The active audience: spectatorship, social relations and the experience of cinema in India

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India is the largest producer of feature films in the world. It is estimated that between 800 to 1000 films are produced in India annually compared to Hollywood which produces half that number (Sridhar and Mattoo, 1997). Indian cinema has been around since 1913, the year to which most retrospectives trace the first Indian films – the mythologicals of Phalke. In spite of its early beginnings, phenomenal productivity and continued success, film in India did not receive industry status from the government till 1998–9. It is therefore more accurate to refer to an Indian film business to describe this heterogeneous body of entrepreneurs and artistes. Unlike Hollywood, the film business in India is decentralized. Bombay, or 'Bollywood' as it is popularly called, produces Hindi-language films which are popular throughout India and abroad. Bombay's is the most widely known film industry, however individual states such as Bengal, the southern states of Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and Kerala each produce films in regional languages. These regional films are widely consumed within their states and language boundaries and have a more limited market nationally and internationally. Bombay cinema has always found a market overseas with the films being exported to the ex-Soviet Union, the Middle East, parts of Africa, South-East Asia, the Mediterranean, the Caribbean and wherever there are Indian immigrants in north America, Australia, Hong Kong and the UK. Recently the overseas market has seen an expansion, with the films increasingly seeking out the diasporic viewer.

Film studies in India, guided by a Western bias, appear not to have progressed beyond a reflection hypothesis and effects research. Several studies on the films themselves analyse content for ideological messages;

others have studied film as myth. Work on directors, stars and retro-spectives of films are numerous. More sociologically directed studies have either examined films as reflections of society and of social change or as articulations of identity. Audiences have not been visible, rather they have been relegated to the background as aggregate factors of class or gender. Indian film studies has therefore overlooked the very visible and vibrant culture of reception – one that is distinctive to cinema in India. To date no study has unpacked film reception as it is elaborated in public settings. In neglecting the participatory audience, film studies in India provide a less than balanced view of Indian cinema. Analyses that fail to take into account the social and cultural contexts in which cinema is consumed, and choose to impose imported theory on local contexts, misrepresent the meaning of the film and the meanings made of it. Film studies in India appear guided by the sensibilities of the educated middle-class analyst, one who is often a stranger to the culture of popular cinema, elaborated as public culture. The indigenous dialogue between audience and cinema has therefore gone unnoticed.

   In this article I seek to address some of these gaps in existing research by examining cinema through a phenomenology of spectatorship. The article draws on fieldwork carried out in Bangalore city in south India between 1996 and 1998. Using ethnographic methods of participant observation and interviews, I investigate cinematic reception in public settings. My analysis is therefore based on mainstream audiences, rather than on any subculture or group. Implicit comparison with movie-goers and movie culture in the USA throws into relief the distinctive aspects of the phenomenon in India.

The formula film and the habituated audience

Popular cinema in India caters to an audience whose diversity is unim-aginable to those who do not know India. The Indian government recognizes 16 major languages, but there are in reality hundreds, each with their own dialects. Viewers differ not only in class, caste, religious background, but in regional culture, age (the films draw viewers of all age groups and the family audience), gender, educational background and those living in rural areas as well as in urban centres. Rather than target niche markets as Hollywood movies do, Indian films have typically taken on this diversity for a broad appeal. It is only recently that there is evidence of a segmenting market, *India Today* (Jan. 2000) reports that in 1999 no single film did well at the box office in both rural and urban centres, a phenomenon unheard of in earlier days of 'all-India hits'. However, audiences throughout the country continue to flock to the films. In the 1990s it was estimated that about 10–15 million movie tickets were sold

every day in India. Indian cinema has always provided competition for Hollywood and continues to do so throughout the country in contrast to France, where the film industry has suffered a great deal due to the popularity of Hollywood imports. Indian films are seen to have an integrative impact within the country and to shape a national public culture. Hindi (language) cinema, which is made in Bollywood, is popular in non-Hindi speaking areas of India, language being no barrier to the film's reach. Films made in Tamil in south India are either dubbed into Hindi or other languages, or are 'remade' as Hindi-language or Telugu films with the same stars and film crews.

The popular film addresses a habituated audience (Srinivas, 1998). Habituees may be thought of as insiders to the culture of commercial cinema, audiences who have developed a relationship with the films based on long acquaintance with them. Film-makers, attentive to the expectations of habituees, construct the films as a dialogue with such viewers. The expectations habituees have of movies and the movie-going experience consequently shape the culture of movie-going.

The films are melodramas with comedic elements and a strong romantic theme. Unlike Hollywood movies, the films fail to fit a particular genre as they provide the audience with family drama, boy-meets-girl romance, fight and chase scenes as well as slapstick, verbal gymnastics and folk humour all in the same film. Habituees refer to the films as '*masala*', a term meaning 'spice mixture', an apt phrase to describe a product that is a mix of ingredients such as song-and-dance sequences, fight and chase scenes, comedic interludes and lavish spectacle, all of which provides entertainment that lasts three to three and a half hours on average. Viewers may be heard saying 'I just want to see some *masala*', or, when asked how a movie was, might reply 'Entertaining! Pure *masala*!' The popular Indian film may therefore be described as a pastiche, as it is constructed like a variety show, with something for everyone rather than a seamless and linear narrative following a single theme. Film-makers claim that audiences want variety rather than a narrative with a single story-line or homogeneity in emotion. In the films a tragic scene is somewhat abruptly followed by comedy which then shifts to a romantic dance. Even the recently released *Pukar* (2000), which incorporates the subject of terrorism and where the hero is a Major in the Indian army, has three or four dances. The portrayal of a love-triangle occupies a significant portion of the film, along with scenes of family life, jokes, humour about the status-conscious middle classes and politicians in India, and fight scenes which resemble street brawls rather than military tactics.

Yet another characteristic of popular Indian cinema is that all the films are musicals. For those in the film industry it is clear that the formula film is a quantified product. The expectation for a three to three and a half hour film is that it have a minimum of six to eight 'songs'. Even a film such as

Border, which has as its subject or frame the Indo-Pakistan conflict, manages to incorporate song sequences as the dreams and reminiscences of Indian soldiers at the Front. Often these interludes, choreographed as music videos, provide the scaffolding for the narrative. Many film-makers begin by filming, or 'shooting', the song sequences, the script for the film being non-existent when filming begins and gradually evolving over time. In today's market, movies are often 'hits' or 'flops' based entirely on how the songs fare with audiences. A director anticipating the release of his first commercial *masala* film with some trepidation confessed that, while he was unsure of the reception the film would receive, he was certain he had a couple of hit songs.

The structure of the film makes certain demands on its stars. For instance, the versatility of the central characters is a requirement, while secondary characters maybe in standard and specialized roles such as the comedian who is a side-kick and friend of the hero. When talking about the demands of his role as a lead male, a Kannada 'superstar', comparing himself to his Hollywood counterpart, described his job as 'very tough' as he 'cannot be only a husband or father' in a film. As hero he has to be 'everything: husband, lover, son, brother' as well as having to dance, fight and do comic scenes in the same film. His description of his role fits in with a multi-faceted narrative and a central character who is able to evoke several emotions, as stipulated by the Indian theory of emotions (see Lynch, 1990).

Habituees' comments on Hollywood films reveal their expectations, which are based on watching popular Indian cinema. They complain that Hollywood movies or 'English pictures' are 'too short'. 'Accustomed to films where scenes change rapidly and there is constant action and song and dance, viewers find 'English movies . . . boring because there is too much conversation, nothing happens . . . one Hindi movie-goer wondered how people can watch "English movies" as "they are not emotional, actors' faces are blank"' (Srinivas, 1998: 327). The Hollywood films that draw the largest audiences in India are fast-paced action-adventures, slapstick comedies, martial arts films and those built around special effects such as *Jurassic Park*.

Movie-goers are not only accustomed to sudden changes in scene but also to a narrative which shifts between reality and fantasy and in time and space. With devices such as flashbacks and 'flash-forwards', a scene in the narrative present is spliced with a fragment from the distant past or reality merges into a dream-sequence expressing a character's wishes, fears or emotions which cannot be expressed in everyday conversation. In such sequences anything appears possible as human beings transform into animals, or Gods manifest themselves. The song-and-dance sequence facilitates the framing of such non-linear narrative representation, in which the magical and the supernatural can easily be incorporated with the

mundane. Recently Hollywood movies appear to be experimenting with these devices. The film *Out of Sight* incorporates flashbacks and fantasy sequences. Fantasy sequences also make their appearance in the recently released *Nurse Betty* while *American Beauty*, winner of the Academy Award for Best Picture, uses fantasy, flashback and flowers, some of the devices routinely used by Indian film-makers.

In Indian films the sets for song-and-dance sequences are lavish and often consume a major portion of the film's budget. The film *Jeans* was advertised by a single song-and-dance sequence for which the stars were flown to all the Seven Wonders of the World and it was promoted as 'the most expensive Indian film ever made'. In the late 1990s, Bollywood films featured the 'mega-hit song'. A choreographer for such song-and-dance sequences placed the minimum budget for a single song-and-dance inter-lude at 25 lakhs of rupees[1] (*India Today*, 22 June 1998). This same choreographer lined up 100 dancers and 150 camels for a song sequence (*India Today*, 22 June 1998). For the film *Barood*, a song sequence cost 46 lakhs of rupees and featured 'a space-age volcano city cum stadium set with five split levels, inbuilt lighting, a seating capacity of 8000 and 30-foot tall dinosaurs'. For *Vinashak* 'dancers cavort on top of a 40-foot high, 60 lakhs of rupees-worth of "crystal" dome made of acrylic and mirrors to give a futuristic effect'. Another description for a song interlude emphasizes the lavish spectacle reminiscent of Hollywood from 1930s on, 'Six hundred people laboured for 20 days to create this quintessential Bollywood chimera. A Roman-style coliseum, a Harappan structure, Spanish pillars and a Grecian pool with half-clad Rubenesque ladies painted on the walls, are sprawled across 2 kilometers at Mumbai's film city' (*India Today*, 22 June 1998).

As with the early Cinema of Attractions (see Gunning, 1990), the musical interludes are devices to entertain the audience with spectacle and travelogue. The audience, together with the hero and heroine, are fre-quently transported to foreign locales such as Switzerland (*Yes, Boss*), Las Vegas (*Pardes*, Foreign Land), London (*Dil Wale Dulhaniyan Le Jayenge*, He Who has Heart will Win the Bride), or New York City (*Aa Ab Laut Chalein*, Now Let's Return Home) and what looked suspiciously and inexplicably like the desert of the southwestern USA in a movie which had as its theme cross-border terrorism in India (*Pukar*, Cry Out).

The social dimensions of movie-going

That the social experience of movie-going is as important, if not more important, than the film itself, is seen in the ways in which audience members structure the experience as well as the manner in which film exhibition is organized to anticipate the social aspects of the event. Even in

the USA, where film-viewing is an atomized and highly disciplined activity, where in theatres audiences are expected, and are found to be, fairly quiet and absorbed by on-screen images and sound, movie marketing shrewdly attends to various 'extras' which audiences have come to expect as part of the larger movie experience. Revenues from sale of movie food and drink often top ticket sales at theatres and much attention has been paid to the design of seating, seats with arms transformed into cup-holders or 'stadium' seating being successful innovations (Epstein, 1992). More recently, the spate of teen movies targeting the youth market is a testament to the social nature of movie-going, with teenagers recognized as more likely to seek out group and collective experiences compared to other demographic segments.

In India, the social dimension of the movie event appears exaggerated when compared to the West. Public places such as cinema theatres are centres of group experience in contrast to many Western societies, where it is now an acceptable practice to see a movie, or even eat at a restaurant by oneself. Movie experiences in India involve families, friends and co-workers. Groups maybe composed of 4 to 8, even 10 individuals or more. Families include all ages – even infants are brought to the theatre and toddlers and the elderly are part of the group. The camaraderie in movie-going is evident in the crowds emptying out of the theatres. People emerge as a group, and there is a lot of talk and laughter. Men are to be seen smoking, their arms slung around one another's shoulders, laughing, or holding hands with either a female or male friend and viewing companion. Women are seen laughing and chatting or holding the hand of a male companion or children. Families emerge, with a child carried by a male or female parent or the elderly carefully guided down the steps by a family member.

Privileging the social aspects of movie-going means that one often sees a movie that one is not really keen on, but that has met with the approval of one's group. The following excerpt from my fieldnotes reveals how movie-goers design the outing to accommodate the group. The film becomes secondary in importance with convenience for group members, proximity of theatres, and ease of access taking precedence. While this construction of movie-going is encountered in the west, the emphasis on the social and group event makes such occurrences that much more visible and more frequent in India.

> Veena and I are talking on the phone and discussing the possibility of seeing a movie that day.
>
> V wants to see *Kamasutra*; she tells me 'I think it's running at Cauvery (theatre)'. Cauvery is just around the corner from V's house.
>
> L: I thought Steven Segal (movie) is at Cauvery. Isn't *Kamasutra* at Galaxy?

V: Galaxy means we'll have to do Advance Booking. Someone will have to buy
  tickets now. (It is 10 a.m. and Galaxy is further away from V's home than
  Cauvery).
L: (I remember I don't have a set of keys to the house) 'I would offer to go,
  except that I have to stay at home. I can't lock it (the house) and leave.'

V discovers that it is Friday. 'That means the movies will change.' She asks me
if I have the *Indian Express* (newspaper) nearby and can tell her what movie is
at Cauvery.

L: It's a new Hindi movie, *Zor*, with Sushmita Sen, Om Puri (I am reading out
  from the newspaper).
V (quickly abandoning plans to see *Kamasutra*): 'Shall I go and book tickets for
  the 2:30 show?' (Bangalore, 1997).

Choosing showtimes and viewing companions is revealing of the way in
which audiences creatively use social relations to construct the event.
Women often see a matinee with a group of friends or female companions,
but go with their families/husbands for the evening show (also called 'First
Show' at 7:30 p.m.) or 'Night Show' at 9:30 p.m.

During my fieldwork I found that in conversations about movies, people
would invariably include the experiences of the group and stories of friends
and family. It appeared that movie-going was never constructed as a
solitary act. I found that asking people questions about going to the movies
alone created awkwardness. Many thought it a strange question as their
assumption of the group or family experience was so closely tied in with
the experience of leisure in public spaces. Many insisted they had never
been to see movies alone and some questioned why anyone would do so. A
middle-class woman appeared visibly upset when I asked her if she had
ever gone to see a film by herself. She told me emphatically that for her
movie-going was something for which she needed company and that she
would 'never, never' go alone, it being pointless to do so. Others
interpreted the question to be about what movies they saw and assured me
that they only saw movies 'you can see with the whole family' or
explained that they went to see movies 'for entertainment, so we usually go
together'. In general, the seeking out of a solitary movie experience is
considered an anti-social and unnatural act.

Women in Bangalore are to be seen moving around the city by
themselves – driving cars, or two-wheelers, taking buses and autorick-
shaws, commuting to work, running errands, shopping and so on. However
women rarely go to the movies by themselves, rather they experience it as
a leisure outing with family and friends. Even female domestic workers,
who may stealthily see a movie while ostensibly on an errand for their
employers, often set up a meeting with friends or relatives to see the movie
with. Men, however, did admit to seeing the odd movie alone. In crowds
emptying out of theatres it is not uncommon to see men alone, just as

inside the theatre one may see men looking for single seats. Particularly for lower middle-class or lower-class men, movie-going, while often a group event, is not necessarily constructed as such. Autorickshaw drivers, for instance, said they had seen movies by themselves as, in-between fares, they would take a break and duck into a theatre, sometimes to see just part of a favourite movie. In the anonymity afforded by the theatre, by their overt responses to the movie, through shouting and talking to the screen, male viewers may construct a group experience even though they may have gone to the theatre alone.

The films themselves cater to group viewing as they strive to provide something for everyone. Even though the debate on popular cinema frequently revolves around vulgarity, obscenity and censorship, film-makers as well as theatre-owners in Bangalore expressed their concern with movies which had scenes bordering on the vulgar and obscene, fearing that women and the family audience would be turned away. A Bombay film director is quoted as saying, 'We must make clean and decent entertainers. I shouldn't feel ashamed to sit with members of my family in a movie theatre' (Director Yash Chopra in *Express Magazine*, 26 May 1997). The criterion of suitability for family viewing led many directors and producers to identify *Titanic*, with its story and music, as the ideal 'Indian' film.

Evidence that there is more to this debate than just rhetoric is found in conversations with those in the business of film-making, its distribution and exhibition. Given the importance of women viewers and the family audience, theatre-owners are relieved when censors cut scenes considered risqué. Exhibitors and film industry insiders reported the problems they were having with the Kannada film, *A*, which was drawing record numbers of male viewers. Many felt that the film being titled *A* was a turn-off to potential women viewers and others who mistakenly thought the film was an 'adult' film.

Requirements of decent family entertainment may be seen as crippling to a star's growth as an actor. A Kannada star described his dilemma with his loyal female audience. A recent film of his required him to play the role of a husband in a troubled marriage. He was surprised to receive irate letters from female viewers who asked him why he had 'become indecent' as the role required him to enact 'bedroom scenes'. Women in the audience objected to him taking off his shirt in the bedroom scenes. 'They asked me "Why are you taking off your shirt and doing scenes like this?"'

The theatre setting

Cinema theatres in India are sites for the articulation of public culture and are seen to be microcosms of Indian society. Bangalore city and its

environs in 1997–8 had roughly 102 theatres (Srinivas, 1999). Viewers typically decide to go to a theatre near their homes, or to one in a part of the city they are familiar with. The location of theatres in the city consequently sets up its own rough division of audiences. In Bangalore, the area called 'Majestic', also known as Kempe Gowda Road, is the older part of the city or *pettai*. This area is less preferred by the educated middle classes and the more westernized section of the population, who are seen to frequent theatres in 'Cantonment', many of which screen Hollywood movies. Bangalore has not yet seen the development of multiplexes. In certain areas of the city, the close proximity of theatres – in some cases three or four theatres next door to one another or opposite the street from one another, function as a multiplex for audiences.

The interiors of movie theatres contribute to a distinctive culture of movie-going. Theatres in Bangalore seat around a 1000 plus. A few 'mini-theatres' seat approximately 600 to 700. Theatres offer a stratified viewing experience with seating for different sections such as the 'Balcony', 'Dress Circle' and the lower level close to the screen, also called 'Gandhi class', offered at different prices for the same film. The Balcony is the choice of the middle classes while seats at the lower level and close to the screen are typically frequented by the lower classes, the crowd English-language newspapers in India typically refer to as 'lumpen elements'. This observation needs to be qualified as it applies generally to audiences but not to regional movies, which often attract fans and movie-goers belonging to the lower middle and lower classes. For such movies, even lower-income viewers are prepared to pay Balcony rates and even 'black market' rates. There is also a de facto gender segregation in the theatre as the inexpensive seats close to the screen are monopolized by men. When women go to the movies they are rarely seen in these seats. Older movie-goers reminisced about their experiences decades ago, when rows of seats were reserved for women as 'ladies' seats' just as ticket queues had 'ladies' queues'.

People dress up for the movies and go to be seen and to see others. Middle-class viewers expect those seated closest to the screen to be loud and boisterous and to adopt overtly participatory viewing practices similar to the Elizabethan pit audiences who were part of the spectacle and the subject of comment in 16th-century England (Papp and Kirkland, 1988). In many theatres, those in the Balcony are able to literally look down on the audience in the less expensive seats and the activities of these viewers become part of the movie experience for the Balcony audience. During certain scenes in the movie, middle-class audiences in the Balcony look to the lower-class audiences for certain specific behaviours, such as throwing coins at the screen or throwing torn up lottery tickets to indicate appreciation of the movie or of certain stars. When talking about their movie experience, middle-class viewers frequently refer to 'front-

benchers', 'lower class', or 'peons and autorickshaw drivers' or simply to 'Gandhi class' and comment on their unrestrained habits of shouting, 'cat-calls', whistling and lewd comments on the movie.

Film screening and the social audience

In Bangalore, as in other parts of India, film screening is organized with the social audience in mind. Since the films have a screening time between three and three and a half hours, they are structured to accommodate an intermission. During the 10 or 15 minute break audiences get something to eat and drink, catch up on news and cricket commentary or chat with friends. I observed some viewers plunge into everyday life as they ran errands to nearby stores during the intermission.

Audiences are so accustomed to an interval that even Hollywood films which may have a total screening time of 90 minutes are stopped halfway. If the interval is delayed for any reason, viewers become restless and leave their seats. Rather than pay attention to the film they carry on conversations with their friends near the concessions stands or in the aisles. Theatre management has devised a way to get the often reluctant post-intermission audience back in their seats. A bell is rung in some theatres before the lights go off, and the duties of the usher include rounding up stray viewers to tell them the film has commenced.

Socializing in the theatre with friends and family takes priority over seeing the film. Rather than the attentive stillness of audiences in the USA, in cinema theatres in India there is a continuous buzz of conversation and sounds of children laughing or crying. Audience members are not satisfied with chatting with people in the theatre. Cell phones are a boon to viewers who want to talk to someone outside or at home while watching the film. Anticipating the audience, some theatres have notices requesting audiences to turn off their 'mobiles' or cell phones in the theatre. The mobility of the Indian audience is yet another feature of the viewing culture that shapes the experience. During the film, audience members move around, visit the toilets or the concessions stand, take restless children outside. Often repeat viewers take a smoke break from the film and can be seen chatting in the theatre lobby.

The resulting collective experience of watching movies in India, where interaction is central to the experience, is therefore very different from the emotional experience which contemporary Western audiences have of Hollywood films, where audience members expect to be riveted by on-screen action and do not expect their fellow viewers to distract attention from the screen.

Viewing practices and the constitution of film experience

Habituees employ an aesthetic or style of spectating which may be described as 'active'. Active spectating constructs a particular relationship with the film – for instance, the film is not accepted as an entirety or finished product. Audiences use the film as raw material with which to construct their own experience, in the process reconstructing the film. Four such practices adopted by audience members are identifiable as: 'selective viewing', 'participatory' and 'performative viewing', and what those in the film industry refer to as 'repeat viewing'. In the following section I will elaborate on selective viewing – introduced in an earlier article (Srinivas, 1998) – and describe attendant practices of repeat viewing and the constitution of film experience.

Selective viewing
Rather than accepting the film as an entirety or whole, Indian audiences select scenes to watch. Viewers who find the song-and-dance sequences uninteresting may leave the theatre at the beginning of such a sequence and return after the scene has shifted. Alternatively people wander out when there is conversation on screen and return to watch a dance. Audiences were seen to adopt this piecemeal viewing style when, during the film *Jeet*, they exited the theatre to avoid a 'serious' conversation between the central characters and returned cheering and whistling when the scene shifted to a fight between the hero and the villain.

> . . . in theaters screening the film *Hindustani*, debated by members of the intelligentsia as an ideological piece with a controversial social and political message, viewers demonstrated an interest in exotica as they left the theatre after a particularly lavish song-and-dance sequence set in Australia which some viewers claimed was the sole reason for them to have seen the film repeatedly. During the interval people could be heard exclaiming about the kangaroos in the scene and the very realistic make-up to age the star for which it appeared to be common knowledge that Hollywood make-up experts had been flown in. (Srinivas, 1998: 329)

The ambulatory viewing style of Indian audiences brings them closer to spectators of plays in 16th and 17th century Paris, who are described as standing and milling about during the event 'just as they were accustomed to doing outdoors' (Mittman, 1984: 3). Walking in and out of the theatre during the film enables viewers to select out scenes which are of no interest to them, that is, effectively edit them out, like hitting the 'fast-forward' button on the VCR, thereby selecting fragments with which to construct a whole. The process of constructing a bricolage therefore becomes visible with Indian audiences.

Selective viewing is achieved not only through moving in and out of the theatre. Viewers may apply different levels of attention at different parts of

the film. Very often conversation on-screen is used to 'take a break' from the film, during which interlude viewers have conversations of their own.

Evidence of this viewing style is seen in aesthetic appreciation of the film as well. Viewers may hum along with a tune or tap their fingers to the music even when it is background for a tense or tragic scene. Such aesthetic appreciation extends as viewers look beyond the film to the reality which contributed to it, in what may be termed a documentary mode of viewing (Sobchack, 1999), as they remark on scenery 'See it's [Melkote, where the film was shot] so beautiful! We can go there on a picnic all of us!'

Looking through the film instead of at a constructed imaginary world, viewers take apart a scene to appreciate fragments which they constantly relate to everyday life. In Bangalore, while watching the film *Kurubana Raani* (Shepherd's Queen, 1997), during a tragic scene where the heroine has just swallowed a bottleful of sleeping tablets to escape the attentions of the villain, a viewer repelled by the heroine's physical condition remarked audibly to her viewing companion 'Do you see her flab?' Another viewer who had recently ordered a dining table for her home commented on the décor and furniture in the room. And then, during a scene when the heroine is recovering from her suicide attempt in the hospital and the hero is portrayed as nearly out of his mind with grief, a viewer loudly remarked, 'I like that brocade blouse' worn by the heroine in the scene. This mode of meaning-making is, of course, not entirely specific to Indian viewers. What is specific to the Indian case is that the meanings become available to others. With the Western movie audience people's thoughts are very much their own.

Through selective viewing habituees do not consume a narrative with its own sequence and coherence. Their practices enable them to cobble together fragments to reconstruct an entertainment to suit their taste and needs. Cinema becomes a group construction, one which is particular to a local setting, rather than a mass media product which is universal. Consequently the 'film' that emerges is the result of audience interaction rather than a construction of the film-maker's which audiences passively consume. In this context, cinema does not provide a homogenizing effect, rather, plural audiences construct differentiated experiences. The explanations that viewers are 'resisting' the 'dominant messages' in the film, an explanation given in cultural studies and in the interpretive tradition of audience research, responsible for theories of decoding of texts, merely polarizes and simplifies the various ways audiences have of consuming a cultural product, and may attribute an intentionality that is questionable. I believe that it also unnecessarily politicizes an activity that is carried out in the spirit of spending leisure time with family and friends.

Selective viewing influences the organization of screenings in theatre settings. Since audience members view the film in parts they do not feel

compelled to be in their seats when the film begins. Typically, people continue to trickle in, locate their seats and shout out to their friends, long after the film is under way. Several interviewees admitted to taking last-minute decisions to see a film, walking in during or after the intermission. Once I overheard talk among those seated behind me in the theatre. Finding the first half-hour of the film disappointing they were considering going to another across town for which they would have arrived an hour after it had begun. An American theatre manager of a theatre in Massachusetts which has been leased to screen Indian movies remarked that in this respect Indian viewers were very different from their American counterparts who would not even miss five minutes of a film. In India, ushers are equipped with flashlights to seat those who arrive after the film has begun. Theatres do not turn off the lights when a film starts but may keep them on for 10 to 15 minutes anticipating a gradual filling up of seats.

Films themselves appear to be structured in anticipation of such viewing practices. Frequently narratives begin with a song-and-dance sequence, which may lure viewers to their seats in time, and which, if missed, will not be critical to the storyline and can therefore accommodate late arrivals. Since songs are played at maximum volume, they are effective in drowning out noise from the audience. As viewers leave the theatre as soon as the story ends – often before the last scene is played out, film credits frequently do not appear on the screen. In more than one film I attended the last scene was a freeze shot of the hero and its appearance seemed to be a signal for fans to applaud, whistle and shout and for the audience to rise to their feet and prepare to leave.

The interactive nature of the film–viewer relationship is made visible when watching Hollywood films in India as Hollywood films are not structured with the Indian viewing setting in mind. Expecting audiences to be in their seats and attending to the screen, films often start with a crisis or a crucial scene, expecting that viewers will be both pacified by the crisis and attend to the opening sequence in anticipation of deciphering the story based on what happens in the beginning. Out of special consideration for the film, Indian fans of James Bond films at times make it a point to be 'early' for a Bond film, in order not to miss the crucial first scenes and the introductory song. Viewer conversations are often more audible during Hollywood films as the films do not anticipate talk among audiences and therefore are not equipped with a soundtrack to drown them out.

Repeat viewing

Both Hollywood and Bollywood realize the value of the repeat audience. In the field I was introduced to the notion of 'repeat viewing' as a description of audiences when theatre managers, distributors and film-makers would refer to 'repeaters' or 'repeat audience'. The term 'repeaters' in India refers to an extreme type of viewer who sees the same film over and over, to set

apart such viewers from general Indian audiences who also routinely see films they like more than once, which allows them to have a distinctive experience of the film (Kakar, 1980; Iyer, 1988).

While repeat viewing is a routine practice among Indian audiences, there are occasionally films which capture the audience's attention in an extreme way and these films have become 'superhits'. Some of the films which have remained in theatres for months, sometimes for a year by popular demand, are *Sholay*, *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun*, *Dil Wale Dulhaniyan Le Jayenge* and *Bangarada Manusha* (Kannada film].

Often repeat viewing comes about through 'word of mouth', as, upon telling a friend or family member about a film one has seen, one sees the film again in the company of that friend. Through repeat viewing audiences construct cinema as a social experience as they go to the movies either with the same group but often with different people which varies the experience. When I asked a viewer about her seeing a film more than once she indignantly informed me that she went the second time to the movie, '*because* I was going with another group'. Seeing a film for the second, third or twenty-fifth time makes for a different viewing experience for repeaters as well as those who may be seeing the film the first time.

Repeat viewing facilitates the participatory and interactive style which Indian audiences adopt in their engagement with popular cinema. Repeaters have had time to form a relationship with the characters and talk back at the screen, sing along with the soundtrack. They loudly 'predict' what will happen next or carry on a conversation with a character responding to each line of dialogue with their own improvised dialogue. Repeaters applaud and cheer seconds before the occurrence of an event on-screen and provide sound effects which preview the scene for other viewers and make sense to first-timers only after the scene has shifted. A community atmosphere emerges in the theatre. A woman who had been to see the blockbuster hit *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun*, which featured the story of a joint family wedding, remarked that 'it was like going to a family wedding'. After the film had been in theatres for almost a year, every screening held mostly repeat viewers. A viewer described the in-theatre experience:

> . . . everyone who went to see it had seen it before. [In the theatre] people were passing coffee, talking, [they] knew when the songs in the film would come on and they would join in. There was continuous talking, like there was a marriage in the theatre. People would say [referring to a character's outfit] 'that backless blouse is nice, I got one stitched like that'. (Srinivas, 1998: 336)

Such comments from habituees counter the argument that movie-going in India is about escaping reality, an assumption that is produced as fact by many intellectuals who are outside the culture of popular movie-going in India. I frequently came across academics who would tell me about cinema's role in providing an escape from harsh reality for the masses.

Some of these academics admitted to never going to see the movies in question as they were troubled by the 'non-sequiturs' in the narrative, or would comment 'they're so awful! So vulgar!' and 'The heroes are so ugly.'

When I presented data on repeat viewing in the USA, I was questioned about the movie *Titanic* which is known to have drawn repeat viewers many of whom are teenage girls, fans of Mr DiCaprio. However, films such as *Titanic* and *Star Trek* are exceptions in the movie culture in the West, whereas in India repeat viewing is a phenomenon that is fairly routine and one which cuts across age and gender. Engaging with a narrative whose story is known is something Indian audiences have been doing for generations. Performances of religious myths such as the Ramayana, Krishna Lila, dance-dramas whose stories most Indians know from childhood, are constructed for a participatory audience (Hein, 1959; Booth, 1995). Selective and repeat viewing, practices through which modern-day mass media is refashioned by viewers, appear lodged in Hindu tradition and serve to make the movie experience culturally distinctive.

Cinema: a collective construction

Sudhir Kakar's reflection on his childhood movie experiences in India highlights the importance of participation in experiencing cinema. He writes:

> I always joined in the appreciative laughter that followed a raucous comment, even if the exact meaning escaped me. I too, would hold my breath in the hushed silence that followed a particularly well-enacted love scene, and surreptitiously tried to whistle, with the 'O' of the thumb and the index finger under the tongue, in imitation of the expert whistles that greeted the obligatory scene in which the heroine fell into the water or was otherwise drenched. (1980: 12)

In the theatre, habituees expect to interact with their fellow viewers and with on-screen events. When narrating a movie outing with his group of 25 college friends one of my interviewees mentioned the excitement of seeing a film he and his friends had seen before, waiting for a song sequence to begin so they could all sing along, waiting for remembered lines of dialogue so that they could repeat them loudly. An Indian watching a Hindi film in a theatre in Massachusetts found that the unusually quiet audience did not meet his expectations as he remarked loudly 'This gang doesn't know how to watch' and followed the remark with a piercing whistle as the heroine appeared on-screen in a mini-skirt. Indian viewers can find the experience of watching a Hollywood film in the USA constraining. During a screening of *Thelma and Louise* in a theatre in the Boston area, an Indian viewer connected with a scene where the characters drive through

Oklahoma as he had been a graduate student at the state university there. His excited shouts of 'Oklahoma! Hey guys, its Oklahoma!' met with disapproval as the people in the seats in front turned around and shushed him. When he exited the theatre a woman tapped him on the shoulder and told him that she and her fellow viewer were 'very upset' by his behaviour and advised him, 'If I were you, I would show some courtesy to others who are watching the movie.'

In India the interactive and participatory style of viewing which audiences adopt allows a certain spontaneous involvement as viewers shout out comments to the screen, talk to characters, give them advice and take sides. Audiences take over a scene and reconstruct its meaning and impact. Overly dramatic scenes are often mocked, as viewers use ridicule and irony to transform meaning and emotion. In a scene where the hero stands at the edge of a precipice and tells the heroine he will jump into the chasm below if she doesn't return his love, viewers shout '*Kood ja*!' ('Jump!') evoking laughter from fellow audience members and neatly subverting the intentions of the film-maker. Viewers interact with other audience members as well. A woman became tearful during an emotional scene in the film *Khamoshi* (Silence). Hearing her, two men seated nearby pretended to sob loudly, the interaction making fellow viewers laugh (Srinivas, 1998: 336).

Such practices are not restricted to Indian films. Watching *Air Force One* in Los Angeles I was struck by the difference in the experience from watching the same film in Bangalore. In Los Angeles, the half empty theatre was quiet, several people appeared to have wandered in by themselves and being present in the theatre one did not get a sense of how the film was being received. One had to assume that the audience's attention to the screen meant a certain enjoyment of the movie and the muted and polite laughter a couple of jokes drew from individual viewers attested to some degree of emotional affiliation with the scene. In Bangalore the theatre was packed. The 'House Full' sign proudly displayed the movie's and the theatre's status. Viewers waiting outside for the doors to open excitedly called out to family members and friends. I heard 'Harrison Ford' mentioned several times, along with the name of the director. It was clear that many had seen the movie before as phrases such as 'too good!' 'whatta plane!' and so on filled the air. Within the theatre, audience members chatted throughout the film. Repeaters 'guided' first-timers among the group through the film, 'See what happens now!', 'You thought he would jump off the plane? I knew he was still there!', 'This is a funny scene' and provided sound effects such as the sound of gun-shots before the event occurred on screen. At moments of tension, such as when Ford's character is hiding in the aircraft a few feet away from the terrorist guard, viewers would whistle piercingly, meow loudly or make popping sounds eliciting laughter from fellow viewers. On-screen humour received loud and collective laughter and applause. Many repeated the 'punch-line'

to their viewing companions; men slapped each other on the shoulder and rocked in their seats with laughter. Moments of victory for 'good' over 'evil' similarly received appreciative applause and whistles. When the electricity failed and the screen was thrown into darkness audience members made their displeasure known by shouting out to theatre staff.

Commentary and participation are devices through which audiences reconstruct the film. Viewers are able to inscribe themselves in the film text by providing sound effects (of a train to accompany visuals), or by supplying dialogue – either improvised or repeated. Seeing a film more than once is a pragmatic device as each opportunity becomes an occasion to memorize dialogue. By spontaneously shouting out responses to on-screen dialogue, audience members construct a parallel dialogue which elaborates the meaning of the film or may incorporate an engagement with the actor that is in between the frame of the narrative and film-making. Watching a fight scene, for example, when the hero is being trounced by the villain, viewers shout out 'to' the hero, 'Now kick him!' and in doing so they are also instructing the actor and designing the fight scene.

Audiences re-edit the film while watching videos at home. One person assumes the task of 'fast-forwarding' and during viewing is instructed by others to 'fast-forward!' The film editor's role may be appropriated in theatres as well, as when in the course of watching the film *Hum*, audiences created a commotion in the theatre demanding that a favourite song-and-dance sequence be screened repeatedly while they sang along and danced. Conversations with viewers revealed that this is not an isolated instance. Audiences are known to routinely stop the screening and demand that certain scenes be shown repeatedly.

Those in film exhibition are forced to deal with the audience as critic. Male viewers belonging to the lower classes are known to leave lasting records in the theatre as they rip up upholstery in the seating with razor blades and knives when disappointed with the film or with viewing conditions (as when electricity fails). Theatres anticipate audience's actions and have made the seats close to the screen out of hard plastic. In one Bangalore theatre, the seats are made of cement.

Concluding remarks

In Western societies mainstream film audiences are quiet and highly disciplined in their viewing styles. In cinema theatres people watch the film for the most part silently, the expectation of silent attentiveness to on-screen happenings providing a guiding etiquette. Viewers rarely talk out loud and never engage in the overtly interactive and spontaneously expressive style of reception seen in theatres in India and with Indian audiences. Cult films or midnight movies are frequently pointed out to be

instances of participatory viewing. However, even in these settings, an example of which is the *Rocky Horror Picture Show* in the USA, audience participation is scripted and choreographed.

Film studies in the West encountering audiences who appear silent, even mute in their viewing, have therefore been unable to access practices of mass reception in public settings. It is no wonder that the focus of study has not moved beyond the analysis of film texts. In this context, audiences, when acknowledged, are seen as either 'readers' of texts or as subjects of market research in a market that is highly fragmented and niche-oriented.

Given the obstacle to ethnographic observation at reception sites posed by Western audiences, Indian spectators become a strategic site for unpacking what has thus far been a 'black box' of media reception. Indian cinema and its culture of reception questions many basic assumptions about mass culture. Cinema is seen not to have the necessarily homogenizing effect expected of mass media. Instead, audiences are found to engage with various renderings of film content, which they achieve through group or 'clustered' viewing. Interactions with other viewers – known and unknown – as well as relationships with real-world settings and stars provide audience members with prisms through which they 'see' the film. Rather than the loss of community and face-to-face relations, which theorists such as Adorno and Horkheimer (Adorno, 1991; Adorno and Horkheimer, 1972) associated with the growth of mass culture in the West, the Indian case reveals the generation of community and face-to-face interaction through consumption of mass media. Participatory involvement with cinema allows Indian audiences to reconstruct the film, providing an experience that is heterogeneous and contextual – one that can vary with each viewing. Indian audiences are consequently closer to the producers and less alienated from the product compared to their Western counterparts.

Notes

1. 1 lakh = 100,000.

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