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## Dreaming in Canadian



*Faiza Hirji*

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**Dreaming in Canadian  
South Asian Youth, Bollywood,  
and Belonging**



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*For my parents, whose courage and faith brought us here.*



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# Note on Transliteration

Words and names in Arabic, Hindi, and other languages recur throughout this work, presented differently in various sources. For direct quotations, I have retained the spelling used by the cited author. In other cases, I have chosen the spellings that appear to be the most standardized, although I recognize that native writers and readers of each language may not see these as the most exact renderings. As much as possible, I have attempted to maintain consistency in spellings of film titles, actor names, and religious and cultural terms in order to simplify the reading of this text.

The participants in this study were kind enough to provide me with names and spellings of their favourite movies. In a few cases, I have found alternate spellings that I believe to be the standard spellings and have thus utilized these rather than the ones provided. Many of the movies cited throughout this study have either been released under English titles or can be translated, and where possible I have provided these English names in parentheses following the Hindi title. However, in some cases, the title merely refers to the name of a character (e.g., *Veer-Zaara*) or may be interpreted in a number of different ways. In the first case, I have usually refrained from adding any explanation unless the character's name may signify an additional meaning (e.g., the title *Fiza* refers to the heroine but can also be translated as "Air" or its various synonyms). In the second case, I have offered the translation I believe to be the most apt, but this is generally based on information provided by other sources, including academic works, Web-based databases such as the Internet Movie Database, and more informal references such as friends or family.



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## Dreaming in Canadian



# Introduction:

## How Canadian Are You? Mapping Nationalism, Media, and Self

*Visible-minority immigrants are slower to integrate into Canadian society than their white, European counterparts, and feel less Canadian, suggesting multiculturalism doesn't work as well for non-whites, according to a landmark report. (Jiménez 2007, A1)*

*It's not that Canadians don't see racism; in the CRIC-Globe and Mail survey, two-thirds said they believe it is still a problem. But University of Victoria sociologist Francis Adu-Febiri said young people ... will be less willing to accept it as the status quo. "They were born here," he said. "They see themselves as involuntary minorities [unlike their parents] and full Canadians." (Valpy and Anderssen 2003, A6)*

In 1998 my sister returned home after viewing a Bollywood movie in one of the local theatres. In Vancouver it was fairly common at that time to watch popular Indian movies in specialized theatres, but it was extremely rare in our family. Although our ancestry is Indian, my parents and my older sisters were born in East Africa and had called Canada home since 1974. Born and raised in Vancouver, I couldn't identify sufficiently with another nationality to really understand why people so often asked the inevitable questions: "Where are you from?" "What is your nationality?" "What is your ethnicity?" "What is your background?"

Our Indian heritage was not something we considered often; indeed, although we all spoke or understood certain Indian dialects and carried on a few South Asian traditions during weddings or prayers, such as wearing henna or burning incense, we did not consider ourselves Indian. Unlike some of my aunts and uncles, we rarely watched Bollywood films and in fact had difficulty understanding them, as even my parents were not – and still are not – conversant in Hindi. Moreover, we found the stories to be absurd for the most part, littered with unrealistic action sequences, featuring

unattractive heroes, and showcasing questionable production values, unfocused pictures, abrupt changes in setting, or overly dramatic acting. The few Indian movies that I remembered from my childhood were either black and white, with the heroines wearing saris and the heroes sporting mustaches, or bright and garish, with the characters trapped in 1970s fashions. Raised on a steady diet of *Charlie's Angels*, *General Hospital*, and *Dynasty*, with an admittedly limited frame of reference for Indian cinema, I thought that these mainstream American amusements were far superior to anything that Bollywood could produce. The song-and-dance sequences that everyone else enjoyed meant nothing to me – I couldn't understand the words and found some of the slow-moving melodies depressing, as I did many of the films themselves. Long, melodramatic, and filled with the romantic angst of star-crossed lovers, often capped off with an untimely death, they made little impression on my youthful mind. At the urging of relatives, we had watched one or two films at home and had found them mildly enjoyable, but for the most part we preferred the viewing material of our friends, shows such as *Beverly Hills 90210*, *Friends*, and *ER*.

On this particular day, however, my sister came home full of enthusiasm. She had watched a film that, she assured me, I would love. The storyline was overwhelmingly romantic; the acting of Shah Rukh Khan, Kajol, and the film's child star was heartwarming; the songs were beautiful; and this film, she told me, wasn't like the ones we had watched in our childhood. Despite her shaky grasp of Hindi, she and her non-Indian viewing companion had understood the plot without difficulty. Moreover, there was, she suggested, something modern about this particular film.

The film was *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* (KKHH; 1998), and as my sister had commented, it did indeed contain nods to modernity. Having received a copy on VHS, we screened it at home, dependent on my mother's tentative translations for a better understanding of the dialogue and even the title. Since none of us understood Hindi fluently, several years passed before I confirmed that the title translated as "Something Happens."

Something did happen that day. Although I had never felt the slightest temptation to engage with Bollywood films before then, I did recognize in *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* a film that I could relate to – at least partly. The plot was still unrealistic and there was broad slapstick humour, but the action sequences were gone. Both the hero and the two heroines were attractive and appealing. As they metamorphosed from teens to adult women, the two lead actresses began wearing saris and salwars, but in the early scenes they wore jeans and miniskirts. The uniformity that I remembered (rightly or wrongly) from my childhood was gone: the tightly wound hair, the dark hair and dark eyes, and the conservative fashions had given way to more diversity, with the presence of light-eyed, fair-skinned actresses countering the classic aesthetic of dark eyes, hair, and skin. Shah Rukh Khan, already a



Bollywood icon by that time, also looked different, wearing Western suits, speaking a combination of Hindi and English slang, and engaging in familiar pursuits such as basketball. Only later would I question the reason for this shift – at the time, I merely enjoyed it. For young people like me, with a South Asian heritage and a North American upbringing, such a film provided the best of both worlds. The production values had improved and the settings did not seem foreign – indeed, only later did I realize that the rolling hills and camp playgrounds were practically and purposely generic. The songs were typically melodramatic but enjoyable, and they merited repeat listening.

I didn't know it then, but I was displaying a tendency that was common among young people of South Asian origin living in the diaspora. For many people of my generation, the turning point had actually been the 1994 film *Hum Aapke Hain Koun* (*HAHK*; Who Am I to You?), a Bollywood blockbuster that moved away from the violent gangster movies and tragic melodramas that I remembered and instead depicted two happy, middle-class families who moved together through the major rituals of life such as marriage, birth, and death. *Hum Aapke Hain Koun* and its subsequent imitators included lavish depictions of Indian weddings, frequent costume changes, and the usual song-and-dance routines, although the spectacular aspect had been stepped up significantly.

I had not seen *HAHK* and, at that time, had no interest in doing so. *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai*, however, captured my imagination. It was Indian – but modern. The heroine might have switched from denim and skirts to modest saris once she grew up, but the hero wore brands I recognized, such as DKNY. These characters were still different from my own friends and relatives, few of whom wore richly embroidered Indian clothes or participated in Hindu rituals – but not as different as their predecessors had been. As Hansen (2005, 250) points out in an analysis of Bollywood's reception in South Africa, "part of the thrill of *KKHH* was that it presented images of a supposedly Indian form of modernity that many local Indians felt comfortable with, and that it displayed female beauty and elegance."

The attempts to make films such as *HAHK* and *KKHH* modern and interesting to youth living in the diaspora were deliberately thought out by producers who recognized that migration was a fact of South Asian life with real consequences. First-generation migrants might have felt nostalgia for the fashions and music seen in Bollywood films, but the second generation, raised outside of South Asia, might not have been able to identify with characters dressed in Indian clothes or speaking Hindi. By the 1990s the diasporic market was becoming increasingly important to Bollywood film producers. With the astonishing worldwide success of the film *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (*The Lover Takes the Bride*, 1995), Bollywood began increasingly to market its wares to young people living outside of India.

In itself, *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* did not turn me into a Bollywood devotee – in fact, I never really did become one, not in the truest sense. However, it represented a kind of turning point for me. From that time onward, I became increasingly curious about the ways that Bollywood could influence its many viewers and about the ways that Indian media might influence popular culture.

I was no regular viewer of Bollywood, but I was now more familiar with it, and I started to see how aspects of Bollywood were becoming widespread. My mother had told me stories of growing up in Tanzania and being discouraged from wearing Indian clothes, as doing so attracted the ire of the local population and made integration ever more difficult. On settling in Canada, she and many of her contemporaries often continued this policy of blending into mainstream society as much as possible, shunning traditional Indian clothes at work and at home. Even though Indian clothing attained trendy acceptance from time to time, many of the women in our community avoided it except for special occasions, trying to indicate the extent to which they had assimilated. By the time *KKHH* was released, however, Indian clothing was becoming more widely accepted by Canadian women of South Asian origin, including those of my mother's generation. In fact, Indian "culture," whatever that might mean, was becoming attractive to a wide audience and could now be embraced to a certain degree without stigma, although that culture had been hybridized through the marketing apparatus of fashion designers and pop stars. Madonna had apparently discovered it, bringing her version to the masses with the song "Shanti/Ashtangi"; other celebrities soon followed suit.

Indian clothes and jewellery were acquiring a certain cachet, although they continued to be viewed as exotic or unusual. It was now possible to find the kind of look that appealed even to someone like me, previously an avowed enemy of Indian fashions. The garish colours and bright sequins that I remembered from very occasional trips to Vancouver's Main Street in the 1980s or early 1990s were still there. Now, however, these existed alongside the possibility of more fitted tailoring, softer shades, and even some items that could have doubled as outfits for a non-Indian social gathering. It took me some time to realize that perhaps my newly discovered interest – which remained mild compared to that of many of my contemporaries – stemmed from the fact that those fashionable items were less noticeably Indian than before and more in line with a North American ideal that was familiar to me.

As I entered my twenties, when my siblings, other relatives, friends, and I had to start considering how we wanted to mark major rites of passage such as weddings, births, and funerals, I found myself noticing, more and more, the extent to which we had to decide between cultures. Questions arose for this originally South Asian, quasi-African, officially Canadian

woman to consider. What did one wear to a wedding – sari or dress? For one's own wedding, which cultural rituals actually counted as Indian/Muslim/Hindu/Christian, and which ones did I and the groom even understand? When selecting names for a baby, should we be influenced more by the desire to affirm cultural identity than by the desire to provide a name that sounded Anglo-Saxon, thereby improving the odds of mainstream acceptance and correct pronunciation?

Initially, I could produce answers to these questions, but I was never quite satisfied with my responses. As I moved throughout various regions of Canada during my graduate studies and research, I found that many young people of South Asian origin were grappling with similar questions of identity and belonging, regardless of what part of South Asia they were descended from or what religion they practised. Just as I had, these youth were producing responses that were ambiguous, dependent on a number of factors, and in flux. Raised to believe that cultural and religious issues were black and white, with fixed responses, some of us had come to believe that there were few right answers to the questions we were posing. Hybridity, migration, and evolution had occurred in the time of our ancestors and were certainly taking place in our own time, influencing our interpretations of faith, nationalism, and community.

As a budding scholar of international communication, I had maintained a recurring interest in popular Indian cinema, fascinated by various suggestions that the industry offered a source of national pride to audiences with Indian heritage, that its influence was widespread and helped to maintain diasporic Indians' sense of connection to home, and that Bollywood was alternately a stalwart defender of local/Indian culture in the face of American media imperialism, an example of globalized media that incorporated product placement and actors whose appearance was increasingly European, and/or a suppressor of alternative films and dialects that existed apart from Bollywood/Hindustani dominance. Increasingly, however, as I engaged in more discussions of identity and observed confusion about the concept among other young Canadians of South Asian origin, I began to feel that the link between Bollywood and identity construction was worth examining, given that Bollywood offered one of the more consistent windows available into the world of South Asia.

I was not entirely unique in terms of the disinterest and disconnect that had defined my youthful relationship with Indian cinema, but my experience was also not commonplace. Many young Canadians with ethnic origins similar to my own had been raised with popular Indian cinema, either in the background or front and centre. In some cases Indian films had provided the aesthetic and music that shaped their homes, family gatherings, and clothing choices. In others, Bollywood was an occasional presence. Regardless of which was the case, I observed several instances among my peers and

relatives where families seemed to use Indian films as their barometer of what was fashionable, appropriate, or culturally authentic, all the more fascinating since many of the people involved did not have the same ethnic, religious, or class background as the characters in the films.

Although the link seemed difficult to establish clearly, I began to wonder whether Bollywood was providing a key component of identity construction for young people in Canada whose ancestry was South Asian. In particular, as a Muslim who researched questions around Islam and media, I was especially interested in understanding how Bollywood might affect a sense of identity and community for young Muslim Canadians of South Asian origin. A Muslim presence was not new in Canada, but a string of incidents allegedly linking Islam to terrorism in the late 1990s and early twenty-first century had raised recurring questions about young Muslims' ability to find a sense of belonging and integration within this country.

### **Involuntary Minorities? Young Muslim Canadians of South Asian Origin**

Official statistics and our own observations suggest to many Canadians that the country is becoming increasingly multicultural, its foundational Aboriginal-French-English composition giving way to an enormously diverse group of people, including immigrants and their children. The belief that globalization is transforming most countries, Canada among them, contributes to a perception that migration is on the rise and that the developed world will never be the same. This may well be true, although it overlooks the reality that Canada's history is more pluralist than some might acknowledge and that migration is a constant fact of world history.

Similarly, the anxiety that some seem to feel in Canada over the question of immigration leads to many authoritative pronouncements about the future of the country and its citizens (see Bissoondath 2002; Reitz and Banerjee 2007). Particular attention has recently been devoted to the broad category of youth, not only because those who occupy that category constitute the workers and decision makers of the future but also because they are younger and presumably adaptable, have often spent more time in Canadian educational institutions than have their parents, and are thus more apt to be fluent in English or French, to understand Canadian cultural norms, and to possess the necessary training for a productive life in Canada. If the young cannot be integrated, one might suggest, there is little hope that any immigrants can be incorporated fully and meaningfully into Canadian life and the dream of multiculturalism is unmasked as mirage and myth (Jiménez 2007; Reitz and Banerjee 2007). As the epigraphs to this introduction demonstrate, a considerable amount of time has been spent exploring the situation of these youth, yet there are – as I had suspected from my own experience

– no simple answers to whether or not immigrant or minority youth feel a sense of belonging and citizenship in Canada.

A few broad-based studies do exist, such as the cross-generational examination of immigrant life by Reitz and Banerjee cited in Jiménez (2007) and the *Globe and Mail's* series on “The New Canada” summarized in Valpy and Anderssen (2003), as well as the work of the contributors exploring racism, mixed-race identity, and confusion over belonging in Lee and Lutz (2005). Elements of these works, including questions of how to define or achieve a sense of identity, are relevant and have been enfolded into this book, which focuses on the identity construction of young Canadians of South Asian origin, with particular emphasis on Muslims.

Following the kind of informal observations previously described, I went in search of young people for this study, asking them to articulate their identities in nationalist, ethnic, and religious terms and to relate the formation of these to their use of mass media, specifically to Bollywood cinema, a popular Indian export with strong themes around patriotism and religious piety. Their comments in these areas are assessed within a theoretical framework that is unfurled in the opening chapters, covering perspectives on the South Asian diaspora, on constructions of nation, nationalism, and citizenship, and on Canadian multiculturalism. The focus then shifts to identity construction and the role of media in this process, with particular emphasis on the significance of tradition, nation, and faith in Bollywood film. The final chapters discuss the primary research itself and the findings.

The choice of young Canadians of South Asian origin with an emphasis on Muslims stems from a belief that this group is particularly well placed to address intersecting tensions within and challenges to what is sometimes defined as Canadian culture, despite that culture's amorphous and plural nature. South Asians rank among Canada's largest and most visible ethnic minority groups, and Muslims practise Canada's second-largest religion. Despite their high numbers relative to other minorities, however, many events have reminded South Asians and Muslims on more than one occasion that they occupy a marginal position in the overall Canadian population. Karim (1997), Razack (1998), Khan (2000), and Jiwani (2006) all document a long history of stereotyping of these groups, a history that became even more significant following 11 September 2001, when fear of terrorism began to be elided in the media and in policy discourse with a fear of certain religious and ethnic groups, particularly the two under study here (see Siddiqui 2006). Polling data collected months after 11 September suggesting that Canadians were uncomfortable with Islam and with Muslims (cited in Blanchfield 2002; Sevunts 2002; Walton and Kennedy 2002) illustrated that South Asian Muslims occupy a rather uneasy place in Canadian

society, despite Canada's ostensible commitment to pluralism and diversity and despite the fact that both South Asians and Muslims have been part of the Canadian cultural and religious mosaic for many years.

This anxiety over the presence of South Asians and Muslims has only been accentuated by events around the world and at home, including rioting by immigrant youth in the suburbs of Paris, the stabbing of Dutch filmmaker Theo van Gogh by a Muslim man, and the arrest of South Asian Muslim youth in Britain and in Canada for alleged terrorist activity. Events of this kind have taken place during a period when several countries, including Canada, have debated the importance of multiculturalism and flexible policies on immigration and citizenship, particularly in the wake of crises such as the 2006 evacuation of dual citizens from Lebanon during that country's conflict with Israel (Worthington 2006; Aubry 2007; Campbell 2007; Brender 2009). Such events, however, also followed others that had placed the spotlight on Canadian Muslims and/or Canadians of South Asian origin, including Quebec's attempt to limit the practice of *hijab* (veiling), synonymous with the headscarf worn by some Muslim women, as well as use of the kirpan, the knife that some Sikhs consider part of their faith (see Khan 1995; Gagnon 2006; Ferguson 2007). Although this is less relevant in terms of cultural practice, young South Asians have also been the subject of special police task forces and government reports as the City of Vancouver has grappled with the problem of rising crime and violence among South Asian men.

In many respects, then, South Asians and Muslims are not only minorities but also minorities who are sometimes presented in the press or in policy as inherently problematic for their refusal to adapt to mainstream norms. This is not to suggest that South Asians and Muslims do not integrate into Canadian society, conducting themselves as citizens, workers, and neighbours; they can and do. It is, however, to suggest that Canada's official commitment to pluralism and diversity does not guarantee that all of its minorities are completely free at all times to practise their religion and express their ethnicity, and it also highlights that Canadian Muslims of South Asian origin have special challenges before them. Increased political and media attention do not seem to have mitigated these challenges. In some cases, it may have augmented them, accentuating Muslims' and South Asians' difference from the mainstream, presenting a few individual viewpoints as the perspective of the majority, and simplifying religions and cultures rather than explaining them more thoroughly so as to increase public understanding (see Karim 2000).

Muslims and South Asians living in Canada belong to tremendously diverse groups. Muslims who are South Asian can be equally diverse, although they may be particularly marginalized as public attention turns toward an image

of Islam that is associated with Middle Eastern countries, as one participant of Pakistani origin pointed out to me during this study. However, the opposite also holds true: diasporic South Asians of different religious backgrounds may identify more strongly with Muslims who are marginalized than with other minority groups, especially if they are mistaken for Muslims, which did happen in North America following 11 September. In short, they are people who are visibly marked as different, whose cultural practices have been subject to intensive observation and judgment, and who represent a high level of internal diversity, as discussed in subsequent chapters.

Hence, for a number of reasons, these young people present an interesting case for study in the Canadian context, although this work does take into account concerns expressed in other countries over ways to integrate immigrants, particularly Muslims. In some places this concern has expressed itself through a pronounced degree of attention to some Muslim women's practice of veiling or covering themselves, whereas other countries have struggled to contain what they see as the violence and extremism endemic to alienated Muslim men. Many of the cases that have attracted attention have involved youth, and this has raised anxiety levels as governments ask whether their policies on integration or assimilation have failed them. Canada is no stranger to such worry. Since Canada's requirements for human capital, stemming from its declining rate of natural increase, make it unlikely that the flow of immigration or the reproduction of new generations will cease, there is an ongoing question in the minds of educators, politicians, and interested citizens about the best way to merge the disparate elements of a diverse society, and more and more often that question locates itself in relation to minorities such as Muslims and South Asians (Karim 2003; Gardner 2006; Diebel 2007). The way that young Canadians of South Asian origin construct identity and sense of self directly impacts their ability to engage positively in civic life as students, workers, parents, professionals, and voters. In other words, it influences their very status as citizens, people who feel they belong in Canada. This study thus aims to examine the ways that young people belonging to these groups identify themselves and the factors that lead to these forms of identification, specifically mass media and, in particular, the complex, hybrid form of cinema called Bollywood.

### **Seeing the Self: The Role of Media in Identity Construction**

Over the past few years, some scholars (Nandy 1983, 1995; Bhabha 1994; Karim 1998; Kraidy 1999; Khan 2000) have begun to reinterpret notions of cultural resistance and purity, theorizing that these ideas may be more complicated than previously assumed. Accepting that traditional, straightforward resistance to assimilationist pressures may be a thing of the past, these theorists have turned their attention to the survival strategies employed

by immigrants and their children as they struggle for acceptance in their adopted countries but insist on retaining a foothold in the communities of their birth. For example, members of a diaspora may live thousands of miles apart but share interests in indigenous media such as film.

In the case of South Asians, media such as popular Indian films entertain members of the diaspora, but they also serve an important purpose, offering a vision of South Asia and South Asian culture to those who may never have visited a South Asian country but who seek some sense of cultural heritage and have no alternate means of satisfying that need. Here, I have centred my study on the interpretation of Bollywood films partly because of their consistent focus on issues of nationalism, identity, tradition, and integration into different cultures and partly because of their astonishing audience reach. As Desai (2005, 62) points out in a summary of her own study of Indian film and its reception by South Asian Americans, various media can be seen as formative in the identity of youth, but the role of film in the diaspora is particularly noteworthy: "I maintain that film is unique in the ways it constructs a shared South Asian diasporic identity. Indian films have a significant impact on second-generation South Asian American youth, even on those who seldom watch films, because they provide much of the vocabulary for understanding culture, authenticity, the nation, and cultural difference."

South Asian Muslims' readings of Western films are also of interest because there is a clear sense of nationalism and cultural affirmation found in many of those as well. Likewise, there are non-Bollywood films that address issues affecting South Asians; some speak of the diaspora and are marketed to audiences living there. These are frequently made by diasporic filmmakers living in North America or Europe, but some are co-produced with Indian companies and may demonstrate some overlap with Bollywood films. Other films, such as the 2009 Oscar winner *Slumdog Millionaire*, may include nods to Bollywood but utilize entirely different narrative and production techniques. Defining Bollywood films is often a tricky process, as noted by participants here. The Bollywood moniker is often applied to films made in Mumbai, formerly Bombay, but only some of those films may fit the standard Bollywood formula, which produces cinema that is usually glamorized and globalized. As Gopal and Moorti (2008, 4) explain, the origins of the term cannot be identified with great certainty, but some suggest that Bollywood is a relatively recent name referring to a contemporary, global phenomenon, whereas Hindi cinema may refer to a domestic industry. Explicitly political or socially conscious Indian films may not really fit into the Bollywood mould, given their more weighty subject matter, although they do have familiar elements such as song-and-dance sequences. As it is used here, the term "Bollywood" generally refers to popular Indian films, usually produced in Mumbai, with an emphasis on themes of nation, family, and faith. Admittedly, this usage is oversimplified, although it is even narrower than that



adopted by participants, some of whom employed “Bollywood” as a catch-all term for any cinema with Indian themes or elements of Indian production. Some also saw Bollywood films as very similar in some ways to Hollywood films, a description rejected by Prasad (1998).

Prasad (1998, 43-44, 136-37) demonstrates that Hollywood and Bollywood are in fact quite distinct from one another, not least in terms of the fluidity of categorization found in popular Hindi cinema. Despite their clearly commercial focus, Bollywood films are very different from those produced in Hollywood. This is due partly to the target audience of South Asians and diasporic South Asians. Marketing to this audience demands a strategy to fulfill a cultural need, both for those living in India and for those whose early years in countries such as Canada may have been marked by a sense of cultural alienation and hence an inability to blend in. In recent years, particularly since the mid-1990s, some Bollywood producers have begun restructuring their work with extra attention to the experiences of audiences living in the South Asian diaspora – hence the hybrid feel and incorporation of Western logos in films such as *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai*.

This apparent willingness to engage with the perceived concerns of immigrants from South Asia highlights Bollywood’s defining characteristics as well as its embedded contradictions. As Prasad (1998) notes, Indian film encompasses numerous categories, including a middle-class cinema that is distinctly less glamorous as well as the more glossy Bollywood. Nonetheless, even Bollywood’s commercial productions may have socio-political implications: the industry often engages with imperialist tropes, eschewing foreign influences and simultaneously courting them while offering its own form of domination, which silences regional or somehow Othered voices (Pendakur 2003, 24-27). Its dual identity can be seen in its frequent attempts to portray American culture while pointedly referencing an East-West dichotomy. For the most part, it asserts independence from cultural imperialists while simultaneously neglecting the diverse forms of Indian culture and language in favour of a homogeneous, glossy, pan-Indian identity. It valorizes global consumer culture, as seen in its attempts to court revenues from the diaspora, but also points these viewers back to religion and tradition as all-important guides. All of these factors are significant in the current study. The intersection of religion and ethnicity within Bollywood content, and how this is read by its potentially marginalized viewers, is a focal point of the research here. Although others have studied the importance of South Asian film in the lives of its viewers, very few have examined this importance through firsthand interaction with those viewers. The exceptions that exist (Gillespie 1995; Durham 2004; Desai 2005) do not place Bollywood viewing within the Canadian migratory experience. Unpublished research by Jiwani (1989) in Vancouver and more recent work by Khan (2009a, 2009b) are among the few exceptions and are cited in this study.

Most important, however, although a number of studies have investigated issues of Indian culture and Hindu rituals in film, only a few (Rai 2003; Ghuman 2006; Khan 2009a, 2009b) have seriously examined the complicated portrayal of Muslims in an industry that constantly seeks to homogenize the India shown in its films. The role of Islam in Bollywood content is worthy of discussion given the complex history between Hindus and Muslims in South Asia and the high level of interest in understanding Islam and ways to represent it. Further benefit may be gained from gathering input from young Muslims at a time when they are most likely to be seeking ways to better understand their identity and their place within various communities. If media offered within the diaspora fail to satisfy these youth, the transnational nature of electronic mass media allows for many other possibilities, from the political to the popular to a complicated combination of the two. These minority youth may thus engage with media to make sense of a multicultural society and to help reconcile the various worlds they inhabit.

### **Symbiosis in Another Form: Nationalism and Media**

Although the young adults in this study spoke of the role that Canadian institutions and North American media had played in shaping their identities, many also pointed to the formative role of travel to their ancestral countries, usually India and Pakistan. A training ground for many engineers, computer experts, and healthcare professionals, India has joined other third-world countries in watching those talented individuals move away. The colonizer no longer needs to come to India – Indian subjects move willingly to the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada, and other places in search of a new life. For the Indian government, there is the perception of a net loss. Its citizens may have found new upward mobility, but despite funds sent home or visits back to the mother country, not all the proceeds from remittances and tourism are available to the Indian government. In 2002 India responded to the challenge posed by the loss of human capital, extending the option of overseas citizenship for the first time. Moving away from a stalwart position on the necessity of residing in India exclusively, it has offered non-resident Indians the ability to come back home, as it were. This is an offer with definite limits, of course. It is made only to diasporic Indians living in specific countries and provides a different form of citizenship, one that could eventually be upgraded and whose implicit purpose appears to be promoting investment from a group assumed to be affluent and constructed in government discourse as people who still feel attached – which is to say obligated – to home (see Kalam 2007; Singh 2007).

At the same time that the Indian government has had to devise a more flexible strategy, film too has taken on a new life, whether by coincidence or as a result of global and economic pressures, particularly policies of economic

liberalization introduced in the early to mid-1990s. This is true on two levels: non-Bollywood films made within and marketed to the South Asian diaspora, such as *Monsoon Wedding* (2001), *Bend It Like Beckham* (2003), and *Water* (2005), manage the neat trick of being not completely Indian and yet just Indian enough. The rise of such films and their filmmakers, diasporic talents of South Asian origin such as Gurinder Chadha, Mira Nair, and Deepa Mehta, was perhaps inevitable as the South Asian diaspora grew larger, stronger, and more mature. The real surprise, perhaps, lies in the concurrent transformation of Bollywood films, with their tried-and-true formulas of romance, song-and-dance intervals, and overwhelming Indian pride. Film is hardly the only medium involved in nationalist efforts, but it is one of the most effective.

In various ways – by controlling or commissioning production, by censoring content, by providing financial or official support – governments may signal what types of media are acceptable and should be watched. Pakistan has attempted to protect its own national identity by filtering the amount of Indian films entering the country, but as participants in this study observed, citizens sometimes have their own ways of deciding what media to watch, a decision that is greatly assisted by technologies such as black-market satellite dishes. India is no stranger to protectionist or paternalistic techniques, censoring the popular film industry through the Central Board of Film Certification, although it is not otherwise linked to the industry as an official sponsor (Pendakur 2003; Engber 2005). Nonetheless, there has been a distinct cohesion in the nationalist, return-to-the-roots narratives favoured by Indian politicians (Kalam 2007; Singh 2007) – particularly since the 2002 establishment of citizenship for Indians overseas and the 2004 establishment of a Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs – as well as in those narratives that circulate through various Bollywood films about coming home, such as *Swades* (Our Country, 2004), whose storyline suggests that even the most successful Indian American will find the greatest happiness in India. Many of these narratives demonstrate the growing importance of the diaspora in policy and in media, to the extent that some of the film discourses, Desai (2005) suggests, are finally moving away from anti-diaspora sentiment and toward greater acceptance of diasporic communities.

Beginning with pivotal films such as *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (DDLJ; 1995), a massive domestic and international success, Desai (2005, 61) detects a change in the tone of major filmmakers: “Almost without exception NRIs [non-resident Indians] are now portrayed as sometimes wealthier than Indians in India but no different culturally from them. Indianness is now determined less by geopolitical location than by the performance (‘maintenance’) of cultural and ‘traditional Indian values’ that encapsulate the ‘real India.’” I concede this point to an extent and certainly understand Desai’s assertion that Bollywood film has evolved in many ways in respect to its

treatment of diasporic Indians. At the same time, however, there are clearly many aspects of representation in Bollywood films that do not speak to the realities of the diaspora or to living in countries outside of South Asia. Bollywood films may indeed be willing to speak to non-resident Indians, but the majority do so in ways that inaccurately depict the realities of living in countries that are loosely categorized as Western – usually translating as Canada, the United States, England, and Australia. Bollywood has shown a definite reluctance to depict people who are of South Asian origin but who have been born and raised elsewhere. There are exceptions, as in the case of *DDLJ* and the later *Kal Ho Naa Ho* (*Tomorrow May Not Come*, 2003), but they are few and far between. Where they occur, they are frequently negative, as evinced by even earlier examples such as *Hare Rama Hare Krishna* (1971), where migrants lapse into hedonistic and rootless lifestyles.

Heavily nationalist discourse in popular Indian cinema is nothing new and has not receded noticeably in contemporary film, where subjects are expected to be overtly pro-Indian, to preserve their beliefs, and to respect traditional rules of Indian/Hindu culture, such as deferral to parents and other elders. The nature of nation does appear to have changed in some ways with an increased emphasis on Hindutva, described by Khan (2009a, 87) as “a linear narrative of Hindu supremacy” promoted by Indian nationalists. Such narratives mean that Bollywood’s pro-Indian/Hindu stance is one that increasingly refuses to acknowledge India’s historical pluralism and the facts underlying intercommunal conflict. Mishra (2002) suggests, however, that some of the rigid patriotic commentary may be softening as part of Bollywood’s effort to market to the diaspora. The film *Veer-Zaara* (2004) went so far as to promote a Hindu-Muslim, Indian-Pakistani romance that dwells continually on the unity of South Asia and its peoples.

However, as I note in later chapters, discourses around Islam and Pakistan have become increasingly exclusionary, with images and narratives that bear a strong resemblance to long-standing Orientalist archetypes about Muslims. Ironically, although Said (1978) popularized the term “Orientalism” in reference to negative discourses constructed by the West about Islam and the East, or “the Orient,” the same tendencies seem to have been imported into Bollywood, a setting where the presence of Muslim writers and actors does not appear to have resulted in fewer exoticized or superficial portrayals of Muslims. In the Orientalism described by Said, a certain amount of ignorance and fetishizing of the unfamiliar was at work: here, this seems less likely to be the cause. It is difficult to isolate the cause with any certainty, but the extreme politics of right-wing, Hindu-nationalist parties such as the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) may exert some influence and may certainly draw on pre-existing Orientalist stereotypes with great effect.

The identity promoted in certain Bollywood films, then, is nationalist to the point of denigrating any and all potential threats to the nation, from

neighbours such as Pakistan to foreign influences such as the United States and England. It is generally Hindu and often middle class, and it also offers images of the nation that are gendered in significant respects. In a genre whose storylines often centre largely on romance, marriage, and procreation, women are invested with the responsibility of maintaining cultural rituals in order to teach them to children, thereby ensuring the safe continuation of the traditions that define this imagined India. Although these women can now be seen in educational and professional settings, and sometimes declare their independence, it is frequently the case that they are eventually led to marriage as the ultimate act of importance in their lives, with the assumption that they will be raising children and looking after their husbands. That the protection of women, especially mothers, is an overriding theme in many such films suggests that the nation is feminine, nurturing, and a space of nearly inevitable return.

### **Young Muslims of South Asian Origin in Their Own Words**

With all of the above in mind, I set out to interview young Canadians of South Asian origin to obtain their impressions about nationality, ethnicity, religion, media, and the purported portrayals of themselves found in Bollywood cinema. My primary emphasis was on Muslim Canadians, but for comparative purposes interviewees included Canadians of different religious backgrounds. The details of the interview process are elaborated on in a later chapter; in brief, I spoke to participants in Toronto, Vancouver, and Ottawa, taking into account the diversity of these cities, their prominent South Asian and/or Muslim populations, and – for Toronto and Vancouver – their positions as nodes in a widespread South Asian diaspora. Vancouver, a relatively small city when viewed on a global scale, has nonetheless been the source of several South Asian members of Parliament at the federal level, a South Asian Muslim senator (Mobina Jaffer), and the country's first South Asian provincial premier (Ujjal Dosanjh, who later served as a federal cabinet minister). Toronto boasts the country's largest population of South Asians and demonstrates enormous plurality.

I interviewed Canadians between the ages of nineteen and thirty, building on the previous, personal observation that these years, despite representing a wide range of experience, mark a period when ideas about identity and adulthood have already been explored to some extent but have not necessarily solidified. Certainly, identity is also explored at younger ages, but one's earlier notions of identity may still be nebulous and strongly influenced by parental input. The participants in this study – who were undergoing or finishing education, beginning careers, and/or entering or cementing serious relationships – were well positioned to address questions of belonging, integration, or nationalism, as they had already undergone relevant experiences as citizens and as minorities in Canada. They were also likely to think

of the future, their place in various communities, and how their own lives could be interpreted in relation to those of previous or future generations. Additionally, these young people possessed the acumen to convey their opinions in ways that were thoughtful and significant.

As I discuss in the final chapters, a distinct consistency emerged between my findings and those of Maira (2002), Durham (2004), Desai (2005), and Haji-ar-were (2006), arising through issues such as cinema's socializing role, the consumerist, imperialist, and sexist implications of enjoying popular cinema, and a sense of nationality and belonging that is complicated and uneasy. Findings from one study to the next must take into account various factors. The most important commonality may lie simply in the finding that Bollywood does appear to be influential; it does elicit a reaction even from those young people who would prefer not to acknowledge it. Bollywood can be, in some respects, an acquired taste: its length, its language, its format, and its rather heavy-handed storytelling are not for everyone. However, as participants in Gillespie (1995), Maira (2002), Durham (2004), and Desai (2005) have indicated, Bollywood film is unique in its impact. Even those young people who do not admire it in any pronounced way have opinions on it. Informants' comments were often framed in relation to their own social positioning, not only in Canada but also as members of a diaspora. They referenced the way these positions had changed, and they explained how upbringing, education, peers, and other media all combined to frame their interpretations.

These interpretations of Bollywood's dominant messages demonstrated a slippage between opposition and enjoyment that was simultaneously perplexing and understandable. Few young people whom I interviewed felt they were receiving everything they needed from any of the media to which they had access, but they dealt with this lack in different ways, combining various media forms, applying informal knowledge to the reading of texts, or accepting that complete fulfillment was not possible. Their resistance to assimilation, then, came to take on far more meaning than previously anticipated. I employ the word "resistance" as a reference to theories surrounding second-generation immigrants who choose not to assimilate completely into the host society, resisting any temptation to join the mainstream. Certainly, as the participants here described, and as Gillespie's (1995) and Handa's (2003) studies also suggest, the temptation to blend in, to downplay difference, ethnicity, and faith, strongly exists, as does the desire to belong within cultural communities. Resistance in this case, then, involves a delicate balancing act: even those individuals who struggle most ardently to retain a sense of their origins and cultural difference are unlikely to engage at every stage of their lives in an unwavering repudiation of the host society. Resistance is complicated and laden with ambiguities for those who must live in a society while juggling competing demands for national, ethnic, and reli-

gious authenticity. In this book, resistance, and the difficulty of enacting resistance in a straightforward manner, comes to signify a number of issues: Bollywood itself, as a counterpoint to Westernization/Americanization, has exhibited a form of resistance to cultural domination but has also emulated American media in some respects. Similarly, the viewers interviewed here recognized that the act of consuming popular Indian cinema could signify resistance to dominant North American media, but they also indicated that this was not a wholly empowering act (for related findings on reception of the film *Fanaa*, see Khan 2009b). Most important, in light of the aims of this research, resistance did indeed have a nuanced and complicated meaning for the participants in terms of identity construction.

### **Resistance: How Much and What Kind?**

As indicated in articles from Valpy and Anderssen (2003) and from Jiménez (2007), as well as in studies by Maira (2002), Handa (2003), Hoodfar (2003), Durham (2004), and Desai (2005), first- or second-generation immigrant youth living in a diaspora remain a source of preoccupation at a number of levels. Common to all of these works is an interest in identity: What is the identity claimed by these youth, and why? How do they construct that identity and then maintain it? The young people in this study could be defined loosely as youth, but they also fell into a liminal category in terms not simply of their ethnicity or nationality but also of age, which meant that they both corroborated the findings in earlier works on youth and added to it, providing a developmental arc that indicates what may follow the stages identified in Gillespie (1995), Maira (2002), Handa (2003), and Durham (2004). Unlike Durham's (2004) teenage respondents or Maira's (2002) university ones, these young adults spanned more than one category. Some were still completing school, one had already started a family, and the rest were old enough to consider seriously the ways that their past could create a bridge to their future, allowing them to move out of a childhood defined by seemingly simple influences and into an adulthood marked by a diverse pantheon of cultures, interests, and people. Their occupation of such transitional space might explain their deep engagement with the topic of identity. Identity was neither static nor the same for everyone, although there were some definite common denominators, including an acknowledgment of marginalization, racism, and stereotyping in media and society.

### **Transcending the Bell Jars: Identity, Belonging, and Understanding**

*We children of immigrants often seek to return to the country that our parents have left behind. I have made my own wanderings through Malaysia, through Hong Kong and China. We know there is something to be recovered, we want to open what our parents have closed, we are*

*ever curious. I make these journeys not because I hold onto the belief that there is another place and culture in which I might be more at home, but because I place my trust in empathy, in what Michael Ignatieff describes as the possibility that "human understanding is capable of transcending the bell jars of separate identities." (Thien 2003, A13)*

The individuals in this study spoke articulately and sometimes poignantly about learning how to live with multiple identities, and they provided analyses that suggested their experiences with difference had shaped them in meaningful ways. Critics such as Bhabha (1994) have identified the possibilities provided by inhabiting what has been dubbed the "third space," a place that embodies the realities of being neither here nor there, and have suggested that this is a space of infinite potential for creativity and change. This is not always the case, of course, for the third space can also signify loneliness and alienation.

The following chapters open a discussion of issues such as these, focusing on film, diaspora, nationhood, hybridity, community, and citizenship. Although the respondents discussed these concepts in their own words, their comments did speak very much to the realities of globalization and responses to deterritorialization, the pressures placed on diasporic young individuals to construct and protect community, the role that media can and do play in the formation of identity, and strategies for survival in a society that is increasingly marked by hybridity and diversity, characteristics that triggered fear for some but hope for others. As their comments indicate, the participants here adopted their own methods of learning about others, applying active interpretations to a variety of media. As Thien (2003) posits above, such second-generation immigrants are aware of their place in the world and retain an interest in that world.



# 1

## East Meets West – and Everything Else: Living La Vida Loca in Bollywood

Although Bollywood is hardly the only film industry in India, it is one of the most powerful, the most commercially successful, and certainly the most contradictory. It consciously mimics some American norms and contains other aspects of Western culture, yet it also repudiates the same, suggesting the superiority of Indian culture and of India as the only really desirable location for the authentic South Asian. In its avowal of nationalism and cultural tradition, it presents a significant challenge to American domination of international film and culture. At the same time, however, Bollywood itself plays the role of attempted imperialist by primarily marketing Hindi-language films to an enormous community characterized by a high level of linguistic diversity and by working to promote a kind of Hindu, Hindi-speaking, middle- to upper-class, pan-Indian identity that ignores the specificity of various regions and cultures. This lack is addressed partly by specific regional cinemas, as seen in Bengali and Tamil film production, but Bollywood rarely acknowledges Indian diversity.

Identity, in fact, is one of several recurring themes in Bollywood movies, some of which focus on frothy romantic comedies but an equal number of which emphasize the importance of Indian nationalism and Hindu tradition. Indeed, although Bollywood does have a certain formula, it is not monolithic. Some Bollywood films exist strictly for entertainment, built around romance, comedy, and music, whereas others are more serious in nature. Some popular Indian films, such as *Swades* (Our Country, 2004) and *Lagaan* [Land Tax]: *Once upon a Time in India* (2001), tend to blend romance with discussions of national identity, poverty, and resistance to colonizing influences.

The treatment of identity is also a source of contradiction, offering mixed messages about the ability and obligation of viewers to retain an authentic Indian identity, with authenticity often linked to physical residence in India and adherence to Hindu values. These themes, and their potential implications for non-Hindu viewers who do not live in India, are discussed in detail in the following sections and chapters. Whereas diasporic audiences and

their reception of themes of nationalism, religion, and diaspora are examined in the final chapters, this chapter offers an overview of popular Indian cinema, its operations, its evolution, and its content. For ease of discussion, Bollywood cinema is often discussed as a whole in this book, but as noted above, there are many differences between films and between film categories. Some of these distinctions were noted by the participants, who commented on their respective preference for or disinterest in the more serious representatives of Bollywood film.

### **Creating a Monster? Behind the Bollywood Scenes**

At the same time that Bollywood struggles to portray an authentic sense of Indianness, it also comes under fire for lacking its own sense of self. Bollywood films have been accused of mimicking selected Hollywood tendencies in terms of production, writing, and marketing (Nayar 2003), and indeed there are marked similarities. Plots are borrowed routinely from popular Hollywood films, even if they are then tailored for an Indian audience; these plots are sometimes dotted with a similar patriotic undertone and with glancing references to a nationalist politics; a parallel star system flourishes; distinct writing and production formulas underpin major films; there is often considerable emphasis on cross-marketing film-related merchandise, such as soundtracks and fashions; much of the film's budget may be poured into star salaries, special effects, and costumes; vast revenue can often be recouped outside of the country where the production was based; and major releases are now as likely to show New York or London in the background as they are to feature Mumbai or New Delhi, reducing – although not eliminating – the disparity even between settings. Indeed, as taboos around the depiction of overt sexuality continue to collapse, some of the most notable distinctions between Bollywood and Hollywood are crumbling into apparent nothingness. All the same, some remain, such as the prominence of family, stories that may draw on Hindu epics, influence from various forms of Indian theatre, poetry, and dance, and as Prasad (1998, 107) notes, an emphasis on tradition.

Additionally, Bollywood films possess other characteristics that distinguish them from non-Indian films as well as from other Indian movies. Pendakur (2003, 24, 26) notes the multilingual nature of Indian film production, as well as the many different venues for studios and processing, including Madras, Hyderabad, Bangalore, Mysore, and Tiruvananthapuram. Commercially, however, Bollywood films – which take their moniker from Bombay, the former name of Bollywood's production centre Mumbai – are dominant, and although fears of cultural imperialism from American films abound, Bollywood has its own patterns of cultural domination, primarily offering Hindi-language films to a diverse community whose languages include

Bengali, Telugu, Kannada, Malayalam, and Tamil, among others. Although regional-language films can claim a following within their own communities, Hindi-language films, “which make up about 20 percent of the total production, have captured the all-India market and have reached out to Indians settled in Africa, Middle East, South East Asia, North America, and Australia” (Pendakur 2003, 27).

The use of Hindi (a modified, hybrid form) can perhaps be explained by the fact that it was declared a national language after Independence, even though it is native to only five northern states (Virdi 2003, 18). Language aside, even regional “markers of costume, dress, and culture are either erased or deployed arbitrarily, and elements from different regions are mixed to figure as signs of cosmopolitan culture that account for a particular type of kitsch” (Virdi 2003, 2). Dwyer (2000, 110, 120) does single out the different cultural influences on Indian cinema, from Urdu writing, which found a rare venue where it could flourish commercially, to Punjabi actors and their ideals of beauty (i.e., tall and fair-skinned), but she also acknowledges the degree to which Punjabi and Muslim participants in the film industry have attempted to minimize any regional or religious markers (120-21).

The pan-Indian gloss applied to Bollywood movies may upset some, but as a commercial strategy it has paid off handsomely. It is estimated that roughly 10 million people a day purchase tickets to see a Bollywood movie, some of whom will return repeatedly to view a favourite movie (Gokulsing and Dissanayake 1998, 10, 14; see also Rajadhyaksha 1996, 2000). Despite producing more films a year (believed to be around 900, but figures vary) than any other country, including the United States, India typically does not export its films at the same rate. Indian films, reflecting the country’s diversity, may come from various regions, including Mumbai, Chennai, Kolkata, Karnataka, Kerala, and others. However, Bollywood films, mainly produced in Mumbai, are the ones that have significant international recognition and a global market (Ogan 2002, 212). In many cases, costs incurred in the production of Bollywood films are primarily recouped through the overseas market, rather than within India, due to “the growing market of non-resident Indians, or Indian expatriates, nostalgic for all things Indian” (Mann 2001, F3). Exporting Indian films is not a new practice, but the areas of greatest popularity have shifted along with geopolitics. In the 1950s stars such as Raj Kapoor gained enormous audiences in places like the Soviet Union with Russian-dubbed releases such as *Awaara* (1951) (Pendakur 2003, 40), but this popularity waned as the Soviet territory began to break apart. Former Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, although he was not particularly a fan of such films, was convinced that maintaining good relations with the film world was necessary when he saw “the political advantages of Raj Kapoor’s popularity in the Soviet Union and elsewhere” (Dwyer 2000, 98).

African, Arab, and Latin American audiences still maintain a long-standing enjoyment of Indian cinema, and audiences can generally be found in countries that have become home to South Asian migrants (Pendakur 2003, 40). The financial significance of this diasporic audience is enormous, with hit films such as *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (The Lover Takes the Bride, 1995) reportedly earning 200 million rupees internationally, a substantial figure even when viewed against the film's domestic gross of 500 million rupees (Pendakur 2003, 42).

Perhaps partly in recognition of this global market, and owing to a belief that the new generation of viewers has different requirements, Bollywood cinema has demonstrated some recent changes in its operations. In an industry populated by hundreds of different producers, some of whose projects are fuelled by substantial investments from criminal organizations, costs have crept up steadily over the past two decades. Increased economic liberalization has paved the way for more foreign imports, including films, television programs, and the ubiquitous MTV, offering alternatives to young viewers that Indian film directors argue must be countered through productions offering “visual exuberance with eye-popping images and renditions of sounds to draw this generation of audiences into the theaters” (Pendakur 2003, 33).

The producer Yash Chopra, no stranger to this thought process or to the lure of a foreign audience, has already set up distribution offices in the United Kingdom and New York City (Pendakur 2003, 43-44), and he has released films that target diasporic audiences and, as Rachel Dwyer argues, “set a new cool, urban visual style for Hindi films” (cited in Larkin 2003, 175). Similarly, in 1999, Sony Entertainment Television opened an office in New Jersey to market Indian films in North America, staging a New York premiere and advertising its films in diasporic newspapers and television programming (Pendakur 2003, 44). *Kabhi Alvida Naa Kehna* (Never Say Goodbye, 2006), Karan Johar's controversial film about infidelity, enjoyed a gala showing at the Toronto Film Festival, and *Guru* (2007) marked a Bollywood first by holding its world premiere in Toronto. In turn, South Asian audiences have demonstrated their desire to see such films, visiting South Asian-owned theatres in places such as New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, Toronto, and Vancouver.

Within India, movies have often been seen as promoting nationalist or religious beliefs, to the extent that British colonial powers once saw fit to censor the film industry rigorously. Indian film, then, despite its strength in centres such as Chennai, Kolkata, and particularly Mumbai (previously Madras, Calcutta, and Bombay, respectively), has been profoundly affected by the vestiges of colonial practice governing cinema, and it reflects, in some ways, the political turmoil that has characterized India at different times in

the nation's history. Notions of censorship still exist in Indian cinema, but as the economy has liberalized, so have the themes and depictions in that industry, with producers adjusting their ideas to what they believe the audience wants to see. Increasingly, this audience is considered to be middle class, to be at least partly diasporic, and to have some knowledge of Hindi or English. English, then, can be found more frequently in some Bollywood films than can any number of regional Indian dialects, which remain marginalized by the mainstream film industry. One of the greatest sources of conflict within the industry and its accompanying music sector is the linguistic diversity of India, a pluralism that fails to be reflected in the majority of Bollywood films. This neglect has prompted speakers of minority languages to mount fierce opposition to the dominance of Hindi (Oommen and Joseph 1991; Dickey 1993; Gokulsing and Dissanayake 1998; Dhareshwar and Niranjana 2000; Rajadhyaksha 2000).

However, if there is fragmenting at the linguistic level, there is also a universal appeal in terms of sound and song. Music is a key element of Indian cinema, as is dance. Almost all Bollywood movies tend to incorporate musical sequences, a characteristic that has been enormously influential in determining an individual film's popularity and the profits it can generate (Bhimani 1995, 127, 316; Pendakur 2003, 119-44). Although other film industries, such as Hollywood, produce musicals, Bollywood does not make a similar attempt to reconcile the divergent elements of "narrative and spectacle. Instead, song-and-dance sequences were and are used as natural expressions of emotions and situations emerging from everyday life" (Gokulsing and Dissanayake 1998, 21; see also Prasad 1998, 136). Many different forms of South Asian music co-exist in these movies, including the *ghazal*, usually identified with a Muslim/Urdu tradition. Although its popularity has fluctuated and, indeed, the popularizing of such a classic form has attracted criticism, the *ghazal* remains prominent in Hindi films and on their accompanying musical CDs (Dwyer 2000, 41).

Song-and-dance sequences in Bollywood are crucial for conveying emotion, for offering catchy or heartrending tunes that capture the viewer's attention, and for subtly expressing sexuality, which was once impossible to depict openly in Indian film lest it provoke the disapproval of the all-powerful censors, who were notoriously strict in ensuring that Indian films did not promote sexual licentiousness or any other type of potentially corrupting activity. This is less true now, but for many years a belief prevailed that it was impossible to show kissing or anything explicitly sexual in an Indian film (see Prasad 1998, 88-127). Such sights still remain rare, particularly in the films featuring the most popular stars (Chopra 2005). Even in the absence of censorship, the desire to keep Bollywood content family-friendly has contributed to the use of romantic dances rather than open

love scenes. Characters come close to kissing, dance intimately, and daydream about one another in these escapist sequences, which often involve serial costume changes, a luxurious set, and a sense of being removed from reality. Songs and sound are among the more compelling elements of Hindi film, with the introduction of sound in 1931 touted by some as the reason for the rise of Indian cinema's popularity and the failure of Western cinema to secure the Indian market (Chowdhry 2000, 13). Interestingly, the popularity of music in Hindi-language film can be credited partly to its incorporation of Western rhythms, although these sounds do not mask the presence of other influences, such as folk traditions (Barnouw and Krishnaswamy 1980, 73; see also Pendakur 2003, 121, 126-39).

Although linguistic minorities remain largely unheard, filmmakers outside of Mumbai fare little better. Lesser-known producers compete with dozens or hundreds of others for financial resources and access to smaller potential markets, and nearly all Indian filmmakers are alert to the potential competition presented by foreign films, particularly American ones. Indians who do not speak Hindi, the primary language of Bollywood cinema, can and have made an argument that Bollywood films tend to ignore local ethnic differences in favour of a homogeneous portrayal of India. This portrayal is easier to produce given the financial restraints on smaller film-production centres in India. Gokulsing and Dissanayake (1998) have tracked a significant increase in the number of films being created in centres outside of Mumbai and in languages other than Hindi (see also Prasad 2000, 145), yet few of these productions have offered a serious challenge to Bollywood's dominance. It is also worth noting that these smaller industries, or even Pakistan's Lollywood (so called because of its base in Lahore), often do not seem to have the same grip on the South Asian imagination as does Bollywood.

Bollywood's strength was further asserted when the dreaded American imports finally arrived in India. After India took out a loan from the International Monetary Fund in 1991, Washington and the Motion Picture Export Association of America placed increasing pressure on then-Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao to allow dubbing of Western films into Hindi and to permit direct imports, a pressure to which he eventually succumbed (Alessandrini 2001, 321). Despite fears that the import of foreign films, combined with the increasing cost of making Indian films and challenges from television, would destroy the Indian film industry, it only grew stronger (Alessandrini 2001, 321-22). Popular Hollywood films do not generally perform well within India, unlike massive Bollywood successes such as *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* and 1994's *Hum Aapke Hain Koun* (Who Am I to You?) (Rajadhyaksha 1996, 28). Hindi films that borrow liberally from Hollywood storylines are far more common, and more likely to experience success, than are American films brought into India. Although the extraordinary popularity of a Hindi-dubbed version of *Jurassic Park* raised hopes in the United

States of finally capturing the stubbornly elusive Indian market, several dubbed American films released subsequently demonstrated little or no appeal to the Indian masses (Sidhva 1996, 49), who seem to prefer the version of America most often found in Bollywood, one where hedonistic tendencies can be detected.

Although major Bollywood blockbusters are still relatively chaste, a number of more recent movies contain overt sexual references, feature heated scenes, and make reference to premarital pregnancy, adultery, or steamy affairs. Such material was not completely absent from previous films, but the depictions have become more pointed and explicit, and although certain expressions of sexuality do still meet with the expected punishment, a few characters now manage to live happily following their premarital affairs. Bollywood films also now incorporate – or emphasize – a number of features that appear to be nods to watchers who are non-resident Indians. Subtitles, of course, are now *de rigueur* in most Bollywood films, but the characters have become increasingly prone to adding English phrases at random. This may be seen as further evidence of Bollywood's nonchalance regarding barriers of language or dialect – it may also be seen as a game, although confusing, attempt to meld East and West, leaving no viewer out in the cold.

Similarly, there is a definite movement afoot to portray Bollywood heroes and heroines as the epitome of sophistication in their physical appearance. Rich or poor, the main characters usually have access to a number of different costumes, but these are not exactly what they used to be. Saris, achkhans, salwars, and lenghas still dot the landscape, as extravagant and appealing as ever, but they are usually now presented in turn with increasingly revealing sundresses, jeans, and halter tops. Of course, the global flow of goods and the exposure to other cultures through travel and media mean that clothing practices can change from one generation to the next. In fact, it may be worth noting that scanty costumes can be found in some of the earlier films, although these were sometimes donned by non-Hindu characters or disparate characters coded as somehow Other. In the same way that it has now become far more common for diasporic Indians to wear Indian clothing and accessories in their host countries, there is no need to assume that resident Indians live in a static world where chaste costumes of an earlier era remain reified.

However, it is puzzling that many of the so-called Western clothes depicted in these films appear to be revealing or glamorous in a way that is unlikely to be seen in everyday life. The vampy clothing of many female stars in today's Indian films seems best calculated to display toned midribs and inevitably fair skin, a departure from the days when modestly dressed, relatively dark-skinned, dark-eyed women were more likely to be seen. Light-eyed, fair-skinned, and sporting miniskirts and tube tops, these young women appear to be catering to a different audience than did their predecessors.

This may be due to any number of factors, but one possibility is that directors targeting a global audience may assume that diasporic viewers are most likely to embrace those Indian stars who appear, essentially, a little less Indian.

The irony is poignant: although India, as the exoticized former colonial subject, may be perpetually misunderstood and exploited for commercial gain, the vision of the colonizer – past or potential – is equally skewed in popular Indian cinema. Influenced, perhaps, by the fact that Hollywood television shows and films depict characters in revealing clothing or increasingly explicit sexual situations, Bollywood producers insert similar sequences but even take them further on occasion, dressing women in ways that seem out of place or surprising. Despite its apparent shift toward globalized norms, Bollywood also continues to draw on some of the same influences it has always used, such as the two great epic stories *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, classical Indian theatre, folk theatre, nineteenth-century Parsi theatre, and musical television (Gokulsing and Dissanayake 1998, 17; see also Booth 1995, 169; Pendakur 2003, 103). Both traditional Indian themes and a capitalist, globalized modernity underpin many Bollywood films; as Prasad (1998, 107) notes, “the construction of ‘tradition’ is part of the work of modernity.” Chakravarty (1993, 55) notes that Hindi cinema is the ideal vehicle for presenting old myths with a new veneer, reminding audiences that Indian culture can continue to thrive even in times of change and globalization. No matter how strong the foreign influence, it cannot truly injure “all institutions of our traditional culture that are now under severe threat – the joint family, patriarchy, the traditional qualities of the image of the Indian woman, and also, the nation,” an observation echoed by Nayar (1997, 86), who notes that Western life may be incorporated into Bollywood only in superficial ways, not in any sense that would affect the filmic depiction of family ties and togetherness.

The influence of *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* can be seen not only in plots that feature this kind of familial devotion but also in these plots’ emphasis on divine intervention, sacrifice, and the fulfillment of dharma, “one’s ‘sacred duty,’ a code of conduct that is appropriate to (and expected of) each individual depending on his or her social rank, stage in life, or kinship ties” (Nayar 2003, 81). Individual fulfillment is not always the goal of these characters, each of whom is acutely aware of his or her place within family and society. This idea of a greater good is present in many Bollywood films, but its treatment is generally different in more contemporary films, where sudden changes of heart and miraculous events may lead to happy endings, a stark departure from the bleak politics of earlier films.

### **All about India: The Evolution of an Industry**

There is little question that the content of Indian films has markedly changed, at least in terms of those films that are most popular. The industry is so



undeniably prolific that it is not possible to discuss many of the best-known films in any great depth. Although specific films are examined briefly later in this chapter for their depiction of particular topics, this section provides an overview of major themes in mainstream Indian cinema, with later chapters offering more detailed consideration of questions of nationalism, diaspora, and globalization in Bollywood film. It is currently the case that topics such as romance, marriage, and family anchor most of the major Bollywood hits, but at one time Bollywood was distinguished for mixing romance with questions of social justice and political commentary. As Thoraval (2000, 49) notes, serious dramas have more or less gone out of style, supplanted by purely entertaining features.

Certain stories do recur, and screenwriter Javed Akhtar has suggested that most Bollywood narratives can be traced back to “ten master plots” derived from Roman, Greek, and Hindu mythology. He names stories about lost and found items, vendettas, and of course romances, arguing that most of these stem from classic myths (cited in Kabir 1999, 34). Stories about love are frequently found in popular Indian films. In the late 1980s politically infused tales of marginalized young men began to disappear, giving way to an abundance of romantic young heroes who are spiritually devout, possess extraordinary filial piety, and are hopelessly in love. These stories usually have some kind of happy ending, in contrast to the older, more tragic strain of the genre, where hero and heroine alike suffered enormous travails only to be separated in the end, sometimes by death. The contemporary emphasis on heroes, rather than on heroes *and* heroines, is no coincidence.

Although female characters are infused with enormous symbolism and generally represent the salvation of the nation and the successful transmission of positive values, many of the best-known films are distinguished by the hero’s role. Pendakur (2003, 145) notes that in Bollywood male stars are better-paid and receive better stories. In the 1970s, viewed by some as a kind of golden era in popular Indian cinema, Amitabh Bachchan shot to fame as a brooding young anti-hero whose female leads were sometimes abused as he vented his rage at a society characterized by injustice and inequality.

Indeed, Bollywood’s preoccupation with gender and sexuality is so marked that it is almost impossible to ignore. Catering to an audience whose members are presumably raised to believe that marriage and reproduction are the ultimate goals, Bollywood films rarely address the issue of homosexuality in a serious or explicit way. Where films do incorporate homosexuality, this is often in the form of transvestites who are the butt of jokes; the strong bonds of masculine friendship (referred to as *dosti*) are often emphasized, but any connection to homosexuality is usually glossed over. Men and women are called on to unite and to do so in marriage, as relationships outside of marriage are dishonourable and shaming to one’s family. Although both partners are required to contribute to the marriage and to the creation

of children, Hindu society and Hindi film place greater domestic expectations on women. Pendakur (2003, 146) suggests that many ideas regarding appropriate gender-specific behaviour are drawn from *Manusmriti*, “considered the pivotal text of Hindu orthodoxy ... Ideas from Manu resonate in the daily lived experience of people as well as in their consumption of popular cinema.” Dwyer (2000, 26) quotes some of these ideas: “Her father guards her in childhood, her husband guards her in youth, and her sons guard her in old age. A woman is not fit for independence (Manu 9.3).”

Bollywood keeps raising the bar for young women, asking them to be all things to all people. Female characters often combine bright minds with beautiful bodies and a demure, respectful attitude to elders. Whereas sweet virgins once stood in stark contrast to alluring seductresses (often explicitly coded as Christian to explain their irreligious activities), the modern female star must combine the qualities of both, offering spunky assertiveness that in no way detracts from her ability to metamorphose into a suitable wife, one who generally “wears more conservative clothing and follows tradition to behave as a ‘respectable’ daughter-in-law or a married woman” (Pendakur 2003, 151). As Zara, a participant from Toronto, pointed out, both conservatism and sexualization can pose a problem for women:

When you do have newer films like *Namasteey London* [2007] or *Salaam Namaste* [2005], they attract such a backlash. The role of women is not really evolving. They might put women in miniskirts or modern clothes and say that she’s modern now, but is that modern? I would say not.

Maira (2002, 171) describes a feminine ideal of light skin and overt sexuality (see also Nayar 2003, 74), an ideal that must also offer some indication that this sexuality is intended to be expressed fully following marriage. Although fair skin has long been prized in much of Indian society, new requirements for slenderness are more recent and may demonstrate some influence from global media.

One feature that has not changed is the use of these major stars to attract audiences, such that celebrity-studded blockbusters sharply distinguish themselves from lesser lights in the waves of films entering the Indian and diasporic South Asian market every year. Bollywood operates on a clear celebrity hierarchy, and magazines and websites that track the activities of the stars help to promote the films. Features in the movies that have changed include the growing use of English mixed in with more commonly used Hindi (possibly due both to the predominance of English in the South Asian diaspora and to its increased use among the Indian middle class), the increased appearance of non-Indian settings, and an amplified emphasis on consumerist pleasures in many of the newer films, including lavish dress,

enormous homes, and expensive cars. Many of the major rituals in Bollywood cinema are accompanied by costume changes, sometimes in conjunction with musical routines. Following the release of a major film, it is common to find similar fashions and CDs of the movie's music widely available within the diaspora.

These costume changes and song-and-dance sequences, often mixed into a meandering, derivative script that is marked by improbable coincidence, miraculous acts of salvation, and some degree of predictability, combine to offer a form of film that is often dismissed as escapist. Regardless of the perceived negativity associated with the notion of escape or fantasy, some commentators have greeted such charges with a shrug, arguing that these films are at least partially designed for Indian film audiences whose lives contain limited pleasures (see Chakravarty 1993). Nonetheless, Bollywood producers do often find themselves on the defensive, particularly when their work is weighed against that of the so-called "parallel cinema," a more artistic stream of Indian film (Pendakur 1990, 248) that has focused on tackling taboo subject matter and winning worldwide recognition for its serious treatment of issues. Although these films account for only 10 percent of India's cinematic output, they are central to artistic attempts to "capture a segment of Indian reality" (Gokulsing and Dissanayake 1998, 23), and their makers sometimes add to criticisms of Bollywood as superficial and outdated (Baghdadi and Rao 1995, xii, 34, 46, 76, 113).

As noted, Bollywood films may also address cultural and political issues, although in a way that is different from the parallel cinema. The nationalist, capitalist, or sexist ideologies that underpin much of contemporary Bollywood cinema may send strong messages, even if they appear in the guise of an epic love story. Certainly, popular Indian films have also explicitly addressed political and cultural issues, notably in earlier classics. Pendakur (2003, 99) explains that British censorship during the pre-Independence era prevented selected scenes and films from being shown, but "screen writers circumvented the censors by using coded language in dialogue, which the audience understood and admired. Instead of locating stories about corruption and nepotism to indict contemporary political regimes, the writer would place the film in some distant past." Kumar (2002, 50), expressing some disappointment with Bollywood's current treatment of globalization and nationalism, points to films that "offered criticism of the nationalist project and its skewed modernity," such as the 1950s films *Do Bigha Zameen* (Two Acres of Land, 1953), *Jagte Raho* (Stay Awake, 1956), and *Pyaasa* (Eternal Thirst, 1957). In these films, Kumar argues, it was possible to detect commentary on divisions of class, gender, and geography in a country that touted its status as a modern democracy. Of course, Bollywood does still present films that discuss pressing issues, such as poverty and terrorism: one example

is the low-budget thriller *Aamir* (2008), in which the lead character is suddenly removed from a comfortable existence and forced to follow the orders of an extremist group, taking him into the slums of Mumbai. However, Kumar may well be correct in suggesting that critical, hard-hitting films are increasingly in the minority, particularly if the political winds have shifted away from socialist groups such as the Indian People's Theatre Association and toward the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and Hindu nationalists.

Films such as *Mother India* (1957) may have enforced the gendered nature of nationalist ideology, but they certainly spoke powerfully about poverty, corruption, and despair. In *Mother India* the character portrayed by the actress Nargis comes to represent the nation as a mother whose various trials drive her son to angry action, including a physical threat against a young woman. Despite maternal love, Nargis' character acts to subdue this violence against woman/nation and the natural social order by killing her son, an iconic moment in Indian cinema and one re-enacted in a variety of films calling on women to make difficult choices between personal feelings and social obligation. *Mother India*, an enduring classic, remains one of a handful of Indian films to be nominated for a Best Foreign Film Oscar – the others are *Bandit Queen* (1994) (Dwyer 2000, 130) and *Lagaan* [Land Tax]: *Once upon a Time in India* (2001).

Stories of star-crossed lovers mixed with those depicting the new nation and its various tensions. The emphasis on the political became only more noticeable with the rise of stars such as Amitabh Bachchan in the 1970s, when Indian cinema began to address unemployment and inequality in a society where youth had been raised to expect more. The anger that Bachchan's characters displayed toward the political system, corruption, and inequality spoke strongly to the nation, and his films during that period became some of the best-known of all time.

The action scenes found in these earlier films and some social commentary remain, but they are generally less common now than storylines centred on star-crossed lovers. When more serious issues do arise, they are rarely addressed in a way that threatens the societal status quo. Discussing, for instance, the question of gender in the enormously popular *Hum Aapke Hain Koun* (*HAAK*), Chatterji (1998, 5-7) suggests that the film replicates patriarchal norms embedded in an affluent, conventional lifestyle that every urban Indian family would see as ideal (see also Gokulsing and Dissanayake 1998, 75-79; Viridi 2003). In discussing *HAAK*, Alessandrini (2001, 323) opines that Bollywood entered a new era by dispensing with questions of social justice and subalterns. It is interesting to note that whereas some participants in the current study specifically cited films that dealt with history or social issues, others pointed to a film such as *HAAK* as holding special meaning for them. Several commented on the importance of family and the rituals around weddings and births depicted in this film, perhaps pointing to the

fact that they could see South Asian identity performed on screen. Others also indicated that they saw *HAKH* as heralding a new type of film altogether – one that was more modern, fun, and interesting. None offered any explicit commentary on the open promotion of consumerism and Western products (such as Cadbury or Pepsi) found in this film, which would come to set the standard for future blockbusters, although Tariq, an Ottawa participant, did comment negatively on the formulaic production of such films:

I enjoyed *Hum Aapke Hain Koun* and whatever else, but I also felt like it was the beginning of the teen-flick era of Bollywood, and I think to this day they're still following that same formula, which really becomes bothersome to me because there's no originality and it's just the same thing over and over again.

As Tariq noted, *HAKH* has indeed been viewed by many as a turning point in popular Indian cinema, a revival that allowed entire families to enjoy movies in a way that threatened no one and supposedly benefited everyone. A story of marriage and family – essentially, the entire movie consists of an ill-fated love story between one couple and a slowly unfurling courtship between another – *HAKH* “reinforces India’s cultural heritage” through its depiction of various rituals, including engagement, marriage, and *mendhi*, the traditional tracing of decorative patterns on the bride’s hands using henna (Gokulsing and Dissanayake 1998, 44). Religious traditions are also affirmed in this movie, as in so many others, providing a backdrop of divinely determined justice (Gokulsing and Dissanayake 1998, 62, 70). *HAKH* also heralds an era in which movie characters almost always represent a form of national identity that is largely upper-caste, upper-middle class, Hindi-speaking, and Hindu (Alessandrini 2001, 323).

Other movies that followed and matched *HAKH*’s success, such as *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* (Something Happens, 1998) and *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham* (Sometimes Happy, Sometimes Sad, 2001), are also careful to combine homage to the consumerist dream with respect for perceived Indian values and culture. In other words, family conflicts are avoided or else resolved by the end of each movie, marital harmony prevails in a way that allows the male head of the family to retain (most of) his authority, and Indian culture is celebrated in many ways, including the dances, traditional costumes, and religious festivals or ceremonial events. *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai*, which was notable for the fact that its popularity with South Asian fans helped it to enter top-ten lists in the United Kingdom, has been described as “a bubble-gum romance in which clean-cut students sport American designer clothes and live by traditional Indian values” (Lakshmanan 1999, W3). There is a cultural conflict presented by this juxtaposition, which may speak to the composite existence of diasporic viewers.

Indeed, the notion of diaspora looms large in present-day Bollywood films; certainly, themes of migration, movement, and exile from home are not new, but they tend to have more of a presence in films from the mid-1990s onward. Some of these films, such as *Pardes* (Foreign Land, 1997), a story of a young woman's painful discovery that America's promise is shallow and unfulfilling, are relatively serious and speak explicitly of identity and asserting one's values; others, such as *Kabhi Alvida Naa Kehna* (Never Say Goodbye, 2006), may not significantly speak to issues of diaspora, but they feature jet-setting characters or ones who live in places such as London and New York, rendering them perhaps more familiar to audiences in the South Asian diaspora.

It is difficult to identify one singular theme that defines contemporary Indian films: escapism exists side by side with more serious movies, including those I mention in a later analysis as well as those cited by participants. However, the escapist movies do continue to be the most popular, with a consistent emphasis on family and relationships. Diasporic experience is not a universal theme, but the recognition of diasporic audiences' spending power does seem to be a major factor in the ways that Bollywood cinema has attempted to become more cosmopolitan and sophisticated. Whether or not it succeeds is a question that provoked open skepticism from the participants in this study. Certainly, its vision of an upper-class, well-dressed diasporic population is not representative of the South Asian labourers, service employees, taxi drivers, and working poor in the diaspora who exist side by side with moneyed professionals. Despite its limitations, however, there is no question that Bollywood is keenly aware of the diaspora and feels it cannot afford to ignore that dispersed audience.