

# From “ghetto” to mainstream: Bollywood in South Africa

---

HASEENAH EBRAHIM

Wits School of Arts

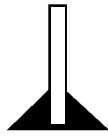
University of the Witwatersrand

Haseenah.Ebrahim@wits.ac.za

## Abstract

This essay explores two aspects of the Bollywood “phenomenon” as it has played out, in the past decade, in South Africa — a part of the Indian diaspora where the popularity of Hindi-language Indian cinema has an established history. Firstly, the article maps the expansion of Bollywood *beyond* the Indian diasporic audience to so-called “crossover” audiences, a phenomenon I have labelled the “mainstreaming” of Bollywood in South Africa. Secondly, it examines developments in relation to the expansion of Bollywood — South African film industry co-operation, including Bollywood’s use of South Africa for location shooting.

Bollywood is apparently trapped in some sort of purgatory of global cultural expectations; at any given time, it’s too “Indian” to be accessible to Western audiences, too north Indian-centric for the rest of South Asia, too imitative of Hollywood to be appreciated as authentic Indian cinema among North Americans seeking something exotic, too potent of an imposition of an Indian version of modernity on other traditional societies, or too low-culture to qualify as real art for snobs of all national origins. (Lal 2004)

 In the list of “too somethings” mentioned above, South Africa appears to be an exception in several instances. Bollywood is no longer “inaccessible” to “Western” audiences

in South Africa. Most South Africans coming from Tamil- and Telegu-speaking (i.e. South Indian) backgrounds seem eagerly to consume Bollywood films and music despite a sometimes vocal South Indian dissident view. Any perceived imitativeness of Hollywood does not seem to have deflected from its appeal among its South African fans; on the contrary, most cite its “wholesomeness” (usually referring to Bollywood’s lack of explicit sex and excessive violence) as being distinctive from Hollywood. North Americans may deem Bollywood an insufficiently “authentic Indian cinema”, but Bollywood remains sufficiently exotic for most South Africans regardless of so-called “authenticity”. In fact, criticisms of Bollywood’s lack of “authenticity” appear to reside primarily

in the argument that its construction of India is “unrealistic”; arguably, it is this very lack of realism that constitutes its primary appeal.

When I returned to South Africa in 1999 after a decade-long period of postgraduate study and teaching in the United States, I was surprised to discover that Hindi-language films, now popularly known as “Bollywood films”, were being screened in some “mainstream venues” and were subtitled in English. My curiosity as a film scholar was aroused by the resurgence in popularity of this “genre” of films that I associated with my childhood. They evoked memories of sitting through what seemed like interminably long films with overly emotional dialogues in a language I understood only patchily — all relieved by the song-and-dance sequences which left both me and other spectators humming as we left the cinema. Thus began a research interest which has, in the interim, seen steadily growing scholarly attention and a corpus of academic publications, emerging primarily from the United Kingdom and the United States. This sudden increase of publications about Bollywood has occurred much to the chagrin of those scholars within India who have been engaging in academic research of not only Bollywood but also other Indian cinemas. Scholarship on Bollywood, emanating from both Western scholars and NRI scholars domiciled in the West, demonstrates the hegemony of the West in global flows of scholarly knowledge production and publication.<sup>1</sup>

This essay explores two aspects of the Bollywood “phenomenon” as it has played out, in the past decade, in a particular part of the Indian diaspora where the popularity of Hindi-language Indian cinema has an established history, i.e. in South Africa. Firstly, it maps the expansion of Bollywood *beyond* the Indian diasporic audience to so-called “crossover” audiences, a phenomenon I have labelled the “mainstreaming” of Bollywood in South Africa. Secondly, it examines developments in relation

to the expansion of Bollywood-South African film industry co-operation.

To begin, it is necessary to comment on my use of the term “Bollywood”. I use it, as has now become accepted parlance, to refer specifically to the Hindi-language commercial cinema of India based primarily in Mumbai (previously Bombay). Despite common misconceptions, Bollywood is not India’s national film industry; it constitutes only *one* of India’s many film industries and/or cinemas. These include several regional commercial cinemas as well as the “art cinema” of India known as “Parallel Cinema” or New (Wave) Indian cinema. Of India’s many cinematic traditions, however, it is Bollywood that has attained a global reach and a considerable measure of international commercial success.<sup>2</sup>

Some scholars and film commentators have characterised the term “Bollywood” as derogatory, arguing that it maintains Hollywood as its standard of reference and that, by implication, it positions Indian cinema as a stepchild of Hollywood. Commonly believed to have emerged only in about the past decade, originating as a term used in some English-language Indian trade journals in “a slightly jokey, self-deprecating way”, Rajadhyaksha describes the term “Bollywood” as having become “an expression of the outsider’s fascination with a slightly surreal practice that nevertheless appears to possess the claim to be a genuinely popular art form” (2003:29). It is arguable whether the term reflects an outsider perspective any longer (even if one accepts that it was ever primarily that), and whether any Bollywood fan would even aspire to refer to a Bollywood film as an art form. Regardless of such debates, the term “Bollywood” has achieved widespread currency to refer to a specific mode of production or industrial practice and a distinctive aesthetic. The term “Bollywood” connotes a characteristic set of stylistic conventions, the prominence of song-and-dance sequences, recognisable themes and genre categories, Indian cultural

values, and an overall entertainment ethos. The term also encompasses a particular manifestation of the star system that includes primarily actors but also producers, directors, playback singers, lyricists, musical composers/directors and choreographers. Moreover, both audiences and producers appear to be able to reconcile Bollywood's ideological investment in a conservative Hindu nationalism — which often positions itself narratively in opposition to Western values and to Muslims — with its paradoxical but ubiquitous appropriation of Western locations and modes of dress and dance. Additionally, Bollywood also happily counts a half dozen Khans among its major male stars, including Shahrukh Khan, the darling of diasporic audiences, and Aamir Khan of *Lagaan* fame.<sup>3</sup>

Rajadhyaksha (2003:27) convincingly asserts that Bollywood is more than just a film industry, arguing that:

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 even an *alarmingly small* part, of the overall culture industry that is currently being created and marketed.<sup>4</sup>

Such “diffuse cultural conglomeration” became manifest in the manner in which Bollywood took England by storm in the late 1990s when Andrew Lloyd Webber produced the musical “Bombay Dreams” in a co-operative venture with renowned Bollywood musical director A.R. Rehman,<sup>5</sup> and when Harrods and Selfridges showcased Bollywood fashion and decor, and when henna, yoga and bhangra became the rage in the UK. One can add to these activities the independent consumption of song-and-dance

sequences as film trailers in television shows, of live music concerts featuring Bollywood stars and/or music, of television talent shows drawing on Bollywood/filmic music, and of print magazines dedicated to Bollywood news and gossip. Rajadhyaksha argues that the diffused nature of Bollywood as a cultural industry leaves many producers of its filmic narratives bemused, unable to identify how to best exploit or stabilise what appears to be a lucrative marketing opportunity.

Films are India's largest cultural export, and Indian cinema as a whole has produced over 30 000 feature film titles since the first documented Indian film, *Raja harishchandra*, was released in 1913 (Mishra 2002:1). Achal Mehra, editor of the “Little India” newspaper, contends that “the Indian film industry is the hardiest survivor of Indian culture among overseas Indian communities globally” — estimated to number about 25 million spread among 110 countries (2007:3). Jigna Desai (2004:40) notes that “South Asian diasporas are one of the largest sites of consumption of Bollywood films and are considered a distribution territory by the Indian film industry.” It is estimated that the sale of overseas distribution rights for a big-budget Bollywood film now rakes in twice the revenues brought in via the largest domestic market, namely Mumbai (Deshpande 2005:190-191).

It must be emphasised, however, that Bollywood's appeal outside of the Indian subcontinent is not limited to the Indian *diasporic* populations in the United States, Canada, UK, Middle East, southern and East Africa, the Caribbean and elsewhere. Indian cinema's (primarily Bollywood's) presence in many African countries is not only a long-established one, as media anthropologist Brian Larkin (2002, 2003) has documented in his studies of film audiences in northern Nigeria, but its popularity has also been consolidated in the *absence* of an Indian diasporic population with the importation of Indian film styles into Nigerian Hausa

“video films”.<sup>6</sup> Sudha Rajagopalan (2005) has documented a “taste” for Indian cinema in post-Stalinist Soviet society, and Indian films are said to have something of a cult status in Japan. The October 2006 issue of the North American journal *South Asian popular culture* is dedicated to the study of Indian cinema’s global reach. Seeking to decentre Hollywood in debates on cinema and globalisation, it includes articles and anecdotal accounts of Indian cinema in countries as diverse as Spain, Romania, Bulgaria, Egypt, Greece, Israel, the former Yugoslavia, Italy and Turkey, among others — by non-NRIs. Other countries to which India exports its films include Peru and China.

In South Africa, there exists an established history of Indian film exhibition. Jagarnath (2004:212) notes that “[i]t was not long after India started producing its own films that they made their appearance in South Africa” and that as early as 1936, the Indian government appealed against the high import taxes on films imposed by the South African government. The appeal was unsuccessful on the grounds that “Indian films appear to be purely a money-making matter and not for the education of the Indian community” (Board of Censors 1939, cited in Jagarnath 2004). Nevertheless, Indian film exhibition continued, although the segregationist policies of the South African government limited its exposure and appeal beyond the Indian population.

In 2002, the film distribution and exhibition chain Ster-Kinekor hosted a Bollywood Film Festival in the cities of Durban, Cape Town and Johannesburg. The festival heralded several new developments in relation to Bollywood in South Africa. These include the establishment by Ster-Kinekor of a “Bollywood circuit” in its mainstream cinema complexes. I use the term “mainstream” to refer to the previously so-called “white” areas where many of the popular shopping malls are situated, and in which the larger multiplexes are housed, as opposed to residential and/or commercial areas in which

people of Indian descent predominate (a legacy of the spatial/racial segregation policies of the apartheid era). This move was followed by the other major film distributor, Nu-Metro, exhibiting ten to twelve Bollywood films from 2003 onwards. While both Ster-Kinekor’s and Nu Metro’s Bollywood circuits (SK Bollywood and Bollywood Unlimited, respectively) are now well established, the rather belated discovery by mainstream exhibitors of the potential of Bollywood at the box office was eclipsed by the migration of Bollywood to television in 2004.

Prior to this development, however, Ster-Kinekor’s decision in 2002 to include Indian films on its screens not only testified to the substantial market for Bollywood films in South Africa, but also heralded a shift from “ghetto” to mainstream. Especially in Durban, the city with the largest Indian-descent population, Indian films — mainly Hindi-language films — were screened in large grand cinemas with names such as Shah Jehan (a two-thousand seater), Isfahan, Raj and Shiraz. Jagarnath (2004:218) describes the success of these films from the 1950s to the mid-1970s as “quite phenomenal”. Thus the “ghetto” in the title of this essay is used ironically; it reflects an ethnically bounded cultural space and practice, but cinema-going by Indian South Africans saw women dressing up in their Saturday evening best, and the cinemas becoming “palaces of excess and enjoyment” (Jagarnath 2004:215). Both in name and decor, they “aimed at linking themselves with an Indian past of royal dynasties, and Mughal extravagance” (Jagarnath 2004:215).

From about the mid-1980s onwards, however, Durban saw its once thriving Indian film scene begin to decline with the advent of video and India’s boycott of South Africa’s apartheid policies. Pirated videos abounded, and many of Durban’s once luxurious Indian cinemas were shut down.<sup>7</sup> Independent (Indian) distributors fought to revive the industry with chains like Ster-Kinekor only joining forces once the revival

was already well under way. Shaffie Mohamed Ali, General Manager of Ster-Kinekor in KwaZulu-Natal, explained the catalyst for Ster-Kinekor's interest in Bollywood as beginning with the film *Kuch kuch hota hai*, for which Ster-Kinekor was offered screening rights in 1998. Ster-Kinekor warily decided to risk screening the film and was surprised when it grossed more than some of the Western films against which it was competing. The country's biggest distributor and exhibition chain saw a marketing opportunity that had long been ignored in the context of a racially segregated cinema-going environment. In 2002, Ster-Kinekor launched its Bollywood circuit with the Oscar-nominated film *Lagaan* (Tax 2001), which portrays a battle on the cricket field between Indian villagers and the occupying British colonial forces.

However, while Ster-Kinekor's statements to the media acknowledged the crucial role of independent Indian film distributors in the survival of Indian films in the South African market, the company's public relations strategy was careful to present Indian films as entertainment for all ethnic groups. The expansion of the market for Bollywood films to "crossover audiences" involved several strategies. Ster-Kinekor, followed less enthusiastically by Nu-Metro, began by expanding the exhibition of Bollywood films to mainstream cinema venues, facilitating access for both Indian-descent audiences now living outside the Indian residential areas (demarcated by the previous apartheid regime) and viewers of other races. The availability of subtitled versions of Hindi films helped support the expansion campaign — enabling comprehension for both Indian-descent audiences no longer familiar with Indian vernaculars and non-Indian audiences. Additionally, expansion to cinemas in small towns across the country ensured that even those living outside the major metropolitan centres were able to go to a cinema in order to watch a Bollywood film. Subsequently, video

stores in non-Indian areas began stocking Indian diaspora films such as *East is east*, *Fire*, *Bend it like Beckham* and *Monsoon wedding*, as their hybrid mix of Bollywood and Hollywood themes, conventions and aesthetics provides those audiences unable to accept Bollywood's varying degrees of realism with something easier to digest. Some video stores that attempted to provide a stock of Bollywood films found this to be less profitable.<sup>8</sup>

The new-found accessibility of Bollywood films outside the traditionally Indian residential/commercial areas was given a marketing boost through the hosting of Bollywood festivals, such as the aforementioned one in 2002, and particularly by the decision of the International Indian Film Academy (better known as IIFA) to hold both the 2<sup>nd</sup> (2002, Sun City) and the 4<sup>th</sup> (2004, Dome at Northgate) International Indian Film Academy Awards in South Africa. Testimony to the recognition by Bollywood of South Africa as an important overseas market is the fact that within the first five years of the existence of the glitzy awards they have already been held twice in South Africa.<sup>9</sup> By the late 1990s and early 2000s, the commercial potential of Bollywood was increasingly acknowledged by players other than film distributors, with segments of the leisure and entertainment industry, including film producers, bankrolling local tours by Bollywood actors, musicians, fashion designers and so on.

However, all of the efforts to appeal to a crossover audience and expand the market for Bollywood were eclipsed by an independent decision by the national public broadcaster, SABC, to begin screening — initially often in direct competition with theatre distributors — a series of Bollywood films on SABC3, South Africa's "public commercial" television service, on Saturday nights. Starting in April 2004, the weekly broadcast of Bollywood films catapulted Bollywood, in one bold move, into the South African mainstream. Considering that most

of the South African population has access to only a few free-to-air television channels — although more affluent viewers can subscribe to the satellite network DSTV — and that South African television channels have national coverage, there is nothing more mainstream than being on television. The then commissioning editor in charge of the Bollywood programming at the SABC, Anu Nepal, requested the channel's "dead slot", viz. the 10 p.m. slot on Saturday nights, as a way of getting a foot in the door for the screening of Bollywood films. Bearing in mind the marketing of Bollywood films as family fare, scheduling the films in the problematic dead slot to test out the market for Bollywood appears to have been a decidedly risky gamble considering that Bollywood films are usually at least three hours long. Amidst a mixture of condescension and scepticism by colleagues who claimed that Bollywood was "way too Indian" for South African audiences, especially for the traditionally English-speaking, sophisticated and affluent audiences of SABC3, Nepal's gamble paid off.

Audience ratings, despite the lateness of the time slot, surprised many of Nepal's colleagues. The screening of the first ten films increased the channel's viewership in this time slot as follows: a 700% increase in Indian-descent audiences, a 115% increase in English-speaking audiences and a 20% increase in Afrikaans-speaking audiences, a 30% increase in the category called All Adults and a 35% increase in All Adults LSM 8-10 and, finally, a 70% increase in Coloured audiences.

The huge increase in Indian-descent audiences is not as unsurprising as it may seem — Indian audiences have an extremely high rate of VCR/DVD ownership and access to low-cost rentals or purchases of Indian films. In addition, many subscribe to satellite subscription channels such as ZEE TV, B4U and Sony. The "dead slot", previously lacking advertiser support, began to attract substantial advertising, primarily

mainstream advertising (cellphones, fast food, etc.).

As a result of the positive audience ratings, Nepal was able to negotiate a repeat screening time slot. The repeat screenings, which started in August 2004, on Saturday afternoons (2 p.m.) were the result of public demand. The 2 p.m. slot became the primary screening time for Indian films, as SABC3 created a marketing brand called "Bollywood on 3" which, in fact, increasingly included non-Bollywood Indian films, especially those in the South Indian languages of Telegu and Tamil.

One demographic group not mentioned in the audience ratings figures is the black/African audience. This may be due to the fact that there exists a common perception among black South Africans that SABC3 is a "white" channel and, except for the more educated, affluent segments of the black population, viewership among blacks is concentrated on the SABC's channels 1 and 2. A proposed marketing strategy to flight "promos" of Bollywood films on these channels did not materialise.<sup>10</sup>

At the time of writing, Bollywood — which had disappeared from South African television screens for a while — has reappeared as part of SABC3's normal weekend programming of films. No longer "ghettoised" as a distinctive brand, Bollywood films are now simply included in the channel's feature film screening schedule. In addition, references to Bollywood — in Rajadhyaksha's sense of it constituting a cultural phenomenon that goes beyond the films it produces — continues on South African television in the inclusion of film clips and other snippets of Bollywood news and gossip on the magazine show *Eastern mosaic*. Additionally, Bollywood's imprint remains in the consciousness of most viewers as it is referenced on variety shows and on arts and culture shows that reflect a wider phenomenon of inclusion of Bollywood-style song and dance in many live

performances. Thus, while many non-Indian viewers (and some Indian South Africans too!) may not remember the names of individual films, many are familiar with Bollywood as a “genre” and some have been motivated to attend theatrical screenings and even — according to some DVD retailers — to buy Bollywood titles. Such retailers also mention that a number of their customers are West and East Africans, such as Somali and Nigerian immigrants.

The shift in the *consumption* of Bollywood (films, music, celebrity gossip, fashion, etc.) in South Africa to one that moves beyond the Indian South African population to a wider, increasingly more mainstream audience is paralleled by industry developments with regard to Bollywood film *production*. Indian co-operation with South Africa in relation to film production invites further examination with regard to two aspects: firstly, South African-Indian film industry co-operation and, secondly, Bollywood’s increasing use of South Africa for location shooting.

South African-Indian film industry co-operation has gained an increased momentum in the past few years. In September 2002, Eddie Mbalo, CEO of the NFVF (National Film and Video Foundation), argued that “[t]he Indian industry has two important lessons for South Africa: the first is how to build a film industry in a developing country; and the second, how to enable commercially viable films to be produced in a multilingual, culturally diverse society”.<sup>11</sup> Soon afterwards, Eddie Mbalo and other senior staff from the National Film and Video Foundation visited India to solidify relationships with the Indian production community, as well as to establish an agreement with a film school in India that offered placements to South African students. Subsequently, a number of visits and events have strengthened South Africa’s links with the Indian film industry. One of these is a formal agreement between the two countries in the form of a Memorandum of Understanding

(MOU). The MOU was signed during the International Film Festival of India held in New Delhi in October 2002 by delegates representing South Africa’s NFVF and India’s National Film Development Corporation Limited (NFDC). The Memorandum of Understanding makes provision for Indian-South African co-operation in film-related industry matters in several key areas, including co-production, distribution, festivals and cultural programmes, and information exchange. The MOU’s provisions regarding co-production include the facilitation of joint funding of the development, production and distribution of films. The MOU also undertakes to devise strategies to encourage the distribution and exhibition of films from both countries. Provisions also cover the exchange of film-related information about cultural programmes in the respective countries, the exploration of the possibility of organising a film week in the two countries in accordance with pre-existing provisions for cultural co-operation and the exchange of information on industry development and promotion within these countries.

Subsequent co-operation between the two countries’ film industries has been erratic, but it is beginning to show signs of an increasing dynamism. In September 2004, an entire day of the three-day-long India International Film Convention held in New Delhi was dedicated to South Africa and the whole exhibition floor occupied by the South African delegation. South Africa also started entering some films in Indian film festivals. In February 2005, a Bollywood delegation was received in South Africa to discuss Bollywood-South African film industry co-operation. Nevertheless, for several years after the MOU was signed, no co-operative film production seems to have taken place under the aegis of the agreement. Tusi Fokane, Senior Manager for Policy and Research at the NFVF, notes:

Whilst there have been a number of trade delegations to India, the MOU with respect to film has not really taken off the ground. One of the reasons may be the fact that we received information indicating that the NFDC was no longer in operation. Furthermore, there has not been any subsequent communication from our Indian counterparts.<sup>12</sup>

A report commissioned by the Western Cape Department of Economic Development and Tourism on the film industry suggests that the MOU should be expanded into a full co-production treaty:

Developing the Indian Memorandum of Understanding into a full co-production treaty would also provide substantial returns. Although Indian budgets tend to be a great deal smaller than those of European and American origin, the tourism spin-offs are substantial. Indian tourists are renowned for travelling to locations showcased in Indian films. Furthermore, a co-production treaty could 'work both ways'. Despite the enormous quantity of films produced by the Bollywood Industry each year (over 800 feature films), only 1-2% are distributed internationally.<sup>13</sup> South Africa can help make Indian films more commercially viable and offers a large potential consumer base for Indian releases. Delegations from both countries have recently made reciprocal trips to further co-operation. The Indian delegation is concerned about the tax incentive schemes available, however. With regard to the DTI rebate scheme, they feel that the minimum budget of R25 million is too large for the majority of Indian films. It has been suggested therefore that a Special Purpose Vehicle be created specifically for Bollywood productions. This would be a potentially useful way to foster further collaborations. (Tuomi 2005b:6)

In March 2007, the South African trade publication *Screen Africa* reported that South African film producer Anant Singh had announced at a press conference in Mumbai that the sequel to the hit comedy *Mr Bones* will be partly shot at a location on the Indian subcontinent, as a co-production with an Indian production company.<sup>14</sup> The article further quotes Singh:

*Mr Bones* was very popular with Indian audiences, both in theatres and on TV, and it was dubbed into Hindi and other local languages. We are thrilled to be doing a film in India which has the largest film industry in the world, making more movies than Hollywood, and which is supported by a vast audience from a population of more than a billion people. It makes perfect sense for *Mr Bones*, a white African sangoma, to end up in India to continue his journey in an exotic location and to generate his unique brand of chaos. We have also had fruitful discussions with potential co-production partners, among whom are Mohan Shetty of AdLabs, Bobby Bedi of Kaleidoskope Entertainment and Ronnie Screwvalla of UTV. ("Mr Bones" 2007)

The article goes on to note that "[t]he sequel to *Mr Bones* is scheduled to be shot in India later this year and marks the first time that a South Africa/India co-production will be shot in both South Africa and India. This production is an extension of the significant economic and cultural ties that the two countries have developed". While for South Africa the potential access to a massive Indian market for films is clearly an incentive, a mutual sense of the other's exoticism appears to inform much of the Indian-South African film co-operation agreements. For example, the Sun City sequences in the Bollywood film *Hera phiri* utilise the iconography of colonial nostalgia (a hallmark of much of South Africa's tourist appeal), African exoticism, etc.

Another aspect of Bollywood in South Africa is Bollywood's discovery of South Africa for location shooting. The use of South African locations by international film productions — be it Bollywood, European or North American productions — benefits the country in several ways. These benefits reside primarily in the positioning of film production units as "super tourists" because of their extensive use of resources such as airlines, vehicle rental (not just car hire, but truck, bus, fire engine and ambulance rentals), accommodation, restaurant and catering services, and electrical and other equipment — all of which support a large



number of auxiliary industries. In addition, there are spin-offs in terms of marketing the country or city as a tourist attraction, the employment of local technical and creative crew members, as well as the use of local actors, mainly as extras, but also sometimes in more substantial supporting roles. For foreign film producers, South Africa offers a favourable exchange rate, good weather conditions, a wide range of natural landscapes, up-to-date equipment rental companies, access to support services and a well-developed film infrastructure. Domestic and international commercial and feature film production in South Africa currently generates about seven billion rand annually, and revenues are expected to rise substantially as a result of the government's recent launch of a rebate scheme for the film industry. Additionally, some Bollywood film producers have reportedly moved productions from the UK to South Africa as a result of the new, less favourable tax system introduced there, including a "cultural test" for Britishness (Bollywood prefers South Africa 2006).

The city of Cape Town and the province of Gauteng remain in the forefront as preferred locations for film productions. It is Cape Town, however, which has established itself as the premier location of choice for *international* films. The use of the city as a film location pumps in hundreds of millions of rand into the local economy. On a good day, there may be as many as forty shoots in and around Cape Town (including commercials, Indian films and Hollywood films). In the past decade, a number of Bollywood films have been shot in South Africa, including *Hera pheri*, *Filhaal*, *Aankhen*, *Dil ka rishta*, *Armaan*, *Ishq vishq*, *Andaaz*, *Khel* and *Dhoom 2*. Many of these productions appear to be private arrangements between Bollywood producers and local entrepreneurs, rather than co-operations forged under the formal aegis of intergovernmental agreements.

Cape Town (and its environs) is particularly popular with Bollywood producers. For example, in 2001 only one Bollywood film (*Rehnaa hai terre dil mein*) was shot in Durban. During that same period, seven Bollywood films were shot in Cape Town. The entire second half of the melodrama *Dil ka rishta* (Naresh Malhotra, 2001), which stars Bollywood superstar Aishwarya Rai, is set in Cape Town. More recently, however, Bollywood has begun utilising Durban and other KwaZulu-Natal locations more frequently. One such film, shot in Durban as well as at the Sun City holiday resort, is *Hera pheri* (Priyadarshan, 2000). A comedy revolving around three working-class, unemployed heroes, *Hera pheri* integrates the thinnest of romantic sub-plots with a set of rather gritty, even grimy locations — elements unusual for a contemporary Bollywood film.<sup>15</sup> However, the locations set in South Africa function to provide the contrasting glamourised, exotic settings necessary for the fantasy song-and-dance sequences. Bollywood song-and-dance sequences are already famously global, and *Hera pheri* uses locations around Durban as a backdrop for a song-and-dance sequence with neither explicit acknowledgement of the geographical location nor reference to it in the narrative (which is set in Mumbai). This is not unusual for a Bollywood film, however. Bollywood conventions do not valorise "realism" or verisimilitude to the degree that mainstream Western or Hollywood genres do. It is left to those familiar with Durban's Pavilion shopping mall and its Marine Parade and beachfront area to recognise the rickshaws and the landmarks around which a female character tries to seduce one of our hapless heroes.

While the film *Andaaz* (Raj Kanwar, 2003) not only uses South African locations in the song-and-dance sequences but also in some of the narrative sequences, the narrative itself is not set in South Africa. Such geographical substitution is commonplace in film production. Vancouver

and Toronto, for example, have frequently stood in for New York or Los Angeles. Thus, in *Andaaz*, scenes shot in the outskirts of Cape Town stand variously for “somewhere in Europe”, and the word “VLIEG” is even visible on one of the buildings in the background of a rich man’s private air fleet. South African authorities were reportedly upset about this geographical substitution, which deprives South Africa of the beneficial spin-offs for tourism when its locations are passed off as being elsewhere — particularly after the Minister of Defence agreed to allow the South African Air Force to do a fly-past for the film.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, the recent Bollywood blockbuster *Dhoom 2* (Sanjay Gadhvi, 2006), a sophisticated action thriller, passes off its locations in Oribi Gorge on the KwaZulu-Natal South Coast and scenes around Durban as parts of Brazil, with Durban substituting for Rio and parts of Mumbai. The spectacular opening sequence, however, is shot in the Namib Desert and is acknowledged as such.

Despite the increasing use of South Africa for location shooting, Bollywood has been slow to include South African actors or characters in its films. To date, only (very) occasional use has been made of South African actors.<sup>17</sup> South Africans of Indian descent rarely appear as *characters* in Bollywood films, even as minor or secondary characters (with speaking parts). While Bollywood obviously relies on the star power of its leading *actors* to draw audiences, Bollywood films will often *characterise* them as NRIs from the US, Canada, Australia or the UK. The reluctance to acknowledge, narratively, Indian diasporas in Fiji, Mauritius, Guyana, Trinidad, Surinam, Malaysia, South Africa, Sri Lanka and the Middle East reflects the class bias of Bollywood. Recent Bollywood blockbusters have increasingly focused on the lives of high-caste Hindus belonging to the upper, middle or professional classes, many of whose emigration to the West is of relatively recent vintage.

Indians in the Caribbean or South Africa left during British colonial rule and the majority emigrated as indentured labourers.<sup>18</sup>

However, a Bollywood action thriller shot in Cape Town in September and October of 2006, entitled *Cash* (starring Zayed Khan and Ajay Devgan) and scheduled for release in 2007, apparently has a plot based in Cape Town in which a Capetonian, with underworld links, needs to complete his collection of three precious diamonds. If accurately reported in the newspapers, this would make it the first Bollywood film with a South African protagonist.

Jigna Desai (2004) notes that until recently, “diasporas hardly registered in the national filmic imaginary; in other words, diasporic lives and experiences rarely were the subject of films. This is clearly not the case anymore, because Indian film industries have ‘discovered’ the diasporas (as lucrative markets)”. Ravinder Kaur (2002) notes that “the factors of demand, supply and profitability guide the actual production of cultural products”. However, it is the recent wave of emigration to the First World nations, and the consequent establishment of diasporas with significantly high disposable incomes, that has asserted the primacy of diasporic markets.

South Africa’s relative invisibility as a source of diasporic narratives and characters is reproduced in scholarly analyses of Indian cinema’s international markets. Despite Bollywood’s own recognition of South Africa as a lucrative market — as reflected in the choice of South Africa to host two of the IIFA award ceremonies — Pendakur and Subramanyam (1996), for example, simply exclude South Africa from their discussion of Indian cinema’s major diasporic markets. However, they do acknowledge two other African countries, Kenya and Nigeria (although the latter hardly counts as a “diasporic” market). Additionally, a pattern emerging in scholarly analyses of Bollywood in the diaspora

reveals a tendency to give lip service to the existence of Indian diasporas in many parts of the world before proceeding with analyses that assume all Indian diasporic subjects reside in the First World nations of the US, Canada, England and, sometimes, Australia.

One analysis of the role of Bollywood in the construction of diasporic Indian identity in South Africa is Thomas Blom Hansen's "In search of the diasporic self: Bollywood in South Africa" (2005:240). Flawed by the assumption, made from the outset, that "Bollywood films have for a long time been a type of 'mega-signifier' of Indianness in South Africa (and elsewhere)," Hansen also pays little attention to class, religious and generational differences in the reception of Bollywood films, or in relation to South African Indian subjectivities. Hansen uncritically assumes that sources such as the Durban-based newspaper *The post* represent the views of a homogenous and monolithic "Indian community". Hansen argues that the Bollywood film *Kuch kuch hota hai* (Karan Johar 1998) gave South Africans "a glimpse of being a modern 'diasporic Indian' in contemporary South Africa" (Hansen 2005:257) by providing, it seems, "a fantasy India widely held among Indians in South Africa" (256), i.e. one devoid of squalor and poverty. Far more interesting would be an interrogation of Hansen's argument that, in fact, for most South Africans, "India is nowhere in the picture as an object of identification and even less as a destination of emigration" (258).

Anecdotal evidence emerging from my own teaching of a brief introduction to Bollywood in an undergraduate film studies course at the University of the Witwatersrand (better known locally as "Wits") suggests that many young South Africans — *of all races*, including those of Indian descent — draw on Bollywood as just one of the global cultural references which support their perceptions of themselves as cosmopolitan, sophisticated and media-savvy. As a colleague, who approached a number of

Indian South African students at Wits about whether they perceived Indian-targeted media as a way of returning to their cultural roots to find their identities in a post-apartheid South Africa, has noted, "to most of the students, the cultural worth of Bollywood movies was no different from MTV, markers of fashion trends that one might emulate at a family wedding, just like replicating a popular Western culture fashion trend on campus" (Mistry 2004:34). It could be argued, then, that via the act of daily media consumption in a globalised media environment, viewers are "transported" in and out of alternative worlds and cultural scenarios, resulting in a form of cosmopolitanism I would describe as "armchair cosmopolitanism". How processes of media consumption may be linked to identity formation is, of course, worthy of further exploration.

Ethnographic audience studies may help provide some useful insights into the role of Bollywood not only in the South African Indian imaginary, but also in relation to identity construction among South Africans of different races. In particular, ethnographic studies among diasporic Indians may help dispel existing perceptions that the consumption of Bollywood films signifies a desire for the idea of either an "authentic" or a romanticised homeland to confused diasporans — a narrative favoured by Bollywood itself. Additionally, ethnographic research is necessary to provide verification of, and insights into, anecdotal accounts of the popularity of Bollywood among many African/black domestic workers and nurses, and some white teenagers, among others. Such studies may well provide evidence that contradicts Hansen's concluding argument that "the deep-running racialisation of cultural practices in South Africa means that there are few signs of Indian cinema becoming a ... medium of entertainment and visceral engagement between the city's Indian and African worlds" (2005:259).

Bollywood films are unquestionably formulaic; their appeal lies not in the uniqueness of plot or characterisation, but in the pleasures of spectacle. Neither Bollywood nor Nollywood valorises the “real” (as is the case with the classical realist narratives of Hollywood) or the psychological (European art cinema). The appeal of Bollywood films in different cultural contexts seems to lie simultaneously in their exoticism and their familiarity, their high production values and their lowbrow “corn” factor. One South African magazine article summed it up thus: “They’re predictable, they’re over-the-top and they’ve got more musical interludes than a Walt Disney children’s cartoon. And that’s why we love ’em” (Good Golly, it’s Bolly! 2005:21).

Within the South African context, Bollywood’s shift from “ghetto” to mainstream has occurred within the domains of both consumption and production. Bollywood’s appeal beyond the Indian diasporic audience has, in my opinion, reached a stage where it has become sufficiently integrated into the popular consciousness of South Africans to justify the argument that Bollywood has become “mainstream” in South Africa: visible on national television, exhibited in cinemas at major shopping malls, and with live “Bollywood” concerts and performances frequently involving organisers and participants, as well as audiences, of all races. The expansion of Bollywood-South African film industry co-operation, whether state-supported or private, is increasingly following the same path as more Bollywood producers become aware of the benefits South Africa offers, not only in terms of fresh, new, foreign locales for their (in)famous song-and-dance sequences, but also in terms of the production facilities available in South Africa. Finally, recent co-operation between South African and Indian film producers — currently in the development of Leon Schuster’s sequel to *Mr Bones* — promises the beginning of a more active co-production relationship between South Africa and India.

## Notes

- 1 The term “Non-Resident Indian” — commonly abbreviated as NRI — is a term referring to Indian nationals living outside India, but is commonly used to refer to the diasporic Indians in general (regardless of nationality). Diasporans themselves often jokingly argue it means “Not *Really* Indian”.
- 2 Another common misconception is that Bollywood is the most prolific film industry in the world. While India is, in fact, currently the most prolific film-producing nation in the world, it is the combined output of all of its film industries — not of Bollywood alone — that makes it the world’s largest producer of films.
- 3 The surname “Khan” is a Muslim surname. Other well-known Bollywood figures with the surname “Khan” include male stars Salman Khan, Saif Ali Khan, Zayed Khan and Fardeen Khan, the late director Mehboob Khan (whose 1957 film, *Mother India*, is a classic of Indian cinema) and director/choreographer Farah Khan, among others.
- 4 Owing to rampant piracy of Bollywood films, it is likely that a very small percentage of revenues generated from DVD sales actually reaches the producers or official distributors, but the sale of DVDs should perhaps be acknowledged as an ancillary “industry”!
- 5 A.R. Rehman’s name is alternatively spelled as “Rahman”.
- 6 Additionally, in interviews with this author, several West African filmmakers from countries such as Senegal and Burkina Faso have attested to exposure to Indian films in their youth; neither country has an Indian diaspora population of any note. Despite the immense popularity of Indian films among African audiences, their prevalence on African screens (together with Hollywood movies and kung fu fare) has long been a bone of contention among those filmmakers and film scholars committed to expanding African audiences for African films. The only home-grown African “industry” to have achieved substantial popular/commercial appeal in

- Africa is Nollywood (i.e. the Nigerian “video film” industry).
- 7 For a discussion of the early history of Indian cinema exhibition in Durban, see Jagarnath (2004).
  - 8 The reasons for this are clear to those familiar with the manner in which Bollywood films are distributed, marketed and consumed in South Africa. The cost of purchasing a DVD version of a Bollywood film is not only very low, it is also frequently available while the film is still on circuit. Additionally, most Bollywood fans watch their favourite song-and-dance sequences repeatedly. These factors result in most fans purchasing their own copy of the film for about the same price as a single rental from a DVD store in a mainstream/cosmopolitan neighbourhood. However, video rentals in Indian areas are considerably cheaper, and viewers in these areas will both patronise video rental stores and acquire their own collection of favourite films.
  - 9 The IIFA awards ceremony is extremely glamorous, and the major Bollywood stars, choreographers and costume designers pull out all the stops to entertain audiences with a number of extravagant song-and-dance performances.
  - 10 “Promos” refers to promotional inserts of a television station’s own programming.
  - 11 The statement was made during Mbalo’s speech entitled “Towards a KZN Film Office” at the 22<sup>nd</sup> Durban International Film Festival. Although looking to Bollywood may provide some lessons for the development of a local film industry in South Africa, it would perhaps be more productive for us to look closer to home — to Nollywood and the Ghanaian video film industry — for models. South Africa does not share with India a large domestic market, a crucial factor in the success of the Indian film industries. Film ticket sales in India average 12 million per day; in South Africa the figure is 26-30 million per year!
  - 12 Stated in email communication to the author in April 2006.
  - 13 The figures cited as Bollywood’s output are inaccurate; the figures more accurately reflect the total output of India’s several regional (and commercially successful) cinemas, not Bollywood’s alone.
  - 14 In an interview on the TV magazine programme *Top billing* (aired 26 July 2007) the director of *Mr Bones*, Leon Schuster, described the sequel, entitled *Escapades* and currently in production, as a South African/Bollywood film project.
  - 15 In recent years, Bollywood films have increasingly focused on the lives and loves of the affluent classes, or the “transnational Indian”, with opulent sets, designer clothes, etc.
  - 16 The supposedly European plane clearly displays the colours of the South African flag!
  - 17 At the time of writing, a film recently released in South Africa, *Just married* (Meghna Gulzar, 2007), does include South African model/actress Tarina Patel in a secondary role, and the white South African actress Shannon Esra appears in the recently released film *Salaam-e-ishq* (Nikhil Advani, 2007), playing a Canadian woman.
  - 18 Many Indians in the Middle East, whose emigration is more recent, appear to be included in some other regional cinemas such as Malayalan cinema.

## Works cited

- Bollywood prefers South Africa to UK. 2006. *The Hindu*, 25 December.
- Desai, J. 2004. *Beyond Bollywood: The cultural politics of South Asian diasporic film*. New York: Routledge.
- Deshpande, S. 2005. The consumable hero of globalised India. In: Kaur, Raminder and Ajay J. Sinha (eds). *Bollyworld: Popular Indian cinema through a transnational lens*. New Delhi: Sage.
- Good Golly, it’s Bolly! 2005. *Club magazine: The Foschini retail group*, February.
- Hansen, T.B. 2005. In search of the diasporic self: Bollywood in South Africa. In: Kaur, Raminder and Ajay J. Sinha (eds).

- Bollyworld: popular Indian cinema through a transnational lens*. New Delhi: Sage.
- Jagarnath, V. 2004. The politics of urban segregation and Indian cinema in Durban. In: Kaarsholm, Preben (ed.). *City flicks: Indian cinema and the urban experience*. Calcutta: Seagull Books.
- Kaur, R. 2002. Viewing the West through Bollywood: A celluloid occident in the making. *Contemporary South Asia* 11(2):199-209.
- Lal, P. 2004. Bollywood ain't world cinema. <<http://www.greencine.com/article?action=view&articleID=125>>. Accessed 5 November 2004.
- Larkin, B. 2002. Indian films and Nigerian lovers: media and the creation of parallel modernities. In: Inda, Jonathan Xavier and Renato Rosaldo (eds). *The anthropology of globalization: a reader*. Malden: Blackwell Publishing.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2003. Itineraries of Indian cinema: African videos, Bollywood, and global media. In: Shohat, Ella and Robert Stam (eds). *Multiculturalism, postcoloniality, and transnational media*. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP.
- Mehra, Achal. 2007. Overview: ministry of overseas Indian affairs. *Pravasi bhartiya: connecting India with its diaspora* 2(2) (February). <[http://www.overseasindian.in/pdf/2007/feb/ENGLISH\\_PAGES.pdf](http://www.overseasindian.in/pdf/2007/feb/ENGLISH_PAGES.pdf)>. Accessed 24 March 2007.
- Mishra, V. 2002. *Bollywood cinema: temples of desire*. New York: Routledge.
- Mistry, J. 2004. Beyond homeland nostalgia. *The Media*, September.
- "Mr Bones" sequel to be co-produced in India. 2007. *Screen Africa*, 14 March. <[http://www.screenafrica.com/news/stop\\_press/687510.htm](http://www.screenafrica.com/news/stop_press/687510.htm)>. Accessed 20 March 2007.
- Pendakur, M. and R. Subramanyam. 1996. Indian cinema beyond national borders. In: Sinclair, J., E. Jacka and S.C. Cunningham (eds). *New patterns in global television: peripheral vision*. Oxford: Oxford University Press: 67-82.
- Rajadhyaksha, A. 2003. The "Bollywoodization" of the Indian cinema: cultural nationalism in a global arena. *Inter-Asia cultural studies* 4(1):25-39.
- Rajagopalan, S. 2005. *A taste for Indian films: negotiating cultural boundaries in post-Stalinist Soviet society*. PhD thesis. Indiana University.
- Tuomi, K. 2005a. Micro Economic Development Strategy (MEDS). Western Cape Department of Economic Development and Tourism: Film Sector: Paper One. <[www.capefilmcommission.co.za/documents/Western%20Cape%20Report-%20K%20Tuomi.doc](http://www.capefilmcommission.co.za/documents/Western%20Cape%20Report-%20K%20Tuomi.doc)>. Accessed December 2006.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2005b. Micro Economic Development Strategy (MEDS). Western Cape Department of Economic Development and Tourism: Film Sector: Second Paper. Policy Recommendations and Interventions. <[http://www.capegateway.gov.za/other/2005/11/final\\_second\\_paper\\_film\\_printing.pdf](http://www.capegateway.gov.za/other/2005/11/final_second_paper_film_printing.pdf)>. Accessed 21 March 2007.

Copyright of *Scrutiny2: Issues in English Studies in Southern Africa* is the property of Routledge and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.