Young people viewing Hindi films: ideology, pleasure and meaning

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Abstract

Despite or perhaps because of the continued popularity of Hindi films, it has often been assumed that audience responses can be read from box office takings or film texts. Assertions are also made about how young male audiences of Hindi commercial films go to the cinema because they like action, nudity and sex, while young female audiences deplore it and go to view moral narratives, romance and melodrama. When it comes to young people viewing 'Bollywood' films, few have made more than superficial attempts to engage seriously with the sociocultural contexts of such Hindi film consumption or to explore the range of pleasures and meanings Hindi films hold for viewers across the globe. Based on a three-year study of Hindi films and their audiences in India and the UK, the research outlined in this article pulls together a wide range of ideas and theories on Hindi film and audiences put forward in the last few decades and connects these to the sociopolitical contexts in which the films are watched and to the individual interpretations of young viewers in India and the UK. At a practical level, it explores the connections between film consumption in India and the UK diaspora, representations of sexuality and desire in Hindi films, with a special focus on constructions of gender and ethnicity, and their significance for young viewers.

The context of this study

Theorising the films

Hindi commercial cinema – colloquially known as 'Bollywood' – is now the focus of rapidly escalating interest both amongst teachers of film or media and in the academic community. Skillfully choreographed dances, moving songs, aesthetically pleasing or lavish sets and costumes and sensational plots and characters have invited the attention of newer and wider audiences and, in tandem, given rise to literature that seeks to explain, or to explain away, the popularity of Hindi films. Recently, dozens of scholarly and journalistic articles and several book-length studies (Chakravarty 1998, Prasad 1998, Kazmi 1999, Mishra 2002) have offered interesting textual analyses of aspects of Hindi films ranging from nationalism and 'culture' to the 'role of women' and 'nature of the hero'. Others have championed aspects of these films and assumed that viewing them is essentially 'Indian', radically 'traditional' or 'popular' in that it empowers 'Bollywood' audiences by connecting them to a set of necessary cultural traditions. Historically, however, textual studies of have argued that Hindi films are based on the good versus evil master narratives of epics, are pre-realist, spectacular, irrational, based on emotion, formulaic, escapist, patriarchal and/or ultra-nationalist

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[1] This discussion is based on research elaborated in Banaji, S. (2006), *Reading Bollywood: the young audience and Hindi films*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan.

and generally politically reactionary (cf. Rangoonwala 1975, Dasgupta 1991). Whatever has gone on in the film, many textual analyses have tended to give more weight to the ending, although this is by no means the only type of textual analysis that is being done (for instance see Gledhill 1995, Barker and Austin 2000, Ghosh 1999 and 2002, Gopinath 2005).

Figure 1. Hindi film poster, Bombay Courtesy the author

Explaining the audiences

Despite one study based in India (Derné 2000) and a number of thought-provoking small-scale studies on diasporic viewing (Dudrah 2002, Bhattacharya 2004) Hindi film audiences remain an undertheorised realm. Clichés about them that circulate amongst the intelligentsia have often suggested that they tend to be pre-rational, childish, individualist, superstitious, easily influenced, patriarchal, authoritarian and/ or tradition-bound (Valicha 1988, Nair 2002, Vishwanath 2002). Certainly, given the penchant of Hindi films for melodrama, few audience theorists have seen the audience's emotional engagement and their pleasures in the films as adequate grounds for study. Indeed, assumptions about Hindi film viewing tend to follow in the path of dominant assumptions about much other popular cultural spectatorship across the globe. Namely, critics write as if spectatorship is monolithic and based on demographics; the film texts themselves are coherent and viewed in a linear manner; their spectators have fixed identities and are more or less highly vulnerable to textual influences depending on their social background. Many conclude from this that textual closure must cue psychic closure in the sense that the endings of Hindi films, with all their potential erasures of class differences and ethnic, intergenerational and other conflicts, are somehow seen to affect audiences more than other sequences in the films. These trends in terms of the theorising of film texts from production to narrative, and these assumptions about spectators have, in general, meant that there is unremitting concern expressed about the effects of Hindi films. Those writers most uneasy about commercial films often eulogise neo-Realist cinema and 'third' cinema in India, and operate on the premise that the effects of commercial films need to be counteracted via censorship or ideological decoding and intellectual critique for the masses.

Methodology

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The cinema hall context: observations and interviews
In the light of such conflicting approaches as the ones outlined, I chose to conduct an extended, in-depth qualitative study that engaged texts and contexts, personal and group identities. I carried out observations over a two and a half year period outside and inside Hindi film showings at cinema halls in Bombay and London, two cities with large Hindi film viewing populations. In the course of these observations, I conducted around 80 brief public interviews with young Indian and South Asian viewers both individually and in groups, and noted the kinds of sequences eliciting responses such as clapping, wolf whistles, calling out or jokes in the cinema hall, tears, embarrassment, laughter, leaving the hall, chat and conversation as well as avowed reasons for going to the cinema to view particular films. Predictably, perhaps, many of the instantaneous reactions to viewing in groups contradicted or were at odds with what interviewees said they felt about particular sequences in private. This should serve as a caution about looking for the 'truth' of viewer reactions to cinema in one single viewing, event or statement.

Figure 2. Crowds of viewers at a Bombay cinema hall, Courtesy the author

Figure 3. Typical young viewers at a night show, Courtesy the author

Interviewing and analysing data
In addition to the observations, over a three year period, I undertook extended, in-depth semi-structured interviews with 36 viewers in London and Bombay aged 16-25 who were married or single, from a range of class, caste, language, sexual orientations and religious backgrounds. In analysing the data collected (primarily notes on viewings, film texts and interview transcripts), I took a Cultural Studies approach which involved elements of historical and political contextualisation, Critical Discourse Analysis as well as aspects of social semiotic analysis and Screen theory. To illustrate how such a mixed approach has informed the analysis of discourse about films, I turn here to a piece of talk from one of my later interviews with a 21-year-old British-Pakistani trainee primary teacher, Latifa:

> **Interviewer**: Have any Hindi films really upset you?
> **Latifa**: [pause] There've been times when I've just cried and cried and cried. [Pause] Like I watched Preity Zinta that time and the baby and that was so [pause]
> **Interviewer**: Which film was that?
> **Latifa**: […] Kya Kehna that was unusual, an unusual role. And then I also saw Chori Chori Chupke Chupke. Actually that film just made me cry [pause] so much. When I saw Rani lose her baby, when she falls over, yeah, and then when Preity fell in love but she could never have him, you know, Salman Khan, and when she has to say goodbye to her baby. I felt like I couldn't stop crying.
> **Interviewer**: That's sad. [Pause] Why was that?
> **Latifa**: Actually my friend [pause], she had to give up her baby [pause]; I mean she had one of those operations, you know, [whispers] an abortion [pause] when she was sixteen and that was a very bad situation for her. She had become close to this boy at college and then they [pause, upset] but her dad wouldn't accept it then. [S: I'm so sorry. That's awful.] Yeah. He said the boy was bad. A bad fellow. [Angry.]

> **Interviewer**: And these films reminded you of that situation because of the stuff about illegitimate children? Or because Preity and Rani were upset?
> **Latifa**: [Pause] Why did I cry? Being pregnant, yeah, it's such a BIG thing…if you're not married … In our community. It's like saying 'this girl', yeah, 'she's had sex!' When we were watching Preity Zinta in CCCC I could imagine my mum thinking, 'My daughter, she's not like one of them disgusting sluts who wears clothes like that and goes with men like that.' But I watch and I think, 'Who am I? Who am I', yeah? Because that was me. That could've been me. What if I can't have another baby?
> **Interviewer**: Another baby? [Pause] Your 'friend'?
> **Latifa**: [Pause] Yeah. [Deep breath] You won't say anything? [S: shakes head; touches her hand.] Yeah. [Disgusted] Now we're married, official 'nikah', yeah, there're all like, 'When you two gonna have babies?' They forget. But I can't forget. [LAT.1/Eng.]

In terms of a search for patterns in the data, connecting different films, social discourses and interviews to each other, Latifa's testimony surrounding talk of the films Kya Kehna? (What's To Be Said?) and Chori Chori Chupke Chupke (By Theft, Softly, Softly), speaks immediately to several of the themes and ideas identified as being central to talk about films: the experience of relationships before marriage, the legitimacy or otherwise of sexual encounters within patriarchal culture, the unhappiness of girls and women within certain types of family structure, community hypocrisy, anxieties about how one behaves and is perceived. In addition, Latifa dwells not on entire films but on aspects of films and scenes or situations that are relevant to her, mixes talk about different characters to suit her needs (Rani and Preity in Chori Chori Chupke Chupke are initially presented as the social antitheses of each other, one an adored wife, the other a call-girl and table dancer). In line with Potter and Wetherell's insistence that talk may fulfil different 'functions' (1987:168), Latifa's use of a 'friend' diffuses intimacy and also serves to 'protect' her during the subsequent narrative, until she has established how I, also an older Asian woman, will receive her description of an 'illegitimate' sexual and emotional experience.

At another level, thoughts about sequences in the two films mentioned provide the stimuli for discussions of community[i] prescriptions on sexuality, femininity and masculinity. Read in the light of Barker and Galasiński's reminder that we must look not simply for examples of 'gender' or 'ethnic' identity per se, but should seek out the ways in which 'gender' discourses ethnicise masculinity and femininity or how community discourses might gender ethnicity (2002: 156-176), Latifa's account takes on new undertones. By locating thoughts about pregnancy in the confluence of discourses about sex and the body that take place within her community, and then later within the web of discourses surrounding marriage, Latifa enables a comparison of perspectives that highlights, for her, something uncomfortable and unjust about the conservative morality she finds in her community. Her assertions about the appalled thoughts her mother might evince on watching Preity the prostitute or Preity the unwed mother are tellingly counterposed to the self-doubt occasioned for her not merely by Chori Chori Chupke Chupke's representation of a 'scandalous' woman but by Latifa's own assumption of how these representations will be positioned and received by those in her family/community who set up the norms for acceptable femininity. As such, her question, 'Who am I?' is asking not only whether she fulfils the criteria for 'good

woman' set up by the discourses subscribed to by people like her mother, but which are somehow challenged by her own reading of the film representation of Preity, but also whether she fulfils the criteria for 'good Muslim' or 'good Asian' set up by intersections with the same discourses.

Some findings

Spectatorship, memory and romance

No films were spoken of in their entirety and all were discussed according to specific sequences, ideas or characters. Young viewers segued between discussions of their own romances and those of screen characters. Responses to romantic films ranged from aspiration and empathy to irritation and critique. Emotional-rational engagement is an active process always immanent within spectatorial practices, whether the spectators are 'academics'/'critics' or 'ordinary viewers' and however they may classify themselves. Just like the critics mentioned in previous sections, the viewers I spoke to carefully selected the aspects of Hindi films they wished to critique or praise based on a range of factors including their political and social values, their experiences in the world and of Hindi films. They used textual evidence in more or less convincing ways to support or justify their views.

One of the most common features of interviewees' engagement during discussions of Hindi films was their selective choice of lessons about love and relationships. Take the following example, from an interview with a working class 16 year old:

> **Jomir:** 'though I don't take it all inside when I watch Hindi films, the one thing I know from watching them is what's the worth of falling in love if you're going to be scared? .... Dilwale Dulhaniya Le Jayenge (The One with the Heart Takes the Bride) that's the movie I would look at to see how I want my [relationship] to go. After watching that movie, actually I realised what love means and everything. I must have seen it thirty-five times now – maybe more times. [British Bangladeshi student, London]

There were, of course, viewers who displayed a romantic disposition and, as such, appeared to respond with particular delight to passionate excess in a number of mainstream films, rather than to any particular sequences that they saw as being morally educative:

> **Interviewer**: Why do you think you liked Maine Pyar Kiya [I've fallen in Love]?
> **Neetu**: Because [pause] I believe in love. Really, I believe in love. You know, people say, 'What is all this nonsense, love-dove stuff, well? What is love? Love is nothing. It's only attraction they say, but no, it's not like that, love at first sight, yes, I believe in that. [16-year-old working-class Sikh, Bombay]

While positive responses to romance featured regularly in interviews, as did extended commentaries on family relationships, I did not find that this was highly sentimental, or that it differed hugely from the ways in which my white British students spoke of Hollywood films However, saliently, it was the case that younger viewers – or viewers

who spoke of themselves as adolescents – especially those under seventeen, tended to speak more constantly about adult choices and positions and to see themselves as implicated in the ideologies and practices of adults in their local communities, extended global communities and by extension, in film communities.

Another common feature of young people's talk about film sequences was an empathy with on-screen pain of different sorts and sources.

> **Ashok:** Before I realised I was gay I had a really close friend, this girl, yeah, and I started to feel that I wanted to be with her. [But] she was with someone else and every time I watched Kuch Kuch Hota Hai I thought of that, and when I heard that song, when Kajol is on the train, it used to bring tears to my eyes. [Ashok, 23-year-old British-Asian clerk]

Romantic aspirations inspired by film sequences were often clearly understood and discussed as such. Viewers were far from unaware of their own choices with regard to the aspects of films to engage with:

> **Rahul:** It was watching emotional films [such as Qayamat Se Qayamat Tak and Maine Pyar Kiya] that I first thought 'I will have a love marriage, come what may'. I didn't have a clear idea of whom I would marry, but I was determined that I would not marry into my own caste. [23-year-old Rajasthani metal worker, Bombay]

Indeed, belying assumptions about the uniformly escapist and retrograde nature of Hindi film viewing, frequently enjoyment was linked to irritation and critique, rather than to admiration and acceptance:

> **Farsana:** [In DDLJ] Amrish Puri, Kajol's father….I feel that he is wrong. See how he holds her by the wrist? You can see in his eyes. He is an angry man [pause] Because of what he's doing, she's become more strong and more vibrant. Yes And [fast, angry] how can you marry your daughter to a person you've never met, she's never met in her life? [21-year-old receptionist, Bombay]

Throughout my interviews, commenting on sequences depicting authoritarian parental behaviour, young viewers contextualised their disapproval of such behaviour as one of the pleasures of shared viewing with other youth. Romantic fantasies, whether framed in relation to lovers or parents, were often quite distinct from decisions and experiences in real life, which tended to be less well thought out, less moralistic and occasionally contradictory in terms of the young people's avowed beliefs:

> **Ruksana** [laughing]: You could say we learn about sex from Hollywood or East Enders and about romance from Hindi films!
> **Interviewer**: Do you believe in love strongly enough to go against your parents' wishes?
> **Ruksana** [laughs, embarrassed]: No. No I don't.
> **Shaku**: You've had a boyfriend?

> **Ruksana**: [pause] Yeah. I have, [my mother doesn't know] but …[working-class British Bangladeshi student]

It was clear that all viewers did not all respond to the invitations of Hindi films in the same ways or to the same extent, and that some groups of young viewers were implicated more in the narratives of most films, while others, who loved Hindi films but felt distanced from certain narratives by virtue of religion or class tended to focus on the songs, the mis-en-scene, the stars and the sets.

Spectacle, violence and politics
To complicate matters, romance and violence are intertwined in both film and viewer narratives.
Bombay and Gadar pack issues about religious/ethnic violence around erstwhile romances.
Depictions of and responses to violence were far more diverse than those to romance. Sometimes, for instance, enjoying violent action sequences was a matter of fan loyalty to a particular star rather than a generic pleasure:

> **Preeta:** I like fight scenes in action movies. Sometimes. I liked Arjun Pandit, I liked Gadar. I like Sunny [Deol], the way he fights. The way he looks. The way he runs [laughs]. The way he acts. [laughs]. He has got a good body! [Preeta, 19-year-old lower-middleclass Sikh, Bombay]

The pleasures of spectacular action are undeniable for many young viewers such as Harish, a trainee engineer in Bombay: 'Till sixteen or seventeen I really liked fighting scenes. I [still] like the cowboy style horse riding, camel riding, boxing'. For others, rationalisations of [film] violence are also sometimes a matter of accepting the hero's psychology because at some level it is similar to their own:

> **Nikhil:** [In Arjun], Sunny Deol, from college like he turns out to be into fighting, just because of the misbehaviour of others with him. His parents were harassed by the villains. That's why he turns [to] fighting. [25-year-old Gujarati Hindu worker, Bombay]

For other viewers, quite poignantly, being closer to the action in terms of their experiences of violence, may mean that they remain further from the film, as is the case with young viewers who have been the victims of pogroms such as episodes of horrific state sponsored anti-Muslim and anti-Sikh violence in India in the last three decades. Despite their attempted love stories, many viewers read such films in political ways:

> **Farsana**: When I saw Bombay in the theatre I loved the romantic beginning but then I was like 'Oh I have come into the riots again'. [pause, very agitated] I couldn't breathe. It was unbearable. Some of the scenes that they have shown, that is like reality what we have experienced. [pause] I saw it only once and I have not watched it again. [working-class Muslim, Bombay]

Thus films that attempt to engage viewers in fictions of history which relate to these events are less successful (in terms of repeat viewing) when it comes to those who have actual experiences of the events.

Conclusion

Hindi film narratives follow a limited range of pathways but the meanings made from sequences in these films vary significantly. Young viewers can watch and interpret both romantic and violent sequences in Hindi films in radically different ways based on intersecting aspects of their identities; their own interpretations may change based on the viewing context and companions, their age or the number of times they have viewed a scene. Life experiences draw young viewers closer to or distance them from particular film narratives. As this is the case, is not true that groups of viewers such as South Asians born in the UK are more likely to believe in or accept nationalist and patriarchal narratives than those who live in India; nor is it the case that the identities of those viewing films in India are more stable and fixed than their British-Asian counterparts. Changes in both countries, including the availability of new media and foreign satellite channels, have meant that there is as much questioning of identity, values and beliefs, and playing with possible actions and futures in each location, and much of this is related to and inflected by film viewing.

Discussions reveal that sequences at the beginning or in the middle of Hindi films carry as much if not more psychic weight for young people than those at the conclusion, and may be viewed multiple times, even when a film is not liked as a whole. Thus heroic conformity and textual closure are not necessarily reflected in the meanings carried away by viewers. On the other hand, contemporary Hindi film fictions of history that play around with themes of ethnicity and gender, religion, love and violence also contribute to the highly authoritarian contexts in which many viewers live, and some viewers are more ready to answer the invitations of such films than others who have experienced actual events or are aware of the political undertones. In most discussions of viewing, regardless of the political positions being explored, talk about films was a complex dialectic of critique and pleasure, rationality and emotion. Textual critiques of Hindi film texts and of films more generally need to be rethought in the light of such varying reasons for and modes of engagement and differing meanings made by viewers.

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[i] I use the word 'community' here in its exclusive rather than inclusive formation to label the groupings that many of my interviewees ascribe to themselves. Inherently it is somewhat amorphous, encompassing, at times, language, religion, region and geographical/national location and at others only language and religion or religion and location.