

# A conversation

*A conversation about an essay between three academics of South Asia – **Manan Ahmed**, who grew up in Lahore, Doha and Chicago; **Rohit Chopra**, who grew up in Madras, Calcutta and Bombay; and **Aswin Punathambekar**, who grew up in Madras and Bangalore. They belong to varied casts, nations, geographies. They were all in diasporic North America.*

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From: Rohit Chopra  
Subject: Re:  
To: Aswin Punathambekar

Dear Aswin  
Hope you're doing well and your summer is going well! I was wondering if I could bother you with a request, and would be most grateful for any suggestions. My friend Manan Ahmed (who also runs the superb blog Chapati Mystery) wanted suggestions about journal articles on bollywood as a language across south asia – whether in its audience or in its composition – Cinema creating a community type of work. I have suggested your book and some other readings but thought I would take your guidance as an expert. Any suggestions would be very welcome.  
Rohit Chopra

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From: Aswin Punathambekar  
Subject: Re:  
To: Rohit Chopra

Dear Rohit,  
It's good to hear from you.  
Re Manan Ahmed's query, I'm afraid there isn't

\* The essay was completed in due time.

much by way of good Ethnographies. In terms of the films themselves, Vijay Mishra's work comes to mind (his book, *Bollywood Cinema: Temples of Desire*, and an overview essay titled 'Bollywood Cinema: A Critical Genealogy'). I've attached the article.

When it comes to thinking about Bombay cinema across South Asia, I like some of Ashis Nandy's writings (a few throwaway lines, actually, in some essays (like the bit about a hijacker singing a film song, in 'The discreet charms of Indian terrorism'). And there are some interesting ideas in an interview he did with Chris Pinney (attached). Then there is an essay by Phil Lutgendorf ('Is there an Indian way of filmmaking?'), which may be of interest if he's thinking about this in terms of aesthetics (I've attached this as well).

In terms of cinema creating a community, work on fandom is one way to go. You can tell him to look up S.V. Srinivas' work on Telugu cinema and fan cultures (he has a book on Chiranjeevi). And I've written an essay that goes beyond the fandom-south Indian politics link (on Rahman, it's in the *Global Bollywood* anthology).

I'm not sure if any of this is helpful. If you could ask him to say a bit more on what he's looking for, perhaps I can come up with better suggestions. Also, academic writing aside, it might be worth looking at films themselves (I am reminded of a scene in *Kabul Express* when everyone breaks out into a film song – the Indian journalists, the Pakistani taxi driver, and the terrorist figure).

best, Aswin

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From: Rohit Chopra  
Subject: Suggestions from Aswin and articles on Bollywood  
To: Manan Ahmed  
Cc: Aswin Punathambekar

Dear Manan

Further to my earlier email, here is Aswin's mail and some articles. Feel free to email him at aswinp@umich.edu for more suggestions as he mentions below. He's the nicest guy and both of you will get along fabulously and will have much to discuss.

Cheers

Rohit

Attached: Vijay Mishra: 'Bollywood Cinema: A Critical Genealogy', Christopher Pinney: 'Hindi Cinema and Half-Forgotten Dialects: An Interview with Ashish Nandy', Philip Lutegendorf, 'Is there an Indian Way of Filmmaking?'

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From: Manan Ahmed

Subject: Re: Suggestions from Aswin and articles on Bollywood

To: Rohit Chopra

Cc: Aswin Punathambekar

Dear Aswin, Rohit,

Thank you so much for these insights and the articles. So very helpful. Aswin, it is really funny that you quoted the *Kabul Express* scene since it lies at the root of my question. Both of you might have heard about the controversy banning *Tere Bin Laden* in Pakistan and the resulting editorials written all across the Pakistani mediascape decrying censorship and ham-headedness of Pakistani state – including tweets by the Governor and CM of Punjab showing grave concern and regret about an Indian movie getting banned in Pakistan.

We have come a long way.

The impetus for my writing a shortish piece is that I have been asked to imagine a future for South Asia from a cultural perspective. I wanted to tease out the task of Bollywood as constituting a public across South Asia. This isn't necessarily analogous to Bombay cinema across Tamil or Kannada publics within India, either. Pakistan's film industry is largely moribund – though the art continues in other forms. So, in a way Bollywood operates in a vacuum across Pakistan, Afghanistan (to a lesser extent across Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bangladesh, Egypt, Morocco, Turkey). I want to see how does it enable the creation of new cultural referents, provide a common vocabulary, and most crucially, maintain long-standing historical and cultural thematics within living memory.

Songs, drawing on the Ghazal form, of course, but I am also looking at historical romances such as *Jodha*

*Akbar* which place in the past working models of cohabitation. But I am not speaking merely of syncretic models – for my purpose *Mission Kashmir* would be just as valuable a reading as *Jodha Akbar* since it also showcases the capacity to imagine the Other – however demonically. My sense is that it is not the specifics of what the public imagines but that they *imagine at all*. Not precisely intuitive here, maybe, but my gist is that the nationalist discourses in Asia have worked hard to erase *all* consciousness of mutuality or difference for decades and it is to realms such as Bollywood that we need to turn to, in order to perceive perception. I think back to the movies of the 40-60s and my mother listening to Doordarshan radio in our kitchen in Lahore (we were close enough to the border to catch a signal) and singing along to Sahir and Majrooh, etc.

All this is rambling – but thank you so much for the articles and I will read them quickly and think through this more.

cheers,

Manan

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From: Aswin Punathambekar

Subject: Re: Re: Suggestions from Aswin and articles on Bollywood

To: Manan Ahmed

Cc: Rohit Chopra

Dear Manan,

Glad to play a part in what sounds like a very interesting experiment! It's easy enough for anyone to look to Bombay cinema when thinking about South Asia, but very difficult to come up with convincing explanations as to why. And I think you're on to something very interesting.

I agree with your argument re films like *Jodha Akbar* and *Mission Kashmir*. And I'm really interested in hearing more about your point that it's not the 'specifics of what the public imagines but that they imagine at all.' I've been chatting with Rohit about something similar but in relation to the work that reality television sometimes does in spaces like northeast India. When we think about the implications of a 'public' that comes together around a contestant on a show, it's not about how long it lasts or whether it reshapes long-standing conflicts. At one level, it's about the struggle for the ordinary – to be able to imagine coming together as a 'public' in the first instance. I feel we, at least media studies folks, don't take this aspect seriously enough.

And hearing about your mother listening to All India Radio/Doordarshan (and I'd guess Radio Ceylon as well? Ameen Sayani and Binaca Geet Mala?) and singing along raises some very interesting questions about \*how\* a 'South Asian public' coheres around Bombay cinema.

So in addition to issues of cultural referents and long-standing historical and cultural thematics that you've mentioned, I would also make a case for technology – all the way from radio sets equipped to receive shortwave signals to VCRs to current pirate networks and a range of online spaces.

I'd even go so far as to say that until recently (the '70s, say), we could have traced Bombay cinema's influence at an oceanic scale and not just the subcontinent. Radio Ceylon's film music programmes (produced in Bombay, flown to Colombo) were broadcast on shortwave and reached audiences across South Asia and as far as parts of east Africa and southeast Asia. How wonderful it must have been to listen to Sayani reading a letter from someone in Madras followed by one from Jhumri Tilaiya followed by one from Nairobi! Let me know if this sounds interesting – I can send you a transcript of an interview I did with Sayani recently.

Contemporary pirate networks that enable Bombay cinema's cross-border flows are all the more interesting now given the Indian state and 'corporate' Bollywood's (with help from LA) struggles to impose strictly national boundaries on media flows.

best,  
Aswin

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From: Manan Ahmed  
Subject: Re: Re: Re: Suggestions from Aswin and articles on Bollywood  
To: Aswin Punathambekar  
Cc: Rohit Chopra

Aswin,  
Thank you for raising the technology issue, since it is also something very central to how I am constructing the piece. However, I did not think of the radio/shortwave in that regard. Man, maybe you should co-write this piece with me. Since we are so on the same wavelength. Ahem. Please do send me the Sayani transcript, I would love to read it for all sorts of reasons. The story of my Mom's love affair w/AIR is actually weirder still. In 1974, we all moved to Doha Qatar for my Dad's engineering gig. Doha, back then, was basi-

cally a tent-city, and my parents (young couple barely 5 years into marriage) made friends within the larger Desi diaspora. Their closest friends were this couple from Bombay who held weekly film screenings in their house. First on projectors/reel and then bootlegged VCR tapes (movies were banned in Doha). So there was a healthy 'illegal' traffic across Sri Lankan, Indian, Pakistani families of Betamax and VHS videos.

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From: Rohit Chopra  
Subject: Re: Re: Re: Re: Suggestions from Aswin and articles on Bollywood  
To: Aswin Punathambekar  
Cc: Manan Ahmed

Lovely discussion. I'd say there's a book here about the cultural memories of consuming Hindi cinema. For me the imaginary of Ceylon has a life of its own beyond Sri Lanka, and while Binaca became Cibaca, Binaca Geet Mala is forever...

Cheers  
Rohit

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From: Aswin Punathambekar  
Subject: Re: Re: Re: Re: Re: Suggestions from Aswin and articles on Bollywood  
To: Rohit Chopra  
Cc: Manan Ahmed

Rohit – agreed. There really is a book waiting to be written. The story about film screenings that Manan has about desi life in Doha is very similar to stories I've recorded from families in North America (in fact, one of these families used to get prints from India, circulate them across north America, and they even began organizing film star tours).

And Manan – very kind of you to suggest co-writing. But to be honest, I'm not sure I'll be able to add much to what you've already outlined. Do send me the piece when you have a draft done, and I'll let you know if I have more/anything new to say. Would that work?

And here are 2 pieces – one is the transcript of a conversation with Sayani, and the other is my essay about Bombay cinema & broadcasting that's going to be published in a journal called *Bioscope: South Asian Screen Studies*.

cheers,  
aswin

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From: Aswin Punathambekar  
Subject: one more thing (on film music)  
To: Manan Ahmed  
Cc: Rohit Chopra

I've been thinking about the song sequence in *Kabul Express* that we were talking about, and can't help wondering about the song they pick – *main zindagi ka saath nibhata chala gaya*. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sagi0o-d7XU>

It's a brilliant choice, given the setting, and seems all the more appropriate when Imran Khan Afridi begins singing. What kind of affect does it produce? Does it remind us to think about the ordinary and pleasurable in the face of intractable conflicts? Of just going on with life as it unfolds?

And here, I'm also reminded of Lalitha Gopalan's notion of Indian cinema being a of interruptions, music being one element. Do moments like the one in *Kabul Express* then interrupt the story to take us onto an ethical plateau of sorts where the two Indian journos, the Afghan driver, the Pakistani soldier, and viewers can suspend doubts and suspicions and be reminded of shared experiences?

This is the 'inexpressible dimension of experience' that Bhriku Singh talks about while recalling his mother singing *aa chal ke tujhe, main leke chalun* in an ambulance taking her husband's body from the hospital to the ghat. (<http://www.india-seminar.com/2003/525/525%20the%20problem.htm>)

I thought you'd find his essay interesting and useful.  
cheers,  
Aswin

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From: Manan Ahmed  
Subject: Re: one more thing (on film music)  
To: Aswin Punathambekar  
Cc: Rohit Chopra

Beautifully put Aswin. I too read the Singh essay recently and was stuck with that deeper relationship between the cinematic and the social. One that I think is profoundly 'lifelong', to use a rather clumsy phrase. That is, it is the viewer/listeners engagement with the mo-

tifs, the sounds, the looks, the dialogues, the lyrics of (shall we say) urdu/hindi cinema across the time/space of 1947 onwards that writes a very different type of history of the subcontinent than one visible through battle scars of 48, 65, 71, so on. I think there is a generationality to this, surely – where everyday poetics is both created and disseminated across a broadly varied ethno-linguistic terrain. So, to imagine a pakhtun-khwa conversant in Sahir Ludhianvi's lyrics (through Dev Anand, of course) is to recognize that there already exists a cultural space where such a translation can happen effortlessly. And the creation of that terrain, since it is not in the hands of 'the state' is the work of communal memory aka 'constituting a public'. (?)

The brief with a political or strategic lens on South Asia in the last 60 years is that it conflates high politics for everyday life. And it restricts the latter to the former's narrow imagination. Clearly, the work of the various states in demonizing the other is well-documented through these decades (not just Hindu-Muslim but ethnically Pakhtun-Sindhi – Punjabi – Mohajir etc) resulted in bloodshed across these geographies. YET, in every bus driven by every Pashto speaker in Lahore, you could always count on M. Rafi to come on after Essa Khailwi. Always. In Lahore, in fact, the illicit cinema audience (of both Bombay cinema and 'blue films') were the day labourers – comprised of Afghans, Pakhtuns, and southern Punjabis. What I find notable is that the 'translation' in practice is so little noted in theory. I mean the translation of hindi/urdu idioms outwards into punjabi/pashto which is facilitated precisely because the idioms are couched in cultural symbols/communal stories that are extremely legible to all viewers. Can I say that there is a particularly South Asian imagination of Love, of Jealousy, of male friendship, of pratfalls and one that we can trace back to the folk epics of (at the least) seventeenth century.  
yeah?

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Ps. Also, Hum Dono is The Return of Martin Guerre before The Return of Martin Guerre!

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From: Rohit Chopra  
Subject: Re: Re: one more thing (on film music)  
To: Aswin Punathambekar  
Cc: Manan Ahmed

Wonderful conversation, sparking off so many ideas and thoughts. You'll should post this thread on your respec-

tive blogs. I was watching the song 'Sandese aate hain' from *Border* this morning on 'Namaste America', a show about Bollywood on San Francisco public TV, and I started thinking about the Tim O'Brien collection of Vietnam stories *The Things They Carried*. The memories of-- and around -- the act of viewing films are really a lens through which one apprehends so much, without even consciously thinking of it.

Some twenty years ago, the writer Amit Chaudhuri had visited St. Xavier's College Bombay where I was a first year undergrad. He made a remark about R.K. Narayan saying that we did not possess an adequate critical vocabulary to appreciate his work. I had often thought that the same argument might be applied to Hindi cinema for much of the '90s, barring a few works, but in the last decade a supple, rich theoretical apparatus to talk about Hindi cinema has been taking shape. Right now is a particularly exciting moment.

It is remarkable, the way communities suddenly materialize around a shared appreciation for Hindi films and music. I have, online and in person, just had to mention being a Kishore Kumar fan, and have discovered a common world of memories and connections with various people.

Best  
Rohit

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From: Aswin Punathambekar  
Subject: Re: Re: Re: one more thing (on film music)  
To: Manan Ahmed  
Cc: Rohit Chopra

Yes!

Can't wait to read the essay!

And while I'm sure you can come up with countless other examples, your point that there already exists a cultural space for this exchange and that we can trace the south asian-ness of imaginations of mohabbat, yaari, etc. to the 17th century reminded me of Farina Mir's book on punjabi qissa that just came out (*The Social Space of Language: Vernacular Culture in British Colonial Punjab*).

Hir-Ranjha FTW!

And oh, here's another YouTube clip (not to take us farther afield, but you've got to see these Moroccan fans of John Abraham): [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=13BIy16Y-VU&feature=player\\_embedded](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=13BIy16Y-VU&feature=player_embedded)  
cheers,  
Aswin