CHAPTER 2

The Distinctiveness of Indian Popular Cinema

A distinction needs to be drawn between the 'popular' and the 'artistic' traditions of filmmaking in India. Popular films are the films seen and appreciated by the vast mass of Indian movie-goers. They are largely melodramatic, often musicals, conveying simple clear moral messages; they represent a distinctly Indian approach to cinema as a form of mass entertainment. The artistic films, which constitute only about ten per cent of the total output, are realistic, often inspired by neo-realism, and seek to capture a segment of Indian reality. These are the kinds of films that are shown at international film festivals in London, Paris, Berlin, Venice, Tokyo and Toronto. Internationally acclaimed filmmakers such as Satyajit Ray, Mrinal Sen, Ritwik Ghatak, Adoor Gopalakrishnan work in the artistic tradition. There are thus very clear differences in terms of theme, style and technique between the two streams of filmmaking in India.

It is in popular cinema that we see most vividly the 'Indianness' of Indian cinema. In terms of the exploration of complex and multifaceted human experiences, depth of psychological motivation and social vision, popular films may be found wanting. However, in terms of popular response and how popular imagination is shaped, they are highly significant. With their unique combination of fantasy, action, song, dance and spectacle, Indian popular films constitute a distinctively Indian form of mass entertainment.

There are a number of genres associated with Indian popular cinema. Most significant are: mythological films with the fantastic narrations of ancient stories; devotional films that foreground the diverse forms of union with divinity; romantic films dealing with erotic passion as they confront social conventions; stunt films where the focus is on the action and physicality;

historical films with fanciful stage settings and costumes, social films that explore important social problems and issues; and family melodramas that seek to explore tensions and upheavals within the matrix of the family. There is nothing specifically Indian about these genres. What is distinctive are the ways in which they have been handled by Indian filmmakers, investing them with a characteristically Indian cultural imprint. Popular films play a central role in the construction of popular Indian consciousness; they are the most dominant and pervasive force responsible for creating in the public mind the notions of heroism, duty, courage, modernity, consumption and glamour. The relationship between Indian popular cinema and modernity is extremely close. Whatever the genre may be, all Indian popular films display a culturally grounded engagement with modernity.

Just as there are a number of significant genres associated with Indian popular cinema, there are a number of significant themes and subjects that find repeated expression. Romantic love, male friendship, motherhood, renunciation, fate, respect for tradition, social injustice are some of the most compelling among them. As with the genres so with the themes – a distinctively culture-specific approach is adopted, giving these Indian films a characteristically Indian outlook. So when examining what is unique about Indian popular cinema we need to pay particular attention to questions of theme and genre.

The Genre of Mythological Films

Mythological films constitute a very important segment of Indian popular cinema. They have their roots in the ancient past in that they deal with characters and events taken from the distant past, very often as inscribed in the epics and scriptures. They depict the actions and interactions of gods, demons and superhuman powers. But they are not merely historical; they portray the interface between the past and the present. The very fact that these traditional stories are presented in a modern and technologised medium like film underlines this. In interesting ways this mythological imagination also informs films based on contemporary experiences. The idea of femininity as represented by Sita and the aspects of alienness and villainy as represented in the image of Ravana are not confined to stories depicting episodes from the *Ramayana* but can also be found in films dealing with modern experiences like *Kartavya* (1985).

The Genre of Devotional Films

One of the best films in this genre is *Sant Tukaram* (1936) directed by V. Damle and S. Fatehlal, which became the first Indian film to win an award

at the Venice film festival. It is about a poet-saint who lived in the seventeenth century and who holds the villagers enthralled by his songs of devotion. His wife is somewhat perturbed by his behaviour, and urges him to become more practical and attend to family matters. Tukaram has also to contend with an envious priest and aspiring saint, Salamalo, who hatches various plots against him. Divine intervention results in the saving of Tukaram and the villagers from various catastrophes. As time passes, great leaders come from long distances to sit at the feet of the poet-saint. He is offered wealth and other material blandishments; he rejects them. When the time comes for Saint Tukaram to leave, a divine vehicle is sent for him and he invites his wife to join him. She says she is quite happy with her home and children and she decides to stay on earth. Through a series of intrigues against the low-caste village poet by the high caste temple performer Salamalo, the story is transformed into a memorable film with devotionality at the centre.

The Genre of Social Drama

This genre figured prominently right from the beginning of Indian cinema. What is distinctive about the social dramas is the way that social issues are treated with a characteristically Indian flavour cinematically. *Achut Kanya*, made in 1936, is an early exploration of an important social issue that had been highlighted by leaders such as Gandhi and Nehru. The film deals with the love between a Brahmin boy and an untouchable girl. They cannot unite – caste and religious barriers stand in their way. The Brahmin boy is compelled to marry someone he does not love and the girl is similarly forced into a marriage with someone she dislikes. They happen to meet at a village fair. The girl's husband, insane with jealousy, misconstrues this meeting and attacks his wife's former friend. They fight on a level-crossing. A train comes down the track. The girl tries to separate the two men and is run over and killed. Through this tragedy, the filmmakers call attention to the problem of untouchability. In most of these social dramas with a clear social message, the action unfolds within a framework of melodrama. This is also true of recent films in this genre.

For example, Mani Rathnam's film, *Bombay* (1995) generated a great deal of interest and controversy, both within and outside India. It explores a highly sensitive issue – relations between Hindus and Muslims in India. The film deals with the love between a young Hindu man, a journalist, and a young Muslim woman. Initially, both their families are strongly against their union. They flee to Bombay and get married. They have two children. Later their families are won over to the marriage. Just as things begin to look up for the

couple, the fierce and bloody clashes between Hindus and Muslims erupt in the city of Bombay. Director Mani Rathnam has highlighted the self-defeating nature of extremist thinking and xenophobia and stressed the need to take a more rational approach to the whole question of religious loyalties and ethnic affiliations in the context of multiracial, multi-religious India. Once again the story unfolds within the framework of melodrama.

The Erotic/Romantic Genre

Romance and eroticism have always featured strongly in Indian popular cinema. As with most traditions of cinema in the East and the West, romantic films are extremely popular in India and have been so from the very beginning of Indian cinema. Here again, one sees very clearly the shaping hand of culture. Unlike in Western films, overt sexuality is prohibited in Indian films, so much is conveyed through suggestion, innuendo, coded signs and symbols. Songs and dances play a crucial role, eroticism and sexuality often being closely linked with song and dance numbers. In these romantic films, the sentiments expressed and the ways of expression are rooted in traditional culture. Indian film historians observe that in order to understand the true meaning of Indian romantic films we need to reconnect them with tradition. In this regard, the 'Laila-Majnu' and 'Radha-Krishna' traditions are important. In the 'Laila-Majnu' tradition, love is seen as the essential desire of God; earthly love is regarded as a preparation for heavenly love. The absolute devotion of the woman to the man, marital fidelity, loving secretly but without guilt are important aspects of this tradition. The 'Radha-Krishna' tradition, on the other hand, emphasises the here and the now, the desire to capture the joy of each moment as it passes. Love is seen not as tragic but as tender and joyous. In some popular films such as *Barsaat* (Rain, 1949) and *Andaaz* (Imagination, 1949) both traditions are present. This brief discussion of the different genres that go to form popular Indian cinema indicates the importance of reading the cultural inscriptions found in each. It is these cultural inscriptions that give Indian popular cinema its distinctive flavour.

Characterisation

In Indian popular cinema, there are a number of readily identifiable characters who already have specific valuations attached to them. The hero, heroine, villain, comic are commonly found in Indian cinema as well as in most other popular cinema. However, in Indian cinema there are a few characters who are distinctly Indian in outlook both in their conception and in the role they play in propelling the story. The figure of the mother is the most important. She is crucial in the epic, the *Mahabharata* and many classical mythological stories and folk tales. Drawing on these resources

also, modern Indian filmmakers have constructed an image of the mother that is highly visible in Indian cinema. She is caring, steadfast in her devotion to the family, nurturing and upholding moral values. A common image is of her praying in the temple or at home and she epitomises the virtues of religiosity and spirituality. At times the mother finds herself in very difficult situations, caught as she is between competing loyalties. For example, in the popular film *Deewar* (The Wall, 1975) the mother is torn between her love for her immoral son and the imperatives of morality and lawfulness. This film deals with the interactions of two brothers – one a smuggler, played by Amitabh Bachchan, and the other a police officer, played by Shashi Kapoor. And the mother is caught in between. In other films, such as *Mother India* (1957), the mother, a hardworking, law-abiding peasant woman, is compelled to shoot her own son when he descends into immorality. We need to pay particular attention to the image of the mother and her distinctiveness, and the kinds of role she plays in the unfolding story (See Thomas, 1989).

Indian popular films are basically morality plays, where good triumphs over evil, and the social order, disrupted by the actions of immoral and villainous people, is restored by the power of goodness. Entertainment and moral edification are combined in a way that has direct appeal to the vast masses of movie-goers and the idea of evil is central in Indian popular filmic discourse. Indian popular films are, as already noted, basically melodramas, and the idea of evil plays a central role in melodramas. As many commentators on melodrama have pointed out, the polarisation between good and bad, the clash between moral and immoral, the antagonism between what is wholesome and what evil is an inescapably dominant ingredient of melodrama. Melodramas by definition deal with characters who are easily recognisable, often stereotypical, and who incarnate the forces of good and evil. Evil is a vital ingredient because melodramas seek to establish the authority of a moral universe. By vanquishing the villain, and the evil he or she embodies, melodramas seek to reassert the moral authority of a world that for a while threatened to fall prey to the dark forces of evil. When we examine Indian popular films this becomes very clear. (For a fuller discussion see Dissanayake, 1993.)

This concept of evil, so central to Indian popular cinema, has been evolving over the years in response to diverse social, cultural and political forces. This is readily illustrated in three of the most well-known popular films: *Kismet* (1943), *Awaara* (1951) and *Sholay* (1975). *Kismet* tells the story of Shekhar, who runs away from home as a child and grows up to be an expert thief. He falls in love with Rani, an ex-dancer who is now almost an invalid, and their relationship fuels the story. *Awaara,* directed by Raj Kapoor and a smash hit

Sholay

not only in India but in such countries as the former Soviet Union, tells the story of Judge Raghunath, his wife Bharati, the notorious criminal Jagga, the judge's son Raj and his girlfriend Rita. Bharati is abducted by Jagga in revenge for the judge wrongfully convicting him of a crime he did not commit. Jagga later returns the judge's wife but the news of her abduction and pregnancy quickly spreads in the community. Upset by this turn of events, Judge Raghunath decides to discard his wife. In the slums Bharati gives birth to a son, whom she calls Raj. The film depicts the life of Raj and the way it relates to his situation. The third film, *Sholay,* is one of the most popular films ever made in India. *Sholay* can best be described as an Indianised Western, with the visual vocabulary and the attitudes portrayed in such films as *The Wild Bunch* (1969) and *The Magnificent Seven* (1962). The film deals with the lives and conflicts of a group of characters who personify the pervasiveness of evil in society. Thakur Saheb, a retired police officer and rural landlord, hires two trigger-happy jailbirds to hunt down a gang of

bandits, led by the much feared Gabbar Singh, who are terrorising villagers. It is interesting to see how in these three films in which the concept of evil is central to the filmic experience, the concept of evil itself has evolved with time and changing circumstances. (For a comprehensive analysis of *Sholay* see Dissanayake and Sahai, 1992.)

Style and Technique

These are as important as the content. Indian popular films are generally melodramatic musicals which are non-naturalistic in the Western sense. The story does not progress in a linear fashion but meanders, with detours and stories within stories. This circular form of narration is commonly found in classical and folk literature. Song, music and dance are significant in conveying the meaning of the story and in generating the desired emotions. Songs fulfil a number of important functions within the filmic experience. They generate emotion; they underline moral messages; they convey eroticism and sexuality whose overt expression is disallowed on the screen; they create the mood for participating in the various episodes. Similarly, dance sequences are important to fulfil a number of different functions. Indian popular films are sometimes referred to contemptuously as 'masalas' (spices). Just as different spices are used in cooking, so the filmmaker, it is contended, uses the standard elements associated with the given formula for success, namely: song, dance, melodrama, stunts, fights, cabaret sequences, exaggerated humour. While there is much substance to this charge, and some of the worst films are nothing but such a formula, the more talented and successful popular filmmakers have deployed these elements with remarkable ingenuity to create a distinctively Indian form of cinema, just as Hong Kong filmmakers have used the styles, techniques and choreography of traditional martial arts to create a distinctively Chinese style of film-making. So when you go to see an Indian popular film, you must do so in the right frame of mind: understand that what you are going to see is not a realistic, western-type film with a linear narrative but a film that conforms to a different set of aesthetic imperatives. (See Thomas, 1985 for a spirited defence of the pleasures and popularity of Indian cinema.)

Until recently, when we talked about Indian popular cinema we meant Hindi films produced in Bombay, and called them 'Bombay Films' or even 'Bollywood'. But this is no longer accurate. A substantial number of popular films are now being produced in the South and in languages such as Tamil and Telugu. Despite the diversity of origin, Indian popular films display readily identifiable characteristics in terms of theme, narrative, style and technique.

Artistic Films

Artistic films differ sharply from popular films. They are realistic, often ethnographic, and they seek to capture important aspects of Indian reality. By and large, they avoid glamour and glitz and use cinema as an artistic medium capable of exploring important areas of Indian experience. They are usually low-budget and are shown at international film festivals. The artistic films, understandably, do not attract the huge audiences that the popular films do. Often they are made in regional languages like Bengali and Malayalam, and do not receive pan-Indian exposure. In terms of the commitment to serious cinema, to making cinema a significant medium of artistic communication, to eschewing the vulgarities and crudities often associated with Indian popular cinema, artistic filmmakers differ significantly from their counterparts in popular cinema.

Satyajit Ray

When we talk of artistic cinema in India the first name that comes up is Satyajit Ray. This is because he was primarily responsible for fashioning this genre and gaining international recognition for it. His film *Pather Panchali*, made in 1955, was the first such film. In a poll conducted in 1992 by the magazine *Sight and Sound*, *Pather Panchali* was voted one of the ten greatest films of all time. It depicts the childhood world of Apu, the little boy whose life and fortunes are recounted in two subsequent films that together form the Apu trilogy. The second film in the trilogy, *Aparajito*, explores the world of Apu from ten to seventeen years of age, and the third, *Apur Sansar*, narrates his marriage and fatherhood against the backdrop of city life in Calcutta. These films offer a striking contrast to Indian popular films. They use understatement effectively, something totally absent in popular films. There is a visual lyricism and a deep humanism that sophisticated cinema lovers the world over find intensely satisfying. Satyajit Ray made a number of significant films in the same mould that have won for him and Indian cinema great international acclaim. His work provides a sense of the preoccupations of artistic cinema and how they differ from popular cinema. Many of Ray's films are readily available in videocassette.

Satyajit Ray is generally regarded as India's greatest filmmaker and, along with Jean Renoir and Vittorio de Sica, he is rated among the great masters of humanist cinema. His film, *Jalsaghar* (The Music Room, 1958) deals with an arrogant member of the declining aristocracy and portrays both his refined taste and ruinous self-indulgence. *Mahanagar* (The Big City, 1963) explores the impact of urbanisation on consciousness and lifestyles. It concerns Arati, a young girl, who decides to take up a job, much against the wishes of some

Pather Panchali

of the elders in the family, thus disrupting the traditional household. His film *Devi* (1960) takes as its theme the problem of religiosity and is set in the 1860s. It is about a happy couple who are living in sheltered comfort but who are tragically engulfed by religious hysteria when the wife is suddenly thought to be a reincarnation of the goddess Kali. *Charulatha* (1964), which many consider to be Ray's most accomplished film, is set in Victorian India and narrates with great sensitivity and cinematic skill the life of a young woman striving to come to terms with her enforced upper class idleness, suppressed artistic propensities, and illicit love for her husband's cousin. *Home and the World* (1984) similarly explores female subjectivity against a political background based on a novel by Rabindranath Tagore. Ray's films, and indeed those of other directors belonging to the artistic tradition, are clearly quite different from popular films.

Other Artistic Filmmakers

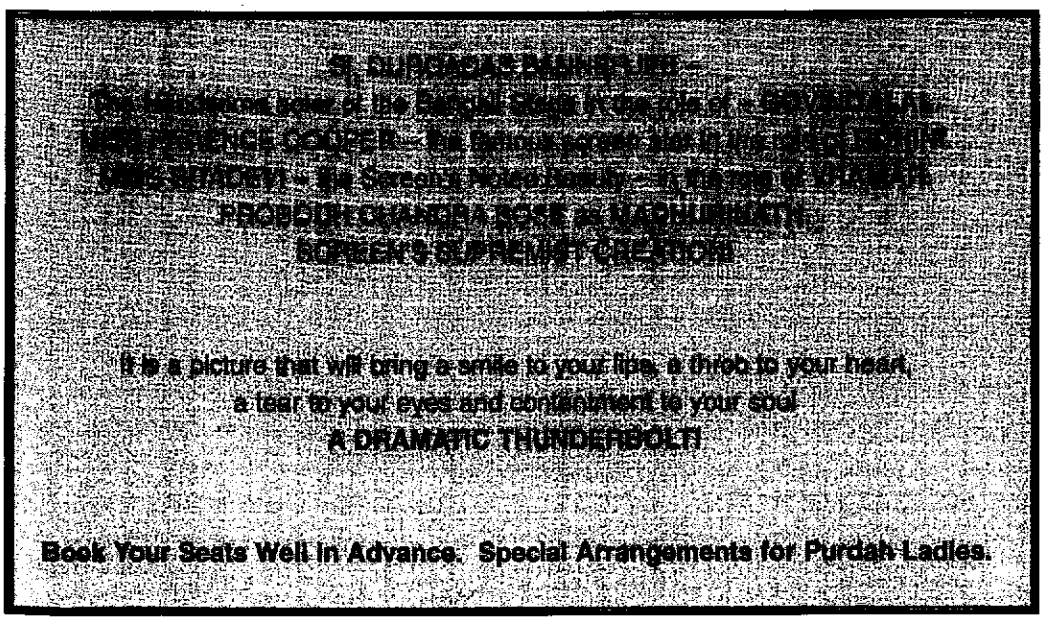
A number of highly gifted directors are associated with the artistic cinema. We have already referred to some of them: Ritwik Ghatak, Mrinal Sen, Adoor Gopalakrishnan, Aravindan, Kumar Shahani, Mani Kaul, Buddhaheb Dasgupta, Aparna Sen, Gautam Ghose, Shyam Benegal, Govind Nihalani, Shaji Karun, Vijaya Mehta, Ketan Mehta. All, from their distinctive vantage points, seek to cinematise important areas of Indian reality. Adoor Gopalakrishnan's film, *Rat Trap* (1981), for example, which has won many prestigious awards, is about Unni the pathetic middle-aged man, unmarried, set in his traditional ways, who cannot accept social change and adjust accordingly. He is demanding and authoritarian and is emblematic of the decaying feudal class. The film charts his inability to adapt to social change and the catastrophic consequences. As in Ray's films, we find remarkable use of understatement, a slow meditative camera that weighs the meaning of the most mundane event, avoiding the flashy exuberance normally associated with popular films. Similarly, in his film *Face to Face* (1984), Gopalakrishnan explores the theme of self and modernisation, this time taking a different angle. The film deals with the love and death of Sreedharan, a devoted Communist and loyal party worker, deeply respected by his fellow workers. He leads the trade union at a tile factory but suddenly begins to shun politics. Once again the style of the film follows the neo-realistic tradition.

As we seek to identify the distinguishing features of Indian cinema, we need to keep in mind the main characteristics of its two main branches – the popular and the artistic. Both relate to the Indian reality and consciousness, but in very different ways. The techniques of popular cinema are largely shaped by traditional narrative, whereas those of the artistic cinema are Western in nature, largely neo-realistic. However, in terms of the experiences explored, the artistic films are much closer to Indian reality than the popular films, which are mostly fantasies. Topics such as self and modernisation, alienation, clash of tradition and modernity and the ensuing confusion of values, Westernisation and its impact, the role of the artist in a consumer society, the subjection of women – issues that are central to a deep understanding of contemporary Indian society – find expression in artistic cinema.

In most artistic films, all aspects of movie-production are deemed ancillary to the presentation of realistic narrative. Hence, camera angles are largely at eye-level; lighting unobtrusive; framing concentrated on the main action of a given scene; cuts effected at logical junctures in the flow of action. Popular cinema, which grew out of different roots, never felt a need to follow this pattern of Western filmmaking. The styles of presentation and techniques

associated with popular cinema merit our close attention. Indian popular filmmakers, with their inordinate love for dramatic camera movements, extravagant use of colour, flashy editing, and self-conscious use of sound, depart significantly from the 'invisible' style associated with artistic cinema. Indian popular filmmakers aim to create a different kind of film and narrative discourse. The narrative closure, unobtrusive camera, continuity of image, shot centering, frame balance and sequential editing adopted by artistic film directors sought to create in the minds of the spectator the impression that what is being shown on the screen is an objective reporting of real events rather than a created narrative. Indian popular film directors on the other hand do not conceal the fact that what is on the screen is a creation, an invention by the makers of the film.

This chapter has sought to present in broad outline some of the features that give Indian cinema its distinctiveness. For this purpose we categorised Indian cinema into two groups – the popular and the artistic – and discussed the distinguishing features of each in terms of theme, content, and style. The points we have made in this chapter will become clearer still as we exemplify them in a number of films associated with each group. Indian cinema as it has evolved over the past ninety years is a cinema with a distinctive set of characteristics and it reflects an imaginative world very different from that created by British or French or Italian or Japanese cinema. It is a world that bears the Indian cultural inscription.



Untitled advertisement for a film. India Office file no. L P & J 6 1747, pg.418

CHAPTER 3

Cinema and Society in India

Indian cinema is essentially an institution of modernity. This is because it is at one level 'a machine engaged in the mechanical reproduction of images, and so has an impact on the way traditions of representation are refracted through its mechanisms' (Vasudevan, 1995a).

This chapter is divided into two. In the first part we identify the traditions of representation; these are then explored in some depth in the following chapters. In the second part, we examine the economic and institutional paraphernalia associated with the mechanical reproduction of these representations. The primary purpose of this chapter, refracting the traditions of representation/re-presentation, is to focus on entertainment, since cinema is essentially a spectacle. Consequently, issues dealing with the development of an industry geared to mass produce that spectacle for a market will also be explored. Information and discussion of the economics of film production and the relationship between the government and the film industry are not readily available to the general reader but are valuable to our study.

What are the traditions of representation that Indian cinema refracts? India has a long tradition – five thousand years of history, two hundred years as part of the British Empire and only fifty years as an independent country. Conceptualising Indian society is highly problematic. Labels such as Indian and Asian are loosely used. Furthermore, many writers (for example, Varshney, 1993; Kohli, 1990) believe that these are anxious times for India – the decline of the Congress Party and the problems of governability, the assassination of two previous Prime Ministers, the continuing terrorism in the state of Kashmir, the rise of Hindu nationalism and the aggravation of communal violence – yet India has not so far disintegrated as a society. Indeed, it has maintained its national identity and political stability since

independence and it is opening up to the world market and is now seen as having much potential for the technological revolution.

Here we focus on those traditions which have a bearing on Indian films and explore how they illuminate the relationship between Indian cinema and Indian society. Two concepts which we regard as central are pluralism and secularism.

The Influence of Religion in Indian Film

India is a religiously plural society – the majority of its people are Hindus. But unlike its 'Christian counterpart where religion is concentrated in churches, religious authority is widely diffused in the Hindu world' (Brown, 1994). Brown notes that the Hindu's religious life is centred on the family and the caste. The church, synagogue or mosque as seats of worship and education have no real Hindu parallel. But who actually is a Hindu? According to Savarkar, father of Hindu nationalism, a Hindu means a person who regards the land from the Indus to the Seas as his fatherland as well as his Holyland.

> This definition is territorial (land between the Indus and the Seas), genealogical (fatherland), and religious (holyland). Hindus, Sikhs, Jains and Buddhists can be part of this definition, for they meet all three criteria (Varshney, 1993).

Other minorities – Parsis, Jews and Christians – are assimilated and have become part of the nation's mainstream. Only the Muslims, according to the Hindu nationalists, are the principal adversary, since they are a substantial minority and they have their homeland in Pakistan.

This line of argument, however, marks a significant departure from the idea of nationhood conceived and propagated since Independence. To Nehru and Gandhi, there were no insiders and outsiders in India; throughout its history India has regularly received and accommodated other religions and in this process:

> Syncretistic forms of culture and syncretistic forms of religious worship have emerged and become part of India. Religious pluralism in India could not only exist, but also if there was a dispute, the state would maintain a posture of equidistance, a principle that came to define India's secularism (Varshney, 1993:235).

The film *Roja* by Mani Rathnam was one of the most popular in the period 1992-3 and it is generally considered to be extraordinarily well made (it was awarded the President's National Integration Award). As the review by

Niranjana (1994) indicates, *Roja* is a text about nationalism, the power of the state and the future of secularism.

The film is set in Kashmir against a backdrop of terrorism. Rishi Kumar, a young scientist, is kidnapped and held captive by terrorists in retaliation for the capture of their leader by Indian security forces. His wife struggles for her husband's release and ultimately succeeds. But what the film does is to point out through the hero the misguided action of the Kashmiri separatists, since Kashmir is part of India. Nevertheless, Mani Rathnam does present the human face of the terrorists and is careful to avoid siding with either the Hindus or the Muslims. *Roja* highlights the centrality of the question of national integration; the story wavers dramatically between the hero's invocations of *Jai Hind* (long live India!) and the cost of being beaten senseless and the bond that developed between the captive and the terrorists.

It is partly in response to the disintegrative tendency of the Kashmir (Muslim) separatists that the Hindutva's commitment to India's territorial integrity can be understood. As Varshney (1993) says 'Most of India is, and has been, Hindu by religion – anywhere between 65 and 70 per cent in the early twentieth century and 82 per cent today'. Consequently, it would be fruitful to state in a summarised form what Hindus believe and then focus on the beliefs and traditions as they are reflected in and refracted through the cinema.

Hinduism

According to Bruce (1995: 84-85) the term 'Hindu' simply means 'of India'. As one would expect, given the size of the Indian subcontinent and the ethnic and linguistic diversity of those who have inhabited it, Hinduism is extraordinarily complex and encompasses almost every possible sort of religious belief and practice, from pagan superstition to ascetic and scholarly traditions.

The heart of the philosophical Hinduism of the Brahmans is *dharma* which, at the cosmic level, means 'self-subsistence', that which has no antecedent cause, and is comparable to the Christian 'Word'. As it says at the start of John's gospel: 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God'. *Dharma* also means 'universal law' or norm, which applies at the moral, the ritual, and the social levels. Every individual has a *dharma* specific to his/her social status and stage of life. There is also a *dharma* specific to each caste.

As in Buddhism, the individual's spirit (or *Atma*) is thought to be 'really' just an embodiment of the universal soul but, in so far as it has an identity, it is retained through a series of reincarnations.

Underlying reincarnation and everything else is *karma*, which means both action and the consequences of actions. Rebirth is a profoundly moral process in that the accumulation of good *karma* will ensure a better birth next time round. This doctrine is, not surprisingly, favoured by high-caste Brahmans because it explains their privileges as being deserved by their good actions in previous lives and it reconciles the lower orders to their humble position.

The good Hindu life has four ends. In addition to *dharma*, there is *artha* (correct behaviour in the material world of productive and economic activity) and *kama* (the pursuit of love and pleasure). Proper action in these spheres will lead to the fourth end: *moksha* or release from the cycle of rebirth. As in the Buddhist tradition, the culmination of religious activity is final departure from the material world.

There is no single work or canon which contains the authoritative version of divine revelation. Instead of a Pentateuch, Bible or Quran, there are a very large number of sources. The Vedas, the oldest of which date back to 3000 BC, contain hymns, ritual instructions, and philosophical observations. Then there are the two great epics: the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabarata*. The latter tells the story of a great battle in which Prince Arjuna is taught the significance of *dharma* by the God Krishna, who acts as his charioteer. The convoluted story shows the dreadful consequences which result when people follow their own interpretation of duty rather than that laid down by Krishna and teaches that the highest morality lies in doing what has to be done, entirely detached from the consequences.

The Hindu text best known in the West, the *Bhagavad Gita*, is an excerpt from the *Mahabarata* and illustrates the connection between *dharma* and *karma*. Brahmanic Hinduism is complemented by a theistic devotional strand which worships, among many others, Indra (God of Rain), Surya (Sun), Chandra (Moon), Ganesha (the remover of obstacles, depicted as a creature with four arms and an elephant's head), Yama (death), Sarasvati (Goddess of learning and wife of Brahma), and Lakshmi (Goddess of wealth and wife of Vishnu).

The philosophical strand readily encompasses the theistic cults by supposing that the variety of deities are 'really' illusory embodiments of the single spirit of cosmic consciousness. They provide a useful channel for the religious consciousness of the less sophisticated, in the same way that the cult of Mary provides a way to God for the less sophisticated Catholic.

Central to an understanding of Hinduism, as the summary above which we have adapted from Bruce (1995) indicates, is the immense variety of beliefs

and practices which form part of the 'Great Tradition', because its roots are in textual religious sources and in the laws of such classical ethical codes as *Manusmriti*. However, the main sources of the Hindu tradition are the two epics, the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* which have informed and influenced Indian cinema since its beginnings. Consequently, we offer a summary of the essential points of these epics.

The ***Mahabharata*** revolves around the struggles between two princely families, the Pandavas and their cousins, the Kauravas for possession of a kingdom located near the present city of Delhi. The central character of the epic is Lord Krishna, a man of action and a statesman. The climax is the great battle in which Lord Krishna becomes the charioteer of Arjuna, one of the Pandava brothers. The lengthy conversation between them is the subject matter of the *Bhagavad Gita*, which is in many ways the most important aspect of the narrative. For although the Pandavas were victorious, the story of the struggles occupies only about a quarter of the epic, the rest being devoted to Indian philosophical, metaphysical, spiritual and ethical thinking.

The ***Ramayana*** is shorter than the *Mahabharata* and celebrates the life and exploits of Rama. Prince Rama is exiled by his father for fourteen years at the behest of Rama's step-mother Kaikeji. He leaves with his wife Sita and brother Lakshman. While in the forest, Sita is kidnapped by the demon-king, Ravana of Lanka. Rama, helped by an army of monkeys led by Hanuman, regains her and his kingdom of Ayodhya.

The influence of these two epics in the lives of Indians and on Indian popular cinema cannot be overestimated. The *Mahabharata* embodies the Hindu understanding of the concept of *dharma*. This is what sustains world order. From the *Mahabharata* people learn the rules and the codes of ideal conduct laid down for everybody. It is an encyclopaedia of Indian culture and has been described as the National Epic of India.

Likewise, stories from the *Ramayana* are constantly told and retold and through them people learn the difference between right and wrong, develop a high sense of values and understand what constitutes ideal behaviour. Rama himself is the epitome of all the virtues, an example to all people of honour, courage and loyalty. One of the most important themes in the *Ramayana* is the potential in all human beings for good and evil. The destruction of evil by good, either by oneself or by divine intervention, is a constant theme of Hinduism and of Indian popular cinema.

While much has been written about the influence of the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* on Phalke, father of the Indian film industry – for example his *Lanka Dahan* (The Burning of Lanka, 1917) is taken from a significant

episode from the *Ramayana* – recent directors such as Shyam Benegal and Kumar Shahani have also explicitly drawn upon the epics. For example, Benegal's *Kalyug* (Dark Age, 1981) and Shahani's *Tarang* (Wave, 1984)

> use structural and thematic elements from the great Indian epic, the *Mahabharata*, for a modern retelling of the ancient narrative of familial enmity, opposition and self-destruction. The epic provides the framework for a dramatic representation of power and greed in the business world of contemporary India (Chakravarty, 1996:253).

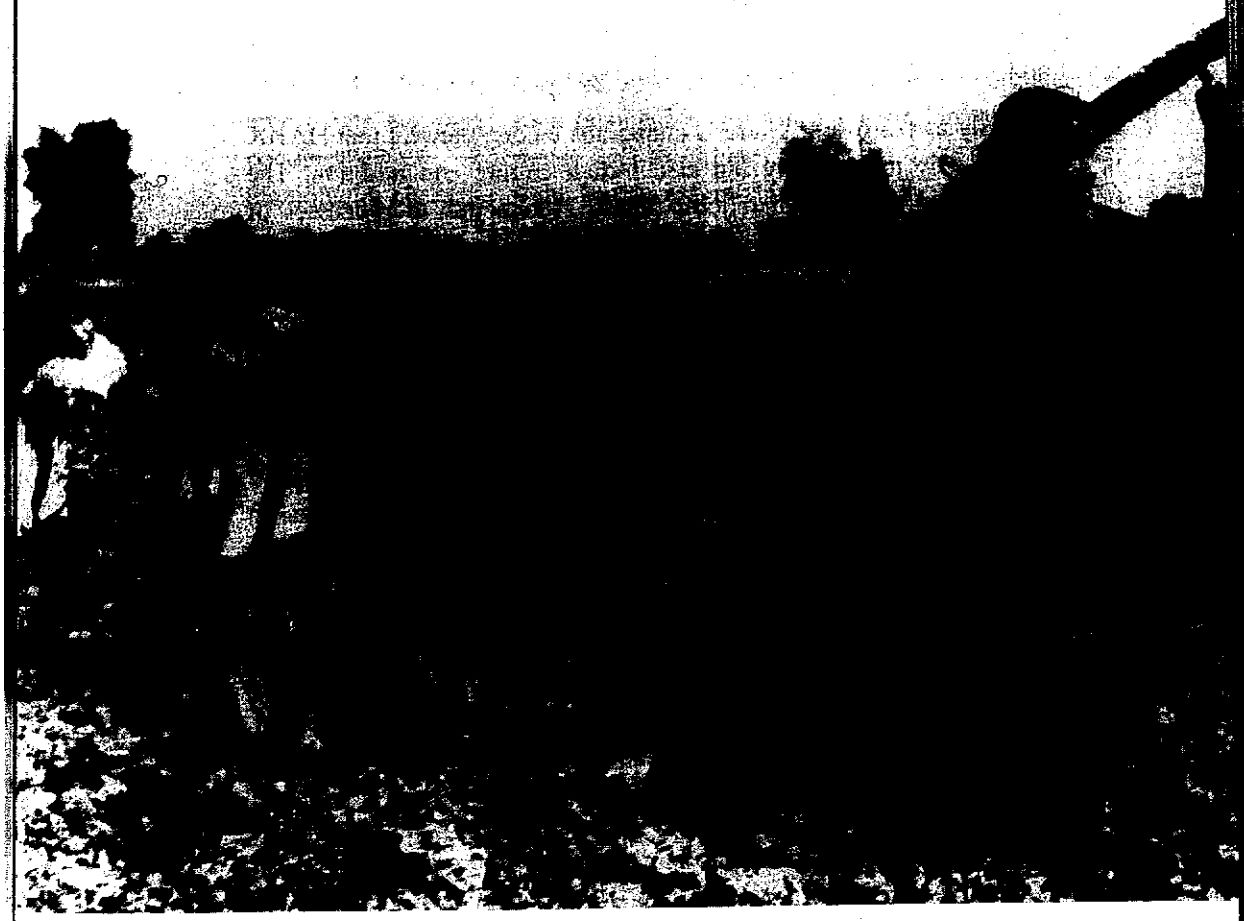
The Relationship Between Cinema and Society

The Role of the Family

We can explore the role of the mother in three films: *Mother India* (1957), *Deewar* (The Walls, 1975) and *Ram Lakhan* (Lord Ram and Lakshman, 1989). In all three, the story revolves around a lone woman bringing up her sons in hostile circumstances. But the ways in which each faces and fights those circumstances demonstrate the changes in Indian society over the past three decades. As observed by Geetha (1990), the picture of Nargis, the mother in *Mother India* is a humanistic one, if politically naive. In *Deewar*, the mother (Nirupa Roy) is less sturdy and withdraws into the world of 'pujas' and prayers – thus becoming marginalised. This theme is further developed in *Ram Lakhan*, where the mother (Rakhee) waits seventeen years for her sons to grow up and avenge her indignities.

The status of the mother and her relationship with her children are interesting. In *Mother India*, the mother does not depend on her husband; in *Deewar* she is defined as a widow towards the end of the film and invested with the traditional signs of Indian widowhood. In *Ram Lakhan*, the mother is already a widow and the 'only justification for her existence after her husband's death seems to be her desire for revenge' (Geetha, 1990:10).

It is fascinating to examine the model of ideal Indian womanhood reflected and refracted through the changing role of both the mother in Indian films and the Indian family in Indian society. The role of the mother is clearly invested with the spiritual qualities of self sacrifice, devotion and religiosity. Right from the earliest Indian films, for example in *Raja Harischandra* (1913), the role of the daughters of India was steadily defined. 'They were to be obedient daughters, self-sacrificing mothers and devoted wives, defined by their relationship to men or to patriarchal social structures' (Geetha, 1990:13).



Mother India

A number of writers (Chatterjee, 1993; Arnold and Hardiman, 1994) have shown how this construction of motherhood and womanhood is central to the colonial discourse on women and how it forms part of the wider processes operating in the world of capitalist social relations beyond Britain and India.

What about the construction of the family itself? Illumination can be found in the 1994 film *Hum Aapke Hain Koun* (HAHK – who am I to you?) which achieved considerable commercial success and has been compared to such blockbusters as *Sholay* (1975) and *Mughal-e-Azam* (1960). At the seminar on Popular Culture in India at the School for Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in June 1995, Uberoi presented an illuminating paper on the film *HAHK* and we draw upon this here.

There are a number of surprising elements about *HAHK*. It is a modest budget family drama without the 'masala' ingredients of sex, sadism and violence so characteristic of recent 'Bollywood' films. It has a considerable number of

melodious songs and catchy tunes, but no more than *Roja* (1992) or *1942: A Love Story* (1994). What is most surprising is that it is a 'clean family movie'. In describing the film as clean and morally uplifting, Uberoi has drawn attention to a number of themes in the film, including the following:

a) **The family as tradition**. There is consensus among viewers that HAHK is about not only joint family but also Indian culture and tradition. The possible break-up of the Indian joint family system due to processes of urbanisation, industrialisation and westernisation has been causing concern for the past fifty years. However, the film is more about what the family should be rather than what it is; hence, there is no antagonism between the father figure and the sons, for example, no tension between the brothers and no tension between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law. Perhaps the best comment comes from Madhuri Dixit, who won the filmfare award for Best Actress of 1994: 'Hum Aapke Hain Koun presents a perfect 'utopia' – about simple values and guileless people'.

b) **Vulgarity.** Sex and vulgarity have been part and parcel of all popular cinema since it began. Indian cinema has had its fair share, but in recent years the Indian public has witnessed more of it through satellite and cable TV channels. Uberoi claims that an important aspect of *HAHK* as a 'family' film is that the whole family (grandparents, parents and children) can watch it together without embarrassment. Despite its highly simplified structure, the film is a universal love story but, as Uberoi rightly suggests, 'the conflicts in the film are those between *dharma* (duty) and desire and between freedom and destiny – conflicts which have to be reconciled before a love story can come to a satisfactory happy ending'.

But perhaps the most important aspect of *HAHK* is how it reinforces India's cultural heritage through depicting series of rituals – betrothal, engagement, the *mehndi* (the decoration of the bride's hands with leaves of the Henna), marriage ceremonies and the celebration of the new-born child. Indeed, according to Uberoi, 'the most remarkable instance is the marriage ceremony itself, the centre-piece and indeed the *raison d'être* of the movie'.

Hindi films are seen as 'collective fantasies' since they have many features in common with fairy tales. Like fairy tales, Hindi films have the psychological function of producing a sense of security by upholding the picture of a world in which the family and *dharma* are safe (Kakar mentioned in Valicha, 1988:35) and that there are parallels between the Hindi film and certain popular myths.

The Role of Language in Hindi Films

How do films communicate the collective fantasies which, according to Kakar, characterise Indian popular cinema? Language has a significant bearing on the relationship between cinema and society in India. Adequate and appropriate communication is possible only through the languages of the people, their mother tongues and, as Oomen (1990:131-132) rightly notes, the polyglot character of the Indian nation-state renders the challenge particularly stupendous: 'we are here referring to 800 million people, one-sixth of humanity'.

A conservative estimate puts the number of languages in India at over 100. However, the Indian constitution recognises only 15 major languages, with Hindi spoken by about 40 per cent of the population. Consequently, although the South of India is more prolific in terms of film production – in Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam and Kannada – and, although Calcutta is normally seen to lead the rest of India as a centre for quality, the grip of Bombay with its emphasis on Hindi is tighter. In 1993, films in Hindi numbered only 182 out of over 800 but they cater to 'the all-Indian market and are understood by the majority of the Indian population (an achievement in India's polylingual society for which the Bombay film itself has claimed its fair share of credit)' (Chakravarty, 1996:9).

The subject and treatment of popular Hindi films are tried, trusted and predictable – a planned mixture of stars, songs, dances and titillation – the story is just a peg on which to hang these elements. The stars themselves (and their ratings) are the most important aspect of any film – they are sought after and relentlessly pursued: Amitabh Bachchan, Sanjay Dutt, Salman Khan, Sharukh Khan, Madhuri Dixit.

Until the 1970s, love stories were very popular and in India, where arranged marriages are still common, Indian films have created a new legitimacy for love-marriage through various devices. According to Nandy (1981), the best-known devices include the following:

a) the couple discover that their parents had planned to get them married to each other anyway.

b) the hero, separated from the heroine by barriers of caste, status or wealth, does a good turn to the girl's family, so that the family, in the last scene, guiltily give their girl in marriage to him as a reward

c) alternatively, it is the heroine who does a good turn to win the hearts of the hero's arrogant family.

Another strategy of Indian narrative structure is the double roles, particularly with regard to the main male protagonists – often two sons, one good and the other bad, one meek and the other aggressive. Sometimes it is the 'lost-'n'-found', 'cops and robbers' formulae with crime being the fulcrum for all kinds of plots.

Scenes of Violence

Many critics have commented on the gratuitous scenes of violence and gory deaths which have characterised the Indian popular cinema since the 1970s. This period saw the rise of Amitabh Bachchan as the 'angry young man' who went on to become the last of the superstars and, according to the Indian press, 'a colossus who may not be seen again'. It marked a decisive break with the past. Any love triangle occupies a secondary position; in many of the films of the 1970s and early 1980s, hero Bachchan has little time for speeches. Using his height and his voice to full advantage, he concentrated on what the plot required him to do – generally to settle a score or redress an injustice. Violence reached its apogee in *Sholay* (Flames, 1975) a film which has become a legend. Bachchan was no longer the avenger seeking justice but a mercenary, selling his prowess as a killer, for a price (Garga, 1996:184). One of the most noticeable features of *Sholay* is that while the two heroes (Bachchan and Dharmendra) still value friendship and male bonding (*dosti*), there is no regard for family values (see Dissanayake and Sahai, 1992 for a cultural reading of *Sholay*).

We said at the beginning of this chapter that the cinema refracts the traditions of representation. One reason for the enormous success of these Amitabh Bachchan films is that the 1970s were a period of deep crisis in India. There was urban crime, spiralling inflation, corrupt and sectarian politics – to such an extent that Mrs Gandhi, then Prime Minister, imposed a State of Emergency in 1975. Out of the window went the kind of romanticism associated with Rajesh Khanna, for example. The public was looking for a hero to put things right and Amitabh Bachchan fitted the bill perfectly.

But Amitabh Bachchan's films did not eliminate the significance of music and dance. According to Barnouw and Krishnaswamy (1963), music is an integral element of Indian film – its importance is due to the structure of Indian traditional performance. Indeed, 'classical Sanskrit theatre made no separation between the arts of music, song and dance – all were required for a perfect enactment of the performance themes, whether they were sacred or secular in nature' (Beeman, 1981). We devote a sub-section to the importance of the role of music, song and dance in Indian cinema later in this book. Here, it is sufficient to identify some of the aspects of music, song and dance in Indian cinema.

In a paper for a Postgraduate Seminar at the Institute of Commonwealth Studies in 1991, Kabir outlined the development of Indian Film music from its early days until 1991. She drew attention to how, ever since the introduction of sound in *Alam Ara* (1931), films became dependent 'on the song in a way that has differentiated Indian cinema from most world cinema'. Remember that *Indrasabha* (The Court of Lord Indra) produced in 1932 had 70 songs!

How the songs were sung changed. In the early thirties and forties, the songs were recorded live during the filming of the song sequence and the 'song would be picturised in a single take, which meant that the song sequence would be virtually static' (Kabir, 1991:1). Since the 1950s, playback singing has become an established feature of music production and this has produced a host of playback singers, including Mukesh, Rafi, Lata Mangeshkar, Kishore Kumar, Kumar Shanu, Udit Narayan, Kavita Krishnamurthy and Alka Yagnik, many of whom have achieved international reputation in their own right.

Dance is equally important in Indian films. Sanskrit theatre integrated dance music and acting – *Natya* and *Sangeet* – separation only recently has occurred. Dance is an inseparable aspect of Indian culture and is manifested in all Indian festivals and religious occasions. Classical dancing was originally associated with the Devdasis in the south and with the Kothivalis in the north. Many men dancers were eunuchs and the dancing women could not lead normal lives. The dance of the eunuchs and of the Kothivalis was called *Nautch*.

Through a mixture of dance forms from the West and other parts of the world, the Indian film industry has popularised and liberated Indian dance from its low status. In 1948, the costliest and most spectacular film of the period, *Chandralekha*, dramatically changed the nature of film production. Nearly three and a half hours long, the film culminated in a spectacular dance which later film producers tried to emulate but never equalled.

The Economics of the Film Industry and the State

Filmmaking is very costly. In the beginning, Indian films were financed from sources connected with the film industry, both the distribution and exhibition sectors contributing to the making of films. By the time of the Second World War, the film industry had, in the words of Majumdar (1995:301), 'a look of solidarity and self respect and among the Indian industries, cinema occupied the 8th place reckoned in terms of investment in the early forties'.

However, the Indian film business has never been officially considered an industry, so raising money from financial institutions has always been

problematic. This, coupled with the high rate of failures at the box office, particularly in recent years, has made the financing of films very risky.

The Second World War created a boom in the film industry which, because it had no standardised practices, provided fertile ground for people with 'hot money'. This led, according to Majumdar (1995), to the decline of the studio system, where actors and crew were employees, and the rise of the star system, with stars becoming freelance artists who performed in more than one film at a time. Consequently, the star, the music director and the playback singer became the beneficiaries of the new order (p.302).

Meanwhile, the import of foreign films was, until 1957, allowed freely through Indian importers as well as some foreign companies. In 1960, the government established the Film Finance Corporation (FFC) and in the middle of the 1960s, an informal system of canalisation of films through the State Trading Corporation was introduced; subsequently, the National Film Development Corporation (NFDC) replaced the FFC and canalised the import of feature films, but this ceased in 1992.

The government's casual approach to the film industry is evident from the fact (reported by Majumdar, 1995) that there are no reliable data on such basic information as the total capital invested in the film industry in India, the annual investment in filmmaking gross collections or the sources from which production is obtained. Very little research has been carried out in this rather nebulous but extremely important area. *The Economics of Film Industry in India* (Jain, 1960) provided an overview of the field. Jain examined matters such as the technology of filmmaking, the raw materials and equipment required, as well as wages and welfare issues. He also provided useful information on the average costs of films, marketing and taxation and some international comparisons. Though limited in scope – it provided very little information on the exhibitions and their interrelationship with the producers and distributors – the book is a landmark.

Dharap's *Indian Films* provides extensive statistical information on various aspects of the film industry such as the number of cinema halls, the number of films produced in India and estimated costs of film production. First published in 1973, subsequent volumes (1974, 1975, 1977, 1979 and 1985) are 'only statistical updates'. In *Economics of Indian Cinema*, Oomen and Joseph (1991) deal with Malayalam films only, but in their introduction and in chapter two they give a useful overview of the commercialisation of the film industry in India. Recently, however, Mital's (1995) *Cinema Industry in India* focuses primarily on pricing and taxation, and he too notes that the

'economics of entertainment is a highly under-researched area of study' and that literature on this subject is 'scant and academic works are few and far between.'

Maitra's (1995) *100 years of Cinema* offers a useful summary of the cinema-going public and India's cinemas. He asserts that India has a cinema-going population of 65 million per week, though the cinemas number about 13,000 of which 6,500 are permanent and the rest touring. This works out to seven seats per thousand of the population, a very low rate compared to other large countries and considering that they are spread over 22 states and nine union territories. Half of the theatres are in the South.

Film budgets range between 3 crores (Rs30,000,000 i.e. about £540,000) and 6 lakhs (Rs600,000 i.e. about £11,000), the multi-star spectacle 'standing at one extreme end – the shoestring art and realism saga at the other!'. A moderately successful film earns much more than its costs and various outlets which have recently opened up have created new avenues for revenue, like the video market at home and overseas, audio rights, telecast on Doordashan (the National Television system) and various satellite TV channels.

So why do people go to the movies? Until the arrival of television, cinema-going was a regular and habit-forming part of people's lives all over the world. The excitement, the novelty and the entertainment which the technology of film production provided had no parallel in people's lives. For the young, cinema halls were places of romance where young people could get together secretly, sheltered by the relative anonymity of the crowd and the dark environment. There were (and still are) films which catered for the gratification of urban youth culture.

Cinema-going was (and to some extent still is) also part of family entertainment. The impact of these social occasions on the lives of people is under researched, but it is clear from a number of interviews carried out, particularly for television programmes – for example the one by Munni Kabir for her programme Movie Mahal on Channel 4 – that many people remember their childhood visits to the cinema in the company of their parents. As they grew up, many saw films which, according to their parents and the Board of Censors, they should not have seen. Consequently, at some stage in the lives of the vast majority of people, cinema-going was almost an act of transgression against parental authority.

The Movie Moguls

Who are these moguls who built cinema halls and financed the industry? The situation in India is different from that in the West. With the arrival of television in the West in the 1950s and 1960s, cinema attendance dropped and many cinemas closed down. However, in recent years, the film industry has fought back with blockbusters such as *Jurassic Park*. In India, however, television is not yet widespread; consequently, cinema attendance has so far not suffered materially. It is true that satellite, cable and video facilities are having an impact on the cinema-going public, but they seem to have made this public more discriminating. Cinema-going is still far more important to people than television.

The earlier movie moguls operated in the studio system. Garga (1996) documents the activities of some of the better known – J. F. Madhan of the Elphinstone Company, Chandulal Shah of Ranjit Movietone, B. N. Sircar, Devaki Bose, P.C. Barua, Nitin Bose of New Theatres, Damle, Fatehlal and Shantaram of Prabhat Studio and Himansu Rai of Bombay Talkies. But there is little reliable information on the financial entrepreneurs of recent decades. Das Gupta (1991:268) asserts that 'the finance for these films comes largely from a parallel economy lying outside the pale of the legitimate organised sector of banking and insurance and manufacturing industries'. Recent reports by the press are disturbing. Producer Mukesh Duggal was gunned down at Andheri, allegedly for refusing to give extortion money. The Dawood Ibrahim gang is reported to be increasingly targeting Hindi film producers and financiers for extortion money and the situation has deteriorated to such an extent that certain producers have fled abroad. According to the *Financial Times* of 13 August (1997: 6), Gulshan Kumar, India's 'Cassette King' and a movie mogul was shot dead, reportedly by Bombay gangsters. *The Financial Times* comments that 'Bombay's thriving movie industry has long had connections with organised crime, largely through the laundering of 'black' money used to finance many of the all-singing, all-dancing Hindi musicals which make Bollywood the world's most prolific film capital'.

Film Censorship

If the operations of the movie moguls are not always transparent, those of the government with regard to film censorship are quite clear. During colonial times, the British rulers were determined that cinema should serve their colonial policy. In the early years of Indian cinema, vigorous attempts were made by the rulers to regulate cinema for a variety of reasons, chief among them the desire to preserve the 'prestige of the white woman'. Constance

Bromley, former secretary and manager of the Opera House in Calcutta, a premier picture house, wrote an inflammatory newspaper article upon her return to England headlined: 'Films That Lower Our Prestige in India: Imperilling the Prestige of the White Woman' (quoted by Arora, 1995).

As the influence of the British began to decline in India, cinema was credited with spreading communism. According to the author of a classified report *The Cinema in the East: Factors in the Spread of Communism* (quoted by Arora, 1995)

> ...there can be no doubt that the way for Communist influence has been greatly facilitated by a powerful and novel element, which in recent years has entered into the lives of semi-civilized people in all parts of the tropical world. That element is the cinema.

Arora (1995:47) comments perceptively:

It is chronic that whereas the native was believed incapable of comprehending such genres of American cinema as romantic comedy or social parody, s/he was nevertheless credited with comprehending the narrative of such Soviet films as *Battleship Potemkin* and *Ivan the Terrible* and consequently being swayed by 'Communist propaganda'.

All these factors help to explain why, half a century after the departure of the British, Indian cinema is still one of the most heavily censured. The Film Censor Board of India continues 'to impose restrictions on the depiction of adult sexuality in a weak, though desperate, attempt at maintaining an essentialist and nationalistic distinction between western and Indian character types' (Arora, 1995:48). The Indian film industry subverts this control mainly through its song and dance sequences.

But here, too, things are changing. Recent developments are discussed in Chapter 7.