

We Are Like This Only: Desis and Hindi Films in the Diaspora

by

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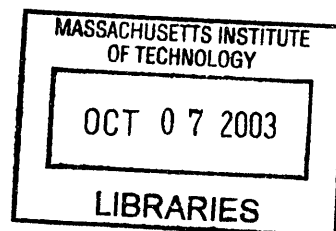
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Abstract

We Are Like This Only: Desis and Hindi Films in the Diaspora

Set in Boston, U.S.A, the overarching goal of this thesis is to develop a theoretical framework and a set of analytical tools that might help us understand how Hindi films are watched in the Indian-American diaspora and what viewers, situated in particular historical, socio-political contexts, bring to bear upon their engagement with these films.

In spite of the sheer number of Hindi films released each year (150-200) and the increasing importance of audiences in countries such as the U.S., we know little, if anything, about audience motivations, viewing practices and consumption patterns.

Suggesting we take the familiar seriously, this project's primary goal is to serve as an inaugural act that will map key coordinates of the space that Hindi cinema and its transnational audience occupies.

This research project is designed to examine viewing practices and interpretations of Hindi films among a small sample of ten Indian immigrant families drawn from two different social positions - (a) the educated, professional and affluent class (doctors, scientists, software professionals, consultants, etc.), and (b) less educated, working class (owners and employees of grocery & convenience stores, gas stations, motels & restaurants, etc.).

Given the complexity of the issue of class in general, and especially its intersections with caste, religion, and other variables in the Indian context, the findings in this study will be treated not so much as a class-based comparison of reception, but instead as an attempt to situate reception in a social and historical context that is marked by profound differences in access to privilege at the local, national and transnational levels. In addition, operating with the family as the research site allows this comparative frame to investigate similarities and differences based on gender and generation.

Drawing on the tradition of using ethnographic techniques to analyze media reception (in this case, participant-observation and in-depth interviews), this project hopes to establish popular culture as a crucial site for exploring how identities are communicatively constituted in the Indian diaspora. Arguing that cinema viewing constitutes one of the most culturally visible arenas of activity in the Indian diaspora, a topic that is just beginning to attract scholarly attention, this project's larger goal is to serve as a starting point for larger debates and contests over several contentious issues that reveal anxieties of Indian immigrants from diverse social positions.

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My first note of thanks goes to all those who lent their time, and shared their experiences concerning immigration and life in the Indian-American diaspora. Every conversation and interview was a learning experience far more valuable than this thesis, with its excerpts and inferences, manages to convey. To Sajan Saini, kindred soul – for all the conversations over chai and Punjabi food in Inman Square, for all your astute observations, for contacts, and most important, for believing in the vibrancy of life in the Indian-American hyphen, a very special thank you.

Thanks to the CMS collective, for making my time at MIT possible. To Henry Jenkins, teacher and friend: for all the help during the thesis-writing months, for encouraging and nurturing the fan-academic in me, and for demonstrating through your work and life, the importance of engaging with the familiar. To William Uricchio: for initiating this thesis through Friday morning *Global Media & Cultures* discussions, for all your questions and unwavering support throughout the writing process, thank you. Thanks also to Mike Fischer, thesis chair, for the space and encouragement to experiment. A very special note of thanks to Tuli Banerjee, for always being there, just down the corridor, and for all the lunches and dinners. Tuli - it was great fun working with you!

A very special note of thanks to Andy Kavoori, mentor and friend, who shaped my formative years in the world of media studies, and sparked my interest in diaspora studies and Indian film scholarship. Over beer at the Blind Pig Tavern in Athens, GA – that's where this thesis really began.

Thanks also to the 3-in-4-2 in-house thesis support group. Sangita Shresthova and Stephanie Davenport – the past year was incredible fun. I'm going to miss y'all in Madison.

From one of Hindi cinema's most ardent fans-from-afar, a big shout of thanks to the Indian film industry: your stories, songs, and stars have enchanted, angered, frustrated, moved, inspired, and aroused me and countless other fans in India and abroad.

Thanks to my family, in Chicago and Bangalore, for their patience and faith in my choices.

Finally, thanks to Mandira: for the "first move", for listening, watching, encouraging, and being such an integral part of my life in Boston.

INTRODUCTION

SETTING THE STAGE

(Speakers Crackle)

I have been working to change the way I speak and write, to incorporate in the manner of telling a sense of place, of not just who I am in the present but where I am coming from, the multiple voices within me.

- bell hooks, *Yearning*, p. 146

FADE IN

Interior Bedroom - late night

CLOSE ON

Your POV:

Dimly lit room with a mattress on the floor, strewn with books and papers.

CLOSER ON

Imaginary Homelands, Modernity at Large, The Karma of Brown Folk, Bollywood Cinema: Temples of Desire, The Audience and its Landscape.

A computer sits in one corner, a poster on a wall to the left, 'authentic reproductions of contemporary signs of the times of India,' a collage. On a wall to the right, a calendar turned to the month of April, with the words 'chapter deadline' written in big, black letters in several spaces.

On WinAmp: Gulzar's poetry set to music by R. D. Burman. Kishore and Lata's voices fade up (for the uninitiated - Gulzar: poet, lyricist; R. D. Burman: music director; Kishore and Lata: famous playback singers).

At the desk: Apu: narrator, immigrant, amateur ethnographer, face lit by flickering glow of the computer monitor. Flopped on the bed: Swami, a friend, fan, immigrant, and informant, flipping through a printout Apu just handed him.

CUT TO:

[Words the Screen (sound of Apu's fingers on the keyboard)]

A little less than four years ago, Swami and I found ourselves waiting in line outside the U.S Consulate in Chennai, India. As we waited our turn to submit visa applications, our thoughts turned to life as a graduate student in the U.S. The thought of leaving behind all that we knew and loved disturbed us. We knew a lot of people - friends and relatives - studying or working in

different parts of North America who had sent us countless emails about fast food joints, their cheap first cars, road trips, strip clubs, music bands, and other fun things.

So we weren't particularly worried about adjusting to life there; as Swami said, how wrong could we go after having spent years consuming Archie comics, TIME magazine, and countless Hollywood action movies? We weren't concerned about keeping in touch with family and friends - cyber cafés mushrooming all over India's urban landscape would ensure electronic contact. Food was not a concern either - we had heard tales about enterprising Gujaratis and Marwaris setting up Indian grocery stores in every town and city in the U.S with a sizable Indian community.

Then, Swami, who had been quiet most of the time, sighed, and pointed to a poster on a wall opposite the footpath we were on - it was a poster of Rajnikant's latest movie we had planned to see before leaving India. Swami and I had grown up watching Hindi and Tamil movies. Every weekend, we would make sure our homework was completed in time for the Sunday evening movie that DD (Doordarshan - India's state owned terrestrial broadcast station) would telecast, and wait for recess next day in school when we would talk about the movie and see who could deliver dialogues the best.

As we grew up, with the entry of satellite television and multinational media corporations in India, our tastes in music and movies expanded. We listened to rock 'n roll and watched sexy bodies gyrate on MTV. They titillated, and introduced new worlds and ideas, yet remained foreign (as MTV would later realize, re-brand and localize). Hindi & Tamil films and film music was what we would miss the most, we decided, as we entered the gates of the Consulate.

Three weeks later, I was in Athens, Georgia, and Swami ended up in Cambridge, Massachusetts. In spite of learning to navigate a new cultural terrain fairly quickly, I found it impossible, as did Swami, to not stay in touch with Hindi films. There were theaters in Atlanta (an hour's drive away) that screened Hindi and other regional language films. There was a local Indian grocery store where one could rent out videocassettes and pirated DVDs. I heard songs

online, downloading the latest releases through Napster. Cassettes and CDs were always being circulated among the Indian student community. I even kept up with film-gossip from *Filmfare* and *Stardust* (magazines) websites! But the 'experience' had changed. The jumble of pleasure and emotions associated with Hindi films was now imbued with more than a sense of nostalgia - at one level, the very act of viewing had become a coping mechanism, reassuring me that I remained culturally connected with India. I knew there was more, but struggled to find the vocabulary to articulate my feelings.

Initiation into the world of media ethnography, diaspora studies, and Indian film scholarship came about unexpectedly, a few days before my move to Cambridge. Late one night, Andy (my advisor) handed me two papers and said I ought to consider studying Hindi film audiences in the U.S. Titled *Our Conversations with a Snake*, the first article discussed issues concerning gender and sexuality in a second-generation Indian-American dance performance. *Why the Dancing Diasporic Desi Men Cross-Dressed*, the second paper, spoke about *Laawaris* (a famous Amitabh Bachchan movie) and a performance by a group of second-generation Indian-American males. These two papers led to several books and articles that provided a vocabulary with which I tried sorting through the many different and often, conflicting thoughts, feelings, and ideas coursing through my mind. However, empirical investigations from which to draw inferences, reach conclusions and make propositions concerning the relationship between Hindi cinema viewing and life in the diaspora were conspicuous by their absence. Anecdotal evidence was rife, especially by theorists who spoke of Hindi cinema being enmeshed, from the very beginning, with dialogues on national and cultural identity.

And so I began the task of trying to understand this process beyond myself. I enlisted Swami's help (who, by this time, had developed contacts with the Indian community in Boston) and planned a research study that would act as a mapping exercise. I wanted to know why countless Indians remained so deeply attached to Hindi films decades after leaving India. How did the very first Indian immigrants get prints of movies from India? How different was the

movie going experience here in the U.S.? How did children, born and raised here, interact with Hindi cinema? What did they think of their parents' deep, nostalgic identification with these films and film songs? How, and in what ways, could Hindi film viewing and related practices, be linked to sustaining and re-inventing a sense of Indianness here in the diaspora?

CUT TO:

Apu swiveling to face Swami.

Apu: What do you think?

Swami: That's good...very good. Listen, I've got to leave now. I'll take this preface and printouts of the other two chapters where you do a literature review...what's it called?

Apu: *Globalization and Media: Brokering Cultural Identity in a Transnational World*.

Swami: Right, and the chapter on research design...*Beginning to Arrive*. I'll read them both before we meet tomorrow.

Apu [raising his eyebrows]: And the interview transcripts. You have to, that's the only way we can interpret interviews together.

Swami [wearing his coat]: No worries, email the other stuff, I'll read it all, I promise. So these two chapters are written in traditional, expository prose?

Apu: That's right – *Brokering Cultural Identity* is a traditional literature review, and *Beginning to Arrive* details methodological debates. It is the analysis that will be presented as a dialogue between the two of us. Here, let me read out a quick paragraph on what the thesis is about.

[Apu's voice fills the room, while Kishore and Lata continue to croon in the background]

Set in Boston, U.S.A, the overarching goal of this thesis is to develop a theoretical framework and a set of analytical tools that might help us understand how Hindi films are watched in the Indian-American diaspora and what viewers, situated in particular historical, socio-political contexts, bring to bear upon their engagement with these films.

In spite of the sheer number of Hindi films released each year (150-200) and the increasing importance of audiences in countries such as the U.S., we know little, if anything,

about audience motivations, viewing practices and consumption patterns. Writing in India, Ashish Rajadhyaksha notes: "the movies are now literally all around us...we still don't know, any more than we ever did, what they (the audience) see when they see those films" (1996: 31). Suggesting we take the familiar seriously, this project's primary goal is to serve as an inaugural act that will map key coordinates of the space that Hindi cinema and its transnational audience occupies.

Swami [near the door]: Sounds good. I'll spend time with the transcripts. And I'll see you at the Bombay Cinema at 6:00 tomorrow evening?

Apu nods and turns to the computer.

FADE OUT.

CHAPTER I

Globalization and Media: Brokering Cultural Identity in a Transnational World

For over two decades now, theorists and commentators have used various disciplinary lenses to understand the interconnected and seemingly contradictory dimensions of globalization. Sociologists, economists, political scientists, and to a lesser extent, historians and anthropologists, have all contributed to what is now a vast and rich literature on globalization. While approaches and vocabulary differ, there is a general consensus that the term globalization is indicative of a dialectical process, a 'new world-space of cultural production and national representation' (Dissanayake, 1996:1) wherein the 'constraints of geography on social and cultural arrangements [are] receding' (Waters, 1995:3) and 'local culture everywhere incorporates transculturality' (Couldry, 2002:5).

Globalization has several academic dimensions (see Pieterse, 1994), its impacts are observable at many levels, and pervades many aspects of daily life. While the term remains slippery, it is possible to highlight two inter-related features of globalization for they are central to understanding the disjuncture between culture and place in a transnational environment. These are migration, and technologies of communication. Rapid mobility of people across local, national, and transnational borders accompanied by new technological developments that ensure the flow of information and images across these borders, has transformed social relations, challenging any easy assumptions about the relationship between cultural space and geographical place.

Variouly termed 'de-localization' (Thompson, 1995), 'dis-placement' (Giddens, 1990), or 'de-territorialization' (Appadurai, 1990; Canclini, 1995; Morley and Robins, 1995), a central feature of a globalized world is 'the loss of the "natural" relation of culture to geographical and social territories' (Canclini, 1995:229). There is nothing 'local' about any bounded locality now, for in every place, 'multiple scales of connection are overlaid' (Couldry, 2002:6). In Clifford's

words, we live in a world where 'difference is encountered in the adjoining neighborhood [and] the familiar turns up at the ends of the earth' (1988: 14).

De/Re-territorialisation

I view locality as primarily relational and contextual rather than as scalar or spatial. I see it as a complex phenomenological quality, constituted by a series of links between the sense of social immediacy, the technologies of interactivity, and the relativity of contexts.
-Appadurai, 1996:178

To begin with, what does it mean to claim that there is nothing 'local' about the places we inhabit? Framing globalization as an integral part of 'late-modernity', Giddens argues that people continue to be 'at home' in their day-to-day, physical contexts, but that their horizon of experience goes beyond 'the particularities of [their] localized place' to include an 'openness to the world' (1990:140). As Giddens puts it, 'the very tissue of spatial experience alters, conjoining proximity and distance in ways that have few parallels in prior ages' (1990:140). Drawing on Raymond Williams' discussion of bourgeois 'cosmopolitan' lifestyle (*Towards 2000*, Williams, 1983) in England, Tomlinson argues that de-territorialization, in terms of everyday life, implies an awareness of 'distant events and processes', including these more 'routinely in [our] perceptions of what is significant' in our day-to-day contexts, and that such 'cultural awareness' routinely transgresses bounded notions of 'physical locality or politically defined territory' (1999: 115).

Easier and cheaper access to telephones, satellite television, and computer-mediated communication technologies has contributed to what William Rowe and Vivian Schelling call 'the release of cultural signs from fixed locations in space and time' (1991: 231), enabling an increasing number of people around the world to locate themselves in 'audio-visual geographies...of image and simulation' in addition to geographies of physical places (Morley & Robins, 1995: 11). As Margaret Morse, writing about "home" in a transnational milieu says, 'our memories include the intrusion of sounds and images from television, and our narratives of origin incorporate an extended family from movies, television, and toys that span the globe' (1999: 67).

Hence, even the most "local" people 'have their lives touched by wider events, linked into a broader geographical field' (Massey, 1999; Morley, 2001: 10). And beyond any measure of doubt, diverse media and communications systems play a central role in this process as they offer newer routes for consumers to "visit" faraway locations and "go places", all from the comfort and familiarity of their homes and local settings (Morley, 2001: 10). As Gupta & Ferguson assert, 'even people remaining in familiar and ancestral places find the nature of their relation to place ineluctably changed and the illusion of a natural and essential connection between the place and the culture broken' (1997: 38).

Of course, there is un-evenness in the way people in different parts of the world experience this 'new world-space'. As Narayan points out, not everyone is moving in the 'fast lane of transnational postmodernity' and dis-placement 'is not experienced in precisely the same way across time and space, and does not unfold in a uniform fashion' (in Lavie and Swedenburg, 1996: 4). Resources for *localization* or *indigenization* of various cultural and consumer products remain inequitably distributed. Where Martin-Barbero speaks about how 'people first filter and re-organize what comes from the hegemonic culture and then integrate and fuse this with what comes from their own historical memory' (1993: 74), Doreen Massey points to a 'power geometry' in which 'some people are more in charge than others; some initiate flows and movement, others don't; some are more on the receiving end of it than others; some are effectively imprisoned by it' (1994: 149)¹.

Such objections to increased inter-connectedness and cross-cultural flows apart, there is widespread acknowledgment that it is 'no longer so easy to conform to an ideal type of a local' (Hannerz, 1990: 237). Let us now turn our attention to a feature of the contemporary globalized

¹ It is evident that analyses of the relationship between media flows, place, and culture have to acknowledge that contemporary shifts complicate any simple cultural imperialism versus grassroots resistance thesis or center-periphery models. As Arjun Appadurai has argued, 'for the people of Irian Java, Indonesianization may be more worrisome than Americanization, as Japanization may be for Koreans, Indianization for Sri Lankans, Vietnamization for Cambodians, and Russianization for the people of Soviet Armenia and the Baltic Republics (1996: 32).

world that further complicates ideas concerning local-ness: migration and the formation of diasporic communities worldwide.

With approximately 20 million South Asians, more than 30 million Chinese, 13 million Jews, 300 million people of African descent and 350 million Europeans living as migrant populations, the idea that the local-ness of culture is tied to the location of culture (Bhabha, 1994) is no longer tenable. When considering diasporic formations, we are confronted with transnational flows that preclude us from theorizing about culture as fixed in place. In fact, recent approaches to migration stress the multiple connections that are developed as immigrants "forge and sustain simultaneous multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement" (Schiller et al, 1995:48). As Tololyan writes, 'diasporas are the exemplary communities of the transnational moment' (1991:4). Diasporic formations are evidence that it is not so much that cultures are no longer fixed in place but that they are 'spatialized in new ways' (Gupta & Ferguson, 1997: 3). Their 'simultaneous embeddedness in more than one society' (Lindolf & Grodin, 1996:7) not only highlights the de-territorialized nature of social relations, but also begs the question of how such diasporic formations *re-territorialize*, i.e., how do migrants reconstruct a sense of belonging in new places, far removed from their homeland? How do they build a sense of community and cultural identity?

Appadurai uses the term 'ethnoscape' to indicate the fluid nature of these diasporic formations, to emphasize that the sustenance and reinvention of cultural identity cannot be understood as dependent on a particular locale or diaspora. Van der Veer points to a tension between 'longing' and 'belonging' as shaping immigrant experience, while Robins points to the struggle in defining a middle-ground between tradition and translation:

the continuity and historicity of identity are challenged by the immediacy and intensity of global cultural confrontations. The comforts of Tradition are fundamentally challenged by the imperative to forge a new self-interpretation based upon the responsibilities of cultural Translation (Robins, 1991: 41).

Hence, for diasporic communities, if reterritorialization implies a struggle to articulate a space between the two extremes of cultural ghettoism and complete assimilation into the host society, a question then arises - what cultural resources, other than memory and nostalgia, are available and how are these resources mobilized towards fashioning a sense of cultural identity in the diaspora?

Media Meet Migrants

Those who wish to move, those who have moved, those who wish to return, and those who choose to stay rarely formulate their plans outside the sphere of radio and television, cassettes and videos, newsprint and telephone. For migrants, both the politics of adaptation to new environments and the stimulus to return are deeply affected by a mass-mediated imaginary that frequently transcends national space
- Appadurai, 1996:6

Reterritorialization, if understood as a problem of reconstructing a sense of 'home' away from 'home', points to the important role played by the imagination, driven in part by memory and nostalgia. Diasporic communities are involved in a constant dialogue between 'a lost past' and 'a non-integrated present' (Chambers, 1994:27), with the homeland 'embodying the discourses of origin, authenticity, and tradition' (Ram, 1999:4). Of crucial importance in this active negotiation between geographical places and cultural spaces, and the development of what Smith calls 'cultural bifocality' (1994:39), is the role of the imagination in everyday life.

Appadurai's approach for developing a cartography of the transnational flows of technology, capital, ideas, images, and people is premised on the need to analyze 'the work of the imagination as a constitutive feature of modern subjectivity' (1996:3). Building on Anderson's thesis that communities 'are to be distinguished not by their falsity/genuineness but by the style in which they are imagined' (1991:6), Appadurai argues that a fundamental change in the nature of *imagination* in everyday life has engendered the formation of new kinds of socio-cultural terrains in which communities and identities are formed and nurtured. Questioning the relevance and

adequacy of the nation-state as a central analytical category to explain the 'discontinuities and disjunctures' between the dialectically opposed processes of deterritorialization and reterritorialization, Appadurai asserts:

the transformation of everyday subjectivities through electronic mediation and the work of the imagination...is deeply connected to politics, through the new ways in which individual attachments, interests, and aspirations increasingly cross-cut those of the nation-state (1996:10).

We can now see that the effect of the "tele-techno-media" apparatus (Derrida, in Bhabha, 1999:ix) has not only been to question the assumed 'naturalness and givenness of territorialised national belonging' (Morley, 2001: 9). The development of vast communications networks has not just enabled large numbers of people to maintain relations across great distances, strengthening transnational kinship, religious, economic, and political ties (Gillespie, 2002:174). Transnational media function as repositories for content and images that help *re-imagine* culture that was formerly tied to a specific locality. For it is 'remembered places that have often served as symbolic anchors of community for dispersed people' (Gupta & Ferguson, 1992:11) and media are not mere artifacts evocative of a 'home' left behind. In shaping *how* the 'home' is remembered, they reconfigure memory and nostalgia in important ways.

Thus, in a diasporic setting, transnational flows of media, particularly media from the homeland, play a pivotal role in the formation of cultural identities. As Hamid Naficy notes, 'it now appears that one's relation to "home" and "homeland" is based as much on actual material access as on the symbolic imaginings and national longings that produce and reproduce them' (1999:5). With few other cultural institutions in place for immigrants to tap into, media have assumed a central role in diasporic communities' maintaining and reinventing socio-cultural linkages and identities. In Lipsitz's words, media have 'become crucibles for complex identities in formation that respond to the imperatives of place at the same time that they transcend them' (1994:6).

Mining Media for Culture in the Diaspora

The shards of memory acquired greater status, greater resonance, because they were *remains*; fragmentation made trivial things seem like symbols, and the mundane acquired numinous qualities.

- Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*, 1991

Popular culture, commodified and stereotyped as it often is... is an arena that is profoundly mythic...it is where we discover and play with the identifications of ourselves, where we are imagined, where we are represented, not only to the audiences out there who do not get the message, but to ourselves for the first time

Stuart Hall, *What is This Black in Black Popular Culture*, 1996

Much maligned for their 'militant attitude against all forms of rootedness' (Friedman, 1996; Morley, 2001:233), scholars such as Homi Bhabha have been instrumental in disputing thinking about identity as 'an already accomplished fact' and 'problematizing the very authority and authenticity to which the term, "cultural identity", lays claim' (Hall, 1990:222). In light of challenges to rationalist, linear conceptions of cultural identity in transnational, diasporic settings, my intention is not to posit any direct correlation between media use and cultural identity. The value of media, amongst a mix of other influences (including family visits, pilgrimages, travel to the home country, local 'ethnic' organizations, places for religious worship, etc.) lies in their ability to permeate various social rituals that create, as Naficy points out, 'stability out of instability and commonality out of alienation' (1993:539).

Naficy's study of Iranian exiles in L.A demonstrates the role played by television in providing content and images that not only act as *aides memoire* (Fentress & Wickham, 1999), but also help people to first define their identity in relation to their host society, easing the transition to a sense of self and community that is 'dual' and 'syncretic' in nature. For people removed from their homeland, particularly those who have moved to Western nations, there is typically little on offer in mainstream media that resonates with their emotions and culture, leave alone addressing the difficulties of life in the diaspora. Therefore, not only do they offer 'discursive and symbolic order and rigidity in the face of personal and social disorder and fluidity'

(Naficy, 1993:118), transnational media forms are 'mined deeply for social cues, personal gossip, and public information' (Cunningham, 2001:139).

Appadurai argues that 'deterritorialization creates new markets for film companies, art impresarios and travel agents, who thrive on the need of the deterritorialized population for contact with its homeland' (1990:302). It is easy to discern that the 'need for contact' is but a starting point; these mediascapes become sites where nostalgia and memory are tapped into in the gradual move towards 'reinventing ethnicity' (Gilroy, 1993:82) in the ethnoscape. Gilroy's work has been particularly influential in illustrating how media compose 'structures of feeling, producing, communicating, and remembering,' leading to the emergence of 'stereophonic, bilingual, or bifocal cultural forms' (Gilroy, 1993:2-3). Annabelle Sreberny's study in the Iranian diaspora in London points to the increasingly two-way flow of media (print and electronic) between Teheran and London, documenting the function of transnational media as community-building vehicles (2002). In *Dangerous Crossroads*, George Lipsitz draws on a stunning range of popular music forms in various 'border' settings (Bhangramuffin, Rai, Reggae, Remix, Hip-Hop, etc.) to argue that such media forms function as 'cultural expressions...as complex as the lives [people in diasporas] live everyday' (1994:131).

Studying the circulation and consumption of Bhangra music and dance among Asians in Britain, Gayatri Gopinath asserts that popular culture forms are more than just entertainment, they are 'seen as a strategic tool with which to transmit tradition and heritage to a younger generation' (Gopinath, 1995:309). In the U.S., Kavoori and Joseph point to performances of Hindi film dances, asserting that Indian cultural shows on college campuses across the country represent a 'struggle to define cultural identity, authenticity and agency' (2000: 90). Mixing classical dance with contemporary Western club moves, these performances reflect the creative and surprising juxtapositions that go on while constructing the 'home' as 'both a world away and right in one's own backyard, reflecting the conflicted character of diasporic culture' (Jenkins, 2003:12).

We can thus recognize the contours of a zone of where 'moving images meet deterritorialized viewers in a mutual contextualizing of motion and mediation' (Appadurai, 1996: 5), leading to new and surprising forms of connection, identification, and cultural affinity (Gillespie, 1995:7). The question facing us now, one that Morley raises, is: having recognized the role of transnational media flows in the lives of people in diasporic communities, how do we step out of a mode of theorization that remains highly abstract (Morley, 2001)? How do we begin studying the circulation and consumption of various media and forms of popular culture as they occur, in the context of everyday life, in a range of 'socio-geographical positions' (Morley, 2001:3)?

Marie Gillespie's ethnographic study of television & video use by young Asians (14-18 years old) in a predominantly Punjabi community in Southall, London is one instance. Based on three years of fieldwork in the community, combining observations, repeated in-depth interviews, and surveys, Gillespie documents the creative and strategic ways in which youth in diasporic communities employ media and popular culture to initiate dialogues between their parents' ideas of culture and their experiences in British society. Sunaina Maira's exploration of second-generation Indian-Americans' participation in and use of popular culture forms such as remix music is another study that illustrates how spaces such as clubs and campus cultural shows function as sites where the 'vibes of "cool"' are mixed with the strains of collective nostalgia' (2002:16). Building on interviews with a wide range of students and observations at several places, Maira demonstrates how media and popular culture function as triggers to discussions and contests over broader issues of ethnic authenticity, cultural hybridity, assimilation, race relations, multiculturalism, and citizenship.

Situated within these discussions of the *cultural* dimensions of globalization, de/reterritorialization, the global being staged within the local and vice versa, and cultural identity, this study aims to lay the groundwork for understanding the role and influence of one

particular transnational media flow - Hindi cinema- in shaping the politics of identity, of being "Indian" in the U.S.

Desis and Hindi Films in the Diaspora

The popular Hindi film proves a considerable element of commonality to Indian communities, even among those where Hindi is not spoken, a profound homage to the Hindi film's rooted-ness in the deep mythic structures of Indian civilization. Across the globe, the popular Hindi film commands an extraordinary allegiance from Indians"
(Vinay Lal)

Alluding to Hindi cinema's intimate connections with the political and socio-cultural impulses of Indian society, there is much comment on how Hindi films are at the center of life in the Indian diaspora worldwide. As Sumita Chakravarty says, 'there are countless stories and phenomenological accounts of the Bombay film and the film song providing the common ground of social intercourse in Indian diasporic gatherings' (1993:4). Referring to Gibreel Farishta, the protagonist in Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*, Chakravarty also notes how the Hindi film industry has been 'the vehicle for one of the most evocative explorations and allegorical representations of the postcolonial consciousness' (1993:5). Before addressing the centrality of Hindi cinema in the Indian-American mediascape, let us first cast a quick look at the Hindi film industry and its presence in global circuits of distribution and reception.

Bombay witnessed its first film screening on July 7, 1896, when the Lumiere brothers exhibited their cinematographe only six months after it had first been unveiled in Paris. Since *Raja Harischandra* (1913), the first full-length feature film, the Indian film industry has grown to be one of the largest in the world. While regional film industries (Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam, Kannada, and Bengali) are just as spectacular and in some cases, well-financed, it is the Hindi film segment operating out of Bombay that holds national appeal, reaching deep into parts of the country, even where Hindi is not spoken. Ashis Nandy tells us that "on an average day, India releases more than two-and-a-half feature films, produced by the world's largest film industry, and sees some 15 million people through the country's 13,002 cinema halls"(Nandy, 1998:1).

It is this centrality of cinema in the average Indian's life that is largely responsible for Bollywood entering global circuits of distribution and reception. Fiji, Australia, Kenya, Nigeria, West Indies, the Benelux countries (Belgium, Netherlands, Luxembourg), U.K and the U.S.A have become important nodes in this circuit primarily because of the Indian immigrant population in these countries. A 1999 report provides a sense of this market - overseas Indians spent close to 800 million dollars (U.S.D) on Indian music, movies and television, and that too, without an organized marketing effort (Rao, 2000). A rapidly growing Indian diaspora, conservatively estimated at 12 million across twenty countries, has ensured that the production, marketing and distribution of Hindi films are now global endeavors.

Newspapers and trade publications routinely assess the fortunes of the latest Bollywood release, with the most successful box office hits of the 1990s making it to the Top 20 charts in the USA and the U.K. Hindi films are today released across nearly 60 cinemas in the U.S and the U.K, with films such as *Lagaan*, *Devdas*, and *Kaante* earning more than a million dollars in box office revenues within a week or two of their release. Satellite and cable channels (channels such as *B4U* (Bollywood For You), Sony, and ZEE estimate 1.5 million subscribers in the U.K and over 250,000 in the U.S), radio stations in several cities, live shows with actors and actresses from India, and countless film-related websites are all contributing to a tremendous rise in the availability and access to films, film music, and film-related gossip/information from India². While high levels of visibility and availability have not translated into revenues for the industry in India³, there is little doubt that Bollywood is now firmly entrenched in the landscape of global

² It must be noted that while 'Bollywood' has generated tremendous hype in the West over the past few years, the industry is plagued by financial worries, with 124 of the 132 films released in 2002 failing to generate profits or just break-even. For more information on box office revenues, live shows, film magazines, etc.:

<http://www.bollywoodworld.com>, <http://www.planetbollywood.com>, <http://www.indiafin.com>, <http://www.indolink.com>, rec.arts.movies.local.indian, <http://www.rediff.com/movies>

³ Cable and video/VCD/DVD piracy is the single biggest problem facing the industry, with losses estimated at 17 billion rupees (\$356 million) annually (BBC, 13 March, 2003).

popular culture, the hype in transnational circles largely attributable to the centrality of Hindi films in Indian diasporic life.

From Grocery Stores to Cultural Shows

One indicator of the centrality of Hindi films in diasporic settings is exports of videocassettes - sales to the U.K remain the highest, bringing in a revenue of 35.6 million rupees. Others include Singapore (15.2m), Hong Kong (11.7m), the UAE (10.3m), USA (4.9m), Nigeria (3.9m), Malaysia (2.5m), Canada (2.1m), and Kenya (1.2m) (Gokulsing and Dissanayake, 1998:114). It remains extremely difficult, if not impossible, to find reliable statistics to estimate the size of the Hindi film market in the U.S, or the distribution system of videocassettes and DVDs (largely distributed through family-owned, Indian grocery stores, this information is not readily available). However, it is not at all difficult to sense the pervasiveness of this cultural product in the lives of Indians in the diaspora; recent research in different settings demonstrates how Hindi films provide the common 'cultural capital and currency which constitutes the diaspora imagination' (Gillespie, 2002:185).

Halstead's study explores how Guyanese Indians, who migrated as indentured laborers in the colonial world during the early 1800s and speak and understand little Hindi now, continue to derive pleasure from Hindi films and film songs. In addition to campaigning to have Hindi films screened on television, Guyanese Indians routinely organize talent competitions in performing Hindi film songs and dances (Gillespie, 2002). A striking instance of Hindi films' ability to travel and provide an emotionally resonant medium that enables people to share their recollections with others is Shenar's (2000) examination of the uses of Hindi films among Indian Jews in Israel. Shenar writes that they keep close contact with India through the movie culture, and that the most visible reminder of an 'Indian' cultural life in Israel are the numerous advertisements for Indian movie screenings in an old theater in Tel Aviv.

Manas Ray's (2000) research in Fiji also documents how Bollywood functions as a crucial resource in Indian diasporic communities' struggle to chart a middle path between wanting to maintain a sense of difference while remaining 'acceptable' to mainstream society. Ray's work illustrates how Hindi films and film music function as a 'moral regime', strategically used by second-generation youth to 'negotiate a post-indenture definition of self' (in Gillespie, 2002:185).

Gillespie speaks of a similar experience from her fieldwork among Indian families in Southall, arguing that Hindi films feed 'talking spaces', where discussions of life in the diaspora echo the 'framing of narratives in popular Hindi films of the 1980s and 1990s' (2002:184). A majority of the young people Gillespie spent time with felt that Hindi films played a crucial role in 'maintaining cross-generational connections and, just as crucially, imaginative links with India and its diaspora' (2002:184).

In the U.S., studies have addressed how Hindi films and film music serve as a dominant resource for public and shared gestures of recall. In her analysis of a cultural festival, Shukla suggests that such public demonstrations "can be seen as an occasion for a new type of imagined community, or an instance of diasporic nationalism, that is produced by immigrant Indians determined to project a positive image of themselves, and is steeped in romantic notions of the home country" (1997, p.296).

Analysing a dance performance at one such public commemoration - Madhuri Dixit's famous *Choli Ke Peeche Kya Hai* from *Khal Nayak* performed at an Independence Day parade in New York - Sunita Mukhi asks us to take notice of the audience' level of familiarity with *filmi* codes and conventions:

They [the audience] recall Madhuri's performance in the fantasy that is the Hindi film as they watch the child...in dancing *Choli Ke Peeche*, audience and performer acquire glamour and talent of the Hindi film, its star, its multi-layered narratives, and a vernacular Indianness' (2001:122).

The same could be said of the cultural shows organized every year by South Asian students in colleges and universities. At these shows (an annual celebration of Indian culture, arts and heritage that brings together international students from India, first generation Indian American students, and the local Indian community), the audience is at its most enthusiastic when film-based performances are staged.

Shamita Dasgupta's analysis of the Independence Day Parade in New York (where the role of Grand Marshal is usually reserved for Hindi film stars), and Madhulika Khandelwal's study of South Asian diasporic communities in the Jackson Heights section of Queens, New York, also stress the pervasive nature and importance of film viewing. For example, local cultural centers, an important part of Indian-American communities, often screen films; Indian student associations in colleges and universities screen Hindi movies during the weekend; politically oriented groups in different cities (Manavi & Sakhi in the New York-New Jersey area, Saheli in Boston, etc.) also sponsor films in and for Indian-American communities. In the U.S, grocery stores continue to double up as video rental stores, with cities such as New York, Boston, Chicago, L.A and San Francisco home to more than 40 such stores on an average. Increased access to the Internet has also fostered the growth of online rental and sales outlets, with companies such as Eros Entertainment offering video via the Internet⁴.

More than Mere Markets

The foregoing discussion makes it clear that we understate the influence of diasporic communities if we treat them as merely markets or marketers catalyzing the globalization of the Hindi film industry; as grassroots intermediaries, 'they play a central role in shaping the reception of those media products, emphasizing rather than erasing the marks of their national origin and educating others about the cultural traditions they embody' (Jenkins, 2003:12). And importantly,

⁴ Detailed information on availability, rental stores, public screenings, etc. in Boston, will be provided in the analysis chapters.

they have influenced the production of some of the most successful films of the past decade, leading to a new genre of 'NRI films' (NRI - Non Resident Indian).

First, it is important to recognize the simultaneity that is in play - movies are released in the U.S and other parts of the world the same day as they are India. Often, pirated copies of DVDs, VCDs, and videocassettes are available within a week or two of a movie's release. As Alessandrini points out, while there is a 'spatial distance between film audiences in the diaspora and in South Asia, temporally there is no such distance' (2000:221). Accompanied by easy access to the soundtrack via Indian stores, Internet portals or peer-to-peer music sharing software, film magazines, various websites and conversations in different spaces with other viewers, audiences in the diaspora can be seen as an integral part of the cultural politics of South Asia that shape Hindi film narratives.

Movies that have been most successful both in India and abroad - *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (DDLJ), *Pardes*, *Kaho Na Pyar Hai*, and *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham* (K3G) to name a few - lend evidence to Mishra's argument that 'diaspora consciousness is now internal to spectatorial desire within India...which means that, in however mediated form, diasporas will constitute one of the key elements of Bombay cinema' (2002: 239). Speaking of the song and dance routines and in some cases, a considerable portion of the narrative set in foreign locales, Lalitha Gopalan argues that such sequences not only serve a tourist gaze, they 'acknowledge a loyal audience abroad that wishes to see its own stories of migrations and displacement in these frames' (2002:6).

In these films, the plot unfolds in foreign locales such as London and New Zealand, but there is nothing inherently diasporic about the narrative apart from the fact that it uses migration as a point of departure⁵. Speaking of DDLJ, Anjali Ram points out: though cast in the melodramatic, hyperbolic vein of "Bollywood" kitsch, this film's appeal resides in its narration of

⁵ This is in sharp contrast to films made in the diaspora, prominent ones being: *Mississippi Masala*, *Bhaji on the Beach*, *East is East*, *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid*, and *Bend it Like Beckham*.

the immigrant myth of the 'eternal return', kept alive by continuously retelling, reliving and remembering the past (2000:109). For her, the stupendous success of these movies (with several more planned), is evidence enough that Hindi cinema is 'deeply implicated in the construction and maintenance of national identity within the Indian diaspora' (2000:143).

What these movies point to is the manner in which Bollywood has begun to fashion its own model of life in the diaspora, replete with anxieties of wayward, debauched second-generation youth (particularly daughters), mothers struggling to construct an 'Indian' home, and fathers and sons toying with 'Western' ways of life while carrying 'India' in their heart. Consider this scene from DDLJ. The hero (Shahrukh Khan as Raj) and heroine (Kajol as Simran), having missed their train on a Eurail trip, end up spending the night in a small town, with Simran swilling a bottle of cognac before falling asleep. When Simran wakes up on Raj's bed, panic-stricken and unable to recall what really happened, Raj holds her close and growls, 'you think I am beyond values, but I am a Hindustani, and I know what a Hindustani girl's *izzat* (honor) is worth. Trust me, nothing happened last night.'

Mishra uses close-readings of this and other scenes in DDLJ to argue that Hindi film consumption in the diaspora speaks to first-generation Indians desperately trying to sustain a value-system and inculcate the same in their children that sets them apart from mainstream society in countries like the U.S and U.K. 'These differences,' Mishra says, 'are generally about tradition, continuity, family, and often, the importance given to arranged marriages' (2002:236-37). Bombay cinema's active construction of a set of 'Indian' values and ethics is, in his opinion, a key factor in diasporic communities becoming a site for popular cinema's aesthetics, in addition to being a market. Acutely conscious of 'NRIs holding caramel popcorn' (Munshi, 2002), these movies index, as Gopalan says, an 'audience straggling between national identities, harboring longings for an original home' (2002:6).

Further affirmation comes from films produced in the diaspora, films that borrow cinematic idioms from Bollywood to represent the complex entanglements of people, culture and

capital in motion. One of the most striking films of this genre is Gurinder Chadha's *Bhaji on the Beach* (1994), a film about a group of South Asian women from Birmingham, England, who go on a picnic to the beach at Blackpool. On this trip, Asha, a first-generation immigrant struggling with an identity crisis engendered by her intense disillusionment with life as a dutiful wife and mother who also has to lend a hand in the family business, experiences headaches followed by visions - visions filmed by imitating Bombay cinema's visual aesthetics and modes of address. As the day wears on, Asha befriends an Englishman, Ambrose, and soon after, we are treated to a fantasy in which Asha imagines Ambrose and herself as the hero and heroine of a Bollywood song and dance sequence, replete with rainfall and a long shot of Asha running through a garden followed by Ambrose. The sequence draws on one of the most routine song and dance theme of lovers wooing one another around trees and flower patches. Another famous movie that references the role of Hindi cinema in diasporic life is Mira Nair's *Mississippi Masala* (1992). The opening sequence of the movie shows Kinu, an Indian immigrant woman, being searched at gun-point by Ugandan authorities with a Hindi film song (*Mera Joota Hai Japani*) framing nostalgia, homeland, and tensions of assimilation and ethnic purity. Srinivas Krishna's *Masala*, Dinker Pandya's *American Desi*, Ketan Mehta's *ABCD*, and Deepa Mehta's *Hollywood/Bollywood* are more recent movies that pay homage to the ubiquitous presence of Hindi films in the diaspora.

It is clear, therefore, that for people in the diaspora, these movies are an integral part of a range of cultural practices and products from dances and other amateur performances at community gatherings to being the main topic of discussion in weekly television shows. In other words, the inherently transmedial nature of Hindi films and film music has led to their acquiring a symbolic/cultural value that enables the mediation, performance, and reproduction of cultural identity within the diaspora. To draw from the slightly different context of Iranian exilic television in Los Angeles:

Rituals gain additional prominence when the actual social boundaries of the community are undermined, blurred, or weakened. Communal celebrations

occupy a prominent place in the cultural repertoire of the exiles, and commercially driven exilic television as a ritual functions in parallel with these social rituals to maintain individual, communal and national boundaries (Naficy, 1999:539).

It Ain't Just Nostalgia

Our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary boundaries, Indias of the mind
Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*, 1991

In beginning to train our eye on reception and the centrality of Hindi films in the Indian-American mediascape, we begin to see how the prominence of films in the diaspora, speed with which they arrive, easier access, manner in which they cross over into other spaces of life, and how the diaspora has moved from being a revenue stream to shaping the emergence of a new genre of 'NRI films', have led to films becoming a 'synchronic warehouse of cultural scenarios' (Appadurai, 1996:30) for several generations of Indian immigrants in diverse socio-geographic contexts. What this forces us to do is move beyond easy explanations of 'nostalgia' and 'keeping in touch' and acknowledge two key ideas that are essential to understanding the jumble of pleasure and emotions associated with spectatorship in a diasporic context - Hindi films as historical inheritance, and Hindi films as translatable signs.

What does it mean to claim that Indian cinema, more than any other cultural form, provides for shared structures of feeling that in turn produce a transnational sense of communal solidarity (Mishra, 2002:237)? Commentators and scholars of film and society in India have spoken of Hindi cinema as a pan-Indian mode of cultural production. Ashish Rajadhyaksha's comment - 'Indian cinema and India itself are arguably the two biggest institutions of the imaginary that we Indians have had' (1996: 30) - is a useful beginning for it helps us redeploy

Anderson's thesis of an imagined community in terms of the diaspora's relationship to 'India', with film as the socio-technical system feeding the imagination.

Beyond any measure of doubt, as India's national cinema, Hindi films are a primary form of 'public culture' (Pinney, 2001). In other words, Hindi films have functioned as the dominant storytelling medium in India, bringing together regional, folk and classical performative traditions and incorporating, in often parodic fashion, Western motifs (Ram, 2001) as well; in fact, it is this ability that allows Hindi films to 'develop a universally "Indian" grammar' (Ram, 2001:118). 'Lengthy,' 'implausible stories,' 'unnecessary songs and dances,' 'overly melodramatic,' and 'for the lower-class' are phrases most commonly associated with Hindi films; a wave of recent scholarship on Indian film has critiqued such commonly held views and conservative notions of a 'prolonged state of not-yet-ness' and made a case for Indian cinema having evolved a 'particular, distinct combination of elements' (Prasad, 1998:5), an index of the many changes in Indian society post-independence.

In framing cinema as metaphor for Indian society, Akbar Ahmed argues that post-independence, films were mandated to act as instruments for promoting national culture:

In the early years the ideas and values of Nehru were used and parodied by Bombay. Heroes self-consciously, bravely, spoke of *naia zamana*, *nai roshni*, new era, new light. They spoke of *pyar*, love, the struggle against *zulm*, oppression, injustice, *satyagraha*, nonviolence...these were the key words and concepts of the new nation (Ahmed, 1992:300).

In a similar vein, Sumita Chakravarty, Rosie Thomas, Madhava Prasad and other theorists also explain how Indian cinema has always been enmeshed in dialogues on the idea of nationhood. Sumita Chakravarty also points out that cinema 'has eclipsed earlier forms of cultural production in India and has emerged as the dominant, pervasive form of popular culture' (1993:4). These films, as Sudhir Kakar explains, function as the 'primary vehicle for shared fantasies of a vast number of people living on the Indian subcontinent' (1986:26-7).

It is not surprising, therefore, that for an entire generation of Indians raised on a diet of Hindi films, film songs on radio (and later T.V) and other spaces (such as weddings and festivals), Hindi films have 'become icons of moral order and citizenship as well as aesthetic expressions of a cultural history' (Tolia-Kelly, 2001:60), particularly in the diaspora⁶. For Indians in the diaspora, watching Hindi films 'galvanizes a sense of Indianness, of 'roots' and a collective experience of the diasporic journey,' with viewing practices enabling socio-cultural networks that in turn bolster a sense of 'community' away from 'home' (Tolia-Kelly, 2001). As Mishra points out:

Bombay cinema has been crucial in bringing the 'homeland' into the diaspora as well as creating a culture of imaginary solidarity across the heterogeneous linguistic and national groups that make up the south Asian (Indian) diaspora (2002:237).

It is in this sense that I would like to think of films as a historical inheritance for Indian immigrants, a shared inheritance that triggers and sustains dialogues between their positions as diasporic subjects, an 'imagined community of post-migration nationals' (Tolia-Kelly, 2001:57), and India, the source of their identity. While this point of view helps us acknowledge nostalgia as an important motivation for film viewing, more important, it opens up the possibility of understanding Hindi films as 'translatable signs'.

This perspective is useful in tackling the question of the relationship between Hindi films and inter-generational similarities and differences. For it is evident that people of Indian origin, born and raised in different diasporic locations, will not 'read' nostalgia but re-purpose these films and film songs depending on the socio-cultural imperatives they are faced with, in turn influencing how first-generation Indians (born and raised in India) interact with Hindi films as they move through different phases of life. As Stuart Hall argues:

⁶ It should be noted that migration from India to the U.S was most significant post-1965, by which time the Hindi film industry was well established and producing close to 200 films a year. It is this generation of Indian immigrants and their children that this thesis is concerned with.

There can be no simple "return" (to) or "recovery" of the ancestral past which is not re-experienced through the categories of the present: no base for creative enunciation in a simple reproduction of traditional forms which are not transformed by the technologies and the identities of the present. (Hall, 1988).

Gillespie's study in Southall illustrates how the act of viewing 'brings the homeland into the family room' for the older generation while for youth, watching films from Bombay functions as a 'mode of legitimizing' their position as second-generation subjects, gradually leading them to read these films as 'translations vital for the diaspora's emotional and psychological well-being' (Gillespie, 1995:87). Further, the notion of a 'translatable sign' serves us well in grappling with changes in the film industry (particularly in understanding why certain films have been successful in diaspora markets) as it re-fashioned itself and its representational idioms for a diverse audience in several countries around the world.

These two ideas concerning Hindi films - as historical inheritance, and translatable signs - complicate the question of reception and diasporic spectatorship and inform this project's central goal: to develop a set of analytical tools and a theoretical framework to understand how Hindi films are watched in the Indian-American diaspora and what viewers, situated in particular historical, socio-political contexts, bring to bear upon their engagement with these films.

There have been few detailed studies that document viewing practices, an important first step towards speculating about relationships between Hindi film viewing, modes of socialization, and notions of selfhood and community in the Indian diaspora. Studies relating Indian cinema to the diaspora, akin to film studies in India, remain confined to textual and formal analyses of films for ideological content (Srinivas, 2002) and pay little attention to issues of spectatorship and participation in constituting identities. In India, Sara Dickey's work on Tamil cinema, fan clubs, and electoral politics, and Srinivas' analysis of Telugu film audiences, stardom and politics are arguably the only in-depth explorations of spectatorship and the viewing public. As Alessandrini notes, 'there has been a sense of resignation, even among the most astute critics working in South

Asia, about the ability to do the sort of work that would bring together a sociological approach with a hermeneutic one when dealing with Indian popular cinema' (2000:244).

While the last 4-5 years have seen a number of doctoral dissertations on Indian cinema, none of them unpack Hindi film reception as it takes place in the family setting. The influence of the domestic setting and relationships between various members of the family on viewing practices and interpretations of these films remains unexplored. This study aims to address this gap and is designed to investigate, in terms of differences between and within families from different social positions:

- (a) Viewing practices vis-à-vis daily activities and modes of socialization in the Indian diaspora,
and
- (b) How Hindi film viewing and related practices contribute to sustaining and re-inventing 'Indian-ness' in the diaspora.

CHAPTER II

Beginning to Arrive: Research Design and Method

The primary commitment of this project is to articulate Hindi film viewing as a practice that takes place in what Grossberg describes as "complex and contradictory terrain, the multidimensional context in which people live out their everyday lives" (1988:25). Given that film viewing in the Indian diaspora is a predominantly domestic, family oriented affair, understanding the role of Hindi cinema in shaping identity (personal, communal and national, among others) depends to a large extent on situating film-viewing in the context of this setting (Morley, 1996) in which movies are watched. A focus on this 'local' setting is key to mapping relationships between transnational flows of media and the "migratory scripts" that are authored as audiences engage with media (Appadurai, 1996:6). While ethnographic techniques appear particularly well suited for situating Hindi film viewing within a larger socio-cultural terrain, there are some difficulties involved in defining this study as an ethnographic inquiry.

Therefore, in outlining a methodological strategy for audience studies in a diasporic setting, I first trace the 'ethnographic turn' in reception studies through a review of recent critiques of this enterprise. In aspiring to contextualize viewers' responses (via in-depth interviews and participant observation) to Hindi cinema with respect to everyday life as Indian-Americans, including my own participation in this "ethno/media-scape", I suggest that the particularities of the 'audience' in this study adds to the complexity of defining what constitutes media ethnography. In doing do, this chapter introduces to recent discussions of studying media and audiences in non-western contexts, a site of media consumption and culture that is in many ways "a differently configured spatial canvas" (Marcus, 1995:98; in Couldry, 2000:9).

Ethnography and Audience Studies

The average sitting room...is exactly where we need to start from if we finally want to understand the constitutive dynamics of abstractions such as "the community" or "the nation"
-Morley, *Where the Global Meets the Local*, 1991.

Contemporary discussions of audience studies have grappled with criticisms of the so-called 'ethnographic turn' in audience research for being too superficial and limited as ethnography⁷. Several critiques point to the problems and pitfalls inherent in transporting traditional ethnographic methods, as understood and practiced in anthropology and sociology, into the realm of media and particularly, audience studies⁸. Arguing that studies have relied on a few qualitative interviews and brief periods of participant observation with little attention to macro-social and structural influences, several scholars have questioned the relevance of an "ethnographic rendering of media audiences" (Tulloch, 2000; Ang, 1996:254).

There have been responses to such critiques. In *Interpreting Audiences: The Ethnography of Media Consumption*, Shaun Moores cites a number of reasons why participant observation over a prolonged period of time is difficult to accomplish when engaging in audience ethnographies, one of the major difficulties being that media consumption takes place in the private sphere of the household and gaining access for prolonged periods of time is not easy. The context of an urban, cosmopolitan setting where privacy and personal access are highly valued complicate this problem even further. Moores suggests that reception studies can be called ethnographies because "they share some of the same general intentions as anthropological research including "questions of meaning and social context and with charting the situational embeddedness of cultural practices" (Moores, 1993:4-5).

⁷ Hay, Grossberg and Wartella's edited collection, *The Audience and Its Landscape*, brings together key media and audience studies scholars including Andrea Press, David Morley, Ien Ang, Janice Radway, and Ellen Seiter to review and suggest ways out of a seeming impasse. John Tulloch's book, *Watching Television Audiences*, also provides an excellent review of these debates.

⁸ See, for instance, Virginia Nightingale's article, *What's Ethnographic Audience Research?* Australian Journal of Communication, 1989, v.16, pp. 50-63.

However, the problem is not merely one of scope, that without prolonged periods of "immersion" and participation, studies cannot claim to be "ethnographic." The ethnographic turn in audience studies was also characterised by an approach that reveled in authorial reflexivity and pushed 'reader response' to an extreme that prompted comment on the "banality of *just* local contexts" and an endless collection of 'ethnographic' studies in the west as "one or other audience group makes its particular meanings in relation to one or other television genre" (Tulloch, 2000:19). As Meaghan Morris argues, "this banality lies in the fact that where we lack a macro-cultural critique, we are doing no more than endlessly repeating the 'Truth' that audiences 'in modern mediatised societies are complex and contradictory, mass cultural texts are complex and contradictory, therefore people using them produce complex and contradictory culture'" (Morris, 1988:22; in Tulloch, 2000:19).

Thus, while acknowledging the importance of moving away from totalizing narratives and beginning to devise strategies to explore the diversity of audience positions and interpretations, Ang, among other theorists, has pointed to the futility of taking up a position of "ceaselessly trying to capture a relentlessly expanding field of contextually overdetermined, particular realities" (1996:254). For Ang, 'if the ethnography of reception wants to elaborate its critical function, it cannot avoid confronting more fully what sociologists have dubbed the micro/macro problematic: the fact that there are structural limits to the possibilities of cultural democracy a la Fiske, that its expression takes place within specific parameters and concrete conditions of existence' (1996:140).

These empirical and theoretical concerns are brought into sharp relief in this case. In dealing with a transnational audience comprised of people who simultaneously inhabit several different spaces and participate in multiple cultural practices, avoiding what Geertz (1988:71) has called 'epistemological hypochondria' becomes all the more crucial and tricky. In Geertz's words, "the world has its compartments still, but the passages between them are much more numerous and much less well secured" (1988:132).

Further, media analysis in a transnational setting such as this one, with an eye towards a broader mapping of cultural complexity, also has to contend with criticisms regarding a rigorous anti-essentialism that postcolonial and diaspora studies have followed. Peter Van der Veer, for instance, takes issue with cultural studies' "extremely romantic notion of nomadism" and argues that scholars like Bhabha "emphasize the potential of migrants to reinvent themselves continuously in the post-colonial situation of cultural hybridity" to the extent that the degree of choice or control that people have over their lives, including access to diverse media and communications technologies, is woefully neglected⁹. Hence, the question of how one can embed 'ambivalence', 'hybridity', 'in-between-ness', and 'difference' (and an accompanying focus on meaning-making and selfhood as 'processual' rather than 'essential') in concrete social practices that are profoundly shaped by logics of class, ethnicity, gender, nationalism and so on becomes extremely important in projects such as this.

It is with these critiques in mind that the approach here follows Morley's model of formulating a "position from which we can see person(s) actively producing meanings from the restricted range of cultural resources which his or her structural position has allowed them access to" (Morley, p.43, 1986), while retaining an emphasis, as Stuart Hall suggests, on understanding diasporic identities as not essences but positionings (in Visweswaran, p. 11, 1997). This project then, is an attempt to step out of the 'liminal stairwell', make the ascent (or descent) into lived experience, jostle with the everyday, and understand the foundations (in this case, the workings of class) that influence what goes on in the hybrid 'third space' that the diasporic condition represents to many theorists and commentators (Bhabha, 1994).

By using social position as a key marker and defining the family setting as the research site, this project aims to lay the groundwork for understanding the "gradual spectrum of mixed-up

⁹ Tim Brennan quotes the views of a long-standing lower East Side community activist who contends that "despite the cultural mixing in New York City, migrant groups strive to maintain a culture they can call their own. The vision that emerges is not one of cosmopolitan hybridity but of immigrant communities longing for their own national cultures and imprisoned in the USA by economic circumstance" (quoted in Morley, 2000, p.238-39).

differences" (Geertz, 1988:147) that the Indian diasporic audience represents. It is designed to examine viewing practices and interpretations of Hindi films among a small sample of Indian immigrant families drawn from two broadly defined social positions - (a) the educated, professional and affluent class (doctors, scientists, software professionals, consultants, etc.), and (b) less educated, working/service sector class (owners and employees of grocery & convenience stores, gas stations, motels & restaurants, etc.).

Here the viewing family is defined as the 'audience' for two purposes. Given that families seldom operate as isolated social units, individual interpretations ('reception') of Hindi cinema will be conceptualized in terms of family dynamics. Such an approach provides an opportunity to explore intergenerational differences in families from different social positions, a key factor in understanding how identity - personal, communal, and national - is negotiated. The viewing family is treated as a site of 'local relationships' that can help us explore the workings of 'local' culture on a global level.

My decision to use the family as a unit of analysis is made with the awareness that in immigrant studies, there is often a "pathologized focus" on "intergenerational conflict". In her study of Indian-American youth culture, Sunaina Maira (2002:19) cites Alejandro Portes (1997) in arguing for a focus on second-generation youth and their practices:

The case for the second-generation as a "strategic research site" is based on two features. First, the long-term effects of immigration for the host society depend less on the fate of the first generation of immigrants than on their descendants. Patterns of adaptation of the first generation set the stage for what is to come, but issues such as the continuing dominance of English, the growth of a welfare dependent population, the resilience or disappearance of culturally distinct ethnic enclaves, and the decline or growth of ethnic intermarriages will be decided among its children or grandchildren.

A focus on second-generation Indian Americans is certainly crucial to understanding the politics of cultural identity in the U.S. However, one needs to recognize that in the case of the

Indian-American diaspora, there is little known about the "generation gap," leave alone a pathologized focus on it. There is little that we understand about the patterns of adaptation of the first generation Indian American community to be able to say their influence is not as important as the next generation's.

It is important to remember, as Avtar Brah points out, that it is not just the second-generation that is "confused" about their sense of belonging. In the case of Indian immigration to the U.S., a vast majority of the first generation moved to the U.S. at an impressionable age and as such, has had to re-construct a sense of identity, 'Indian-ness', even before having to raise children. The politics of identity in the Indian-American community will continue to be influenced by interaction between first and second-generation immigrants. The following chapters that analyze observations and interviews will revisit this issue and illustrate that relying on neat distinctions between the first generation as being from India, and the second generation as being Indian-American, needs to be tempered by considerations made on a case-by-case basis.

Thus, driven by a need to develop a workable project that doesn't stake any claims to generalisability where Hindi film reception is concerned, this study is ethnographic to the extent that it draws on repeated in-depth interviews with members of ten different families and participant observation in several sites over a period of three months, to evolve an initial framework for further exploration and analysis.

Participants & Interviews

There was nothing random about the way families were chosen for this study - they were all approached through personal contacts. Of the ten families I spent time with, three live in South Brunswick, New Jersey, one in Montreal, Canada, and the rest in the city and suburbs of Boston.

In addition to these interviews with families, data that will inform the analysis include two group discussions, an interview with the owner of Bombay Cinema in Boston (the only theater that screens Indian movies on a regular basis), interviews with students at MIT, and interviews with owners/managers of grocery stores that rent out videos/DVDs of Indian movies.

PARTICIPANT PROFILES

	Migration Path	Annual Household Income	Occupation	Education	Home Status	Immigration Status	Children
Balwinder & Sukhjot Sodhi	Punjab - Austria - Boston, U.S	\$35-45K	B: Doorman at Hotel. S: Housewife.	Middle School.	Rent.	Greencard holders.	1 son, 23 (works at gas station). 1 daughter, 17 (in India)
Vinod & Mythili Rao	Maharashtra -- U.K. -- Boston, U.S.	>\$40K	V: Retired doctor. M: works at high school.	Degrees in Medicine.	Own.	Greencard holders.	1 daughter (High school counselor).
Rahul & Anshu Chatterjee	Bengal -- Boston, U.S.	>\$30K	R: Library job. A: Housewife.	High school.	Rent.	Greencard holders.	1 daughter (completed high school. In India now).
Sandeep & Reena Shah	Gujarat - Uganda - U.K. - Boston, U.S.	>\$75K	S: Software Analyst. R: High school kitchen manager.	S: Graduate education. R: Undergraduate liberal arts.	Own.	Permanent Residents.	1 son (Undergraduate, Boston Univ.) 1 daughter (High School Counsellor).
Ajeet & Aparna Kaura	New Delhi -- South Brunswick, U.S.	>\$80K	A: Software analyst. A: Housewife	A: Bachelor's in Computer Science. A: Bachelor's in liberal arts.	Own.	Permanent Residents.	2 sons (both in middle school).
Deepak & Aruna Chaddha	D: Chandigarh -- South Brunswick, U.S. A: Montreal -- New Delhi -- South Brunswick, U.S.	>\$80K	D: Software engineer. A: YMCA administrator	D: Graduate degree in Computer Science. A: Bachelor's in liberal arts.	Own.	Permanent Residents.	1 son, 1 daughter (both in middle school).
Nikhil & Rashmi Parmar	Gujarat -- Boston, U.S.	>\$50K	Grocery store managers.	High School.	Rent.	Greencard holders.	1 daughter (kindergarten).
Kuldip & Preeti Arora	Punjab -- Montreal, Canada.	>\$60K	Entertainment & travel business.	K: graduate school. P: Undergraduate degree.	Own.	Permanent Residents.	1 son (doctoral student at MIT). 2 daughters (married, living in the U.S.).
Avinash & Latika Sharma	Uttar Pradesh -- South Brunswick, U.S.	>\$75K	A: Business consultant. L: Housewife.	A: MBA L: Bachelor's degree in commerce.	Own.	Greencard holders.	1 daughter (3 years old).
Yogesh Patel	Gujarat -- Boston, U.S.	>\$35K	Restaurant Manager	Bachelor's degree in Commerce	Rent.	Illegal Status. Papers being Processed	Not married. Living with girlfriend.

Value in Quasi-ethnography

In light of what I have described, a question still remains to be answered: why is this research strategy any different from several studies that have been carried out in the realm of media sociology for nearly two decades now? In spite of being aware of time limitations, and knowing fully well that an immersive, long-drawn ethnographic analysis of Hindi films and Indian-American migrant culture was not possible, why did I go ahead with an approach that seems quasi-ethnographic? I believe the merits of this approach can be best assessed after reading the analysis but for now, I shall discuss how this study addresses criticisms of 'so-called media ethnography' that were reviewed earlier in this chapter.

First, in *not* asking the question of 'impact', and by focusing instead on understanding how Hindi films occupy various "spaces and times of a basic level of social reality" (Silverstone, 1994:22) in Indian-American life, this project signifies a break from traditional reception studies that have been driven by the question of media impact. In other words, I am not seeking correlations between media use (film viewing) and cultural identity in the diaspora; the politics of identity, of being 'Indian' in the U.S. is far too complicated for any such direct relationship. Besides, given the saturated nature of the contemporary media landscape, and diverse socio-cultural influences on life in the Indian-American diaspora¹⁰, it is practically impossible to isolate Hindi films and study their influence. The influence of "situated qualitative research" since the mid-1980s, led by pioneering studies by David Morley, is evident in this formulation. However, this study goes beyond "contextualizing research into audience practices in the home" (Couldry, 2002:11; Morley and Silverstone, 1991; Silverstone, Hirsch and Morley, 1991) in that, I draw equally on my participation and observation in several different sites where Hindi films and film music dominate the proceedings, and on conversations with a range of people outside the formal interview setting.

¹⁰ In Boston, one has to take into account the presence of a large number of associations and organizations catering to the Indian-American community (www.newenglandguru.com lists 44 cultural organizations, 8 charity institutions, 5 political organizations, 9 professional associations and 14 religious groups.

Second, this study explicitly moves away from a notion of 'radical contextualism', recognizing very simply, that such an approach is neither pragmatic nor the need of the hour. Given that we know little to nothing about audiences of Hindi films in transnational environments, I felt the need to work with as much context as I could possibly obtain in a limited period of time. As Couldry points out, to follow a 'radical contextualist' approach is to contend with the possibility that the "context available [would] never be complete enough" (Couldry, 2002:22)!

Third, in using a comparative frame of two broadly defined class positions, this study aims to interrogate and challenge assumptions inherent in the construction of *an* Indian diaspora as a homogeneous, model minority.

Popular accounts of Indian immigration to the U.S have tended to conceal harsh realities, painting the Indian-American community as well-educated, well-adjusted immigrants likely to be doctors, scientists, engineers and business professionals. With an overall intercensal growth rate of 105.87% between 1990 and 2000, Indian Americans today comprise 0.6% of the U.S population (1,678,765. Boston: 43, 732), and include a high percentage of people with lower education, lower income, fewer professional positions, higher unemployment rates, higher rates of business failures and higher rates of poor families. The 1990 census revealed that 7.4 percent of Indian American families fall below the poverty line, marginally higher than white-American families (7 percent, Maira, 2002:10).

An interesting statistic which disputes the idea that middle class Indian immigrants, trained in English in a post-colonial nation-state tend to be successful in the U.S is contained in a report that states that 25% of Indian Americans in 1990 were found to be 'limited-English-proficient' (lep), with roughly 25,000 families living on less than \$25,000 a year, a little more than \$2,000 a month. Taxi drivers, grocery store and restaurant workers and owners of the infamous Dunkin Donuts and 7-11 convenience stores are all part of this poor Indian-America. Increasing depression and suicide rates among Indian-American children, high rates of domestic

abuse against women are other considerations that go against the 'model-minority' image constructed by the affluent class of immigrants.

In including families from the 'working class', this study hopes to address a call by several scholars for empirical work that addresses our lack of understanding of the different histories and diverse backgrounds of immigrants (and successive generations of children) from India. In the context of this study, this comparative frame creates an opportunity to understand how 'identity strategies that individual immigrants choose...are related to histories of arrival, entry, or exclusion...and how notions of ethnic authenticity...always relate to the material experiences of immigrant communities at particular moments in time' (Maira, 2002: 9).

Further, by situating responses to Hindi cinema within larger debates and contests over issues of ethnic authenticity, assimilation, race relations, and multiculturalism, this study not only provides an opportunity to analyze seriously the pleasure that viewers of Hindi cinema derive, it reaffirms a "commitment to the empirical study of how actual people put media texts to use in their lives" (Couldry, 2002:18). Building on such a commitment, following what Ang calls a more "thoroughly *cultural* approach to reception" (1991: 240), this study demonstrates the value of using media as an entry point to understanding cultural complexity.

Interlude: Reading/Writing

One of the major criticisms of media ethnographies has been scholars' unwillingness to supplement the use of ethnographic techniques, in-depth interviews especially, with detailed information concerning the field experience including the interview setting, immersion, observations in different sites, and the researcher's own situatedness in the media environment. It is clear that a period of three months is utterly inadequate to build close relationships with families. However, Swami and I believe this represents an honest attempt to make things out in the context of their occurrence, a first attempt at outlining the contours of the Indian-American mediascape.

At this point, we want to leave aside concerns regarding the level of empirical detail that can be achieved over a period of three months, and call attention to a different yet related question: how have media changed the boundaries of the ethnographic situation? In what ways can media studies in such transnational terrain refashion the language and practice of ethnography and make good use of it? In problematising the relationship between cultural space and geographical place, Gupta and Ferguson assert that "physical location and physical territory, for so long the *only* grid on which cultural difference could be mapped, needs to be replaced by multiple grids that enable us to see connection[s] and contiguit[ies]" that are transnational in nature.

Media provide an entry point to begin understanding such long-distance and often 'imagined' (not imaginary, as Appadurai would add) social and cultural linkages (in this case, Hindi cinema). Swami and I believe that our writing strategy, of presenting the analysis as a dialogue, is a partial response to Couldry's assertion that ethnographic studies of media in a transnational setting have to be 'an engagement with the situations of others based in a shared attention to the complex webs of determination within which we think and act' (Couldry, 2002:24).

Again, whether our mode of interpreting data actually achieves to communicate to the reader that one does not necessarily have to "be there" in order to understand media reception and its broader context within life in a diasporic setting, remains to be seen; we will have to come back to this question after the analysis is completed.

For now, we would like to stress that our writing strategy isn't experimentation for experimentation's sake. It is about being ethnographers and natives at the same time. It is also about resisting the temptation to generalize audience interpretations. This is, at every stage, a partial account of a small group of people. But one that is necessary

if we are to get rid of our "'art museum' mentality, wherein cultures stand as 'sacred images' whose 'integrity and coherence' make them worthy objects of isolated contemplation" and embrace instead, a 'garage sale' image, where the "focus shifts into understanding the complex 'boundaries that criss-cross over a field at once fluid and saturated with power' (Rosaldo, 1989; Jenkins, 1992:3).

This is an effort to engage in a mode of interpretation that might 'allow ordinary people to speak out and to articulate the interpretive theories that they use to make sense of their lives...such an account moves back and forth between lived experience and the cultural texts that shape and write that experience' (Denzin, 1997:17-18). And as for how this text will shape up, Denzin again: "These texts, however, are not just subjective accounts of experience; they attempt to reflexively map multiple discourses that occur in a given social space" (Denzin, 1997: xvii).

Of course, there are risks involved in attempting this. As Margery Wolf asks, 'how is a fully reflexive experimental ethnography going to be an improvement over "realist" accounts, where the rules are at least fairly well known' (Wolf, 1992:130)? Wolf also asks: If our ethnographies become polyvocal, somehow managing to portray all the uncertainties, inanities, complexities, and contradictions we encounter in our field research, we may indeed avoid appropriating the experience of our informants, but have we fulfilled the responsibility to our audience (1992:58)?

We do not know. We can only hope you shoulder some of the burden of interpretation as you read this account. The only thing we would like to claim for ourselves, with some measure of confidence, is that we feel, now, as we present our interpretation of our observations and interviews, we have begun to 'arrive' in the field we have chosen for our ethnographic forays.

CHAPTER III

Bollywood: From the Backyard to the Bazaar

Your POV:

Apu and Swami getting off the train...heading back home from the 'Bombay Cinema', the only theater in Boston that screens Indian (mostly Hindi) movies on a regular basis.

Swami: You think we needed more time?

Apu: I thought the interview went pretty well. Besides, this was certainly more helpful than the time we spent hanging out at the theater trying to chat up people. Of course, our hanging out didn't work as well partly because there weren't any big releases, apart from *Kaante* and *Saathiya*.

Swami: That's true, we never saw the theater house-full...and it didn't help that the people we talked to thought we were writing for a campus newspaper. Nobody mentioned anything other than 'star cast', 'hype', and 'theater experience is fun and different from home' as reasons for watching a Hindi movie in a theater.

Apu: That's why I felt our interview with Anshu Malhotra was time better spent. As theater owner and producer of the weekly, half-hour Hindi film show, she seemed to have thought about audience motivations.

Swami: You think the hanging out was entirely worthless?

Apu: Not entirely...it does provide a setting for us to imagine how different movie-going must have been 25-30 years back, when public screenings of Hindi movies in the U.S were few and far between.

Swami: Well, I have to say, I kept drawing comparisons to our movie-going experiences back in India...the pre-release hype, making sure we had tickets for the first day, the unruly crowds, the cheering and whistling, peanuts and cigarettes during the intermission...the *hungama*¹¹ of it all. Out here, I was the only one who whistled during the pole-dance sequence in *Kaante* - everyone else in the theater was watching quietly...including you...you're more careful here.

¹¹ 'Hungama' refers to a noisy, boisterous setting.

Apu [smiling, nods]: ...I don't let go the way I used to back home. And, my expectations of Hindi movies have changed as well...choice, taste, judgment...everything has undergone a shift ever since I moved here.

Swami: You don't want to shell out \$8 or \$9 for a trashy Hindi movie...

Apu: That, and easier access to countless Hollywood films does make a difference. I end up reading reviews online before watching a Hindi movie. And the state of the industry plays a part too. Over the past 3 years, there have been few blockbusters, few movies one might want to see over and over again.

Swami: Come to think of it, the music hasn't been great either; few tunes that will stay with me for years to come.

CUT TO:

Apu's bedroom. Books and papers strewn all over the bed, a cassette recorder and a few audiotapes labeled 'Bollywood North' sit in a cardboard box near the computer monitor.

Apu [removing his winter coat]: Switch the computer on and pull out the transcripts from the bag...I'll make some chai before we get started.

Swami [groping for the table lamp switch]: You'll be surprised, I actually went over the transcripts and jotted down some thoughts.

Opening WinAmp to set the mood...C:\Music\mp3\Gulzar...Lata Mangeshkar's voice fills the room...

Swami [handing Apu a post-it note]: Bollywood in the Backyard. How does that sound?

Apu [setting down the chai]: That would make a neat section heading! We could begin by sketching Hindi film viewing in the U.S during the early years of the Indian diaspora - the setting, access, and choice...

Swami [settling down on the bed with a sheaf of papers]: Just track changes over the years?

Apu: For this chapter, yes...and we can think about 'reception'...situating the viewing in a broader context of life in the diaspora...that will be the main analysis...next chapter. I'll get us started.

The Early Years: Bollywood in the Backyard

Apu: When Sandeep's parents, Kuldip and Preeti Arora, recounted their experience screening movies for the Indian community during the 70s and early 80s, I kept wondering how different a world it must have been for desis back then. Let me run through the set-up. The screenings were held in University halls rented for a few hours during the weekend, with films screened off 16mm reels initially and later, as more people started coming, 35mm reels. They started by screening a movie a month, increasing the frequency to twice a month and finally, every weekend as demand increased.

Swami [flipping through the transcripts]: Hearing Preeti aunty talk, it seems like the entire South Asian community would be at these screenings! People would come, buy tickets (tickets cost \$2 back then), get samosas, gulab jamuns, and a cup of chai, coke for their kids, and settle down to watch the movie while their kids played with Sandeep and other Indian kids.

Preeti: We used to inform people by post...they used to wait for that letter, to see which movie was going to be screened this time. They used to come to us and say, show movies as often as you can...from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Indians from West Indies, especially all the student bachelors, for them this was great enjoyment.

Swami: And the best part - the intervals. Can you imagine intervals that last 30-45 minutes? 3 hour movie, 45 minute interval, travel time...sounds like a picnic to me!

Preeti: They used to get a cup of chai and chit chat with their friends, exchange news, gossip, everyday things you know that one starts missing when one is away from one's home.

Sandeep: I've heard people tell me that sometimes, the interval was better than the movie!

Apu: And it is interesting to see how star-power affected distribution back in the 70s. Mr. & Mrs. Arora received film reels from distributors in New York city and Toronto. The movies they received were movies that were box office successes in India. While star cast was a determining factor, the movie also needed good songs to be a success.

Kuldip: The distributor used to tell us which ones were good and how much money it would make. The first movie we screened was *Arzoo*. Those days, Rajesh Khanna was very famous, especially after *Aradhana*. But Amitabh Bachchan was the big star, people were crazy about him.

Preeti: People from the West Indies would come and say [imitating caribbean accent]: oh, we want to see only bachchan movie!

Swami: This was also an occasion, apart from festivals, for people to wear traditional clothes, speak in Hindi or other regional languages with one another...

Apu: ...and be part of an activity that was reminiscent of 'home'. Don't you think it was also a function of there being little else to do? There wasn't anything on offer on mainstream media, T.V especially, that Indian families found appealing. As everyone in our sample who left India during the 60s and 70s said, there weren't any religious or cultural associations established those days. So watching movies became a stand-in for 'Indian' cultural activity, the radio show that Mr. & Mrs. Arora started, adding to this mix.

Preeti: When we started the movie screenings, we had to make a lot of posters. So we thought, let's start a radio show that can be used to broadcast film songs and make announcements for the community.

Apu: It is important also to note that these screenings gradually expanded to include not just the radio show and film songs, but live shows as well - heroes and heroines flying in from India to perform for the Indian community here.

In terms of this early period, I thought our interview with the Rao family was very interesting...for the similarities and differences during this period in the U.K. Remember Vinod and Mythili Rao? You had to pester them for weeks before they had us over for an interview... Swami: I do...they lived in the outskirts of London during the late-60s...Sunday trips to buy groceries in the only Indian grocery store in London...called Pathak's...eat at an Indian restaurant, and watch a Hindi movie at a theater in Piccadilly Circus that screened Indian movies. And after the big wave of migration from Uganda, they used to watch films more often, at public screenings organized in different localities.

Mythili: Back then, there was no outlet for entertainment for Indians. So someone would rent theaters and screen movies continuously on a weekend. We used to go in the evening, start at 6 or 7 and watch 2 movies in a row and come back home at 3 in the morning...we used to enjoy that a lot. Whatever popular movies would come, like *Pakeezah*, *Satyam Shivam Sundaram*...it was mostly Indian people and it would be a nice experience to be among them.

Apu: They also mentioned that watching Hindi movies in the U.K was a lot cheaper - English films would cost 7 or 8 pounds per ticket. But yes, Hindi movies were a marker of being 'Indian'...and a comforting feeling of being part of a larger community of immigrants from the same country. And kids played an important part too.

Swami: You mean what children would do during these screenings? Well, with Sandeep and his sisters, it was different because their parents used to screen the movies. I remember talking to Asha about this:

It used to be a lot of fun. I remember, we used to watch the movie at home the night before to make sure everything was working ok. And because cassettes were not available back then, we used to record the songs from these movies so mom could play the songs on the radio station. And I remember *Qurbani*...it was the last big film...there were such long lines for that movie, lines that ran into the streets.

Swami: And Sandeep said that for most movies, he would play with the other kids, but they would all sit and watch Amitabh movies, particularly the *dishum-dishum* action movies.

Sandeep: I remember watching, riveted, *Sholay* and *Deewar* and *Zanjeer* over and over again - Amitabh was certainly my hero during those days. And I remember *Qurbani* being this strange, sexy movie that we guys never quite understood but enjoyed all the same.

Apu: I think the way in which the second-generation interacted with these screenings and later on, with VCRs and subtitled videocassettes deserves more attention - let's first track changes and then deal with viewing practices among parents and children in greater detail.

The Shady Years: VCRs and Pirates in the Living Room

Preeti: When video players entered the market, we had to stop our movie screening business. Initially, it was a novelty, people were crazy about a new gadget. Why should we leave home, they would say. We screened an Amitabh Bachchan movie and there were no crowds because the cassette was already out. People would say, get a tape for \$2, why spend more in the theater per person?

Apu: Preeti aunty said it all. So, the entry of VCRs and rampant piracy that ensured availability of movies within a week or two of their release led to dwindling audiences for the public screenings. While this did not happen until the early 80s in the U.S, things changed faster in the U.K. By the late 70s (1978-79), BBC began telecasting Hindi movies as part of a six-week program for Indians. In this case too, only movies that were successful in India were screened, often determined by the star-cast.

In the U.S, an important factor was the change in migration patterns. Post 1965 migration to the U.S comprised mainly educated professionals and their families. It wasn't until the early 80s, following the Family Reunification Act, that working class and less-educated South Asians

began migrating to the U.S.¹². The spurt in the number of Indian grocery stores all over the country can be attributed, in part, to this change.

Swami: And it is these grocery stores that served as initial points of distribution for the pirated videocassettes. Piracy isn't unique to the diaspora though - the 80s in India also saw most video rental stores maintaining a stock of 'camera prints'...no amount of tracking and VCR head-cleaning liquid would get rid of the lines! Remember that? Actually, Ajeet and Aparna talked about the poor quality.

Ajeet: People started watching VHS tapes at home and no one went to the theaters. But we got bored of that quickly.

Aparna: yeah, the VHS tapes were bad quality, the prints would be bad, lines all over, the colors wouldn't be bright, no sharpness, it got irritating to watch after a while.

Ajeet: So now, after all these years, the trend is - back to the theaters.

Apu: Yeah, I remember Preeti aunty saying:

After a few years, people came back to us saying it was getting boring at home, that it wasn't the same as watching a movie on the big screen. They were missing the socializing, their kids missed playing with other kids, and it was not much fun.

Apu: The VCRs played a different role in the U.K though. Do you remember the conversation we had with Neeti? She talked about how VCRs were not a gadget that most South Asian families owned. Living on a working-class income, her family watched Hindi movies only when a friend rented a VCR for a weekend or when BBC had a telecast.

Neeti: Back then, it was a big deal to have a VCR. It was a big event if someone managed to rent a VCR...then they would have an all-day fest watching movies and eating Indian food, it was a big event...entire families...and I enjoyed that, I got to hang out with the other kids and play.

¹² In the U.K, a large majority of Indian migrants belonged to the working and merchant class, particularly those from Uganda (when they were deported by Idi Amin's regime). So the audience for these public screenings was more diverse, in terms of social position, in the U.K than in the U.S.

Apu: Closely related to income - occupation. It is instructive to note that Mr. Sodhi, who moved to the U.S in the 80s, said that he had absolutely no time to watch movies or indulge in any form of entertainment. While Indian families in the professional class had the means to purchase a VCR, or maintain social relations with people who could afford one, and watch movies over a weekend, Mr. Sodhi had no time for such luxuries.

Sodhi: Most people who come here come with the sole aim of making as much money as possible. So most don't have time to watch movies or anything else...I used to work 2 jobs, it has been only 2 years since I stopped working 2 jobs...I used to work 40 hours in one job and 25 hours in another, plus overtime. No weekends, no free time. Besides, what does a weekend here mean? There are always 24-hour shops and restaurants where people work...

Swami: The fact that he was single must have played a part too. Most working class immigrants, men, have to work 5-6 years before they can afford to bring their families over, or get married. Of course, things are slightly different these days. Like Yogesh Patel said, restaurant owners bring over a group of bachelors from India, provide housing and basic amenities that include a TV with a Dish-network connection so they can watch ZEE, Sony, B4U (*Bollywood for You*) and other Indian channels. But, I'm getting ahead...back to the days of the VCR!

Apu [nodding]: We'll get to that in a bit...so by this time, both in the U.K and the U.S, there were weekly TV shows, usually for an hour on weekends - film songs, interviews with visiting actors and actresses, clips of movies, etc Not only were these shows widely watched, they determined rental choice as well.

Ritu: We used to watch *Chitrahaar* a lot - on Sunday mornings...or Saturday mornings from 8-9 or something. It was a local program based out of Chicago and included songs, film clips, news from India, and what was happening in the Indian community in Chicago. So my parents would get whatever movies they remembered from the show.

Apu: Everyone in our sample who owned a VCR and watched movies at home mentioned that their choice of movies was also informed by advertisements in the local Indian newspaper, recommendations from friends, and importantly, the grocery store owner who would have invariably watched every film in stock!

Swami: Like the women who work at the Indian store in Central Square...I have a feeling they watch the movie at home before putting the DVD or videocassette on the shelf.

Apu: In my phone conversations with grocery store managers in Boston...I spoke to 18 of them...every one of them said they watched at least 3-4 movies a week. Storeowner recommendations aside, everyone in our sample said they also looked for names of well-known actors and actresses. And parents with children made sure the movies they brought home were 'appropriate' - no violence and foul language, nudity never really being an issue with Hindi films.

Swami: I've heard parents here crib about the lack of a good ratings system in the Indian film industry.

Apu: And let's not forget that theaters continued to exist during this period - its just that they were poorly run and would only screen movies that had already generated revenue at the box office in India.

Swami: Sticky floors...smelly seats...poor audio quality... I do have some memories of the theater in Atlanta, near Stone Mountain. It used to be pretty bad...and the one in Arlington here...the makeshift screen and the audio system with speakers that would hiss and crackle and do little else - things have certainly changed over the past two years. And in Athens, it was mostly videocassettes - DVDs have become big only over the past 2 years. When we first got here, there wasn't much on the Internet either - very few streaming audio sites...if not for Napster, staying on top of the latest film music would have been difficult.

Here and Now: Bollywood in the Bazaar

Apu: What else do you think has changed?

Swami: Small shifts here and there...there has been an increase in number of people subscribing to Indian TV channels in the U.S...

Apu: On the ZEE Network website, a press release says there are over 100,000 subscribers in the U.S today, increasing at a rate of 2,300 a month. But only 2 of the 10 families in our sample had a DISH connection. So they continue to get movies based on snippets during the hour-long weekend show, advertisements, recommendations from friends and the storeowner.

Swami: One change I noticed is an increase in the number of people buying DVDs and videocassettes now.

Apu: Right...6 of the 10 families we spoke with owned film copies and all of them said they knew other families who had a large collection of movies.

Swami: And Kuldip uncle and Preeti aunty - they buy DVDs of Hindi films for their grandchildren in the hope that they will pick up some Hindi! Of course, the stock in the stores has also increased considerably.

Apu: No doubt about that. In a survey of 18 stores in the Boston area - I called them during the day - on an average, each store owns more than 500 DVDs and close to 2500 videocassettes, including serials, soap operas, mythological serials, and song collections of various kinds. Little wonder then that distributors and exhibitors are worried about declining crowds in theaters...what Anshu Mehrotra said.

Anshu: DVDs started in a big way only during the last two years. Pirated DVDs are such a menace...and people feel they'd rather watch at home spending \$2. Of course they lose the theater experience...and the TV channels. We have 5 good channels now. People say they'd rather watch serials and soap operas. But if there is a big movie with a lot of hype, they will come to the theater.

Apu: The theaters have improved though. Every major city in the U.S now has a theater or a multiplex that screen Indian movies. However, given the sheer number of movies released, theater owners opt to screen movies that are well advertised and anticipated in the Indian community.

Anshu: People still want a big cast, they are still star-struck. Like for *Devdas*, people drove here all the way from Maine. If a great movie with newcomers is released, there isn't much of a crowd. An average movie with big stars will draw crowds. We have only 2 screens here and there are so many movies coming out. So if a new movie is good, by the time word gets around, we can't wait - we have to pull it out. The biggest draws are Aamir and Shahrukh...I hate to say it, but no female star is able to equal these two. Not even Madhuri...Aishwarya...they have to be backed by a big hero. But you know, today's audience is quite conscious of directors - like Yash Chopra or Subhash Ghai - people feel even if they bring in newcomers, the movie will be good.

Swami: What about the lip-syncing-and-dancing live shows, like the *Heartthrobs Tour* last year, the one that attracted crowds of over 60,000 in every city.

Apu: You're right, the scale is impressive. But the shows are not without precedent. Kuldip and Preeti Arora were organizing live shows in the late 70s, with the stars of that age performing for the Indian community in North America. To me, the significant changes have been at a local level...birthday parties, festival celebrations, cultural shows on college campuses, and Independence Day parades all feature *filmi* singing and dancing.

Swami: Hmm...and at an everyday level, every major city in the U.S has a radio station devoted to Indian film and pop music, in addition to all the streaming audio and peer-to-peer sharing online...

Apu: To the extent that access is easier, choice is greater, and viewing isn't as much a special occasion as it used to be. But one constant in all this change - viewing remains a family-centric

affair, be it at home or in the theater. This is a key point to keep in mind as we try to understand the various dimensions of 'reception'.

Ctrl-S (Save), Alt-F4 (Close).

CUT TO:

Kitchen. A small table with four chairs. Apu sets water to boil and turns to Swami who is lighting a cigarette, legs propped up on the table.

Apu: Where did you get the Wills?

Swami [smiling, blowing rings]: Edison, NJ. Friend of mine knows this storeowner there. Sells Gold Flake and Paan Masala also. Worth it man, worth it. I tell you, Marlboro just doesn't cut it.

Apu: So, what'd you think?

Swami: It was ok...not as much fun as I imagined it would be. I mean, what...we went back and forth trying to write an account of how the families we interviewed get and watch Hindi movies. I don't see why you couldn't have done this yourself...

Apu [picking up the pack of Wills]: Hmm...yeah, I can see Henry saying the same thing...too forced...doesn't flow naturally...

Swami: I said this during the interviews too...when you showed up with 5 pages of questions...doesn't work that way yaar. I'm sure you have an outline for the next chapter, with quotes pulled out from the interviews and all...[throws Apu the lighter].

Apu [with a Wills pressed between his lips]: Look, you know these interviews as well as I do...you were there for every single one...

Swami: yeah...but I can't be bothered with the words man...the language you use.

Apu: Come on, you've read the stuff too...

Swami [walking up to the kitchen sink]: Your lit review? Yeah...I read it...it wasn't too bad, but it had quite a few big words and needlessly long sentences...and oh, in the methods chapter...can't get this one out of my head...epistemological hypochondria...why do you have to say such things? What's all this white stuff in the water?

Apu: Use the water in the filter. Look, I have an outline. But it's an outline, mostly questions, to organize the interviews...the real insights will come from our thinking through the interviews together. I'll email you the outline...you spend the weekend with the transcripts and let's meet early next week.

Swami: Tell me again, what's the point of this dialogue mode of writing?

Apu [leaning against the kitchen counter]: I don't know anymore, that's the disturbing thing. It's like I was seduced into this and now I can't get it out of my head. Denzin's words keep ringing in my head...a new language...personal, emotional, minimalist in its use of theoretical terms...allow ordinary people to speak out...lived experience. The challenge is to strike a balance between our interpretations and a body of theoretical work.

Swami: Well, you're not the first person to be faced with this. If you're scared that the experimentation might render the analysis less rigorous...

Apu: I know...I know. Screw it all. Let's go ahead and try it.

Swami [walking over to get his coat lying on the couch]: Call me.

CHAPTER IV

Masalas and More: Desis and Hindi Films

DARK SCREEN

Then

FADE IN

A series of images cross dissolving:

Mira Nair's *Mississippi Masala*: Kinu, a Ugandan-Indian immigrant singing a Hindi film song in an Indian festival celebration in Greenwood, Mississippi. Aditya Chopra's *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (DDLJ): Raj and Simran, 20-somethings, born and raised in London, singing 60s and 70s Hindi film songs in Punjab, India. Gurinder Chadha's *Bhaji on the Beach*: a row of South Asian owned shops in England with posters for Hindi films adorning the walls. Deepa Mehta's *Bollywood/Hollywood*: Kulbhushan Kharbanda invoking Amrish Puri's role in *Pardes* to sing 'I love my India, I love my India' in Toronto.

A pulse of black

Then

(Voice Over)

The popular element 'feels' but does not always know or understand...the intellectual element 'knows' but does not always understand and in particular does not always feel...the intellectual's error consists in believing that one can know without understanding and even more without feeling and being impassioned

(Gramsci, cited by O'Shea and Schwarz 1987:109)

FADE IN

Your POV:

Apu, twirling a pen, stands by the window waiting for Swami to arrive. His eyes, reddish, speak of a restless night spent thinking about the interviews. Sticky notes all over the table and computer monitor tell tales of threads of ideas waiting to be woven into a coherent, analytic story. A number of DVDs lie scattered in one corner. Breaks into a smile as Swami turns the corner and comes into sight.

CUT TO:

Kitchen. Apu sets up a laptop computer and hands Swami a sheaf of papers marked 'Academic Frames' (A-f).

Swami: What happened to minimal use of theory?

Apu: What I've cobbled together isn't exactly abstract theory. Most of the quotes and summaries in there are from case studies, textual analyses, and ethnographies. To help us interpret the interviews and field notes in relation to previous work in this and related topics. I'm going to cut and paste these where relevant. Look, you've been more than a close informant during this study...we've had conversations on this topic for more than a year now...so I want you to ask me questions...point out gaps...tell me if my interpretation is effective and sheds light on why and how Hindi films function as a crucial resource for fashioning a sense of 'Indian' identity for desis in the diaspora.

Swami: Can I draw on my own experiences?

Apu: Yes, definitely. I think your position as a fan, immigrant, and in some sense, vernacular theorist, lends this experiment considerable strength.

Swami [pulling out a pack of Wills]: No harm trying...and I can interrupt whenever I want?

Apu: I want you to ask questions...get the process started. Like I said, you know the interviews as well as I do, so yes, feel free to jump in with excerpts from interviews you feel are relevant. But your role, essentially, is to hear me out...

Swami: And when I hear you dropping words and phrases that go right over my head...

Apu: We'll see about that...let's get started...we don't have much time.

Swami: Don't worry about the time...listen, on the way, I could not stop thinking about what Sandeep said to us - that he thought of Hindi films as an inheritance for desis in the U.S...doesn't that make a lot of sense?

Apu: I picked up on that as well...but I prefer Fiske and Hartley's formulation - I feel Hindi films play a *bardic* role.

Swami: Hmm...ok...inheritance sounds a tad too romantic...makes me think of desis lugging trunks full of movie reels... you were saying...

Apu: By *bardic*, I mean that Hindi films, by virtue of being *the* dominant storytelling mass-medium in and of post-independence India, are seen as repositories of Indian culture, possessing

tremendous cultural and emotional value for Indians in the diaspora. The notion of Hindi films as *bardic* is useful because it allows us to think of Hindi films as a language that is legible to an incredibly diverse audience and appeals across divisions of region, religion, class, age, gender, and generation (Kakar, 1981; Thomas, 1985; Kasbekar, 2001; Pinney, 2001).

Swami [lighting up]: That makes sense too. So, you want to begin with what the FOBs did and continue to do with Hindi films?

Apu: If you insist on using words like that, you better explain as well. I'll do it this time. FOB (Fresh-off-the-boat) refers to first-generation immigrants. I anticipate three parts to this analysis - first, we outline Hindi film reception among first-generation immigrants, then speak of second-generation film consumption as an act of translation, and finally, examine responses from both generations to understand the politics that shape constructions of Indianness in the diaspora.

Cultural Residence: Bollywood & the First Generation

Swami: Why don't you begin by telling me what comes to mind first when you think back to desis watching films in the 70s?

Apu: The movies themselves.

Swami: You mean why Hindi movies and not some other form of entertainment?

Apu: Yeah...I believe thinking of Hindi films as *bardic* explains in part why first-generation immigrants in our sample, particularly those who left India post-1965, equated Hindi films with Indian culture. As Rosie Thomas confirms, cinema in India evolved in the context of the fight for independence and was marked, from the very beginning, as a metaphor for Indian society (Thomas, 1989).

Swami [sitting up]: Hmm...I suppose you'd already thought about that...and then? What else struck you?

Apu: In the diaspora, in countries such as the U.S and U.K, Indian families turned to Hindi cinema also in part because there were few other means of entertainment and an utter absence of

cultural institutions that could help ease their transition into a new way of life away from their homeland.

A-f: As Gillespie, based on fieldwork in England, writes: the rapid expansion of the home video market needs to be seen, not only as providing an extension to an already important and dynamic film culture, but also as a response to the social and cultural marginalization of minorities from the mainstream of British society, which provides few cultural or leisure facilities for them (Gillespie, 1995: 79).

Swami: It saddens me to imagine the isolation and loneliness that so many families must have felt back then. Preeti Arora and Mythili Rao both kept talking about how delighted they would be when they bumped into other Indians when they went shopping or for a walk or something...even I used to feel lonely at times, walking around in downtown Athens, sometimes I wouldn't see an Indian face for hours together.

Apu: It is clear that the movie screenings were marked as an *Indian* space, away from mainstream British or American society, where families could meet and indulge their personal and collective memories of life in India. Like Preeti aunty said:

People used to come and say, show movies as often as you can, we come here and remember our days at home. They used to say, our week is so long, we wait for the weekend so we can watch a Hindi movie.

Swami: That remains true to this day! I mean, usually, it is only desis who get together to watch movies, crack jokes, talk in Hindi, be loud and everything they are not when they're around people from here. Where do you think this comes from?

Apu: I think such strong nostalgic identification stemmed from difficulties involved in maintaining connections with India. Not only was air travel limited and expensive, the only means of contact for most people was a monthly phone call and frequent letter writing. Of course, this has changed considerably over the years.

Swami: I agree...phone rates are lower, Internet and email access ensures faster communication, and more important, there are visible, tangible markers of India in the U.S today - increasing Indian population, grocery stores, Indian restaurants, temples and so on.

I remember you laughing out loud when Dr. Rao said just seeing a cow in a movie feels homely! And I have to say, even though we came here in 1999, lived with a group of Indian grad students, kept in touch with friends in India and all that, Hindi films managed to fill a gap that all the sitcoms and movies here couldn't.

Apu: That echoes what we heard from people who migrated here in the 80s and later - that it was a matter of continuity for them.

Swami: No doubt about that - to this day, movie-going and watching film-related programs on T.V constitutes the primary form of entertainment for a vast majority of Indians.

Apu: Closely related to this is the fact that we are schooled in a certain grammar, and a style of expression - the jokes, song-and-dance routines, familiar plots and climaxes - that is unlike anything we get from American television and cinema. Vinod and Mythili Rao spoke for everyone in our sample when they said:

Vinod: You've grown up watching the movies and you continue, that's all. You like the songs, you listen to them here also. You enjoy particular kind of drama...keeps you in touch with the way of life in India.

Mythili: It doesn't matter what the story is like, I like to see the dresses, the people, their everyday life, even if it seems like a fantasy you know.

Swami [staring at his notes]: Nostalgia, continuity, and keeping in touch seem little more than common-sense explanations to me. And there are some contradictions as well. While advances in communications have facilitated contact with India, over a period of time, families here tend *not* to maintain contact on a daily basis. Work, family and other social engagements in the diaspora result in most first-generation Indians gradually losing touch with day-to-day developments in India. Moreover, none of the families we interviewed visit India often - it has been more than ten

years since Ajit, Sachin, and Sodhi's family went back. So, when Mythili, Preeti, Asha and others talk about 'seeing India', the 'dresses people wear', 'way of life there', and 'seeing a cow'...

Apu [smiling]: You're one step ahead of me... at first glance, as you pointed out, it seems like the act of viewing simply resolves the disconnect that migration engenders, enabling people to indulge in personal and collective acts of recollection, particularly as a reminder of their origins.

A-f: As Ram argues, '[Hindi] cinema provides texts for recollection whereby memories of the past can be grafted, rescripted and reconstructed...a technicolor medium through which to share the past with others, both in everyday contexts and in public events' (Ram, 1999:135).

Apu: Public screenings back in the 70s and even today, in theaters, and at home when families get together to watch Hindi films, provide a means for Indians abroad to *imagine* themselves as being part of a community. Anshu's comments that she 'keeps track of changes in India through the movies', and Reena saying she 'likes watching the movies for keeping an eye on the latest *salwar* designs' is an affirmation of a belief that they can perform their *Indianness* here in the U.S.

A-f: These comments point to 'an everyday, concretized instance of maintaining temporal continuities with the imagined homeland' and how pleasures of viewing - jokes, language, gossip, clothes, etc. - are 'associated with experiencing connections, affiliations and identifications as lived rather than as abstractions' (Ram, 1999:156).

Apu: Hence, we can think of Hindi film viewing in the diaspora as an activity that allows Indians to sustain a confidence that they are an integral part of a national community, even if, as Anderson notes, they will never know more than a small number of its members (Anderson, 1991). Further evidence comes from Latika's explanation of her motivations for watching Hindi films in the U.S:

Latika: When I call home or email my friend in India, I'll write a few lines or talk about some movie I recently saw...oh, I saw *Devdas* and Aishwarya looks awesome in it. It also helps you grow together as friends from a distance because we have something to share, this love for movies. When I speak with my parents on the phone, I ask them about a movie I've heard about and they'll tell me if

they've seen it or what they've heard from conversations in India, so yeah, it helps a lot...no matter how much we criticize the movies, we still enjoy some aspects - the jokes, songs, comments, gossip about film stars.

Apu: Latika's comments echo Anderson's idea of the "meanwhile" (1991:24); India, for people like Latika, can be *imagined* because her engagement with Hindi films, particularly the conversations around these films and film songs, assures her of the 'ongoing, ceaseless existence of the national community' (Ram, 1999:153).

Swami: Do you think this holds for people like Yogesh and families like Sodhi's and Chatterjee? Long hours, 13-14 hours a day, little money, little time for socializing among Indian families, leave alone building relationships with non-Indians in the U.S...how does their lifestyle influence what they get out of watching Hindi films? You know...they don't throw or go to fancy birthday parties where Indian kids do *filmi* dances. They don't have the means to own a home theater system and entertain other Indian families...or afford tickets to see actors and actresses from India perform live...or pay for their children to learn how to dance to a popular film song. And even their homes, such stark differences. Their homes weren't cluttered with pots and bronze lamps and wall hangings and boutique prints from India. To me, the stainless steel tumblers in which Mrs. Chatterjee served us tea were so much more evocative of 'home' than all those fancy handicrafts in the sprawling, 4-bedroom, suburban houses that the richer desis live in.

Apu: If anything, considering all these differences you mentioned, I think their identification with Hindi films is even more pronounced than that of middle and upper-middle class Indian families. As bachelors, working class Indians share an apartment with 3-4 other bachelors, and their primary means of entertainment is Hindi movies on video or satellite T.V. Like Yogesh said:

Hindi movies is like a proxy for family, people, friends...things we don't have here, so we dream with the movies...like finishing the big room when you're lonely here...these movies fill that empty space. In India, it is like one joint family and I don't mean just immediate relatives, I mean the street and the neighborhood. And life isn't like that here, and that's what I miss and what others

miss too. Few people in your apartment complex know you...the movie reminds you of the loneliness here and for 3 hours, helps you get over it. And then, there is also stress with the job - especially for people like me who are struggling and working so hard, Hindi films help me relieve the stress.

Apu: Their lifestyle and living conditions render them almost invisible at communal celebrations organized by various cultural and religious associations. It is only over the last few years that NGOs and other non-profit groups have started paying attention to this marginalized section of the Indian diaspora in the U.S. In the absence of opportunities to socialize, Hindi films and film songs are valued

A-f: for their 'cathartic and therapeutic aspects. They are seen as enabling a temporary release from the tensions of everyday life and as helping viewers to discharge distressful emotions vicariously' (Gillespie, 1995: 85).

Apu: In the case of families, with both parents working 2 jobs, often in shifts - like Chatterjee, who does night shifts at the library, or the Parmar family where both husband and wife run a grocery store - the little time they have at home is spent watching Hindi films, with songs and fight sequences being treated as 'commercial' or 'bathroom' breaks or to simply catch up and spend time with their kids.

Swami: They always do that! And that night, when we were there, all of them turned to ask you if it would be ok if they fast-forwarded the songs!

Apu: yeah...but then the kids said that if they like a song, they often go back and watch just the song.

A-f: The family gathering around the set is a social ritual where notions of togetherness take precedence...parents have little time for leisure...so the time when the family is together around the TV set is often much appreciated by all concerned (Gillespie, 1995:81).

Swami: All this is fine...

Apu [affecting a grin]: I'm glad you're pleased...no, seriously, I'm sure what I'm going to say next will address the question in your mind. Hear me out.

Swami: That's all I needed...you reading my mind...all I'm saying is, your explanations until now work, but not in relation to the manner in which first-generation immigrants construct a difference between their 'Indian' culture and the society they live in...between an India they want to sustain and pass on to their children, and the culture of the 'West' they want to avoid slipping into.

Apu: You're talking of two extremes here...but that's ok. My situating Hindi films vis-à-vis Anderson's notion of an imagined community was a first-step towards answering what you just raised. I would like to argue that Hindi film viewing is a crucial 'cultural' activity (among others) that first-generation Indian-Americans use to construct the home as the space where Indianness is sustained and differentiated from the host society (Naficy, 1993).

Swami: And 'home' here isn't used in any literal sense...

Apu: No, its not.

A-f: Ram draws on Partha Chatterjee to argue: 'the distinction between *ghar*, the home, the inner space, and *bahir*, the world, the outer space' allows Indians abroad to adapt to a modern, material Western world, while 'retaining a sense of spiritual distinctiveness by constructing the home as the domain for the true Indian self' (Ram, 1999: 149). The home, as Partha Chatterjee says, remains 'unaffected by the profane activities of the material world' (Chatterjee, 1993: 120).

Apu: Let me illustrate with excerpts from our interviews:

Apu: What did you feel about Sandeep growing up watching movies?

Preeti: It was very good, he was imbibing his culture. During the week, at school, he was learning the culture of this place and while watching Hindi movies, singing Hindi film songs, he was learning about Indian culture.

Kuldip: That's why people used to bring their kids to our screening, so that the kids would get something about Indian culture. See, if a child spends the whole day in school, in another culture, there must be some influence. And at home,

there is another influence. If they listen to the Hindi language for 2 or 3 hours, at least some words, some phrases will stick in their heads.

Swami: I do remember Kuldip uncle talking about how embarrassed and shocked they were when they first came to this country and saw couples on park benches hugging and kissing one another.

Apu: Exactly...using Hindi films to demarcate a period of time during the week that was exclusively *Indian* is something that continued to happen even after families began to watch movies at home, on VCRs and DVD players.

Mythili Rao: You see, like in any community...especially the Western community is very different from our culture. Like respect for parents and elders, how to behave, talk...basic things...and when children go to school and make friends, you don't know the families that those children come from, what problems they may have...drug and alcohol problems and things like that. So your child will get influenced by all that...

Vinod Rao: So Hindi movies...there is no question of influence. But they portray nice things, like moral values...like this Anil Kapoor and Madhuri movie, I don't remember the name...for all time to come you know...we can get lessons for life from it.

Swami: What about the first-generation that came over much later...in the 80s?

Apu: A sense of anxiety as children growing up here begin interacting with mainstream 'Western' society is also reflected in comments by first-generation immigrants who do not hold on to fossilized notions of 'Indian' culture as did the very first generation, the families who migrated here during the late 60s and early 70s.

Swami: More accepting of the 'ways of the West', this generation of parents is more in tune with the difficulties their kids face in striking a balance between an 'Indian' weekend at home and an American week at school...do you think that's a generalization you can make?

Aparna: For our generation...it is easier, I think, to maintain our Indian heritage. But you see, for the kids, Hindi films helps them to stay more connected with Indian culture.

Ajit: We wish we could be more involved...like Diwali. It is easier to put up a christmas tree than decorations for Diwali....yes, they enjoy the idea of Diwali, but they are more familiar with what is around them.

Aparna: Which is why Hindi films help them stay more connected with Indian culture...like the Hrithik concert...I think Hindi movies and songs are very useful...this is America, and we have to try to keep some things Indian and this is one of them.

Apu: I agree with the claim that the professional class of first-generation immigrants of the 80s is more aware of the tricky and often, tension-filled processes of negotiating being 'in but not of the West', particularly when it comes to raising children.

Swami: As Sachin pointed out, the men who migrated here during the 80s had greater interaction, during their grad school years, with mainstream society than did the generation that migrated here during the 60s and 70s.

Apu: However, it is apparent from our interviews with families who lead a working-class life that they hold a 'dated, if not idealized, vision of the India they left behind...clinging to a fossilized definition of social mores that they then hold up as yardstick for their children's behavior' (Maira, 2002: 116). Consider our interview with Sodhi...

Swami: He was incredibly resistant to accepting that Hindi films were indeed a valuable resource for Indians in the diaspora.

Apu: Well, yes. He made it clear that the new films did not resonate at all with his experiences of life, the difficulties he has had to face in building a life for himself and his family in the U.S. A critique of the 'good life' that he, like thousands of others, dreamed of perhaps...but more to the point...consider this excerpt:

Apu: So why do you think so many families here watch Hindi films?

Sodhi: I am not saying they don't help...but it is all on the surface, it very superficial. Inside every person who migrates here is the dream, the wish to become American. See, it comes down to parents also - it all depends on what you give your children, what you teach them about Indian culture. One of my

friends' daughter...all she learns is dance. I tell you, there is more to culture than films and dances. I tell him, wait for another 5 years...she will not be Indian.

Apu: And what about your children?

Sodhi: My daughter is in India...my son takes care of a business and makes his living. He is pretty much Indian now, I think. Once he earns more money, who knows...now he doesn't have time to go out, drink and do things like that, but who knows in the future?

Swami: I was surprised at the hostile manner in which Sodhi answered our questions and at one point said he wouldn't talk anymore.

Apu: Right...but later, when we learned that he sent his daughter to India, against the wishes of his wife, because he felt she would not remain Indian if she continued her schooling here, speaks to the moral panic that Sodhi's answers reflect, doesn't it? Sodhi's family is one of thousands of working class families that remain in a cultural ghetto of sorts, stubborn in their understanding of India as the site of 'tradition' and 'authenticity'.

A-f: As Vijay Prashad writes: Anxious about the capacity of U.S. cultural forms to entrance them, migrants cherish what they conceptualize as their cultural forms in the home (and impart these with persistent care to young children). The home, that domain that many desis see as refuge from a racist polity, becomes the place for the enactment of culture (or, in other words, the preservation of heritage) (2000:121).

Apu: What surprises me even more is the fact that Kuldeep and Preeti sent both their daughters to convent schools in India, while Sandeep stayed behind.

Swami: And then both of them ended up getting married to men in the U.S and back they came...and now Kuldeep and Preeti worry about losing their grandchildren to the West! The story goes on...

Apu: This dichotomy of home/Indian v. outside/Western is, in my opinion, a crucial lens through which we can begin to understand the similarities and differences in consumption between the first and second-generation Indian diaspora and its implications for the kind of community that is

envisioned and fostered. So what we have now is an outline of how first-generation immigrants, the non-resident Indians, remain 'cultural residents' of India, with Hindi film viewing being a crucial component of that process.

Swami: There is more...?

Apu: Yes. Following Juluri's reception study of *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun*, and Uberoi's close reading of *DDLJ* and *Pardes*, I would like to argue that a closer examination of responses to a specific set of films that were referenced during the interviews reveals that both first- and second-generation Indian-Americans' engagement with Hindi cinema is 'primarily a relational one, articulated in and around the notion of the family' (Juluri, 1999: 244). But before we do that, we need to detail how the second-generation's position in the racial economy of the U.S influences their consumption of Hindi films and film music.

Life in the Hyphen: Bollywood & the Second-Generation

Apu: Let's begin with the viewing practices. Viewing practices, be they community-wide or at home, played a key role in establishing Hindi films as a marker of Indianness for second-generation children. As Gillespie notes, watching Hindi films at home is

A-f: 'the regular, family-centric leisure activity. The weekend family gathering around the television set is a social ritual where notions of togetherness take precedence' (Gillespie, 1995: 79).

Apu: Herein lies the explanation to why Hindi films play a *bardic* role for second-generation youth as well. Think back to the interviews - in every interview we conducted with second-generation Indian-American, we were told their parents would watch Hindi films regularly and listen to Hindi songs constantly.

Swami: And they'd say so rolling their eyes or waving their hands...

Sandhya: My mom loves Hindi movies...we used to watch movies together when I was younger. We would rent movies and watch a few every weekend, 3 or 4 back to back, all night long.

Neeti: There is no doubt that my parents were homesick, and that's one reason why they watched movies. I've heard them say it makes them feel like they're back in India. I remember songs playing in my house...on the radio...my parents would listen to tapes a lot...they listened to it constantly...when I go to a grocery store now, I am reminded of the magazines that my mum would browse through back in those days, when I was a kid.

Sandeep: Watching Indian movies was a big social activity for families back then. I used to go with my mom for the screenings...and I used to play games with my mom where we would hum tunes and the other person would have to recognize the song.

Apu: At public screenings, at home when the VCRs and DVDs came, from songs on the radio, countdown shows on satellite TV, streaming audio and mp3 files on the Internet, at the grocery stores, live shows, and during festivals. Growing up observing their parents' emotional and cultural attachment to Hindi films and film songs is what laid the foundation for second-generation youth to explore and gradually appropriate Hindi film texts to fashion their own version of authenticity. For the second-generation, Hindi films are popular artifacts that are imbued with their parents' nostalgic identification with 'home' and 'continually re-tooled, re-sited, re-located' (Bhabha; in Pinney, 2001:14) to create and manage their own, unique version of Indian-ness.

Swami: What about families who don't watch films? I know quite a few Indian families who don't watch films. What about children in such families?

Apu: That's a question beyond the scope of this study. You know we haven't talked to any such families.

Swami [tossing the Wills into the kitchen sink]: That's very convenient.

Apu: I'm being honest here.

Swami: But you're Indian...its not like you're some white journalist who hears about Indian 'musicals' and says Bollywood is Indian cinema and everyone in India watches these films.

Apu: What does that have to do with what we're doing now?

Swami: I'm saying...given that you're part of the desi crowd here, you should be able to say more than 'this is beyond the scope'...can't you guess?

Apu: I don't have any evidence to make educated guesses. And there aren't any studies that focus on Indians who don't watch Hindi films.

Swami [throwing up his hands in mock despair]: Come on...what about Tamilians, Bengalis, Gultis, Malayalis, and Kannadigas? They all watch regional movies made in their respective regional languages, don't they?

Apu [refusing to look at Swami's face]: I suppose they do.

Swami: And families from India who come here with pre-conceived notions of Hindi films being trashy and for the lower-classes...what about those 'high-culture' people?

Apu: Look, I was going to address all these gaps in the conclusion, indicating these are areas for other scholars to investigate.

Swami: Doesn't do any harm to speculate now, does it?

Apu: That's not how it's done, ok?

Swami: Oh you know how it's done...

Apu [glaring a bit]: That's right, I do.

Swami [reaching for another Wills]: Okay.

Apu: All right. Now can we get back?

Swami: I had another question...this one is relevant...children of immigrants interact with Hindi films in relation to other entertainment, right? I mean, come on...by the time we were 13 or 14, MTV and Channel [V] had managed to take some of our film time away...and that was in India...clearly, Hindi films and film music must have been marginal compared to other entertainment.

Apu: Not so much marginal as marked with 'difference'. See...this question was so much more helpful. Anyway, let me explain. The term 'pop cosmopolitans' captures the experiences of second-generation Indians in the diaspora. Jenkins uses the term 'pop cosmopolitanism' to refer to the ways in which 'transcultural flows of popular culture inspire new forms of global consciousness and cultural competency' (2003:4). Hannerz' use of the term cosmopolitanism as 'a mode of managing meaning' (1990:238) is also relevant here. Tell me, what were Sandeep's media habits like?

Swami: Sandeep grew up with the Looney Tunes, Japanese anime, European comic books like Tintin and Asterix, American superhero comics, historical and mythological comics from India, particularly the Amar Chitra Katha series, and Hollywood movies. All this in addition to the Hindi films his family screened for the Indian community. And in the U.K, Neeti grew up with a lot of popular Western music, apart from her Hindi film viewing over the weekends.

Apu: Every second-generation Indian-American in our sample had similar media habits, drawing on a wide array of entertainment programs. Hence, Hannerz's description of such diverse consumption patterns as 'a willingness to engage with the Other' and 'an openness toward divergent cultural experiences, a search for contrasts, rather than uniformity' (1990: 238) hints at how Hindi films and film music were, for the second generation, always marked as a sign of their 'ethnic' roots, to be negotiated vis-à-vis their participation in the popular culture practices of mainstream society.

A-f: As Gillespie writes of her experiences among second-generation Indian youth in Southall: These general and specific competencies include the ability to adapt flexibly to other cultures, and skill in manoeuvring in and between particular cultures. The acquisition of such competencies is, in fact, a central concern for young people in Southall (1995: 21).

Swami: And we shouldn't forget the fact that when it came to watching English movies or serials or music videos, parents weren't around. Like Sandeep said, his watching American movies did not concern his parents as long as he was watching Hindi films as well! Or, for that matter,

Neeti's listening to Bowie and Depeche Mode, Paul's obsession with 'Seinfeld', and Sandhya's fascination with 'Friends'. And back home, I'd stay up watching the wet sari dances on Jain TV late at night and MTV's spring break show...couldn't watch that when my parents were around.

Apu: I didn't need to know that last bit...we're digressing...anyway, what such consumption points to is the existence, from the very beginning, of a 'simultaneous co-existence of tradition and modernity' (Flores, 2000:21). It also indicates a 'temporal dialectic that is deeply embedded in second-generation youth cultures which are always wrestling with notions of purportedly vanishing "traditions" and of the derivative or threatening experiences of the present' (Maira, 2002: 38).

Swami: Hmm...tell me, doesn't my confession point to this tradition-modernity "dialectic" as well? How Indian are we really compared to our parents? And we aren't supposed to be confused like second-generation youth here...but we might be...anyway, this constant push-pull relationship between 'home' and 'outside', tradition and modernity in the lives of second-generation youth is also influenced by their experiences in school and how they manage being neither white nor black, isn't it?

Apu: Yes. Faced with two starkly different cultural fields, second-generation Indian-Americans become very adept at managing 'situational, or context-dependent, ethnic identifications' (Maira, 2002: 92). I think Sandeep and Paul's narration of their experiences vividly articulate the difficulties faced by the second-generation in juggling pressure at home to preserve an authentic ethnic identity and their position in the racial and class economies of the United States as they spend the week in schools and colleges (Maira, 2002; Prashad, 2000; Agarwal, 1991).

Sandeep: My high school years weren't too nice, I used to be bullied and pushed by many people, some racial slurs...and at home, during the weekends, it was a different world altogether...like in high school, I had a crush on this Yugoslavian girl and tried to ask her out. My mom got wind of it and had a serious talk with me and said she didn't want me befriending and getting involved with english girls...to her, they were all the same. So after that, when I entered college, I

started hanging out with an Indian crowd - my best friend was the head of the Indian students' association at a different college. I call that period my ghetto years. One of my best friends from school, who was Chinese, would joke 'oh, it is time for you to go to one of your racist parties' and I'd feel bad. I was constantly trying to straddle two worlds and it wasn't working very well. You know, I liked the fact that my best friends' names were Norman and Laplang...I really came to cherish that. But my parents just could not get it, would not get it.

Paul: It was a very small school, mostly white...in my class, there was one other Indian, one Chinese and that was it. When you go to a white school, other nationalities are joked about and I too used to joke along with others about being Indian, Indian habits, customs, things like that. You know, I just wanted to get by, I didn't want to be noticed, didn't want to be the exception, didn't want people asking me questions, I wanted to be like everyone else.

Apu: Sandeep and Paul's experiences lend evidence to what Fischer calls "ethnic anxiety," (1986: 197), of constantly evaluating one's position as an outsider in mainstream America and belonging to an Indian community parents construct for children at home¹³.

Swami [smiling]: And Hindi films are a part of this construction...I'm getting the hang of this now.

Apu: Right...film viewing and related practices add to the second-generation's 'nostalgia without memory' (Appadurai, 1996:30), but more important, they are 'poached' (Jenkins, 1992) for the purposes of 'translating' between two cultures, and successfully navigating their hyphenated existence as Indian-Americans. The love-hate relationship that second-generation Indians have with Bollywood has to be understood as one of several spaces that they negotiate in their daily condition of being between and betwixt cultural worlds.

A-f: Sunaina Maira argues: Second-generation youth perform a deep ambivalence toward ethnicity and nationality... The space this youth culture offers is not a purely hybrid or "third"

¹³ For a rich, detailed analysis of second-generation Indian-American youth culture, see Sunaina Maira's *Desis in the House* (Temple Univ Press: Philadelphia, 2002).

space (Bhabha, 1994) but is always embedded in the dialectic between the presumably divergent pathways of assimilation and ethnic authenticity (Maira, 2002: 16).

Apu: It is clear from our interviews that second-generation Indian-Americans do not derive pleasure from the stock narratives of Hindi films. In fact, all of them were highly critical of Hindi films as being formulaic, repetitive, excessively melodramatic, and completely unrealistic.

Swami: Well, for starters, none of them, with the exception of Sandeep, understand Hindi enough to get the jokes or follow what's going on without subtitles.

Apu: None of them have any illusions of "understanding" the films anyway. As kids, parents translated for them, but they lost interest as they began interacting more with American and in Neeti's case, British pop culture. With Hollywood movies as a point of comparison, all of them were scathing in their criticism of Hindi films.

Swami: It was more than annoying at times...when they would keep on about how the films are so not realistic. They aren't meant to be...at least not in the sense of depicting life as it is...how clever do you have to be to get that?

Apu: I have to admit that was irritating. But try looking at it from their perspective. Consider what Sandeep said:

As a kid, I did not draw a difference between the India I was observing and what I was watching in the movies. It changed though...when I visited India once. I remember sitting in a cab in New Delhi watching a little girl, severely deformed, come up to the cab and beg for five paise. That shocked me...I'd see nothing like that in the movies I'd seen. I was also getting turned off by the visual excesses - the mansions, the ridiculously huge houses...this wasn't the way my Uncle lives in New Delhi...this is not the way my grandmom lived in Punjab.

Swami: Oh that's nice...anyone can come up with that story of a little girl...

Apu: Come on, don't be so cynical. You have to quit judging people we interview...

Swami: I know...sorry, go on.

Apu: Once second-generation youth reach college, they discover a community of students with more or less similar backgrounds, with comparable stories of growing up 'Indian' in the U.S. Away from home for the first time, many of them begin exploring not just coursework concerning multiculturalism/postcolonial literature/south Asian studies and so on, but in a more lived way...

Swami: Like the clothes they wear, Indian clothes in public...imitating Black hip-hop styles...joining frats and sororities...working part-time...joining different campus groups like the Hindu Students Council, the South Asian Students Association...doing volunteer work at local high schools...

A-f: The experiences of Indian-American youth call for a theory of identity in cultural practice that transcends old binaries of essentialization and hybridity, while still being able to encompass both possibilities as aspects of the lived realities of social actors. Using Jeanette Mageo's (1995) notion of "dialogic cohesiveness", Sunaina Maira argues that second-generation youth are able to draw on models of personhood that are based on stability and authenticity of cultural elements in some situations and to embrace identities that emphasize fluidity and multiplicity at other moments (Maira, 2002: 195).

Apu: I would like to argue that second-generation youth tap into the inherent transmedial nature of Hindi films to strike a deal between the 'ethnic authenticity' learned at home, during weekends, and their experiences as racial minorities in mainstream institutions of the U.S. As Ritu said, she doesn't watch Hindi films to be close to India. Paul, for instance, was emphatic in his saying he watched Hindi films to situate himself in a community of Indian-American fans, and not to derive ideas concerning life in India:

I pick out a few things I like and follow up on that, like songs and posters...I have a lot of posters in my room, of Aishwarya. See, like *Mohabbatein*, it was pretty entertaining even though it was empty, I agree. People like me, who watch movies for cool dances...actresses are pretty and that's what I watch the movies for.

Apu: Discovering a community of peers with similar experiences and comparable backgrounds, college life affords second-generation Indian-Americans space, and an opportunity, away from the watchful eyes of their parents, to distance themselves from a taught 'Indianness'.

A-f: This ability to view their culture "from the outside" (Roosens, 1989:151) is a crucial precondition to nostalgia, which, according to Stewart, "sets in motion a dialectic of closeness and distantiation" (Stewart, 1992: 253).

Apu: It is this fruitful tension engendered by a re-appraisal of their 'ethnicity' that lies at the heart of second-generation youth's listening, appreciating, appropriating and performing Hindi film songs and dances, all in an effort to 'translate' between cultural worlds.

A-f: Like Bhabha says: By translation, I first mean a process by which, in order to objectify cultural meaning, there always has to be a process of alienation and of secondariness in relation to itself (1990:210).

Swami: The culture shows...India Night in Athens...and in the many colleges and universities in Boston.

Apu [reaching for the tape recorder]: Here, listen to this...this is Paul.

Swami [laughing]: That's you pretending you can sing...since when did you start recording your own wonderful voice? I know you know carnatic music and all...but that was more than 10 or 12 years back...

Apu [trying to look offended]: Here's the right one.

Paul: I was hanging out a lot with Indians who shared an interest in these films and music...almost every night for two hours we would be together. It was a new phase in my cultural awareness you could say...the jokes were in Hindi, jokes about Indians, talking in Indian accents, eating at Indian restaurants, take out, the whole conversation would be about actors and actresses...it was a whole different experience to be with a bunch of Indians, someone of your own race as opposed to back in high school where I was the token Indian, the token brown person. So yeah, the culture show tickets are always sold out.

Apu: These shows do not just create an occasion for a group of second-generation youth to toy with their 'Indianness'; performances at cultural shows, with dazzling costumes and elaborate, beautifully choreographed reproductions of chart-topping Hindi film song-and-dance routines are not just a pretext for these youth to re-think and enact their 'Indianness' - for the scores of parents witnessing their children 'perform Indianness', these shows are a way of reassuring them that their India is indeed alive in every multiethnic college campus in the U.S.

A-f: ...It is here, to borrow from Partha Chatterjee, that nationalism launches its most powerful, creative, and historically significant project: to fashion a "modern" national culture that is nevertheless not Western. If the nation is an imagined community, then this is where it is brought into being (1993:6).

Apu: An in-depth analysis of these cultural shows is beyond what we can attempt here (see Kavoori & Joseph, 2000, 2002; Mukhi, 1998; Maira, 2002). My intention in speaking about the culture show was to illustrate how Hindi film songs are extricated from their original narrative context, and 'poached' to the extent that they come to symbolize 'tradition' in the diaspora, while staying in dialogue with the first-generation.

A-f: Across a whole range of cultural forms there is a 'syncretic' dynamic which critically appropriates elements from the master-codes of the dominant culture...disarticulating given signs and re-articulating their symbolic meaning (Mercer, 1988: 57).

Swami: Every parent we interviewed said they always encouraged their kids to participate in these shows...makes it easier, they said, to get the kids to wear Indian clothes, learn some Hindi, and along the way, perhaps pick up some 'heritage' as well. Funny part is, Hindi films become 'tradition' here in the diaspora...in India, my parents, and millions of others, would heap scorn on any such idea!

A-f: Ethnic authenticity becomes commodified through the use of various objects that come to stand in for tradition, such as clothing, and through cultural practices of consumption involving food or music that are part of a cultural economy of nostalgia (Maira, 2002: 117).

Swami: Hmm...that A-f makes sense.

Apu: Glad you think this isn't abstruse academic speak...but why the lost look?

Swami: I was thinking about what you said earlier - that there is, in fact, a zone where the two generations' interactions with Hindi cinema intersect. Going by the different ways in which each generation derives pleasure from these movies, one wouldn't think that.

Apu: I agree, it is not readily apparent.

Swami [getting up and stretching]: And the discussions we've had so far - each one of these sections could be a detailed chapter. Listen, can we go upstairs? I like the terrace...few houses in this country have a terrace. And we've been at this table for way too long...its almost evening.

Apu [shutting down the laptop]: I think so too - if we had had more time to hang out with the families in our sample and develop close relationships with some of them, our data would allow for a much richer interpretation. But like I keep reminding myself, consider this a map whose purpose is to point to interesting features and provide clues for others to explore the terrain in greater detail. And yeah, it is so much nicer to smoke on the terrace.

CUT TO:

The terrace, with a partial view of the Charles river and skyscrapers in downtown Boston. Apu picks up a rag and starts dusting the table and chairs while Swami stands at the far end of the terrace, looking at little sailboats on the water.

Apu [nearly shouting]: I just had an idea to get us started on the final section. Can you go downstairs and get the laptop and a couple of DVDs from my room?

Swami: Which ones?

Apu: Get *DDLJ* and *K3G*...actually, get *Bollywood/Hollywood* as well.

Swami: What's the idea?

Apu: Just get them and oh, pick up my A-f printouts as well - they're on the table.

CHAPTER V

Hold On, Let Go: Negotiating and Circumscribing Indian-ness

Apu [trying to decide which trailer to play first]: You were right in saying connections between responses to films and notions of Indianness are not readily apparent. The trick lies not so much in figuring out how to elicit responses from people regarding their 'reception' of Hindi films, as paying close attention to how they speak about Hindi films through their experiences living as Indians in the diaspora.

A-f: As Mankekar discovered in her study of television viewers in India: I was astonished by how frequently viewers linked their favorite serials with their lives: it seemed to be the easiest way for many of them to discuss not just what they watched but, more significant, their own experiences (Mankekar, 1993: 553)

Swami: I buy that. If someone were to interview me about how my watching Hindi films leads to ideas concerning Indianness in the diaspora, I would find it incredibly difficult to give them a proper answer. So yeah, I agree, to think about reception in such direct fashion will only result in a number of cliched responses. And I have to say, cliches is what we got in our first few interviews...but we improved.

A-f: In fact, Juluri's reception study of one particular Hindi film - *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun* - adds to what Mankekar says. He uses the term 'relational' to speak of reception: I use 'relational' in the context of reception not to indicate the 'connection' between text and viewer, but to emphasize the aspects of meaning in general that pertain to relationships, in the text and in the context of viewers' own lives (Juluri, 1999: 246).

Apu: So, I want to begin with a hypothesis - the life stories we heard, and the films that sparked those stories, take family relations as a central theme around which to rehearse, and re-work accepted and disputed notions of Indianness in the diaspora. And the 'India' that is thus imagined

is a highly circumscribed one, with many crucial omissions. Here, let's start with a trailer of *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham* (Happiness at times, sorrow at times), a.k.a, K3G.

Swami's POV:

A family picture fades in: the perfect family - 2 sons, beautiful daughters-in-law, happy parents. As Lata Mangeshkar's voice croons the title song of the movie, six words fade in: It's All About Loving Your Family. The trailer begins with an aerial view of a mansion that could be anywhere in the world (seems like England though). Inside, diwali (a Hindu festival) is being celebrated with great pomp and splendour: young Indian men and women involved in a typical, elaborately choreographed dance. Cuts to shots of one set of young lovers writhing in passionate embrace in the deserts of Egypt, or so it seems from the pyramids that frame their sexy bodies. Cut to the mansion: close-up of concerned father, clearly unhappy with his son's choice. Cut to London: Shots of the second set of lovers, both dressed in designer apparel, dancing to a catchy song in a nightclub. Cut back to concerned parents: father slaps the older son, mother crying inconsolably at the idea of her son leaving home forever. Cut to London again: the estranged family meets in a shopping mall. Back to mansion that could be anywhere in the world: entire family, reunited, with their differences behind them, dancing to a song and coming together in the same embrace that the trailer begins with.

Apu: What'd you think?

Swami: I've seen the movie twice, why did you want me to watch the trailer?

Apu: Because we don't have the time to get into a detailed analysis of the representational strategies that speak to how Indianness in the diaspora is shaped in dialogue with such movies.

But we can make do with a trailer for now. Anyway, tell me, what struck you about the trailer?

Swami: The phrase - it's all about loving your family.

Apu: And what did families in our sample say when we asked them what in Hindi movies appealed to them?

Swami [sitting down next to Apu]: Hmm...they all said they liked the way Hindi movies portrayed relationships between parents and children. And please, I can't stand that smug look on your face for too long...

Apu [laughing]: But you're right. Here are a couple of them:

Kuldip: We like the stories, family stories, how children live and behave with parents, how life is like in India, how parents sacrifice for children, and how children take care of their parents when they grow up.

Aparna: I like the fact that the movies always show respect to elders, a nice sense of family, movies where you see sacrifices being made, it helps the children stay connected to Indian way of life, you know. Like K3G, I like the story where one brother leaves the family but the other one unites the whole family again, it is very emotional you know and it is nice to tell our kids here about family values in India.

Swami: For me, Neeti's parents' reaction to Hindi movie is one that resonates with the idea of 'relationality' in a very strong fashion. Listening to Mythili and Vinod Rao talk about movies that dealt with life in the diaspora...

Mythili: Yes, I remember, that was a good movie. I think there is some truth and things like that happen. There are parents who are like that...very orthodox...they will not accept children making their own choices.

Vinod: I think parents everywhere have such concerns and if they are not aware from the beginning, they pay the price in the end.

Swami: ...their comments, I believe, were a function of Neeti, their daughter, opting to live on her own, something first generation Indian families have had to deal with in the U.S.

Apu: That's a great example! Further, every movie that was referenced during the interviews deals with the notion of Indianness by defining the Indian family system and its values as the essence of being Indian. Families' choice of movies gives us a clue - no violence, no vulgarity,

only movies that are *for* and *about* a family are rented¹⁴. While the Hindi film industry has dealt with an astonishing range of themes over the past decade, the films that do well in the diaspora are surprisingly limited to the 'family' genre, or, as some call it, the 'NRI' genre (NRI - Non Resident Indians).

A-f: Speaking of two of the biggest blockbusters in the diaspora (*Pardes* and *DDLJ*), Uberoi says: Both are love stories, involving Indians settled abroad. And both identify a specific set of 'family values' with the essence of being Indian. Or, to put it the other way around, both define Indianness with reference to specificities of family life, the institutions of courtship and marriage in particular... whether at home or abroad, it is the *Indian family system* that is recognized as the social institution that quintessentially defines being 'Indian' (Uberoi, 199X: 163-64).

Swami: I loved *DDLJ*, and have mixed feelings about *K3G*, but ended up enjoying the songs immensely, and even cried during the last 10 or 15 minutes of the movie. But yes, I sense the direction in which you are headed: the important, and urgent, project lies in uncovering crucial omissions that are made by movies and people who watch them and how, in the process, a middle to upper-middle-class, sanitized vision of India - an India no longer plagued by political, economic and socio-cultural problems of every imaginable kind - becomes the only available understanding of India in the diaspora. And you thought I couldn't speak like you?!

Apu: So you would say that of *K3G*?

Swami: Oh absolutely... if you ask me to comment on what's most striking about the 'India' that is constructed in movies like that, I'd say - the money, the women, and to an extent, religion. The opulence, to start with - the mansion, as you pointed out, could be anywhere in the world.

Servants for every imaginable chore, children attend posh boarding schools, the hero arrives for a *diwali* celebration in a private chopper, the working class girl the hero falls in love with wears designer clothes as well, chandni chowk - the area in Delhi this girl lives in - its nothing like the

¹⁴ See Uberoi (2001) for a detailed analysis of how *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun* was a movie that set a trend in 'family-oriented' movies.

actual chandni chowk - who are they kidding? The NRIs, I suppose...no signs whatsoever of the abject poverty and its attendant hardships in India or among Indians in the U.S.

A-f: Such gestures of systematic erasure are themselves significant 'social facts', contributing to the construction of a utopian vision of a social order (Uberoi, 1998: 173).

Apu: Aparna and Ajit's comments were striking:

Aparna: Its fun, I think the whole movie industry is changing. The movies are no longer in sets in India, they go abroad, beautiful scenery...here, Canada, Australia. Like that movie *Kaho Na Pyar Hai*, they rented this huge yacht and it was the only ship they could find in the world that suited their purposes.

Ajit: I like the fact that they are spending money and doing the dances well, including the costumes, the colors, the settings, the background dancers, everything.

Apu: So what kind of 'India' do your kids see in these movies?

Ajit: The kids did not like India when we went there a few years back. They don't want to go back there. Perhaps they will go back when they are older but for now, it is up to us to keep things Indian at home. See, we know that Hindi movies are this la-la-land, nothing realistic about them. But they have a role to play...movies like *City of Joy* are not what we need here, movies that show the real India. We don't want to see the *gandhgi* (filth) all the time...

Aparna: We don't want the kids to watch all that. You know, like how women are treated in India, sometimes they portray in a bad way. We want to watch movies that are romantic, loving kind of movies.

A-f: Wealth is effortlessly acquired, and accepted without guilt, an effect achieved both through the display of the fetishized objects of the capitalist economy, promised in unlimited abundance, and through the consistent erasure of the signs of labor and poverty. Plenitude is convincingly naturalized (Uberoi, 2001: 333).

Apu: Our exchange with Sodhi indicates not only his deep-rooted dissatisfaction with Hindi movies' turn to 'presenting narratives of an eternal, idyllic India' (Ram, 1999: 142), but also the fact that working-class Indian immigrants are evidently not of concern to the transnational Indian

elite class. When I asked him why he no longer subscribed to Indian channels via satellite television:

Sodhi: Whatever they show on TV about people and life, it is always the good aspects, only moments in life that work out well, they hardly show or speak about the hardships and difficulties that one faces and goes through in life. Why? You tell me, what do you face more? Good times or hardships?

Apu: Well, it depends on circumstances, but I like to think most people face both hardships and good times.

Sodhi: Right, but don't you think one has to work very hard to make that balance? One has to really struggle to experience good times in life, isn't it? And why is that not shown on TV in all these movies and all?

Apu: Sandeep's was the sole voice that criticized Bombay cinema's 'claustrophobic leveling of narrative and dramatic possibilities' (Bharucha, 1995; Uberoi, 2001: 313)

A-f: and 'normalizing the mutual dependence of wealth and happiness' (Juluri, 1999: 240) when he spoke wistfully of movies like *Deewar* and commended Mira Nair's *Monsoon Wedding* for being honest about its intentions.

Swami: I have no problem when people like these romantic, feel-good movies. I do too. The problem is, none of the families we spoke to mentioned *any* others. Like *Bombay*, which dealt with the Hindu-Muslim riots, or *Satya*, which told a story about gang-warfare in Mumbai, or *Chandni Bar* which dealt with lives of bar girls, or *Sarfaroosh*, a pulp thriller with cops and cross-border smuggling, even *Ghulam*, a pot-boiler about a boxer in a working class neighbourhood, wasn't mentioned. You know, when you asked Asha what was 'Indian' about *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai*, she said:

Oh yeah, it was too fancy, the classrooms, the clothes were all high-end fashion brands...but then again, it was a Hindi movie so you don't expect anything completely real.

Swami: Makes one wonder if this critique of Hindi movies as being unrealistic has been internalized to the extent that Indian families routinely hide behind this statement and refuse to see how limited an 'India' their kids end up seeing. And later, when you went out with Sandeep, Asha and Sachin started talking about their last trip to India, ten years ago, and Asha said: I don't ever want to go back to a third world country again. Made me very sad...but I don't fully understand why families that don't identify with such lifestyles continue to watch these movies.

Apu: For some, it might very well be a question of fantasy - Yogesh, whose immigrant status is still in question, and Chatterjee's or Parmar's family, who barely manage to meet expenses, had nothing critical to say about the lavish spectacles in movies such as *K3G*. Another reason is the break that movies like *HAIK*, *DDLJ*, and *K3G* represent from the standard Bollywood formula fare of gory violence and excessive vulgarity (Uberoi, 2001). But the most effective explanation can be arrived at by conceptualizing this particular genre of movies - the family oriented melodramas - as "consensus narratives" (Thorburn, 1987).

Apu: But let's consider gender representations in these movies - you said that was problematic as well - and then come back to this idea

Swami [nodding vigorously]. So many instances. First, the nature of Jaya's relationship with her husband, Amitabh. Not only does she have little or no say in any decision-making process, one steely look from him silences her into submission. It is only towards the end of the movie that she retaliates, but by then, she has lived most of her life. While this portrayal may seem perfectly in line with 'Indian' families on the subcontinent, particularly for the older generation of viewers, I am surprised none of the younger women we interviewed spoke about this.

Also, once the story moves to London, the role women are expected to play in Indian expatriate families becomes very clear. In London, Kajol is clearly responsible for maintaining an 'Indian' home, including ensuring that children are well schooled in their 'tradition'. In addition to performing an elaborate puja (worship/ritual) every morning, she is up before everyone else, showered, and ready to serve breakfast (north Indian food) for her husband (who works and

brings home the money) and son. As she mills around, she begins singing an old, patriotic Hindi film song, chastising her son for not being attached enough to India. The scene borders on the comical, but Kajol's riposte to her son's indifference to India is interesting. Turning to her husband, she says: He's already half English, don't complain to me if he becomes entirely English.

But the best part is Kareena Kapoor's role as Kajol's sister ('Pu', short for Puja). Dressed in an atrociously short skirt and top that reveals more than it covers, she sashays down the stairs, and speeds away to college in a cool convertible. Women born and raised in the diaspora become westernized and are bound to dress this way, needlessly parading their sexuality, is the intended message.

Apu: Is it?

Swami: Let me finish. Once she meets Hrithik, and falls in love with him - after a really sexy dance in a nightclub - her wardrobe undergoes a complete makeover and all we see Pu wearing for the rest of the movie is traditional, Indian clothes with no hint of her gorgeous body. As if India is sending forth her sons to save her daughters from the debauched West! How else would you understand Hrithik's arrival in London to the strains of *Vande Mataram* (a song composed and used as defining an Indian national identity during the freedom struggle)?!

Apu [laughing]: You're all fired up about Pu! But there are at least two important themes in your account that emerged in our interviews as well.

A-f: Mankekar draws attention to the 'metonymy of family and nation in representations of diaspora and homeland in order to examine how its construction of discourses of belonging and nationhood are fundamentally gendered and heterosexualized' (1999: 734).

Apu: In every family we interviewed, it is the mothers who watch Hindi films with their children, translating for them, explaining, as Asha said, 'all the Indian customs and traditions'. Moreover, none of the women we interviewed held full-time jobs. Recall the home v. outside dichotomy?

A-f: Prashad writes: The desi woman emerges within this logic as the repository of tradition, and as long as she is able to reproduce "India" in the home, she too is encouraged to go out and work...the woman is here responsible, in large measure, for preventing the acculturation of the children, a heavy burden in a society far more complex than this simple and sexist separation of domains is allowed to bear (Prashad, 2000: 105).

Swami: Hmm...and another thing - all these women are shown performing *only* Hindu rituals!

Apu: Everyone, without exception, spoke easily of Hindu culture as Indian culture. Discussing *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai*, Asha said:

In these movies, we get a glimpse of Indian culture. Like in *KKHH*, they have a grandmother with a group of women in religious class, then they have the *barsi* (death anniversary) which is very Indian, and then all the wedding functions.

Apu: Our sample limits what we can infer here - we did not speak with families who were Sikh, Muslim, Christian, Parsi or followed other religious beliefs.

A-f: But Ram doesn't seem to hesitate. Using Zelizer's term 'retrospective nominalism', she argues: One of the crucial ways in which Hindi cinema assists in acts of forgetting is in its portrayal of Indian identity as Hindu identity. By rewriting national identity through Hindu rituals, the lines between "Hindu-ness and Indian-ness" get blurred and start to overlap...secular definitions are arrested in favor of hegemonic conceptions of nationhood (Ram, 1999: 136, 146).

Apu: To get back to what I said earlier, conceptualizing these melodramatic, family-oriented movies as consensus narratives explain how the nation that is imagined is a very selective one, with many crucial omissions.

A-f: Thorburn defines consensus narrative: Consensus narrative operates at the very center of the life of its culture and is in consequence almost always deeply conservative in its formal structures and in its content. Its assignment is to articulate the culture's central mythologies, in a widely accessible language, an inheritance of shared stories, plots, character types, cultural symbols, and narrative conventions. Such language is popular because it is legible to the common

understanding of a majority of the culture...but the central story forms have a special significance, partly because they appeal across boundaries of class and wealth and age and gender, affecting to speak to everyone and partly because their status as entertainment and fiction licenses forms or degrees of expression that are otherwise prohibited (1987: 168).

Apu: In this case, the consensus that emerges in the diaspora is a function of both the values cherished by one particular social class - the professional class of desi immigrants - and Bombay cinema's interpretation and rehearsal of these values.

A-f: As Vijay Mishra points out, 'what we need to address is Bombay cinema's own complicity in both pandering to the diaspora and its constructing an imaginary diaspora for the people of the diaspora themselves' (2002: 269).

Apu: This consensus is certainly not arrived at in dialogue with a diverse and representative group of people, espousing a range of values and beliefs. However, that is not to say that the consensus may very well be fragmented - we have had glimpses of how second-generation youth work understand and subvert this consensus of 'tradition', 'authenticity', and particularly, notions of 'womanhood'. Further, a research strategy that integrates textual analyses of a corpus of films with viewer interpretations (Mankekar, 1999) would more effectively address how a consensus regarding 'Indianness' is arrived at in the diaspora.

Swami [looking at his watch]: I suppose so...but one thing is for sure. After this exercise, I won't be able to watch Hindi films with my mind completely turned off...

Apu: I've thought that myself, but trust me, Hindi films have a way with every imaginable audience member.

A-f: As Lalitha Gopalan says: there is no doubt that we learn a great deal from vigilant readings of cinema's hegemonic influence that reveal its power to affirm ethnic stereotyping, sexism, and jingoism, and caution us against being taken in by its dazzling surface. But all too often we tend to pay too little attention to questions of pleasure. Inasmuch as we assume that commercial films maintain the status quo, suppressing all radical possibilities in their viewers, we must also admit

that filmmakers are constantly inviting us to return to the movies through novel cinematic approaches (Gopalan, 2002: 11).

Swami [stretching]: How about watching Pu dance before you shut down your computer?

FADE OUT.

CONCLUSION

Int. Bedroom.

Your POV:

Swami, picking up DVDs from the floor, putting them into their covers.

Apu, at the desk: Want to take a look at my concluding notes?

Swami: Just read them out while I get this room in order...

Apu's Voice:

Brokering Cultural Identity situated this endeavor within a larger theoretical domain of globalization, technologies of communication, and migration. What is the relationship between cultural space and geographical place? Beginning with this question, the chapter traced discussions on cultural identity in an age of increasingly global flows of people, commodities and capital. Building on theoretical work by scholars such as Appadurai, Hannerz, and Gupta & Ferguson, we introduced the notion of de-territorialization and its influence on people's lives around the world as one of the central features of globalization. Pointing to the call for studies that focus on *re*-territorialization - of reconstructing a sense of cultural identity - and the role of media flows in the process, we then discussed the case of the Indian-American diaspora, transnational flows of Hindi cinema, and posed the research question: in what ways do Hindi films mediate constructions of Indianness in the diaspora?

Having established the centrality of Hindi films in the Indian-American mediascape, the next chapter, *Beginning to Arrive*, outlined a strategy for understanding viewing practices and audience interpretations. Engaging with contemporary discussions on the relevance of ethnography for understanding media audiences, we suggested there are ways to overcome obstacles in studying terrain that is anything but a traditional, bounded locality. In doing so, the chapter also tackled criticism of postcolonial scholarship that celebrates 'hybridity', arguing that it is possible to develop research strategies that take into account multiple contexts while remaining

focused on how those contexts are influenced by macro-social structures. This chapter also included details of the research process and profiles of the ten families interviewed for this study.

Swami [barely paying attention]: Sounds fine to me.

Apu: *From the Backyard to the Bazaar* tracked changes in viewing practices over several decades. Based on interviews with families, conversations with the owner of an Indian cinema theater in Boston, and Indian grocery stores in the region, this chapter traced changes in viewing practices in terms of access, setting, and choice of movies, from the late 1960s to present times.

Masalas and More was an examination of how different generations of Indian Americans engage with the cultural ecology of Hindi cinema. The chapter began by suggesting Hindi films play a *bardic* role; that is, Hindi films, by virtue of being *the* dominant storytelling mass-medium in and of post-independence India, are seen as repositories of Indian culture, possessing tremendous cultural and emotional value for Indians in the diaspora. In dialogue with Swami, I argued that Hindi film viewing in the diaspora is an activity that allows Indians to sustain a confidence that they are an integral part of a national community, that they remain 'cultural residents' of India. We then go on to detail how second-generation Indian-Americans' positions in the racial economy of the U.S influence their consumption of Hindi films and film music. In the final chapter, juxtaposing responses to films that were referenced during the interviews, we discuss the relationship between representational strategies and viewers' interpretations, and how that leads to the construction of a highly circumscribed understanding of Indian-ness in the diaspora.

Silence.

Swami [looking up]: Now that you're done writing a draft of the thesis, if you were to re-do this, what would you do differently?

Apu: Well, like I said earlier, time was a constraint. It would have been immensely valuable if we had had a chance to spend time with Indian-American families apart from the formal, interview setting.

Swami: But you said this was meant to be a mapping exercise.

Apu: I know I did...I said this project was designed to examine viewing practices and interpretations of Hindi films among a small sample of ten Indian immigrant families. I also said they would be drawn from two different social positions - (a) the educated, professional and affluent class (doctors, scientists, software professionals, consultants, etc.), and (b) less educated, working class (owners and employees of grocery & convenience stores, gas stations, motels & restaurants, etc.).

Swami: We certainly did not get a representative sample; not just in terms of numbers, but in terms of regional and linguistic diversity. It would have been very interesting to interview families who watch Tamil and Hindi films, for example.

Apu: I also said, given the complexity of the issue of class in general, and especially its intersections with caste, religion, and other variables in the Indian context, the findings in this study will be treated not so much as a class-based comparison of reception, but instead as an attempt to situate reception in a social and historical context that is marked by profound differences in access to privilege at the local, national and transnational levels.

Swami: Sounded good when I first read it...

Apu: I am not sure our interpretation did justice to that claim. And then there is the issue of generation and gender in the Indian-American diaspora - both very under-examined areas. And of course, methodologically, we ought to have combined our interpretations of interviews with close-readings of a number of films that came up often during the interviews - that would have lent strength to our inferences, and, perhaps more important, helped readers unfamiliar with Hindi cinema understand the terrain better. And the form...

Swami: It was an experiment.

Apu: At best. But on a positive note, I think we did manage to establish popular culture as a crucial site for exploring how identities are communicatively constituted in the Indian diaspora. Arguing that cinema viewing constitutes one of the most culturally visible arenas of activity in

the Indian diaspora, a topic that is just beginning to attract scholarly attention, we traced changes in viewing practices over the decades - something few have done. In speaking with and for families leading working-class lives, we have, I like to think, created a starting point for larger debates and contests over several contentious issues that reveal anxieties of Indian immigrants from diverse social positions.

Swami: Do you realize you talk like you write?

Apu [ignoring Swami]: By juxtaposing responses from more than two generations of Indian-American immigrants, we highlighted the importance of thinking through media reception not in terms of 'first' or 'second' generation, but rather, through specific life stories.

Swami: And I was particularly struck by how reception, in the case of Hindi cinema, is really not about meaning; it is, our stories emphatically said, about relationships between viewers' lives and film texts. It is about what we felt sitting outside the U.S. Consulate in Chennai, four years back. Let's leave it on that note, shall we? And head over to Shalimar and return these DVDs before the aunty there decides to come home and get them!

Apu, nodding, picks up his wallet and heads towards the door.

FADE OUT.

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