Introduction:
Indian Popular Cinema as a Slum's Eye View of Politics

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Mahmood Jamal's charming documentary on Indian popular cinema, *Peacock Screen,* and the official report, *Mass Media in India 1992,* compiled by India's Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, both tell us that on an average day, India releases more than two-and-a-half feature films, produced by the world's largest film industry, and sees some 15 million people throng the country's 13,002 cinema halls.[1] As if this were not enough, these films are an important cultural presence from Russia to North Africa and from the Caribbean to Fiji. Operating in a country with an average per capita income of about US$330 a year, one of the lowest in the world, this is no mean feat for an industry that few in India take seriously, except as a revenue earner. Even other Indian industrialists are dismissive towards the film producers; none of India's more respected chambers of commerce would like to be caught with a film-maker among its office bearers.

What does this immensely successful but slighted industrial product stand for, politically and culturally? Does it have anything to say about the fate of popular culture in societies transiting from older modes of cultural self-expression to a more impersonal, centrally controlled, mass culture? This book gives possible answers. The answers presume that the Indian commercial cinema, to be commercially viable, must try to span the host of cultural diversities and epochs the society lives with, and that effort has a logic of its own.

The logic accepts that the product called Indian popular cinema has undergone change. It is very different today from the pioneering days of Dadasaheb Phalke or Phalkemuni, as Christopher Byrski affectionately calls him to underscore the continuity between classical Sanskrit plays and Bombay cinema.[2] It is different even from the days of Bombay Talkies, New Theatres, Raj Kapoor and Guru Dutt. In the industry itself, I understand, thoughtful persons talk of the earlier years as an age of innocence. By which they mean, I presume, that the heritage has to be remembered and respected, not emulated. What has that loss of innocence entailed? That story cannot be told without involving one other actor of the kind Indian popular cinema has rarely handled comfortably and self-consciously: the politics of culture in India and, for that matter, the whole of South Asia.

Once the role of that other politics is accepted, the right metaphor for the Indian popular cinema, alias conventional, commercial or Bombay cinema, turns out to be the urban slum. Ratnakar Tripathy, who first suggested the metaphor to me, seemed to hold that both cinema and the slum in India showed the same impassioned negotiation with everyday survival, combined with the same intense effort to forget that negotiation, the same mix of the comic and the tragic, spiced with elements borrowed indiscriminately from the classical and the folk, the East and the West. However, there is at least one other sense in which the metaphor of the slum seems apt: the popular cinema is the slum's point of view of Indian politics and society and, for that matter, the world. There is in both of them the same stress on lower-middle-class sensibilities and on the informal, not-terribly-tacit theories of politics and society the class uses and the same ability to shock the *haute bourgeoisie* with the directness, vigour and crudity of these theories.

The slum here means exactly what architect and social activist Jai Sen means when he speaks of the 'unintended city'—the city that was never a part of the formal 'master plan' but was always implicit in it.[3] The official city cannot survive without its unintended self, but it cannot own up to that self either. For that other city consists of a huge mass of technically and officially discarded 'obsolete' citizens who form the underground of a modern city. They provide the energy—literally the cheap labour—that propels both the engine of civic life in a Third World society and the ambitions of its modernizing élite.

The discarded, obsolete population that inhabits the unintended city is a constant embarrassment to the rest of their urbane brethren—in the way that the concerns and style of popular cinema are often an embarrassment to the devotees of art films and high culture.[4] These discards show the same cussed unwillingness to bow out of history and the same obstinate ability to return and 'illegitimately' occupy a large space in the public domain, geographically and psychologically.

Are inhabitants of the unintended city the passive objects or tools of history they are often made out to be? Are they only an urban proletariat waiting to be organized into a new political formation? Or are they the makers of their own destiny in ways that some chapters in this book chart, others vaguely hint at, and still others come close to admitting but never do? Is the apparent obsolescence of the unintended city merely a camouflage that hides a crucial repressed, disowned self of a modernizing society? Is the shock many 'enlightened' Indians claim to feel when facing the aesthetics of the slum, the shock of seeing one's own face in a convex mirror, which distorts but does so in one specific way, according to the strict laws of optics?

Before grappling with these strange questions, a word on the political and social contours of the slum. Nearly half of metropolitan India today lives in slums, as if anticipating a world in which, according to environmentalist Edward Goldsmith, more than half of humanity will live in slums in another two decades. There is nothing particularly strange about this; the slum is often the first visible marker of modernization in Third World society. In both Bombay and Calcutta, the slum-dwellers are in a clear majority; if their present rates and patterns of growth continue, both cities will become 80 per cent slum by the year 2010. However, even in cities where they constitute a small minority, the slum-dwellers loom large on the urban consciousness as a dark, ominous, ill-understood, unmanageable presence. For the slum, whatever its socio-economic status, has now come close to the heart of India's urban, middle-class consciousness. It now sets the tone of India's political culture, even if as a negative utopia or dystopia. About 25 per cent of all Indians now live in urban settlements and they are directly exposed to the urban-industrial world and the media network that supports its cultural style, pan-Indian homogeneity and global connection. These Indians live with the standard nightmares of the middle classes the world over, of which

the fear of the slum is one.

Twenty-five per cent may not sound particularly impressive, but in absolute terms it is enormous. It amounts to more than 225 million people, larger than all except four countries in the world. It is larger than the population of each of the neighbouring countries of India, of which many Indians choose to live in mortal fear. Even if we take 175 million as a conservative estimate of the size of India's urban middle class, it is three times the size of the population of Britain, which once ruled India, with an industrial base larger than Britain's. With this size go greater skills in entering and coping with the modern institutions and a growing ability to influence the country's mainstream culture of politics.

Things could not be otherwise, given the definitions of state, nationalism, national security, secular statecraft, professional expertise, civil society and development the country has opted for. The entire ideology of the Indian state is so formatted and customized that it is bound to make more sense—and give political advantages—to those better acquainted with the urban-industrial world and modern economic and political institutions. The rest are supposed to either painstakingly train themselves to enter that world or cope with the ideology from the outside as best as they can. In a plebiscitary democracy threatening to become a psephocracy, numbers count; and though in the last six decades rural India has arrived politically, even the cause of rural India has now to be processed through the urban middle-class consciousness. Some of the most powerful public figures with inelastic support bases or vote banks have not exercised real power or controlled the course of political events because they have undervalued the middle-class culture of public life. They have managed, within a short time, to offend the intelligentsia and the bureaucracy and to alienate the media, and in the process lose their legitimacy and political manoeuverability.[5]

This veto exercised by the public sensibilities of a minority has ensured the Indian middle class a disproportionate access to state power during the last twenty years and has pushed the culture of Indian politics in directions that would have been unthinkable earlier. The class now gives a sustainable base to the emerging mass culture of politics in the country and, to do so, has redrawn the map of the popular culture mainly created by the class itself in the pre-war years. Structurally, this sustainable base mostly consists of the more numerous lower-middle class, exposed to modern media, pan-Indian politics and the global market. It is the class that has closest links with the slum and lives with the fear of slipping into a slum or never getting out of it.

The definition of the middle class used here is obviously more political-cultural than economic or social. It does not conform to the standard textbook definitions of the class. We are talking of a social stratum that lives with hopes of breaking into the upper echelons of society and provides a political base and the power of numbers to the upper-middle class, which in turn, unlike the upper-middle classes in some other societies, maintains continuities with the lower-middle class in political and cultural tastes. The Indian upper-middle class may have some of the economic features of an élite, but it has not tried to distance itself from the culture of the lower-middle class. Much of India's upper-middle class is simply a lower-middle class with more money. More important, such a class is not big enough in size to influence the political process by itself; it has to carry the lower-middle class with it. This has not proved difficult. The lower-middle class is shot through with fears of demotion to the proletariat and lives with the anxieties associated with that fear and with the standard hopes and ambitions of the middle class. It cherishes its political-cultural links with the upper-middle class. It is willing to be led.

One must read the political and cultural self-expression of the slum against the backdrop of this political-cultural closure. The language of the slum in India is the lower-middle-class reading of the culture of the *haute bourgeoisie* into which it breaks in fantasy, memories of a peasant or rural past serving as a pastoral 'paradise' from which it has been banished, fears about the urban-industrial jungle into which it feels it has already strayed, and anxieties about the 'amoral' frame of modern life into which it fears it might any day slip. It is a psychological existence at the margins of at least two utopias, one of them located—as with all utopias—in the future and the other paradoxically in the past. Everything else—the reactive grandiloquence, the stylized idiom, the conventions and mannerisms of self-expression we see in Indian commercial cinema and increasingly in Indian politics—follows from these mediations. The slum in India is not so much the enforced abode of the industrial proletariat or the urban poor, atomized and massified. It is an entity that territorializes the

transition from the village to the city, from the East to the West, and from the popular-as-the-folk to the popular-as-the-massified. The slum is where the margins of lower-middle-class consciousness are finally defined.

If there is a tacit overall political argument in this analysis, it is that the passions of, and the self-expressions identified with, the lower-middle class—for that matter, the middle class as a whole—now constitute the ideological locus of Indian politics. This social sector is now capable of sustaining large-scale, ambitious political and aesthetic initiatives that were beyond its capability only two decades ago. On the other hand, it has lost some of its earlier élan and creativity which came from being a minority experimenting with new ideas, forms of self-expression and modes of dissent the traditional élite could not risk exploring.

> If the middle class plays a role in Indian society and politics disproportionate to its size, so do popular films. These films, it is true, are seen by a wide cross-section of people, and their appeal is certainly not sectoral. But they are produced, conceived and executed within the middle-class culture, more specifically within the confines of the lower-middle-class sensitivities we have discussed. In fact, they are threatening to turn both the folk and the classical into second-order presences (the way the immensely successful television serials on the Ramayana and the Mahabharata now influence the frame for interpreting the epics for a large number of Indians) and, today, even the global mass culture enters the subcontinent filtered through the same middle-class sensitivities epitomized by the commercial cinema. It is in this sense that the popular cinema represents the low-brow version of the values, ambitions and anxieties of Indians who are caught between two cultures, two lifestyles, and two visions of a desirable society.[6]

To return to our metaphor, the urban slum consists of people who are uprooted and partially decultured, people who have moved out of traditions and have been forced to loosen their caste and community ties. That does not mean that the slum has no access to cultural traditions. Often the resilience of cultures is seen in the most dramatic fashion in the urban slum. Two processes are central to an understanding of this resilience.

First, the slum recreates the remembered village in a new guise and resurrects the old community ties in new forms. Even traditional faiths, piety and kinship ties survive in slums, wearing disguises paradoxically supplied by their own massified versions.[7] The slum may even have its version of classicism. It is not what classicism should be according to the classicists, but what classicism

often is, when bowdlerized and converted into its popular version for easy digestion and saleability in a mass market.

Second, the slum creates its own culture out of the experiences of the slum itself: out of the close encounters between the different time periods and diverse cultures telescoped into the slum; out of the impact of 'strange' communities, ethnicities and world-views on the individual; and out of interactions with the alien world of impersonal institutions that have begun to penetrate even the more sleepy South Asian communities.

Both processes are conspicuous in the popular film—the remembered village and the compacted heterogeneity of stranger-neighbours, with the former often providing a frame to cope with the latter. That is why the popular film ideally has to have everything—from the classical to the folk, from the sublime to the ridiculous, and from the terribly modern to the incorrigibly traditional, from the plots within plots that never get resolved to the cameo roles and stereotypical characters that never get developed. Such films cannot usually have a clear-cut story line or a single sequence of events, as in, say, the dramatic, event-based, popular films of Hollywood or even Hong Kong. An average, 'normal', Bombay film has to be, to the extent possible, everything to everyone. It has to cut across the myriad ethnicities and lifestyles of India and even of the world that impinges on India. The popular film *is* low-brow, modernizing India in all its complexity, sophistry, naiveté and vulgarity. Studying popular film *is* studying Indian modernity at its rawest, its crudities laid bare by the fate of traditions in contemporary life and arts. Above all, it is studying caricatures of ourselves—social and political analysts negotiating the country's past and present—located not at the centre, studying others, as we like to see ourselves, but at the peripheries, standing as spectators and looking at others studying themselves and us. The popular cinema may be what the middle class, left to itself, might have done to itself and to India, but it is also the disowned self of modern India returning in a fantastic or monstrous form to haunt modern India.

Does this mean that the popular film threatens India's cultural élite by confronting them with the underside of their own dreams? Does it inadvertently mock this élite's vision of a desirable society by taking it seriously and standing it on its head? The answers to both these questions may well be 'yes'.

The politics of popular cinema is not a hermeneutic puzzle,

nor is it enticingly tacit. It does not require sophisticated analy⁻⁻
schemes of the kind that an Indian postmodernist might cheri
It is often vulgarly blatant. But it is never trivial, not even wh
it is expressed in films that are trivial. Witness for instance t
way the politician as a character has entered the popular ciner
during the last decade as a *khadi*-wearing villain. As one bc
office hit after another shows, the politician-as-villain today
not merely a counterpoint to the hero-as-the-anti-hero who repe
many film analysts, disgusted with the surfeit of violence and s
in cinema, including at least three in this book. He is also tl
counterpoint to the less violent, more androgynous heroes wl
once represented for the Westernized Indians everything that w
wrong with *Mother India*. The early model of the hero survive
but increasingly as a nostalgic moral presence in a *world dom*
nated by their new, street-smart, ultra-violent incarnations. In fil:
after film, it is the politician-as-villain who pushes the innocei
Devdas-like hero into a life of crime and violence, into his ne'
incarnation as an anti-hero. In film after film, characters close t
the earlier model of the hero are unable to cope with the ne'
villains, who have entered the popular cinema and, presumabl!
Indian life. Elsewhere, I have tried to show how the *same probler*
is sometimes posed in popular Indian cinema through what fo
such cinema is the evergreen device of a double.[8] The hero wh«
is non-violent and innocent, having a culturally rooted moral sel
and a sense of limits, is shown incapable of handling his problems
which have to be solved by his lookalike, an exteriorized pro
jection of his self who usually happens to be a ruthless, hyper
masculine industrialist of violence.

The *trajectory* of Amitabh Bachchan's life in almost every one
of his popular films recapitulates the life of the Indian cinema—
its movement from the days of Dilip Kumar, Raj Kapoor and
Dev Anand to that of Bachchan. It is not a coarse simplificatior
to say that in a typical Bachchan film, the hero begins his life in
the first reel as a Dilip Kumar or a Raj Kapoor—as, for that
matter, any of the more innocent, ethical, visionary heroes of
yesteryear—and ends up midway in the narrative as none other
than Bachchan himself.[9] The anti-hero, when he turns against the
villain, also turns against the 'passive', 'effeminate', ineffective
hero and, if I may add, against the popularly perceived cause of
the decline and collapse of the imagined world of pastoral inno-
cence and moral incorruptibility. To invoke the well-known

psycho-analytic formulation of an ego defence, he turns against a
self that has become identified with *failure* and *impotency*.
Perhaps this is not merely true of the life-cycle of the heroes
Bachchan portrays in his more violent films, but also his real-life
career in films. He *has* moved from playing the role of the quiet,
well-behaved but effete hero, in films that were but minor
successes, to his triumphant portrayals of angry, violent *vigilantes*
functioning at the margins of the society. Ontogeny, as the bio-
logists say, *replicates phylogeny.*[10]

In a parallel development, the villain has become more
handsome, polished, erotically *attractive*, modern and in full
control of himself. Villainy is his not-so-secret self; it is kept only
formally a secret. The decline of politics in India and that of the
moral status of the politician—living in a world of local toughs
available on hire, trade-union gangsters, violent college elections,
corrupt police, petty smugglers—were captured *in Indian* popular
cinema long before they became the subjects of heated debate in
the columns of newspapers and among political scientists. Faree-
duddin Kazmi, who rejects the proposition that the popular cinema
is a new opiate of the masses but comes close to it, should have
noticed one crucial source of the appeal of the *commercial cinema*
that *his* own chapter documents: while serious cinema in India
has been talking about impersonal, larger, reified, institutional
forces of evil in hushed, academic tones, the popular cinema had
already made a clear diagnosis and concretized it in a communi-
cable form.[11]

The glorification of vigilantism in cinema has come not simply
because the politician-as-villain symbolizes the decline of *politics*
and the subversion of the judiciary, the law-enforcing agencies
and *the state itself*—the trust in them was *never remarkably high*
among the wily Indians—but because the communities in South
Asia have begun to come apart. The *individual* is being increas-
ingly left stranded, with only his or her own tattered moral self,
and the fantasies of a secret self represented by the vigilantism
of the hero as the anti-hero-turned-superman.

Like all politics, however, the politics of popular cinema, too,
is *the art of* the possible. Despite the growing emphasis on
individual evil and heroism, it cannot cater to only that sector of
the society to which these themes appeal. It has to be, as I have
said, all things to all people. It has to simultaneously reaffirm
values that go against such individuation of good and evil. Perhaps

here lies one of popular cinema's durable ties with 'eternal India'. Many years ago, A. L. Basham noticed in his *A Cultural History of India* the continuity between classical Sanskrit plays and contemporary films. And more recently Byrski has shown how such continuities are worked out in a specific context by comparing Kalidas's *Abhigyan Shakuntalam* and Raj Kapoor's *Satyam, Shivam, Sundaram*.[12] Such continuities may or may not exemplify the deployment of the traditional *rasa* theory (classical poetics governing Sanskritic poetry and theatre) in a modern cinematic context; they must, while bringing in elements of modernity in Indian concepts of good and evil, simultaneously rebel against such importation. Perhaps even the presence of all the nine prescribed *rasas* of classical poetics comes in as a technology of checks and counterchecks that contends against every excess. The ultimate remedy of a trendy 'pathology' within the popular cinema is not changes in fashion, of the kind available within a mass market, but the seeds of 'self-destruction' the trend or genre carries within itself.

Thus, a decade of sweet romance and chocolate-pie heroes is followed by a decade of revenge-seeking, thin-lipped, homicidal heroes. They, too, in due course yield place to a new trend of, say, teenage romances featuring fresh actors and actresses or a new mythological mode defined by, say, brand new goddesses who seem fully attuned to the psychological demands of urban India.[13] For after a particular level of awareness has been 'mobilized' for the box office by a particular genre, fatigue or boredom sets in and other levels have to be mobilized to sustain interest in the product.

Often the balance is restored within the film itself. Sometimes violence is neutralized by comic interludes or by the inclusion of a more comic version of the violence. In *Appu Raja*, while a life-and-death battle rages, one associate of the hero tickles into submission a member of the enemy gang. In *Kishen Kanhaiya* the villains, at the end of all the violence, seem to make fun of their own humiliation. In *Don*, while the hero and the villain fight their climactic battle towards the end, the hero—none other than the much-maligned retailer of violence, Bachchan—stops midway to ask permission from the villain to eat a *pān* before resuming the life-and-death struggle. In *Naseeb*, a climactic scene of violence is also the final choreography of a film that is a carnival—as if the audience were being reminded in a Brechtian manner that

the depicted violence is only a pretence. Likewise with sexuality. The heroine who is a cabaret dancer by profession is usually doubly submissive as a daughter-in-law and out-mothers her sisters-in-law when it comes to the younger generation of the joint family.

To return to our defining metaphor for one last time: the slum may or may not be ugly, it may or may not symbolize absurdity, but it always has a story to tell about the state of the vitality, creativity and moral dynamism of the society that defines the relationship between the slum and suburbia. That story can take many forms. The slum can be read as the past of the suburbia or as an alternative to or decline from it. It can even be romanticized and invested with the vision of a desirable society or a lost utopia, as Sai Paranjape's *Katha*, Saeed Mirza's *Raju Ban Gaya Gentleman* and the television serial *Nukkad* come so close to doing. That vision is often built on the slum's capacity to recreate a community, sometimes even an entire village with its own distinctive lifestyle. Obviously, a mimic village is never quite like the original one, but the reconstruction can be an impressive cultural enterprise. It tells not so much the history of the slum as the past it tries to remember or pines for, its self-created myths of origin and visions of the future, its adaptive strategies, the politics of culture that shapes it while it desperately tries to incorporate aspects of alien cultures that could be more charitable to the surviving fragments of a community-based culture.

The legitimacy of popular cinema in India is based on a similar set of equations. Such cinema is both a 'romantic' attempt to reconstitute an increasingly imaginary village, and a dialogue with the compacted heterogeneity of urban-industrial India. The attempt challenges the way the problem of *cultural invasion* through popular films has sometimes been posed by the social scientists and film critics. The local, the small-scale and the vernacular are not merely being *supplanted* by an urban, individualistic, aggressively Western, global mass culture leading to a more homogenized society; the former are also being repackaged or *retooled* into mass-compatible forms and made available to the first generation of the culturally uprooted inhabitants of the new world into which the uprooted are entering. That is why such threats to traditions have provoked so little resistance till now.

A corollary of this repackaging is the strangely familiar world

that the popular films conjure up for the shamelessly rustic and the blatantly cosmopolitan. This familiarity is built on a well-honed psychological technique: creating a lovable or at least tolerable strangeness by projecting predictable elements of a once-known world on to the strange and the distant. (Exactly in the manner in which Steven Spielberg's high-tech *Star Wars* series turns out to be, on a less than close scrutiny, a repolished version of old-style westerns. The empire does strike back!) Without the familiarity, the strangeness would have been fearsome, perhaps even incapacitating. Once this projection is shared by the viewers and the strangeness is reinterpreted as part of ancient continuities, the strange—in this instance, the modern world—continues to arouse anxieties, but these anxieties do not become debilitating; they can be contained and channelled along more acceptable paths.

Put differently, popular cinema creates a space for the global, the unitary and the homogenizing, but does so in terms of a principle of plurality grounded in traditions. As a result, the homogenization such cinema promotes is not a unilinear movement from diversity to uniformity, but a multi-layered affair with the global mass culture which itself takes weird new forms as a result.

Our story till now reaffirms the obvious—that all visions, fantasies and nightmares have their politics, and the popular in Indian cinema, even when it seems least political, is a major political statement. But the story also deals with the less obvious: it claims that popular cinema not merely shapes and is shaped by politics, it constitutes the language for a new form of politics. Formal social sciences have not yet thrown up analytic categories appropriate for the form, and normal politics cannot wait for the social sciences to do so. Consequently, there has emerged a different kind of continuity between such cinema and the culture of Indian politics. The former serves as a poor man's political scientist working in tandem with the astrologer on the one hand, and the political activist on the other. Its focus is on the key concerns of some of the most articulate, vibrant and volatile sectors of the Indian electorate today. On this plane, such cinema can be seen as what some less articulate Indians might reveal of their political and social experiences to the psychoanalyst after putting the latter on the couch.

Despite the charisma that 'masses' as an abstract entity have come to enjoy in the last hundred years or so, thanks to what Edward Shils calls the dispersal of the charisma previously concentrated in the monarch or the ruling élite, the political idiom of the 'lower classes', as opposed to their politics, continues to sound meaningless, dangerous or sick. In fact, most well-wishers of these classes like to serve as the latter's mouthpieces in the belief that the they use the wrong language to interpret their predicament.[14] Indian popular cinema suggests that the language, though sometimes garbled, is not insane, and sometimes can even be moving. For it is after all only a distorted history of our own desires, lived out by others who acknowledge them. That is why the most absurd moments of popular cinema often can be its most poignant.

Such a language can survive as an exotica in an old society with relatively intact traditions and community ties, and as a marker of transitory times in a society where modern technology and media have become hegemonic. In neither case can it have any intrinsic legitimacy, aesthetic or social. In a society where traditions and community ties are relatively intact, popular culture of the kind the Bombay films typify is not really that popular after all; it has to compete with the predominant presence of a wide variety of folk culture. On the other hand, the 'magical' powers of mass culture in a fully modernized society come from the breakdown of communities and the decline of traditions and from the substitutes for such communities and traditions ventured by the mass media with the help of modern technology. Until now, Indian popular cinema has refused to cede that magicality to mass media, though it is coming closer to doing so. Nor has it tried to be a typical mass media though in recent years it has borrowed heavily from the genre.

This may be simply a long-winded way of returning to the proposition that in South Asia, and perhaps in much of Asia and Africa, mass culture and popular culture do not fully overlap. Elements of mass culture, disembedded from their global context, can become popular (e.g. denims and cola drinks). But that by itself means little; for these elements have to be processed through the local popular culture which provides, exactly for that purpose, an indigenously forged bicultural sieve. The Indian cinema not only does this processing on behalf of a vulnerable section of the Indian population, it also has a built-in plurality that tends to subvert mass culture even when seemingly adapting to it passively.

This has another implication. If Indian popular cinema has to be seen as a struggle against the massified, it must also be seen

as a battle over categories—between those that represent the global and the fully marketized, in tune with India's now almost fully institutionalized official ideology of the state, and those who by default represent the culturally self-confident but low-brow multiculturalism in which the country has invested an important part of its genius during the last hundred years or so, both as a means of survival in our times and as a technology of self-creation with an extended range of options. The popular in Indian cinema cannot be the classical—art cinema exists for that—or folk, of which there is as yet no dearth in India.

The chapters in this book were generated in the course of a four-year-long study which, we hope, will lead to at least one more volume. In this collection the emphasis is on the larger politics of culture as it is epitomized in popular films. We have avoided here, to the extent possible, 'proper', weighty film criticism and analysis of the kind that is easily available in a number of recent books. The popular Indian film is no longer a step-child of contemporary social sciences.

The first half of the book is organized around two long, highly personalized narratives that try to capture the crisis of Indian public life as reflected in the generational and stylistic changes in the contents and concerns of popular Indian films. In Chapter 1, Ziauddin Sardar captures, in an evocative essay on his own ambivalent affair with Indian cinema, not merely the political history of Indian cinema but also the cinematic history of Indian politics. He seems to suggest that Indian cinema has not been an inert mirror of society; in the popular understanding of the crisis of Indian public life, the changing nature of popular cinema has played an important role. Not only are the present crisis of Indian public life and the degeneration of the Indian state faithfully reflected in violent, anomic films, but there is a celebration in recent films of the narrowing of the cultural, political and moral range that gave earlier Indian films their humaneness and universal appeal. In Chapter 2, Rajni Bakshi has discovered in Raj Kapoor an unwitting political analyst who, even if by default and often against himself, diagnosed the nature of the crisis by charting the society's road to decline and decay. There is more than a hint here that Kapoor even managed to recapitulate in his dissipative, sometimes blatantly self-destructive, personal life the story of that deterioration.

Both chapters, woven around two charismatic, larger-than-life figures, tend to celebrate at places the innocence that began to be lost with the large-scale entry into Indian cinema of components from audio-visual media oriented to more massified societies. The ultimate symbol of this encroachment, Amitabh Bachchan, another charismatic star who dominated Indian cinema for nearly two decades, is the unacknowledged anti-hero for both Sardar and Bakshi. In Chapter 3, Fareeduddin Kazmi brings him—and the kind of cinema with which his name is inextricably linked—centrestage. Kazmi deals with some of the super-hits of the 1970s and 1980s and what they say about the changing political crisis in Indian politics and urban life, and the means available to ordinary citizens to intervene in that crisis. He argues that the intervention these super-hits endorse is a form of dissent in leash. It involves complete identification with a vigilante-superman of a hero who allows the audience to participate in vicarious violence against cleverly individuated crime-merchants, but never against the system that produces them.

Contemporary popular cinema in India may represent both the self-confidence of India's new middle class and the new linkage that it has established with the massified aspects of the country's public culture on the one hand, and global mass culture on the other. But in the process of consolidation of this self-confidence, there have also been some major losses. Kazmi traces some of the intellectual losses, especially the delegitimization of all institutional approaches to the present crisis in Indian politics, to the changing nature of commercially successful cinema over the last two decades.

The second half of the book turns a trifle more technical, the emphasis being on how an entertainment package, suspicious of all messages, itself becomes a carrier of messages that are effective by being seemingly ineffective.

Anjali Monteiro's chapter is included, not because we assume a perfect continuity between film and television in India, but because it focuses on the way the receiver of audio-visual messages reshapes them for his or her purposes. According to Monteiro, there is no passive reception but an active, if unselfconscious, attempt to cope with the messages, in ways that seem to constitute a form of cultural resistance. That the source of these messages is the official, government-owned state television explicitly beaming a statist-nationalist, developmental message, and the recipients are the standard, 'mixed-up' residents of urban slums, only

indicates the complex fashion in which even the motivated message of a powerful medium can be broken down into digestible morsels. As popular films are even more explicitly shaped by audience demand and are even more dependent on the vagaries of popular mood, their resistance to homogenization can only be stronger.

Ravi Srinivas and Sundar Kaali have written the only chapter on Tamil cinema, which has had an altogether different relationship with politics. (Tamil film-stars are popular not only by virtue of their cinematic appeal but also because of the close links they maintain with political parties and the chequered political career of the Tamil film industry itself, especially its long and complicated relationship with anti-Brahmin movements in South India.) Here the dominant idiom is not so much the ideology of the state as the language of transformative politics. Srinivas and Sundar deal with characters not as individuals but as representations of collectivities renegotiating their traditional and not-so-traditional social relationships. They show how the politics of this representation itself becomes a form of renegotiation that does not mechanically mirror the renegotiation going on in society but 'processes' it systematically for the viewer.

The final chapter by Vinay Lal comes full circle by returning to the themes of dissent, culpability and renegotiation with cultural norms that structure this book, and especially to some of the questions raised by Sardar, Bakshi and Kazmi. Lal tries to capture the social and political appeal of Indian cinema by concentrating on one of its most durable features—the absence in it of any genuine outsider, either in the form of an alienated hero or in the form of a villain. Unlike Sardar and Kazmi, Lal discovers a continuity between recent Hindi cinema and the age-old concerns of popular forms of self-expression in the culture, especially the narrative modes of Indian folk-tales. There is the implicit argument here that, in the final analysis, the primary concern, even of films that have explicitly tried to break the conventions of earlier genres of popular cinema, turns out to be the re-establishment within the society of the 'outsider'—as only a camouflaged insider pushed to the margins of the society after being wronged by a conspiracy of the ungodly or fate.

This book invites the reader to use it as a means of thinking about cinema and the politics of cultures in South Asia in less conventional ways, unencumbered by formal film theory and trendy hermeneutics of the kind that, for reasons of academic correctness, sucks all life from one of the most vigorous expressions of the selfhood of the Indian caught between the old and the new, the inner and the outer, the local and the global. We hope that something of that vigour is reflected here.

NOTES

1. *Peacock Screen* (London: BBC Channel 4, 1996), director Mahmood Jamal, script Firdous Ali; *Mass Media in India:* 1992 (New Delhi: Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, 1993), pp. 157, 198.
2. M. Christopher Byrski, 'Bombay Philum—the Kaliyugi Avatara of Sanskrit Drama', *Pushpanjali*, November 1980, 4, pp. 111–18.
3. Jai P. Sen, 'The Unintended City', *Seminar*, April 1976, 200, pp. 33–40.
4. Strangely, the slum seems to be less of an embarrassment to the rural Indians. They perhaps know the slum better as a standard pathway for those who migrate from what has become for them the stifling primordiality of the village, to what has become for everyone the impersonal charm of urban anonymity.
5. This part of the story has been told in more detail in Ashis Nandy, 'The Political Culture of the Indian State', *Daedalus*, Fall 1989, 118(4).
6. Ashis Nandy, 'An Intelligent Critic's Guide to Indian Cinema', in *The Savage Freud and Other Essays in Possible and Retrievable Selves* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).
7. One example are the new versions of faith available in packaged form in the modern sector for those anxious about their wavering faith within; for instance the Hindutva movement that has caught the imagination of a significant section of urban, semi-Westernized Hindus and, appropriately enough, expatriate Hindus, has much less to do with Hinduism than with middle-class expectations from politics.
8. Nandy, 'An Intelligent Critic's Guide to Indian Cinema'. Two questions remain: Shall we now see a decline in the number of films with the theme of the double, given that the hero has begun to incorporate the double within himself? Or shall we see a revival of the double after a decent interval, given that the the idea of the double-in-the-hero has begun to go stale?
9. For the moment I am, of course, ignoring the parallel shift from heroes who start as criminals, to become law-abiding citizens, to heroes who start as innocent migrants lost in a heartless city and end up as criminalized vigilantes.
10. Two distinguished scholars, one an anthropologist and the other a philosopher and historian, have recently argued that the decline of the hero in Indian popular films faithfully mirrors the decline of Indian public life. See Akbar S. Ahmed, 'Bombay Films: The Cinema as Metaphor

for Indian Society and Politics', *Modern Asian Studies*, May 1992, 26(2), pp. 289–320; and Ziauddin Sardar, 'Dilip Kumar Made Me Do It', see Chapter 2.

While agreeing with the overall thrust of their argument, one must recognize the scope of the global crisis in public life and democratic politics precipitated by full-blown 'modern rationality'. The hero is what he is, not by choice, but because he cannot be otherwise in the world he lives in. That is the main difference between violence in these films and in those of, say, Hollywood. The changing life-cycle of the film hero is located within that rationality. As a well-known critic of Western modernity, Sardar, who shows little sympathy for the new 'hard', modern face of the hero in Indian films, should have appreciated this part of the story.

The point I am trying to make is beautifully, though perhaps unwittingly, captured by Sardar himself. In his chapter, he recapitulates a moving episode from the film *Mashaal*, in which an elderly couple played by a famous hero and a heroine of earlier years, Dilip Kumar and Waheeda Rehman, are caught in a heartless megalopolis. The wife, injured and facing death, is carried by the morally upright, law-abiding husband in the dead of the night through the deserted streets of Bombay, where he tries to stop a passing car to take his wife to a hospital. But nobody stops while he screams in anguish, 'Brother, stop the car', and no one ever opens a window of the tall apartments lining the street. Dilip in bitter frustation throws a stone at one of the multi-storeyed buildings. No one responds to that desperate gesture either.

11. Fareeduddin Kazmi, see Chapter 4.
12. Byrski, 'Bombay Philum—the Kaliyugi Avatara of Sanskrit Drama'.
13. Veena Das, 'Jai Santoshi Ma', *India International Centre Quarterly*, 9(1), 1981.
14. The rural and the traditional, it is true, are no longer dirty words, as they were in many of the major schools of nineteenth-century social knowledge, including the major dissenting visions. Environmental concerns and the growing discomfort with urban industrialism in recent decades have changed the intellectual culture in this respect. The wisdom of the peasant and the shaman is a trendy concern today. But this revaluation does not cover those who have one foot in the village and the other in the city. They seem neither authentically traditional nor genuinely modern, and are therefore a hybrid worse than both. Popular cinema originates from that liminal world; it is bound to arouse ambivalent feelings.