [And] To strive for the acceptance of a common language (Hindustani) and a common script (Indi-Roman) for all of India. (PWA 1935)

Whereas a century earlier, for the colonial language scholar, Hindustani had named that which was already in common but needed to be written down, here Hindustani has shifted to something that must be cultivated: a commonality that seems both to exist and to require conscientious efforts for its realization. Writing is crucial to this process of propagation, for it allows one to put this language, and ideas within it, into wider circulation. In announcing the need for a new common script of 'Indi-Roman', however, the Progressives absent themselves from the script debates of the late nineteenth century. These had traded in accusations on both sides, whether the alleged slowness of the Nagari script or the supposedly misleading nature of the Nastaliq one. Even Nehru proclaimed the superiority of the Latin script to all South Asian options, remarking upon its efficiency and reproducibility but regretting that its adoption seemed politically impossible and historically insupportable. For Nehru, the solution lay in dramatic, all-India script changes, with the supremacy of a new 'composite Devanagari–Bengali–Marathi–Gujrati' script;

the retention of the Urdu script, with the Sindhi one absorbed, for political reasons; and a final and reluctant concession to retain ‘also, if necessary, a southern script’ (1937, 7). Nehru’s solution, like Gandhi and his other Congress comrades, is frankly assimilationist, solving the profusion of scripts through a demand (or at least desire) that seemingly minor particularities – by, of course, minority groups – be sacrificed to a larger composite national culture, moulded through minor adjustments on the existing majority norm. The Progressives, however, are more Marxist than liberal in their politics; their radical position espouses innovation over assimilation, advocating not Latin script nor a composite Indic script but some new, yet-to-be-imagined entity called ‘Indi-Roman’. The choice of ‘Indi-Roman’, never well developed or defined, acknowledges, I suspect, the insufficiency of writing to capture the ambiguities of colloquial interactions – that is, to record what Hindustani actually names.

In a 1934 essay entitled *Urdu Hindi aur Hindustani* (‘Hindi, Urdu and Hindustani’), the legendary Hindi author Premchand argued our national language can only be that which everyone can easily understand:

Keep only this norm in front of you: can the ordinary people understand this word, or not? And the common people includes everyone, Hindus, Muslims, Punjabis, Bengalis, Maharashtrians and Gujaratis. If some word or phrase or technical term is used among the ordinary people, then do not concern yourself with where this word has come from and whence this word has emerged. And this is Hindustani. (Premchand 1934)

Reaching beyond simply including Hindi and Urdu, he calls for a national language – a ‘Hindustani *zubaan* (tongue)’ – that will operate as a form of national inclusion and integration. Premchand’s description here completes the transition of Hindustani from a geographical, and ecological, marker to a demographic and biological one: Hindustani now belongs to a group of people, not a particular place, even if this group is defined, not in national terms, but in terms of ordinariness and inclusiveness, as the *janasaadharan* (ordinary people).

Premchand’s Hindustani is basic, but it is not Nehru’s Basic Hindustani: what is included here is not a strategic set of a thousand fundamental words, but rather what Nehru dismissed as words ‘chosen at random because they are common words in the Indian languages’ (1937, 16). Hindustani has become, at this point, less a language *per se* than a disposition towards language: defined not by a grammar or a dictionary, as Gilchrist would have wished, but by a norm (*maanandad*) of membership that includes the largest possible group of people within it, and on the most equitable terms imaginable.

It is Premchand's, and not Nehru's, vision of Hindustani that lives on through the twentieth century, as a vision of subcontinental inclusiveness invoked memorably, for instance, in Alok Rai (2000). It emphatically embraces, not literary tradition, but the nature of colloquial life, in which various improvisatory forms of communication coexist in the context of widespread multilingualism, echoing, and in these advocates' view modelling, the coexistence of various religious and ethnic groups in the diverse texture of subcontinental life. In such contexts, the dominant forms of everyday communication may be dramatically different from any single recognizable language. This split between the colloquial and any single defined language explicitly fissures that which literature records – a distinct language, with a script and a tradition to accompany it – from the colloquial register in which each individual 'nevertheless', in Gilchrist's biting words, 'thinks, lives, moves, and has a being' (1788, xlvi).

Postcolonial Erasure

The commitment to Hindu–Muslim unity, whose banner became Hindustani, was decisively injured in 1947, with the Partition of the subcontinent into Pakistan and India. Whereas Pakistan's commitment to an Islamic inheritance enshrined the primacy of Urdu, the secular agenda of India led to vociferous debates in the Constituent Assembly about the place, and even the existence, of Hindustani. In 1950 the Assembly voted not to recognize the existence of Hindustani, excluding it from the list of official languages in Schedule VIII of the Indian Constitution. The Constituent Assembly Debates (CAD) leading up to this decision, however, were undertaken in the very medium whose existence they disavowed: they are repeatedly recorded as being held 'in Hindustani', even as they debated whether Hindustani existed at all. Thus, on 8 November 1948, the Punjabi politician and writer Giani Gurmukh Singh Musafir argued Hindustani was a simple and widespread reality, reciting as evidence a couplet from the poet Iqbal. Musafir concluded: 'Now tell me what you will call this language – Hindi, Urdu or Hindustani? To which language do the words "updeshak", "Man" and "Moh" belong?'

For Musafir, the existence of widely recited and 'commonly understandable' bits of language, such as the Iqbal couplet, throughout northern India meant that, after suitable simplification and codification of this speech, 'there will be no difficulty in the way of solving the language question', by making Hindustani the national language for the new nation. Musafir's anecdotal argument drew upon the non-written component of a composite literary culture, appropriately enough for a climate of overwhelming illiteracy.

In drawing, moreover, on poetry, he chose both the most hallowed of literary activities and that in which Hindustani's rivals had made the least progress. Both Hindi and Urdu had significant bodies of scholarly and literary prose to their credit, but their usage in poetry was relatively less established.

The very next day, however, Gyansham Singh Gupta, a member of the Hindu reformist movement Arya Samaj, undid Musafir's anecdotal argument by drawing at length from written prose:

I could not find [Hindustani] in the law books. I could not find it even in the official proceedings ... I read English, I read Hindi and I got read Urdu with the idea that I might be able to find what they call simple Hindustani. I could not find it. Urdu was Urdu and Hindi was Hindi. There was no such thing as simple Hindustani.

Gupta's incapacity to locate Hindustani is caused by its reduction, in the moment of writing, to either Hindi or Urdu: Gupta reads Nagari, and names it Hindi; he 'gets read' Nastaliq, and names it Urdu. His demonstration of the non-existence of Hindustani relies upon the written resources of modern life, drawing on examples from newspapers, school textbooks, and mathematics. He concludes: 'It is only in the bazaar that I could find simple Hindustani. When we cannot have simple Hindustani even in the elementary schoolbooks, how can our laws be made in it?'

Gupta seeks to locate Hindustani, not to define it: Hindustani must be 'found', and it must be found in a book, not in a region. The existence of Hindustani thus relies crucially on the realm privileged in the confirmation of linguistic existence, whether oral circulation, as in Musafir's Iqbal couplet, or formal written publication, as in Gupta's examples. Hindustani seems particularly under pressure in the prosaic realm of modern science, and Gupta ends his enumeration of Hindi and Urdu differences with the term for a right-angled isosceles triangle: *samakon samadvibahu tribhuj* in Hindi, *musallas musavius-saquan quamuzzavia* in Urdu.

Hindustani's existence here depends on the emphasis granted to different concepts within a language, and the words that are associated with those concepts. Musafir's examples of Hindustani words were *updeshak*, *man* and *moh*, foregrounding concepts of instruction, mind and heart. Gupta, whose council was more successful, spoke of a triangle with one ninety-degree angle and two equal sides. For subjects for whom these concepts are not significant, or do not even exist, Hindi, Urdu and Hindustani will be experienced differently; Hindi and Urdu's distinct divide, as laid out here, may not exist at all for those who do not encounter formal schooling, print periodicals or legal tomes, the realms of Gupta's greatest concern.

Gupta's position is opposed to Nehru's in its disavowal of Hindustani, yet it is close in its concerns. Nehru wished, after all, in the same pamphlet advocating Hindustani, to keep questions of language from being 'dragged

down to the level of the market place' (1937, 1), and he condoned the divergence in Hindi and Urdu as a symptom of their laudable attempts to generate modern technical and scientific vocabulary, a process in which, he says, they would naturally draw upon different resources for linguistic innovation. Disavowing the innovations of the bazaar and of journalism in favour of the resources of classical languages, Nehru advocated Hindustani in name but rendered it impossible in practice. The Indian state's recognition of Hindi and Urdu, and disavowal of Hindustani, after Independence thus mirrors its mid-century priorities: a deep commitment to progress, science and modern rationality, and a generalized distrust of commercialism and 'the bazaar', the very place in which Hindustani can, all will agree, be found.

Language and Idiom

The historical career of Hindustani enables us to consider the theoretical implications of the colloquial, whose conceptual definition is rather simple (and hence rather elusive): a claim merely to its existence in current use. The colloquial is by definition conversational, but it is a subset of the oral, not another name for it, since it includes large amounts of non-oral communication, particularly in multilingual contexts. The colloquial matters because we cannot assume that its relation to literary language, or to political power, is consistent across regions, periods or traditions. Whereas in India in the early nineteenth century, the colloquial was a realm of unknown anxiety for British colonial administrators, by the early twentieth century it was a zone of imagined unity for anticolonial agitators.

If the vernacular and the cosmopolitan mark two ways of thinking with language that are marked by finitude and potential infinitude, respectively (Pollock 2000), the colloquial marks the conjunction between vernacular languages and cosmopolitan ones. Within the colloquial, the improvisation among various vernaculars renders them cosmopolitan, while the specificity of each site of improvisation renders the cosmopolitan language vernacularized. The colloquial has neither native nor non-native speakers, and it can make no claim to origins. This is part of Gilchrist's misunderstanding with his erudite native informants, for when he repeatedly asked for a *written* guide, whether grammar or dictionary, to Hindustani, his natives responded 'with astonishment, and answered interrogatively, if it was ever yet known in any country that men had to consult vocabularies, and rudiments for their own vernacular speech' (Gilchrist 1788, vii). For Gilchrist, what is being spoken is 'the vernacular', a language whose shape and structure can and must be discerned. His informants, in contrast, seem to understand their lived language activity along the rules I describe here for the colloquial, a

category for which one would never have to consult ‘vocabularies and rudiments’, since all of the speech in current (and effective) use is, by definition, included within its contours.

The project of Hindustani, in its anticolonial manifestation, is for the production of not a language, but an idiom: not a set of grammatical rules and lexical definitions, as Gilchrist would have desired, but rather a distinctive set of words, phrases and stylistic conventions, shared by an imagined (and desired) diverse collective. This production involves the codification and conventionalization of an existing register of colloquial speech, rendering it transportable and reproducible – making it into what Ferdinand de Saussure defined as ‘the language as a reflection of the individual characteristics of a community’ (2008, 189). In Saussure’s narrative, however, the idiom disappears with the emergence of a cultivated form of language use – what he calls ‘literary language’, which splits any language into a dominant form and its dialectical variations. Within the context of South Asia, the ‘literary language’ of a particular region was, for many centuries, an entirely different language from the spoken register, whether Persian or Sanskrit. The deployment of vernacular languages as literary languages constitutes in itself a historical departure, and, as official languages, a rather late and colonially guided one. Whether in the inscription of a Sanskritized Bengali, or that of a Persianized Urdu, the vernacular literatures of the subcontinent emerged through the interweaving of existing literary traditions with everyday colloquial speech.

By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the desire for modernity, and particularly literary modernity, had impressed upon these processes the criteria of rationality, progress and present relevance. Whereas the significance of earlier literary and linguistic practices continued to be invoked and respected, particularly in the utilization of the past as a nationalist resource for mobilization and regeneration, the pressures of the present, and of mass mobilization, pushed towards the convergence of the literary and the colloquial. What distinguishes Hindustani is the extent of its presentism: whereas Hindi annexes Braj Bhasha as a dialect and expunges Dakkani as a dialect of Urdu, Hindustani, by including everyone, of every linguistic, religious and ethnic category, decrees as irrelevant the genealogy of literary inheritance. This centrality of the current colloquial, moreover, separates Hindustani from the governance of grammar: it becomes, in Premchand as in Gilchrist, simply that which is ‘in use’ (*prachalit*) on the ‘open, accessible plains of Hindustan’.

Idiom, as I am using it here, cannot be separated from its scene of address, and it is very similar in this sense to what Mikhail Bakhtin (1986) described as speech genres: spheres of language usage with relatively stable types of utterances, whether these utterances be simple (as in the exclamation ‘Fire!’) or complex (as in a eulogy). The anticolonial project of Hindustani, in

Bakhtin's terms, involves the conversion of a primary, or simple, speech genre – the colloquial register of everyday life – into a secondary, or complex, speech genre – literary, cinematic or political representation. (I use idiom here, instead of speech genre, because of its close association with problems of language definition and its foregrounding of the distinctiveness of a particular community's conventions.)

The idiom was too subjective for Saussure: too dependent on a community's understanding of its own distinctiveness, and too recalcitrant of the rules governing language as a whole. The speech genre, for Bakhtin, was a late theorization, and its uptake in literary studies has been far overshadowed by the success of his other concepts, such as polyphony, dialogism or heteroglossia. Those terms, however, would define Hindustani literature as the presence within a single text of both Hindi and Urdu. While appropriate to our understanding of Hindustani today, as primarily a relation between those two languages, terms like 'polyphony', 'dialogism' and 'heteroglossia' do not quite address Hindustani as it was defined by its early twentieth-century advocates: less a relation between existing linguistic entities and more the enunciation, in a more complex form, of the world of colloquial speech.

For similar reasons, the project of a Hindustani literature is not what Deleuze and Guattari (1986) described as the project of a minor literature, nor is this region between Hindi and Urdu, and between India and Pakistan, what Mary Louise Pratt (1991) termed a contact zone. Both of those paradigms require at least one clearly codified language, as well as an accepted hierarchization between literary language and everyday use, and not, as I have detailed here, a highly contested one. Both Hindi and Urdu have well-established literary traditions, politicized communities and cultural institutions behind them, yet the Hindustani aspiration does not mark the 'becoming-minor' of either Hindi or Urdu. It is in this sense, then, that Manto or Premchand can never be Deleuze's Kafka: not because the subcontinent lacks major languages and major literatures, but because, in the subcontinent, modern literary languages are not 'major' in the same fashion.

Premchand, for example, started his career writing in Urdu, though he then switched over almost entirely to Hindi. He would frequently write two versions of the same story, publishing one in each script. The story known as 'The Chess Players' in English, for instance, exists in two versions: the Hindi 'Shatranj ke Khiladi', published in October 1924, and the Urdu 'Shatranj ke Baazi', published in December 1924. 'Khiladi' and 'baazi' are both the plural word for players, yet the difference between these two versions extends beyond the substitution of synonymous words. The relation between the Hindi and the Urdu versions is somewhere between transcription and translation. The story narrates the decline of the Muslim courtly culture of Lucknow, through its central characters whose chess obsession continues

even as the city falls to the British army. As Frances Pritchett (1986) has persuasively argued, the story's condemnation of Lucknowi culture as degenerate is accomplished in the Hindi version, 'Shatranj ke Khiladi', by the marked use of Sanskritic cognates, distancing the reader from the otherwise sophisticated cultural practices of which he reads. In the Urdu version, 'Shatranj ke Baazi', the language used in narration and that used by the characters is more congruent, and the story compensates through more explicit commentary and condemnation of the titular characters. Premchand thus exploits the triangular pattern in 'Shatranj ke Khiladi', yet Hindustani is inscribed here only as a negative effect. The Sanskritic narration and the Persianized dialogue would be experienced, by most readers, as existing in the same language spectrum, which we might name as Hindustani, yet the contrast here appears only as the marker of a declining civilization: a syncretic north Indian culture that has been easily conquered by foreigners.

Progressive fiction thus suggests the demise of commonality, in both thematic and linguistic terms, for the Progressive Writers were championing Hindustani just as the 'common people' were abandoning the term. Hindustani continued to be the mixed idiom of everyday life in north India, yet the inhabitants of north India increasingly articulated themselves as Hindi-speaking Hindus or Urdu-speaking Muslims. The most famous of Progressive stories, Sa'adat Hasan Manto's 'Toba Tek Singh' (1955), thus unfolds in a linguistic universe gone mad. Manto's conceit in this story is that the governments of India and Pakistan have agreed, a few years after Partition, to exchange the lunatics in their asylums, sending Muslim lunatics to Pakistani asylums and Sikh and Hindu lunatics to Indian ones. Set in an asylum in Lahore, the story focuses on a Sikh man named Bishen Singh, whose speech has been reduced to a stream of nonsense: 'Upar di gur gur di aneksi di be dhyana di mung di dal af di laltain.' This repeated string of speech sounds almost like linguistic information – 'laltain', for instance, looks like the Hindustani word for 'lantern' – and it seems, at first, to encourage our deciphering. His refrain, however, does not make sense in any language: it signifies something, but it does not represent anything.

Bishen's refrain recurs throughout the story, occasionally changing a word or two: ending, once, with 'Pakistan gorment' (Pakistani government), ending another time with 'jo bole so nihāl sat sri akal', a traditional Sikh refrain. These seemingly sensible items, however, are subordinated to the structure of Bishen's repeated gibberish: clearly defined signs in a context of semiotic crisis, wherein countries can change names and villages cross the border overnight. Bishen asks incessantly about the location of his village, Toba Tek Singh, yet what would ordinarily be an empirical enquiry has become an ontological one. As the story proceeds, our protagonist's name is replaced by that of which he speaks, Toba Tek Singh. Today, the district of

Toba Tek Singh is clearly located in Pakistan, but the Toba Tek Singh of Manto's story dies, instead, between the fortified boundaries of India and Pakistan.

Manto repeatedly draws on both Sanskrit and Persian–Arabic cognates, usually associated with Hindi and with Urdu, respectively, for instance when the European Ward's two Anglo-Indian lunatics worry about their status in the new dispensation. The story poses their problem in Sanskritic terms, as a 'mahatyapurna samasya' (great problem), but defines its solution with an Arabic word, 'hasiyat' (condition). Will they continue to get 'breakfast', they wonder, or will they be forced to eat, in the phrase used in the original, 'bloody Indian chapatis'? Manto's story is thus written in Hindustani, but it stages Hindustani, in its undoing of politicized difference, as a no-man's-land, an abandoned terrain. Hindustani is the idiom of those who refuse to choose: between Hindi, the national language of majority-Hindu India, and Urdu, the national language of majority-Muslim Pakistan. In Manto's fictional universe, written briefly after Partition, Hindustani had become the idiom of a marginalized minority – a minority whose syncretism is as crazy as everyone else's nationalism.

The Cinematic and the Colloquial

Hindustani does not persist in literary publications, legal records or elementary school textbooks, yet it can be found in one large, populist realm: that of Bollywood cinema. Although it is frequently noted that the mixed argot spoken in Bollywood films is better described as Hindustani than as either Hindi or Urdu (King 1994; Shackle and Snell 1990; Rai 2000; Dalmia 2003; Dwyer and Patel 2002), the general explanation for this has been to indicate the work of Progressive writers, and Urdu writers more generally, in Bollywood in its formative years (see, for instance, Ahmed 2009, 171). This commonsensical observation reflects a broader comfort with Bollywood as an empirically available object: Bollywood cinema manifests as a cultural artifact that can be read in simple causal terms. Bollywood uses Hindustani, a not-quite-language which no one else uses, simply because Urdu-and-Hindi speakers once wrote its scripts.

This comfort with the obvious, however, also misses the obvious: namely, the divergence between progressive, politicized aesthetics and a conservative, commercial cinema. It also elides the difference between writing for literary publication and writing for the cinema screen. In committing to a Hindustani-language literature, the PWA envisaged a new linguistic commonality for a long-respected aesthetic practice. In embracing Hindustani as the language for film dialogue, the makers of early Indian sound films sought to

forge common interest in a radically new and not particularly respectable medium. Whereas Indian cinema historiography has often emphasized the traditional and even religious nature of an ambitious strain of Indian filmmaking, connecting the devotional vocabulary of the early theological film with the nationalist devotion of the mid-century Bollywood cinema, I focus on the larger and often crass landscape of early Indian cinema, which was dominated by stunt films, romance adventures and special effects. As Kaushik Bhaumik (2008) and others have demonstrated, the respectability of the cinema remained in question well into the middle of the century, at which point the influence of social realism and explicit nationalism effectively elevated it to middle-class status. The choice of Hindustani was motivated in part, I suspect, by this quest for both mass appeal and general respectability, for it enabled the sound film to draw upon both Islamic and Hindu aesthetic traditions: upon both the practice of *darsana*, a two-way devotional gaze associated with the Hindu devotee, and the arts of the *ghazal*, the lyric perfected by Islamic India.

The period of early cinema was animated, in part, by the belief that the new medium of silent cinema could triumph over differences of culture and language. In this vision, moving-image media could produce a new and universal language of gesture and emotion, one which could also be circulated, reproduced and propagated. Within India, however, the problem of linguistic comprehension was resolved only partially through the filmic apparatus, varying according to the kind of film. As the Indian Cinematograph Committee (ICC) report noted in 1928, Indian films were ‘expected to have captions in a familiar vernacular’, whereas western films were not because ‘the western film appeals for different reasons’ (ICC 1928, 41). Most Indian filmmakers would produce different prints for different parts of the country, as well as provide captions ‘ordinarily in three or four languages’, or even up to six (1928, 42). The ‘language difficulty’ lay, however, not only in the lack of a single shared language but also in the lack of widespread literacy. The committee noted:

in some theatres we found it was the practice to interpret the captions in an attractive way by demonstrators especially employed for the purpose. It will be for the trade to determine whether the training of intelligent people in that way will not be the proper remedy for overcoming language difficulties. In every theatre to which we went we found the so-called illiterate classes, sitting in the body of the hall, taking a great interest in reading the captions aloud, probably for the benefit of their companions close by. (ICC 1928, 83–84)

The ‘language difficulties’ of the ‘illiterate classes’ are to be remedied by the ‘training of intelligent people’ to demonstrate the meanings of the film – and not, as is already underway, by their autonomous voicing, for their friends

and seatmates, of what they understand to be inscribed on the screen. The committee placed its faith in the imperatives of commercial innovation: perhaps, they surmised, ‘The ingenuity of Indian producers will possibly tend to devise films which require a minimum of captions’ (1928, 42).

These ‘language difficulties’, and their attendant anxieties about audiences’ comprehension, inform the adaptation of Hindustani – a flexible, colloquial form of address – as the spoken language of commercial cinema in the early sound period. The credits used for these films repeatedly use both Nagari and Nastaliq signage, often in the same frame or in the same poster. The language used in the sound component of these films, moreover, cannot be separated from the fantasy of universal comprehensibility that animates them. Much as the global practice of silent film hoped to create a form of communication that could surpass cultural specificity and linguistic boundaries, which aimed relentlessly for the capture of actual spectacles through familiar narrative themes, the ‘national art’ of Indian sound cinema rapidly developed a set of conventions that evoke vernacular speech without committing to a single specific vernacular. Unfolding in the Marathi-speaking region of western India, with numerous Bengali, Punjabi and Urdu speakers in the mix, Hindustani, in the sense of a mixed, accessible argot becomes the *de facto* and *de jure* language of this commercial sound cinema known as Bollywood, which I use here to refer to a consolidated filmmaking idiom, not simply any film made in Bombay (now Mumbai). The language used in Bollywood films is a flexible, miscible, endlessly expanding collage, using the syntactical structure common to Hindi and Urdu, but throwing in words from other languages at will: Persian, Sanskrit, Punjabi, and, especially lately, English. Khwaja Ahmad Abbas, the most famous of the PWA writers to make his career in Bollywood, provides a long example of how this ‘linguistic pot-pourri’ operates:

In the same film, for instance, you will find allusions to *Bhagwan* and *Khuda*; *dil* and *hirday* will both be there; the hero and heroine will simultaneously suffer from *mohabbat*, *preet*, *prem* and even *love*. People will be heard greeting each other with *pranam*, *namastay*, *adab arz* – and, occasionally, with *good morning* and *good night*. (Abbas 1969, 32)

The words here are taken from all over the triangular pattern, and they become intelligible through the repetitiveness of Bollywood dialogues and the obviousness of Bollywood plots.

Bollywood, I want to argue, is Hindustani cinema, not simply because its characters speak in Hindustani but because it inherits Hindustani’s conceptual aspiration. Bollywood lays claim, in formal terms, to the colloquial or the conversational in its extensive reliance on frontal presentation and direct address, which creates the idea of the audience as an element of the fictional

field, or what Ravi Vasudevan has described as ‘a distinct imaginary geometry of the cinema’ (2011, 402). Bollywood thus converts the colloquial into the idiomatic, and it gives form to Hindustani where the literary text could not. The profound influence of Progressive writers in Bollywood is thus arguably not limited to the influence of their expertise in Urdu. It reflects, as well, the non-literary investments of its manifesto: ‘to bring the arts into the closest touch with the people; and to make them the vital organs which will register the actualities of life, as well as lead us to the future’ (PWA 1935).

Whereas radio was arguably ‘designed for a literate audience’ (Lelyveld 1993, 678), cinema was intended precisely for those who could not read: a medium that could reach the masses regardless of their educational attainments. In 1939 the Indian Motion Picture Congress declared: ‘It is within the power of our film industry to make Hindustani the “lingua franca” for India and we shall make it so’ (quoted in Jaikumar 2006, 99). Whereas this statement has often been read as yet another example of ‘Hindi imperialism’, I would argue that this is a different kind of statement, more reflective of the politics of PWA idealism than that associated with Hindi chauvinism. What this statement registers is not the project of a cinema industry in a single preexisting national language, but rather the realization of a Hindustani idiom – a conventionalized, and thus consistently accessible, form of the colloquial – through the capacities of the new medium of the sound film.

Abbas insisted that because of increasing urbanization and internal migration, Indians needed ‘a common, neutral language’ – a ‘link language’ forged in the ‘city slums, mills and factories and projects’ (1969, 36) – with which to communicate among themselves.

For the upper-class intelligentsia, [this language] was English. For the growing proletariat, it was simple or ‘cinema Hindustani’, which also was regarded as a neutral, common language, not necessarily the literary language of any particular region. It was the ‘English’ of the common man with the help of which he could converse with the common man from another part of the country. (Abbas 1969, 33)

English operates here, not as the model for Hindustani (as in, for instance, Tarachand 1944; see also Dalmia 1997, 197), but as an entirely parallel world: Hindustani *is* English for the common man, because it operates precisely as English does among the Indian upper classes.

According to Abbas, the growth of language is analogous to that of a jungle: ‘wild, wilful and unpredictable’ (1969, 29). We are two centuries and many ideological miles away from the ‘open, accessible plains’ of colonial Hindustan, or, even, the ‘purer Hindi’ of the anticolonial village (Gilchrist

1788, xiv; Nehru 1937, 10). For Abbas, ‘political and economic struggles’ are ‘the great melting-pot of languages’, spawning the redeployment of words to describe forms of collective action in India, far from the original contexts of those words’ usage: thus, the Hindi word *bandh* expands from its meaning of ‘closed’ to be used, across the subcontinent, to mean a general strike. He focuses in particular on the revolutionary slogan *inqilab zindabad* (long live the revolution), contrasting its eccentric combination of Arabic and Persian with the formal Sanskritic construction of the nationalist slogan that preceded it, *vande mataram* (hail to the motherland). Echoing almost exactly Premchand’s 1934 essay, Abbas says: ‘millions raised the slogan [*inqilab zindabad*] from Kashmir to Kerala ... and no one stopped to enquire the genesis of the words, of their Arabic and Persian parentage. It was sufficient that they expressed, in a ringing phrase, the innermost political feelings and aspirations of the people’ (1969, 30).

Abbas then singles out the cinema as the ideal forum for the realization of Hindustani:

In the darkened cinema halls, the subconscious is most receptive to assimilate what is seen and heard. The Hindi films, whatever their aesthetic and artistic quality, are veritable schools for the propagation of the national language of the future. It would be more correct to call them *Hindustani* films for they deliberately use a simple idiom, which will have a chance of being understood all over India – from Kashmir to Cape Comorin. To make themselves understood and liked by the multilingual interstate audience, they deliberately sacrifice realism by creating an unreal and artificial (though not necessarily false) cultural atmosphere in which (for instance) a girl habitually shown wearing Punjabi Shalwar-qameez also performs the Tamil Bharat Natyam, and sings a hybrid song based on the folk songs of U.P. and Latin American rhythms! The language the characters in these films speak is spoken nowhere in India – not even in Delhi, Lucknow or Banaras – but it is helping to evolve the future link language of India. It is an odd, but oddly satisfying, mixture of mythological allusions of the Sanskrit scriptures, the romantic phrases of Persian and Urdu poetry, the earthy philosophy of folk songs and folk proverbs, and the Anglicized expressions of the city middle class. (Abbas 1969, 32)

Here the darkened venue of the cinematic apparatus renders the subconscious most receptive to a process of assimilation, which can then be exploited by the intelligent filmmaker. As ‘veritable schools’, these cinema halls make deliberate if surprising choices – the use of ‘a simple idiom’, and the choice to ‘sacrifice realism’ – to create something that might be ‘understood and liked’ by a ‘multilingual interstate audience’. The creation of this widely understood Hindustani, importantly, is inextricable from choices of narrative structure, *mis-en-scène* and theme: the films create both characters and languages that are found ‘nowhere in India’. Whereas colonial Hindustani could

ostensibly be found all over India, and anticolonial Hindustani underneath the varieties of Indian speech, this cinema Hindustani can be found nowhere: nowhere, as in the pessimism of the Premchand and Manto stories discussed earlier, and hence a utopia housed in the cinema.

What Abbas overlooks, however, is that the persistence of Hindustani in Bollywood film cannot be attributed primarily to the recording of spoken language. Hindustani did not persevere, for instance, in the medium of radio, despite a concerted, multi-year effort by All-India Radio (AIR) to produce Hindustani broadcasts. As David Lelyveld (1993) has argued, AIR inherited its language ideology from the BBC, which included the belief that broadcasting should exemplify a 'single standard of clarity and aesthetic perfection' for each language (Lelyveld 1993, 678). Because all programming was carefully written (and censored) before being broadcast, the language of radio in India became inextricably tied to that of literary language: the aural form of an originally textual linguistic expression.

Bollywood, in contrast, operates through a distinctively heterogeneous mode of film production (Prasad 2000), through which its distinctive filmmaking style comes to operate, I argue, as an idiom. A Bollywood film will frequently assemble several preconstituted chunks of material, whether song sequences, stunts, star personae, choreography or dialogue, presenting them within a loose narrative arc. These elements of the film thus operate as familiar semantic conventions, not as new and discrete utterances. Each film is arguably the digestion of an existing set of units, but units distinctive to this particular cinema. Bollywood's originality, thus, lies not in any individual film, but rather in the idiom that its many films, with their well-known conventionality, collectively constitute.

Terms like 'Indian cinema' and 'Bombay cinema' connote an inappropriate level of regional specificity to the eclectic, travelling forms of Bollywood, while the term 'Hindi film' perpetuates a similar error. For example, Rachel Dwyer and Divia Patel describe the emergence, with the coming of sound, of 'the Hindi-Urdu film', although their book as a whole uses the term 'Hindi film' (2002, 19). Dwyer and Patel explain that describing the language of Bollywood as Hindi is an inaccuracy that emerges because of the stigmatization of Urdu as a Muslim (and a Pakistani) language, yet it seems to me that the consequences of that history demand more than one page of explanation. My categorization of Bollywood as Hindustani cinema foregrounds this problematic history, and it shifts the question of the language of cinema – both that used within the film and that which the film as a semiosis constitutes – with the question of the cinematic idiom: an organized subset of conventions and expressions, linguistic and non-linguistic, that are intelligible within a particular community.

The question of idiom, which I have outlined here with respect to Hindustani, is not unique to the subcontinent, though it may be, for

historical and political reasons, more salient in that context. I am not arguing, however, for the study of ever more vernacular languages, as though the endless aggregation of linguistic expertise would provide some exhaustive or representative coverage. The colloquial, as I have described it here, is precisely that which cannot be ‘covered’ by expert knowledge. It is only discernable through the idiomatic, which is most visible, not in literature, but in the cinema, where language constitutes only one element of the semiosis.

The production of a legible and transportable set of spectatorial and narratorial conventions was a crucial part of the development of cinema as a medium in the twentieth century. In the Indian context, the dream of a universal language of cinema was paired with a distinctively subcontinental aspiration for a lingua franca: the aspiration for an idiom for India. This paired problem of language and cinema makes early Indian cinema quite different from other theorizations, which rely upon the assumption of an already codified realm of linguistic practice, with clearly understood rules of usage (for one foundational version, see Metz 1990; for more recent work on postcoloniality, film and language, see Naficy 2001 and Mowitt 2005).

Foregrounding the concept of idiom, and not language, in thinking about the conventions of cinema also enables the consideration of genre and mode as a component of the cinema’s constitution. Premchand in 1934 called for a ‘Hindustani *zubaan*’ defined solely by its comprehensibility to ordinary people, yet the Hindustani spoken and sung in Bollywood cinema both draws upon and exceeds the vocabulary of ordinary people, be they Hindi speakers or Urdu speakers. Bollywood thus impresses the realities of Hindustani’s colloquial mixture, but it renders it comprehensible, not through the abdication of difficult vocabulary, but rather by embracing melodrama. Bollywood inhabits melodrama’s simultaneous emphasis on performative speech – the stating of the obvious – as well as the realm of the unspeakable – the language, as it were, of sighs and sobs, screams and gestures. ‘Filmi dialogues’, as they are called, are an important part of Bollywood cinephilia, yet they are as much performative as they are informative. In its ability to spin off regional variations, moreover, Bollywood inherits the Hindustani aspiration to develop an idiom which, as Syamcharan Ganguli fantasized in 1882, would rapidly absorb and obliterate all regional vernaculars (Ganguli 1882, 26). Bollywood, I want to suggest, is one resolution to the problem of the colloquial: a cinematic idiom that instantiates Hindustani where the literary text could not. With predictable storylines, histrionic acting, and stars whose roles remain consistent across films, Bollywood films can often be comprehended without knowledge of any Indian language at all.

Conclusion

The significance of political mobilization, so central to the anticolonial notion of Hindustani, is present in the mid-century portrait of cinema Hindustani provided by Abbas, but only as a backdrop. Whereas ‘political and economic struggles’ can melt existing languages together into new connective phrases and forms, it is the ‘conscious use of popular media of mass communication’ and ‘the common strivings of our people in thousands of interstate enterprises’ that can finally make possible ‘the new link language of the common people of India, born out of the people’s need, and shaped by the people themselves’ (Abbas 1969, 36). It will have to be related to Hindi, Abbas concedes, but only because of ‘the compulsions of history’, and it will be, however,

not the jaw-breaking Sanskritized Radio-Hindi, but a more liberal and catholic Hindustani, embracing within it not only the Hindi vocabulary with Sanskrit origin, but the popular Urdu vocabulary derived from Brij Bhasha, the *tat-bhāv* adaptation of Sanskrit words, or Indianized variants of Persian, Arabic or Turkish words; the heritage of thousands of English words or their popular distortions which have gained currency in Indian languages, and an increasing number of words from the regional languages ... which the mingling of the peoples in the city slums, mills and factories and projects have introduced into Hindustani. (Abbas 1969, 36)

Abbas’s ‘odd, but oddly satisfying, mixture’ is the idiom of Bollywood cinema: the commercial inheritor of the Hindustani project of the earlier colonial and anticolonial eras. Hindustani, finally, is something that must be brought into being, not simply excavated or morally encouraged, and pleasure emerges as a component of this process. According to Abbas, these films operated as ‘a cementing force between peoples’ across regions, because ‘even when people did not understand all the words, they enjoyed the musical rendering of its songs! And enjoyment led eventually to understanding’ (1969, 33). The adoption of Hindustani here operates in a reciprocal loop of enjoyment and understanding: one might understand the language, and thus enjoy the films, or one might enjoy the films, and particularly their songs, and thereby learn to understand their language.

The shift of the Hindustani aspiration from the Marxist commitment to the common people to the capitalist commitment to the common consumer is symptomatic of a larger shift in relations between the state, the market and an imagined national populace, in which the people are constituted as equivalent to one another as citizens not primarily in terms of their interactions with the state (as in the phase of Nehruvian socialism) but in their interactions within the marketplace. In fact, one could argue that the

commercial realm is *the* space in which the imagined Indian public emerges as a mass of disidentified public subjects, absented of specific identifying characteristics. In the realm of democratic electoral politics, as so many scholars and commentators have noted, Indians are more likely to vote according to lines of collective interest, voting formally as individuals but understanding the state as a space of group, and not individual, contestation. The practice of filmmaking within Bollywood has followed an analogous trajectory, shifting from the social commitments of the early sound period and the nationalism of much of mid-century cinema to the fabulous commercialism, and enormous global revenues, of the post-1991 neoliberal period. Bollywood is not an idiom of progressive politics, yet it is the last repository of the Hindustani project: the language of the bazaar, and the idiom we have in common.

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