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CINEMA IN INDIA

Overview   Cinema has arguably had a deeper and most widespread impact on Indian culture than any other cultural form. While printed books and newspapers have changed the production and transmission of ideas and opinions, and affected national politics, film has done all this but also held up a large and glittering mirror to the entire country. The spectacular dramas on screen have reflected and reshaped values and behaviour at all levels of Indian society. Like other modern cultural forms, cinema represents more continuity with existing traditions than invention of new ones. Its principal sources have been the Parsi theatre in Bombay and other popular theatre forms, Hindu mythology and epics, Muslim court culture and, much later, Hollywood.

Genres   Indian cinema has several genres. The 'masala' (or 'mixture') combines romance, crime and comedy, while the 'historical' is equally self-explanatory. The 'mythological' adapts traditional stories, and the 'devotional' focuses more on religious themes. The 'social' highlights real-life problems and dilemmas, often within a family or kin group. A sub-genre of 'Muslim social' was popular but virtually disappeared after the 1990s. 'Parallel' cinema refers to films made for an international audience.

Origins   Indian cinema began in 1896, when the Lumière brothers' films were shown in Bombay. Money poured in to finance studios, build cinemas and support tours that took films all across the country. British-owned and run, these touring companies showed mainly sports, news, travel and topical documentaries. The first Indian feature was 'Raja Harischandra' in 1913. Based on a well-known mythological story, it started a genre that has never lost its appeal.

1920s   By the 1920s, only 15% of the hundred or so films made each year were produced by Indians. The majority came from the USA. The colonial government then instituted censorship, a move supported by Gandhi. Thus began the absence of the kiss on screen, a taboo that lasted until the 1980s. Nudity and overt sex is still highly controversial.

1930s The advent of sound in the 1930s was significant. It brought not just the 'talkies' but also the songs that are central to the success of Indian films. Regional cinema also developed in this decade, especially Tamil, Telugu, Marathi and Bengali films. Soon cinemas in south India accounted for nearly half the cinemas in the country.

Golden Age   The late 1940s to the end of the 1960s is regarded as the 'Golden Age' of Indian cinema. This is when Indian-made films, including many classics, began to dominate the industry. Bengali art cinema (directed by Ray, Sen, Roy and Ghatak) emerged and (especially Ray's films) gained an international audience. At the same time, Hindi films were subtitled in three or four regional languages, and fan magazines flourished.

Stars   Stars were born in this period, too. Raj Kapoor, Rajesh Khanna and Sharmila Tagore became India's first celebrities, while in Tamil cinema Shivaji Ganesan dominated the screen. Almost as popular were the play-back singers, who sang the songs, mainly the Urdu-language *qawwali* and *gazal* from Muslim court culture.

Bollywood During the 1970s, Hindi commercial cinema began to draw heavily on Hollywood. The term 'Bollywood' derives from this fact but is now used to refer to

Indian cinema in general, which continues to borrow themes and techniques from American cinema.

Society The genre of the 'social' has produced some of India's greatest films. Many have been overtly anti-colonial, anti-caste or anti-corruption. Several have focused on the urban poor and working classes. In 'Shree 420' (1955), for example, Raj Kapoor plays a poor orphan, while 'Rickshaw Driver' (1970) was the most popular Tamil film for many decades.

Politics As a populist medium, film has always been political. Before 1947, the colonial government banned films with a pro-Independence message. Later, 'Mother India' (1957) became part of the national narrative of Independence. The path from screen to politics was laid down when the female star of 'Mother India' was elected as a member of parliament in New Delhi. More recently, stars of Tamil cinema (MGR) and Telugu cinema (T.N. Rama Rao) have been elected chief ministers of their states.

Today   Today India produces about 1,300 films per year, mostly in Hindi but with substantial numbers in Telugu and Tamil, followed by Kannada and Bengali. Video, TV, DVD and other technologies have changed the viewing of cinema in India, and in recent years the industry has been dogged by financial and crime scandals. But the magic of the cinema is undiminished.

Reading

Ruth Vanita, 'Dosti and Tamana': male-male love, difference and normativity in Hindi cinema. In Diane Mines and Sarah Lamb (eds.), *Everyday Life in South Asia* (Indiana, 2010), pp. 146-158

Ravi Vasudevan, Aesthetics and politics in popular cinema. In Vasudha   Dalmia and Rashmi Sadana (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to   Modern Indian Culture (*Cambridge, 2012), pp. 226-246

E. Barnouw and S. Krishnaswamy, *Indian Film* (OUP Delhi, 1980) Nasreen Munni Kabir, *Bollywood: The Indian Cinema Story (*Channel 4, 2001)

Selvaraj Velayutham, *Tamil Cinema: The Cultural Politics of India's Other   Film Industry* (Routledge, 2009)

Prem Choudhury, *Colonial India and the Making of Imperial Cinema*   (Manchester University, 2000)

Rini Bhattacharya Mehta and Rajeshwari V. Pandharipande (eds.), *Bollywood and Globalization: Indian Popular Cinema, Nation, and Diaspora* (Anthem, 2011)

Discussion questions

Indian cinema, like many other cultural forms, is a product of different influences: indigenous Parsi theatre, popular songs and dance, Urdu poetry, American jazz, early European films and Hollywood. Beginning with its origins in the 1890s, analyse the impact of each of these influences on the growth of the cinema in India.

Analyse the relationship between politics and cinema in India. Start with the earliest films, the colonial era censorship, the famous 'Mother India' and other politicised films in recent years. In addition, discuss the fact that several film stars have used their on-screen success as a catapult to a political career.

Discuss the significance that cinema has in the cultural life of India. While modern theatre, for instance, has not been a success, cinema now occupies a central place in the lives of many Indians, as evidenced by the popularity of fan clubs and fan magazines. Analyse this success by discussing the various components of Indian film: moving image, narrative, music, song and dance. Consider also how the Hindu concept of *darsan* (an audience with a deity) helps us to understand the power of Indian cinema.