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Emboldening and Contesting Gender and Skin Color Stereotypes in the Film Industry in India, 1947–1991

This article examines how the film industry influenced prevailing gender and skin color stereotypes in India during the first four decades after Independence in 1947. It shows that Bollywood, the mainstream cinema in India, shared Hollywood's privileging of paler skin over darker skin, and its preference for presenting women in stereotypical ways lacking agency. The influence of film content was especially significant in India as audiences often lacked alternative sources of entertainment and information. It was left to parallel, and often regional, cinemas in India to contest skin color and gender stereotypes entrenched in mainstream media. As conventional archival sources for this history are lacking, the article employs new evidence from oral histories of producers and actors.

Keywords: film industry, Bollywood, Tamil cinema, India, gender, male gaze, race, social impact, stereotypes, oral history

This article examines the impact of movie content on gender and skin color stereotypes in India between Independence in 1947 and 1991. India developed a huge film industry during this period. During the 1970s and 1980s, the release of some 800 features annually made India larger than any other country, including the United States, in movie production. By 1990, the film industry was estimated to be the

ninth largest industry in the country, and employed 2.25 million people in production, distribution, and exhibition.[1] It was also a diverse industry. Hindi language films, which included the Bollywood industry based in Mumbai (formerly Bombay), were best known internationally, but only accounted for one fifth of the total production. The remainder of movies were in regional languages, especially those spoken in the south of the country.[2]

This article does not offer a general history of the Indian cinema industry as such, nor does it offer critical commentary on particular films. There is already a rich literature by scholars of film and culture on which this article gratefully draws.[3] Rather, the focus is on the impact of the content of films on gender and skin color stereotypes. In particular, there are three main research questions. First, did the film industry in India embolden or contest stereotypes about skin color and gender during the post-Independence decades? Second, to what extent did the business organization of the industry influence the content of films in this period? Third, why and how were there variations on these issues between different segments (such as Bollywood, parallel, and Tamil-language films) of Indian cinema? The film industry has many other impacts on a society and its economy beyond influencing values—such as generating employment and serving as a source of revenue from exports to foreign markets—but these are not the concern of this article.

This article contributes to the literature in business history that has long sought to move beyond a preoccupation with corporate strategy and organizational design to consider the societal impact of business. This literature has explored the ways in which business has helped shape tastes, preferences, and values historically in a number of industries. This article explores these same issues for the film industry, where the topic has to date been mostly left to cultural and social historians. The authors believe strongly that the impact of business on society should be a core issue in business history.

This study is focused on the period between 1947 and 1991. As a result, it does not discuss Indian cinema in the colonial period. Nor does it address the contemporary period, which is the primary concern of much of the existing literature on Indian cinema. The policy liberalization that began in 1991 resulted in major and on-going changes to

[1] Manjunath Pendakur, "India," in J.A. Lent, ed., *The Asian Film Industry* (Austin, 1990), 229.
[2] Pendakur, "India," 231; UNESCO, *Statistics on Film and Cinema 1955–1977* (Paris, 1981), 10.
[3] In recent years a number of excellent surveys have been published, which include extensive guides to the literature. See Ashish Rajadhyaksha, *Indian Cinema: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, 2016), as well as his exhaustive study, *Indian Cinema in the Time of Celluloid: From Bollywood to the Emergency* (Bloomington, 2009).

every aspect of the industry. There was also a major technological shift, described by the leading Indian film critic Ashish Rajadhyaksha, as digital recording and editing replaced celluloid in the production process.[4]

The article proceeds in four sections. The first section positions this study within the broad literature that has sought to examine the historical impact of industries or clusters of firms on societal values and choices. It then turns specifically to film. It shows that the impact of Hollywood on both perceptions of gender and ethnicity has been particularly well documented, although primarily by cultural and social historians rather than from a business history perspective. This scholarly work on Hollywood establishes concepts and approaches which will be used to analyze Indian cinema. The second section turns to the business organization of Bollywood and explores how this might have shaped the content of Bollywood films. The third section reviews historical attitudes to gender and skin color in India, and then explores how Bollywood portrayed these topics on screen between 1947 and 1991. Given the lack of archives for the industry, the lack of state recognition of the industry, and the high-degree of informality in its organization, this article offers a methodological innovation by drawing on the voices of prominent actors and producers that are preserved in two oral history databases. The fourth section identifies different approaches to gender and skin color found in parallel and regional cinema, with a focus on Tamil language cinema. A final section concludes.

Cinema and Society in History

Business historians have long studied certain dimensions of the societal and cultural impact of business. The literature is particularly well developed in food. From introducing tropical fruits into the diets of Western consumers, to the "McDonaldization" of tastes and lifestyles, there is plentiful evidence on the role of business in influencing consumer preferences and habits.[5] However, it is also evident that corporate strategies operate within social, cultural, and historical contexts that condition the nature of that impact.[6] Both the importance of business,

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[4] This is the major element of his analytical framework in Rajadhyaksha, *Indian Cinema in the Time of Celluloid.*

[5] Peter Chapman, *Bananas: How the United Fruit Company Shaped the Wo*rld (New York, 2007); Richard A. Hawkins, *A Pacific Industry: The History of Pineapple Canning in Hawaii* (New York, 2011); George Ritzer, *The McDonaldization of Society* (Thousand Oaks, CA: 1993).

[6] For example, Ai Hisano, *Visualizing Taste: How Business Change the Look of What You Eat* (Cambridge, MA, 2019) examines how business shaped the visual appearance of food, but she emphasizes that the process was an iterative one involving scientists, regulators, consumers and others.

and the fact that impact is embedded in social and cultural context, is evident in the case of the global beauty industry. In his study of the globalization of the beauty industry from the nineteenth century, Geoffrey Jones stresses the role of firms in the homogenization of beauty standards over time, especially towards white beauty ideals. Yet he also demonstrates the continued wide variation between countries and geographies in their preferences for different beauty products, even when the same set of multinationals were predominant across various markets.[7]

Business historians of cinema have written much less than their counterparts studying food and beauty concerning the societal impacts of their industry. This is understandable because it is conceptually challenging to establish causality in any rigorous fashion, given that media, culture and everyday life are so intertwined.[8] Yet this does not mean that the content of cinema and its impact on social issues should not be examined. Cinema is a different kind of commodity than food and cosmetics. It can be copied, distributed, played, and replayed. It is constantly and repeatedly consumed, rather than being ephemeral, and its impact might be assumed to be as, or more, substantial as a result.

There are indeed empirical studies undertaken in multiple academic disciplines that point to electronic media shaping, rather than just reflecting, people's views on a range of values and outlook. For example, a large econometric study demonstrated that when the conservative Fox News channel was introduced in the cable programming of U.S. towns between 1996 and 2000, the vote share of the Republican party in presidential elections increased substantially.[9] A long tradition of experimental research has shown that violent television programs seem to increase aggression, and that cinema content has influenced people's views on matters especially related to sexual assault.[10]

A particular challenge in trying to explore the connection between the film industry and societal values is that the secondary literature on the industry pays limited attention to it as a business. In one recent

[7] Geoffrey Jones, *Beauty Imagined: A History of the Global Beauty Industry* (Oxford, 2010).

[8] John Corner, "Influence: The Contested Core of Media Research," in James Curran and Michael Gurevitch, eds., *Mass Media and Society* (London, 2000).

[9] Stefano DellaVigna and Ethan Kaplan, "The Fox News effect: Media Bias and Voting," The *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 122, no. 3 (2007): 1187- 1234.

[10] Russell G. Green and Susan L. Thomas, "The Immediate Effects of Media Violence on Behavior," *Journal of Social Issues* 42, no. 3 (1986): 7–27; Barbara J. Wilson, Daniel Linz, Edward Donnerstein, and Horst Stipp, "The Impact of Social Issue Television Programming on Attitudes toward Rape," *Human Communications Research* 19, no. 2 (1992): 178–208; Karen S. Miller, "Public Relations in Film and Fiction: 1930–1995," *Journal of Public Relations Research* 11, no. 1 (1999): 3–28; Michelle C. Pautz, "Argo and Zero Dark Thirty: Film, Government, and Audiences," *PS: Political Science & Politics* 48, no. 1 (2015): 120–128.

survey, Miskell has noted the limited number of studies on the industry looking at business organizations, compared to numerous studies of "particular directors, producers, actors, or the development of specific genres or national cinemas."[11] Insofar as cinema has been treated as a business, the growth of Hollywood and its dominance of many international markets has attracted the most attention among business historians.[12] More recently, the growth of other national cinemas, mostly in Europe, has also been explored. However, only one of the mere ten articles on the film industry that have been published over the last decade in the leading U.S. and European journals—*Business History Review*, *Enterprise & Society*, and *Business History*—has focused on the issue of impact.[13]

The single article of these ten that discusses impact is Per H. Hansen and Anne Magnussen's nuanced study of Hollywood films between 1928 and 2016. They employ a narratives and sense-making approach to show how Hollywood films used narrative plots as a strategy to "legitimize certain practices and worldviews while marginalizing others."[14] In particular, they demonstrate that Hollywood films became important vehicles for an audience's understanding of business in periods of uncertainty, crisis, and instability. This article builds on their pioneering contribution to the business history of the cinema.

Hollywood's specific portrayal of gender and race has been much studied from the perspectives of film, general, and cultural studies. The patriarchal nature of the industry after the silent film era—when

[11] Peter Miskell, "Entertainment and the Film Industry," in Teresa da Silva Lopes, Christina Lubinski and Heidi J.S. Tworek, eds., *The Routledge Companion to the Makers of Global Business* (New York, 2020), 378.

[12] Gerben Bakker, *Entertainment Industrialised: The Emergence of the International Film Industry, 1890–1940* (Cambridge, 2008).

[13] The other nine articles are Antonie Doležalová and Hana Moravcová, "Czechoslovak film industry on the way from private business to public good (1918–1945)," *Business History* (2020); Jimmny Parc, "The case of Korean film policies from the 1960s until the present," *Business History* (2019); John Sedgwick, Clara Pafort-Overduin, and Jaap Boter, "Explanations for the Restrained Development of the Dutch Cinema Market in the 1930s," *Enterprise & Society* 13, no. 3 (2012): 634–671; John Sedgwick and Michael Pokorny, "Consumers as risk takers: Evidence from the film industry during the 1930s," *Business History* 52, no. 1 (2010): 74–99; John Sedgwick, Michael Pokorny, and Peter Miskell, "Hollywood in the World Market – Evidence from Australia in the mid-1930s," *Business History* 56, no. 5 (2014): 687–723; John Sedgwick, Peter Miskell, and Marina Nicoli, "The Market for Films in Postwar Italy: Evidence for Both National and Regional Patterns of Taste," *Enterprise & Society* 20, no. 1 (2019): 199–228; Marina Nicoli, "Entrepreneurs and the State in the Italian Film Industry, 1919–1935," *Business History Review* 85, no. 4 (2011): 775–798; Peter Miskell and Marina Nicoli, "From Outsiders to Insiders? Strategies and Practices of American Film Distributors in Postwar Italy," *Enterprise & Society* 17, no. 3 (2016): 546–590; Ronny Regev, "Hollywood Works: How Creativity Became Labor in the Studio System," *Enterprise & Society* 17, no. 3 (2016): 591–617.

[14] Per H. Hansen and Anne Magnussen, "Making Sense of Business and Community in Hollywood Films, 1928–2016," *Business History Review* 92, no. 2 (2018), 308.

female directors and screenwriters were visible, and women played multiple and complex roles—has been extensively analyzed. The oligarchic and profit-focused Hollywood studio system was dominated by men at all senior levels.[15] In 1975, the film critic Laura Mulvey coined the term "male gaze" to describe the lingering cinematic angle of a heterosexual male on a female character. She argued that the woman was represented as the "other," or an object rather than a subject, in Hollywood movies. The narrative structures of Hollywood movies during the postwar decades, in her classic analysis, saw male roles as the primary driver of the story—the character with whom the observer could identify—while the female roles were presented as passive spectacle. In Mulvey's view, the women on screen became part of a commodity culture and created a dichotomy of "the woman as consumed versus the woman consumer."[16]

Hollywood also had a long-term and distinctive stance on skin color. Before the 1960s, Black and Asian actors were largely kept off screen, or condemned to be cast in minor, caricatured roles. Within the context of Hollywood's construction of race, however, a variety of white skin tones were shown from the 1930s. As an industry reliably focused on profits rather than art, Hollywood recruited female actors from Europe and Latin America with diverse skin tones and hair colors to greater appeal to local markets.[17]

Hollywood's portrayal of gender and skin color reflected patriarchal and racist views that existed long before the film industry was invented. It is noteworthy, however, that the film industry contributed to the institutionalization of these views. The Motion Picture Production Code (better known as the Hays Code) launched in 1927 and enforced, through a ratings system starting in 1934, a ban on the showing of all manner of things, from nudity and drug trafficking, to childbirth scenes and white slavery.[18] The Hays Code strongly discouraged showing unmarried men and women in bed, or any criticism of marriage as an institution. The portrayal of same sex relationships was prohibited. However, it was the ban on showing miscegenation, or in the words of the

[15] Majorie Rosen, *Popcorn Venus: Women, Movies and the American Dream* (New York, 1973); Ann Kaplan, *Women and Film: Both Sides of the Camera* (New York, 1983); Molly Haskell, *From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in Movies* (Chicago, 1987).

[16] Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16, no. 3 (1975): 6–18.

[17] Roland Leander Williams Jr., *Black Male Frames: African Americans in a Century of Hollywood Cinema 1903–2003* (Syracuse, 2014); Hye Seung Chung, *Hollywood Asian: Philip Ahn and the Politics of Cross-Ethnic Performance* (Philadelphia, 2006); Sarah Berry, "Hollywood Exoticism Cosmetics and Color in the 1930s," in *Hollywood Goes Shopping*, eds., David Desser and Garth S. Jowett (Minneapolis, 2000), 119.

[18] Jon Lewis, *Hollywood v. Hardcore: How the Struggle Over Censorship Saved the Modern Film Industry* (New York, 2002).

code, "sex relationships between the white and black races," which represented the visual inscription of race-as-color.[19] Censor boards based in southern cities, such as Atlanta, exercised additional pressure on Hollywood, censoring out, for example, any discussion of racism—especially those in southern cities.[20] The Code remained in place until 1966.

It is important, then, to explore the long-term impact of business on societal values and preferences, but it is equally important to recognize the limitations of measuring that impact, principally because there were always other influences at work. This applies across industries, but the challenges become especially acute with the film industry. Hollywood monetized patriarchal and racist views long present in the United States, but it is inadequate to assert that content merely *reflected* and did not *influence* the beliefs of its viewers. Indeed, in the language of Hansen and Magnussen, it seems plausible that at the very least Hollywood legitimized patriarchal and racist sentiments. In fact, constant repetition of the content is likely to have emboldened, and certainly did not contest, such views. The article now turns to the less studied case of the film industry in India. It begins with a brief description of the organization of Bollywood, as this provides important insights on content creation.

The Organization of Bollywood in Independent India

Although the history of cinema in India has a rich literature, it has not featured strongly in the mainstream business history of the country. Despite its size, the cinema industry is not discussed in recent authoritative business and economic histories of India.[21] This is in part due to the fact that the fragmented and informal nature of the industry has made rigorous archival research on its finances and other business aspects more challenging than, for example, research on large business groups such as Tata and Godrej, which retain formal archives. Global consultancies like KPMG, EY, and Deloitte have produced reports on the media industry in India, but they focus on the post-2000 period, and offer only summary statistics, such as number of cinema halls across India and the production numbers of biggest grossing films.[22] Still, much can be discerned about societal impact from more general histories of the industry. Caste and region are usually the focus of

19 Sarah Berry, "Hollywood Exoticism."

20 Jill Watts, *Hattie McDaniel, Black Ambition, White Hollywood* (New York, 2005), 221.

21 The film industry is not mentioned in Dwijendra Tripathi, *The Oxford History of Indian Business* (Oxford, 2004); Tirthankar Roy, *The Economic History of India 1857–1947* (Oxford, 2006); and Tirthankar Roy, *A Business History of India: Enterprise and the Emergence of Capitalism from 1700* (Cambridge, 2018).

22 For example, see *The Era of Consumer A.R.T.: India's Media & Entertainment Sector* by Ernst & Young (Kolkata, 2020).

attention rather than skin color, and while female characters are widely discussed, gender more broadly has been left to more specialist literatures.[23]

The history of the industry is well known. By 1925, Mumbai had established itself as the nation's cinematic capital, but there was and remained extensive filmmaking in other regional centers, using languages other than Hindi.[24] The immediate postwar and Independence periods saw both growth and major discontinuities. The number of Hindi language films jumped from 73 in 1945 to 183 in 1947.[25] For Indian cinema as a whole, the official Film Inquiry Committee in 1951 reported both the growth and the turbulent turnover of production houses.[26] In 1946, the Committee found 151 producers, of whom 94 were no longer in business the following year. In 1947, there were 156 newcomers out of 214 producers. Only 54 producers among the 214 for that year survived by 1948.[27] From an audience point of view, the Committee found that by the early 1950s, "film ha[d] a coverage of about 16 lakhs persons per day [1.6 million], and it [was], therefore, comparable in its influence to the daily press. . . . What [the radio and daily press] attain by repeated contact with the same subjects, the film achieves by greater coverage and by the simultaneous presentation of images both to the eye and the ear . . . arousing vivid psychological reactions in each individual."[28]

There were four major changes that re-shaped Bollywood in the years from 1947 to 1991. First, the trauma leading to Independence greatly affected producers and actors. The violent partition of the country into India and Pakistan resulted in millions of people being displaced.[29] Actors and directors in the industry before the early 1940s were often Westernized elites who had long resided in urban areas. This shifted after 1947, when the industry came to be dominated by migrants from the Punjab region who achieved elite status through the film

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[23] This is evident in Rajadhyaksha, *Indian Cinema*, and Rajadhyaksha, *Indian Cinema in the Time of Celluloid.*

[24] Ashish Rajadhyaksha, "Indian Cinema: Origins to Independence," in Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, ed. *Oxford History of World Cinema* (Oxford, 1997), 398–408; Rajadhyaksha, *Indian Cinema*, chaps. 1 and 2.

[25] Rajadhyaksha, *Indian Cinema*, 54.

[26] This was the second committee of its kind. The first was the Indian Cinemograph Committee established in 1927 to "report on the system of censorship of cinematograph films in India." T. Rangachari, *Report of the Indian Cinematograph Committee, 1927–28* (Calcutta, 1928).

[27] S.K. Patil, *Report of the Film Enquiry Committee, Government of India* (New Delhi, 1951), 63–66.

[28] Patil, *Film Enquiry Committee,* 39.

[29] Barbara Metcalf and Thomas Metcalf, *A Concise History of Modern India* (Cambridge, U.K., 2006), 203–230.

industry.[30] Punjab is located in the northwestern part of the subcontinent, and is a linguistic zone where Hindus, Sikhs, and Muslims have co-existed over time. When Punjab was divided during the partition, many film directors, writers, and crewmembers fled to Mumbai, which became a cosmopolitan hub for displaced members of the creative classes.[31] The pre-eminence of Punjabis was ostensibly surprising, as their language was not spoken in Mumbai, nor was it the language of Bollywood movies. However, the Punjabi dialect was close to Hindi, making it easier for Punjabi actors to find work in Hindi-language films.

Moreover, displaced Punjabis were able to draw upon on capabilities developed in their home region during colonial times. In 1901, the Gandharva Mahavidyalaya was established as a music school in Lahore, where classical music training was made available to the public—no longer only to hereditary families who had previously guarded musical knowledge. The school produced famous musicians, singers and composers among its graduates.[32] Meanwhile, a land act passed in Punjab the same year reduced urban investment in agriculture, shifting resources towards large-scale investment in entertainment. This included building a theatre, first for the stage and then for film.[33]

Cultural factors arguably also facilitated the large Punjabi presence in Bollywood. As India's primary agrarian belt, Punjabis embraced colorful outfits, songs, and dance to commemorate productive harvests, and such exuberance became a stereotype of Punjabis. Punjabis have also been described as embracing traditional gender roles, especially males as rustic and sexual, and females as shy and domestic. The stereotype of the boisterous Punjabi male translated well into the emerging Bollywood culture.[34]

A second major change that re-shaped Bollywood during this period was the transformation from colonialism to independence. Film assumed an important role in nation-building in the newly independent country. The challenges of poverty and inequality faced by the new nation became a topic for filmmakers. One of the most successful films of the post-Independence decade was *Andaaz* ("Style") (1949), a film depicting an upper-class love triangle that examined the common person's struggle between modernity and traditional social values.[35]

[30] Rachel Dwyer and Divia Patel, *Cinema India: The Visual Culture of Hindi Film* (New Brunswick, 2002), 57.

[31] Examples include songwriter Sahir Ludhianvi from Lahore, classical singer Bade Ghulam Ali Khan from Kasur, and lyricist Gulzar from Dina.

[32] Janaki Bakhle, *Two Men and Music: Nationalism in the Making of an Indian Classical Tradition* (Oxford, 2005).

[33] Rajadhyaksha, "Indian Cinema," 400.

[34] Prakash Tandon, *Punjabi Century, 1857–1947* (Berkeley, 1968), 55–60.

[35] Lalit Mohan Joshi, "Bollywood: 100 Years," in *Bollywood: Popular Indian Cinema,* ed., Lalit Mohan Joshi (London, 2002), 29.

The Indian government was interested in the film industry, but only to the extent that it contributed to its vision of a post-Independence India. The Films Division of India (FDI) was established in 1948 as the main film-medium organization of the government. The FDI had a prodigious output, mostly documentaries and other films about rural upliftment, ideal marriage, education, and sanitation. However, FDI material attracted low viewership due to its poor distribution schemes, failure to inspire audiences, and often poor technical quality.[36]

Meanwhile, the government, which progressively introduced a planned economy with extensive state controls, refused to recognize commercial film—including Bollywood—as an official industry. This left film producers with no access to legitimate external finance. The industry was also heavily taxed. In many regions, local governments provided support to cinema, but Mumbai was located in a Marathi-speaking region, and the local government only supported films made in that language, rather than Hindi-language Bollywood movies.[37] As a result, Bollywood never achieved the status of "national cinema" in India the way its parallels in other emerging markets—for example, China and Mexico—did. It received neither subsidies nor market protection from international films.[38]

Like Hollywood, Bollywood was a profit-focused industry, albeit one without access to the kind of finance seen in the United States. There were unforeseen consequences of its informal status. Bollywood became one of the main arenas in the Indian economy for investing and circulating unreported and untaxed income. It was infiltrated by criminal characters, in particular money launderers, who were even more focused on securing revenues than Hollywood financiers. Bollywood became a high-risk enterprise, and producers were reported to borrow money at monthly interest rates of three to four per cent.[39]

These financial challenges translated into a third major change in the Bollywood industry, which was the decline of the Hollywood-style studio system that had emerged during the interwar years. The studio system, including Ranjit Studios founded in 1929, and Bombay Talkies

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[36] Peter Sutoris, *Visions of Development: Films Division of India and the Imagination of Progress, 1948–75* (Oxford, 2016), 99–130; Anuja Jain, "The Curious Case of the Films Division: Some Annotations on the Beginnings of Indian Documentary Cinema in Post-independence India, 1940s–1960s," *The Velvet Light Trap* 71 (2013): 19. See also Nitin Rao and Sudev Sheth, "Mapping India's Films Division using Data Analytics," https://web.sas.upenn.edu/bollywood-and-beyond/code-visualizations/mapping-films-division-using-big-data/.

[37] Gregory Booth, "Traditional Content and Narrative Structure in the Hindi Commercial Cinema," *Asian Folklore Studies* 54, no. 2 (1995): 171.

[38] Rajadhyaksha, *Indian Cinema in the Time of Celluloid,* 16.

[39] Rajadhyaksha, *Indian Cinema*, 103; Tejaswini Ganti. *Bollywood: A Guidebook to Popular Hindi Cinema* (London, 2013), 56–62.

founded in 1934, was adversely affected by rising production costs during World War II. Without access to reliable means of financing, film studios were unable to offer individual film stars the sums they requested. As a result, the power of such large studios dwindled and the industry saw the rise of freelancing, in which stars were not contractually obligated to work exclusively with any studio or director. Often times, criminal figures funded these independent producers through money laundering. The rise of freelancing gave stars bargaining power to work with the director who could offer them the most money. Actors including Raj Kapoor and Dilip Kumar became box-office legends of Bollywood.[40]

Bollywood became dominated by these independent producers, who —although they overtook formal film studios—still lacked access to the level of funding seen in Hollywood. The whole system worked on an informal ad hoc basis. The prominent actor Shabana Azmi later recalled that when she entered the industry in the 1970s there was a "trickle-down way of financing." She added that filmmakers "would get finance in little bits and pieces."[41] Ticket prices were kept low so that viewers outside of major urban areas could access films, thereby limiting opportunities to generate cash through ticket sales. Although it could match Hollywood in the number of films made, Bollywood never matched Hollywood's total revenue figures, even after liberalization began in 1991.[42]

A fourth major change for Bollywood after 1947 was increased censorship. While Hollywood content was highly self-regulated, India had formal government censorship. This had existed in the colonial era, but its scope widened after 1947. The autonomy of regional censors was curtailed, and in 1951 the Central Board of Film Certification was established.[43] The Censor Board blocked mention of politically sensitive topics, including Partition, and also, as discussed in the following section, restricted explicit sexual content.[44] However, and in contrast to the Hays Code, the

[40] Bunny Reuben, *Raj Kapoor, The Fabulous Showman: An Intimate Biography* (Bombay, 1988), 72.

[41] Interview with Shabana Azmi, interviewed by Rohit Deshpande, November 30, 2015, Creating Emerging Markets (CEM), Baker Library Historical Collections, Harvard Business School, http://www.hbs.edu/creating-emerging-markets/ (hereafter Interview with Shabana Azmi).

[42] Historical data on ticket prices, sales, and revenues for Bollywood are difficult to find prior 2000. In 2004, theater tickets, DVDs, and television generated $2 billion in sales compared to $55 billion in revenue for American movies. See Marc Fetscherin, "The Main Determinants of Bollywood Movie Box Office Sales," *Journal of Global Marketing* 23, no. 5 (2010): 462.

[43] Selig S. Harrison, "India's Films Stir Up Revolt Against Bans by Government," *Austin Statesman*, 17 Jan. 1952.

[44] Someswar Bhowmik, *Cinema and Censorship: The Politics of Control in India* (New Delhi, 2009).

Cinematograph Act of 1952 made no mention of gender or ethnicity, and focused primarily on restricting content deemed a threat to the integrity of Indian sovereignty.[45] In 1960, the government issued new directives censoring films that "lower the moral standards of those that see it," but there remained no mention of gender or ethnicity.[46]

Censorship, financing challenges, and informality set the parameters under which Bollywood operated, and more importantly for this article conditioned content creation. The industry provided incentives to deliver movies featuring themes catering to the lowest common denominator. A highly standardized format emerged of romantic melodramas focused on issues related to marriage and class. Movies featured songs that were pop versions of Indian folk music combined with musical styles emanating from Broadway, scripted into Hindi. Songs provided filmmakers with a way to convey eroticism in a situation where government censors prevented explicit romance. The songs were a key component of a film, and assumed commodity status beyond their feature in films. The sale of a film's music became a key factor in the success of the film itself.[47]

The actor-director Raj Kapoor was a formative influence on post-1947 Bollywood. Born in 1924, he grew up on Peshawar's oldest and most famous road, Qissa Khwani, or Street of Storytellers. His father, Prithviraj, became a star in the emergent industry. Like many other Punjabis, the family settled in Mumbai after Partition. Kapoor acted as a child, and in 1948 started his own production house, R.K. Studios, which Rajadhyaksha judges to be "perhaps the most important of the new-era production houses."[48] He financed his first film, *Aag* ("Fire"), by borrowing from friends and family, as well as from his own domestic help, and mortgaging his car. Most of the actors were also friends and family.[49] His next two films established his reputation. *Barsaat* ("Rain"), released in 1949, was shot in the (then) exotic location of Kashmir, which set a precedent for later films which often featured colorful exotic locations. In *Awaara* ("Vagabond"), released in 1951, Kapoor created an Indianized Charlie Chaplin tramp with a bowler hat, a blazer, black pants, and a rucksack on a stick.[50]

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[45] Cinematograph Act of 1952, Government of India, https://www.cbfcindia.gov.in/main/CBFC_English/Attachments/cine_act1952.pdf.

[46] Bruce Michael Boyd, "Film Censorship in India: A 'Reasonable Restriction on Freedom of Speech and Expression," *Journal of the Indian Law Institute* 14, no. 4 (1972), 501–561.

[47] Gregory Booth, "Religion, gossip, narrative conventions and the construction of meaning in Hindi film songs," *Popular Music* 19, no. 2 (2000), 125–145.

[48] Rajadhyaksha, *Indian Cinema*, 60.

[49] Reuben, *Raj Kapoor*, 54; Rajadhyaksha, "Indian Cinema," 404.

[50] Geoffrey Jones and Snigdha Sur, "Raj Kapoor: The Socialist Showman," *Harvard Business School Case* no. 317–100 (rev. April 14 2020).

These films established a basic formula for Kapoor's films over the next three decades. The central story was typically built around one man and his relationship with his heroine and his family. There was little critique of accepted social norms, although there was an underlying critique of excessive wealth. The films typically emphasized the common person's struggle between traditional social values and the promises of modernity, including love stories between upper class and lower class individuals. The female lead was portrayed as a passive and demure figure, conservatively dressed, and coy until swept off her feet by the male lead. It was a format that worked well in many Middle Eastern markets. It also found favor in the Soviet Union, where Hollywood movies were banned and Kapoor's "poor man" focus was seen as politically correct.[51]

Kapoor profoundly influenced Bollywood film as a genre, but from an industry perspective, his most significant contribution was the role he played in establishing what became one of Bollywood's most influential families. He was the nucleus of an extended family network that had no real parallel, whether in Bollywood or contemporary Hollywood, beyond a handful of acting families like the Fondas. Kapoor's brothers Shammi and Shashi were star actors between the 1950s and the 1980s. Shammi Kapoor married actor Geeta Bali. Raj Kapoor's son Rishi also joined the industry, debuting with his father's 1973 film *Bobby*. Kapoor's other sons, Randhir and Rajiv, also became leading Bollywood actors. In the recent past, beyond the chronological era covered by this article, Randhir's daughters Karishma and Kareena have become leading actors, along with Rishi's son Ranbir.

Bollywood, then, assumed a distinctive shape after 1947. Films were built around extended love stories in which song and music were key features. Although there was always some experimentation, and films became more technically sophisticated over time, the industry settled into a broad pattern of norms. This situation was reinforced by censorship that ruled out political or explicit sexual content. The fact that so much financing was informal and indeed criminal, encouraged replication of proven formats. Meanwhile, large barriers to entry arose due to the entrenched position of Punjabi family dynasties, of which the Kapoors were the leading example. Other Punjabi family dynasties included the Chopras, beginning in the early 1950s, the Roshans later in the decade, and the Johars in the mid-1970s.[52] Marriage and

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[51] A. Malik, "Who's the Hero of the Soviet Union," *The Statesman*, 25 Aug. 1985, quoted in Wimal Dissanayake and Malti Sahai, *Raj Kapoor: Harmony of Discourses* (New Delhi, 1988), 19.

[52] Anupama Chopra, *King of Bollywood: Shah Rukh Khan and the Seductive World of Indian Cinema* (New York, 2007), xi-xvii.

casting family members became, and remained, key strategies for maintaining power in the industry. This closed insider club provided the setting for stereotyped views to be endlessly recycled.[53]

Despite India's long history in cinema, Bollywood was largely re-invented during the postwar decades. It was in a unique situation, both successful as an industry but simultaneously distrusted by its own government. In 1971, India became the world's largest manufacturer of feature films, with 431 feature film titles across all languages. By 1979, the figure rose to 700, and by 1989 to 839.[54] A UNESCO survey on national cinematography showed that India was the only non-Western country to have a larger audience for locally made films than for imported films. While international films remained relatively marginal in India, Indian films also secured large market shares elsewhere in Asia, and in Africa and the Middle East.[55]

The next section turns to the impact of Bollywood on India. Raj Kapoor often reflected on the central role of film in Indian society. He met with Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of India, to discuss how "screen celebrities could attract millions. . . [and how] it would result in immense good to the country." Kapoor would likely have endorsed Hansen and Magnussen's view that cinema was a major vehicle for sense making. He told Nehru that he believed that "the screen and the stage were. . . an intimate part of India's life and culture."[56] The statement left unanswered what elements of Indian life and culture would be reflected in the cinema, and whether the mission of cinema was to embolden the views of its audience, or contest them.

Bollywood's Influence on Skin Color and Gender Stereotypes

As in the United States, Indian cinema developed in a society in which certain beliefs about both skin color and gender were already deeply embedded.[57] In the case of India, light skin preferences can be discerned in works written in classical Sanskrit and regional languages. The powerful image of lighter skinned peoples called Aryans invading India and setting fire to the settlements of darker-skinned people, and

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[53] Mark Lorenzen and Florian Arun Täube, "Breakout from Bollywood? The roles of social networks and regulation in the evolution of Indian film industry," *Journal of International Management* 14, no. 3 (2008): 286–299.

[54] Ashish Rajadhyaksha, "India: Filming the Nation," in Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, ed., *Oxford History of World Cinema* (Oxford, 1997), 678–689.

[55] *A Survey on National Cinematography, UNESCO* (Paris, 2000).

[56] Jones and Sur, "Raj Kapoor."

[57] Sonora Jha and Mara Adelman, "Looking for love in all the white places: a study of skin color preferences on Indian matrimonial and mate-seeking websites," *Studies in South Asian Film & Media* 1, no. 3 (2009): 66–67.

of the presentation of fair-skinned women as gifts to dark-skinned for-tunetellers, is documented in the ancient Hindu text *Rigveda* composed in Sanskrit around 1500 BCE.[58] Around 1000 CE, as Islamic armies from Central Asia took over the northern parts of the subcontinent, a prefer-ence for lighter skin was also discernable, although historical evidence is unclear how far these political elites subjugated populations solely based on race.[59]

A stronger emphasis on skin color emerged during the sixteenth century as Europeans arrived in India for trade. Skin color was the most obvious marker of distinction between white Europeans and Indians. Early modern missionaries, traders, and travelers were the first to document such race-based prejudice. When the English East India Company (EIC) established its first outpost at Fort Saint George in Madras in 1644, they bifurcated the settlement, distinguishing between a "White Town" for colonial families and a "Black Town" for native Indians. By the nineteenth century, various colonial cities like Kolkata, Mumbai, and Ahmedabad were organized along racial grounds.[60] Whiteness came to be deeply associated with power, status, affluence, and beauty. Indigenous ideas both fed into and drew from this emerging racialized colonial world.[61]

As colonial power became entrenched through military campaigns, race-based privilege became institutionalized. Army rank and martial prowess was seen to reside in particular racial groups. After the end of EIC rule, when India became a Crown colony in 1858, the British Indian Army also set standards for the perfect human body. The ideal soldier was light-skinned, mirroring his colonial superiors. The politics of rank and file in the army cast the idealized male as tall, strong, fair-skinned, and possessing an aquiline nose and a defined jawline. Such features were more characteristic of populations residing in the northwest mountainous terrains of the subcontinent.[62] For colonial officials, these groups reflected contemporary martial race theories that gave men from these mountainous regions of India privileged access to army positions. This included Pathan tribesmen from modern day Afghanistan, and men from the various ethnic and religious

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[58] R.S. Sharma, *Sudras in Ancient India: A Social History of the Lower Order Down to Circa AD 600* (New Delhi: 1990), 14–23.

[59] Sumit Guha, *Beyond Caste: Identity and Power in South Asia, Past and Present* (Leiden, 2013), 24.

[60] Metcalf & Metcalf, *Concise History,* 66.

[61] For regional tales embodying the trope of fairness/beauty and darkness/ugliness, see Flora Steel, *Tales of the Punjab Told by the People* (London, 1894), 257–61.

[62] David Omissi, *The Sepoy and the Raj: The Indian Army, 1860–1940* (London, 2016), 32–3.

backgrounds of the Punjab region including Sikhs, Muslims, Rajputs, and Dogras.[63]

The evidence on the evolution of gender norms in India appears less robust than that of skin color prejudices, but mostly supports a view that patriarchy was the norm. From the ancient Sanskrit textual tradition dating 500 BC to 500 CE, evidence points to men viewing women as property to be traded for alliance building between different warring clans.[64] These legacies continued into the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries during the Mughal period as women occupied the domestic sphere or *harem* as wives, mothers, and concubines. In this setting, royal women of the Emperor's household were held in high regard, and sometimes possessed their own resources, property, and aspirations.[65] Unfortunately, there is relatively little evidence about the status of ordinary women, a point emphasized by feminist scholars including Ruby Lal, Susie Tharu, and Ke Lalita.[66]

A number of scholars have argued that patriarchy was enhanced by colonialism. In trying to prevent certain indigenous practices like widow burning, colonial law actually contributed to the isolation of females to the domestic sphere. Women became the site and repository of tradition, culture, and religion, in need of protection by Indian men, who themselves felt destabilized by colonial rule.[67] As a result, it has been suggested that women were relegated to the domestic sphere and became the foci of discursive attention by Indian nationalist men, colonial authorities, and social reformers. This process has been articulated most clearly by Partha Chatterjee and Patricia Oberoi.[68] Indian patriarchy was furthered by the colonial state's establishing of a two-tier system of law where secular matters fell under British legal norms while family disputes were relegated

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[63] Rajit Mazumder. *The Indian Army and the Making of Punjab* (New Delhi, 2003), 15–19.

[64] Evidence is abundant in the epic tale Mahabharata set around 300 BC. See Simon Brodbeck and Brian Black, eds., *Gender and Narrative in the Mahabharata* (London, 2007); Sally J. Sutherland, "Sita and Draupadi: Aggressive Behavior and Female Role-Models in the Sanskrit Epics," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* (1989): 63–79; Paula Richman, ed., *Many Ramayanas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia* (Berkeley, 1991); Rashmi Luthra, "Clearing Sacred Ground: Women-Centered Interpretations of the Indian Epics," *Feminist Formations* (2014): 135–161.

[65] Ruby Lal, *Domesticity and Power in the Early Mughal World* (Cambridge, U.K., 2005); Karuna, Sharma, "A Visit to the Mughal Harem: Lives of Royal Women," *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 32, no. 2 (2009): 155–169.

[66] The most exhaustive primary source collection of women's writings can be found in Susie J. Tharu and K. Lalita, eds, *Women Writing in India: 600 BC to the Early Twentieth Century*, Vol. 1, and *Women Writing in India: The Twentieth Century, Vol. 2.* (New York, 1991).

[67] Tanika Sarkar, *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation: Community, Religion, and Cultural Nationalism* (New Delhi, 2003) and Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid, eds., *Recasting Women: Essays in Indian Colonial History* (New Brunswick, NJ, 1990).

[68] Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton, 1993) and Patricia Oberoi, *Freedom and Destiny: Gender, Family, and Popular Culture in India* (Oxford, 2006).

to personal law courts, assessed according to Hindu or Muslim personal law. This further limited the property rights of women, an aspect that has continued under postcolonial and modern law.[69]

It is apparent, then, that as the cinema industry grew in India, exclusionary regimes around skin color and gender were quite entrenched. From the start, there was a tendency to reinforce, more than to contest, such norms in most segments of Indian cinema. During the interwar years, there was considerable influence by both European cinema and Hollywood. For example, in the 1920s, the prominent director Himanshu Rai pioneered several early films in which he used foreign Eurasian actors playing female leads. They were given Indian names and were projected as ideal Hindu women on screen. These were black and white films, but the light skin contrast was apparent. Indeed, the Anglo-Indian actor Renee Smith was the female lead in a Rai trilogy from 1925–29, and changed her name to Sita Devi.[70] Other examples included Mary Evans (whose stage name was Nadia), Beryl Claessen (Madhuri), and Iris Gasper (Yasmin).[71]

After 1947, Punjabi pre-eminence as actors and directors further influenced skin color preferences. Those from Punjab were often fairer skinned than many other Indians. Raj Kapoor, and some other members of his family, had blue rather than brown eyes, which were more typical across the subcontinent. The archetype male hero in Kapoor's films, and Bollywood in general, became a lighter-skinned tall male accompanied by a heroine of similar or even lighter complexion. Moreover, female protagonists had to carry the additional burden of being the site of chastity and morally acceptable romance. To achieve this, films usually carried a contrasting character of the female "vamp," a Westernized woman accepting the sinister glances of men in settings like nightclubs, and succumbing to male desires, aggression, and power.[72] The vamp in Kapoor's and other films has been described as "the sexy, glamourous, dangerous woman whose body was the focus of desire for the male spectator, made guilt-free by her ultimate defeat by the heroine's pure chasteness."[73]

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[69] Rachel Sturman, *The Government of Social Life in Colonial India: Liberalism, Religious Law, and Women's Rights* (Cambridge, U.K., 2012).

[70] Sangeeta Datta, "Globalization and Representations of Women in Indian Cinema," *Social Scientist* 28, no. 3–4 (2000): 71–82.

[71] Sarah Rahman Niazi, "The Transformation of the Self: Women Performers in the Bombay Film Industry, 1925–1947," in *Interrogating Women's Leadership and Empowerment*, ed. Omita Goyal (New Delhi, 2014), 179–94.

[72] Sumita Chakravarty, *National Identity in Indian Popular Cinema, 1947–1987* (Austin, 1993), 273.

[73] Rachel Dwyer, *All You Want is Money, All You Need is Love: Sexuality and Romance in Modern India* (London, 2000), 122.

The star system that replaced studios created celebrities around male personalities, and to a lesser extent around female leads, who were paid less.[74] The Censor Board also propagated unwritten rules around male-female interaction, censoring films with explicit sexual content, including kissing. This had consequences as it contributed to establishing new gender norms. For example, producers had to compensate with exaggerated body language, such as romantic leads bumping shoulders. This led to growing vulgarity, racy song and dance sequences, pelvic thrusts, bathtub fantasies, and dream sequences as a stand-in for expressing sexual desire.[75] Gesture, silence, tongue in cheek dialogue, and other forms of suggestive behavior became the hallmark of the Bollywood cinematic genre.

India had excellent professional training for actors at institutions such as the Film and Television Institute of India (FTII) in Pune and the National School of Drama (NSD) in Delhi. However, their graduates were not typically hired in Bollywood. Instead, actors were cast if they either belonged to a powerful film family like that of Kapoor, or fit standards of beauty that could be commercialized without great difficulty.[76] Stars became key elements of Bollywood's simplistic messaging, and their physical appearance and skin color were important components of the messaging.

The informal nature of the industry and the consequent absence of conventional archives makes it hard it to explore causal mechanisms using conventional business history sources and methodology. In response, this article has drawn heavily on two publicly available oral history databases consisting of interviews with leading actors and producers in India. The first database is based on the Guftagoo talk show series produced between 2011 and 2020 for Rajya Sabha Television, the official channel of India's Upper House of Parliament. Hosted by journalist S. M. Irfan, the interview-based show takes the format of an intimate conversation that explores the life journey and industry experience of creative personalities associated with Indian cinema. Guftagoo literally means "conversation" in Urdu, and all interviews are conducted in either Hindi or Urdu. With researchers at the University of Pennsylvania, a public database was created with interview links, keywords, and other metadata to aid scholars.[77] The second database is the Creating

[74] Rajinder Dudrah and Jigna Desai, *The Bollywood Reader* (Berkshire, 2008), 9.

[75] Someswar Bhowmik, "From Coercion to Power Relations: Film Censorship in Post-Colonial India," *Economic and Political Weekly* 38, no. 30 (2003): 3148–3152.

[76] Ganti, *Bollywood,* 56–72; Soumya Rajan, Priya Ganesh, and Nandini Mehra, "Human Capital: The Key to the Longevity of a Family Business," *NHRD Network Journal* 13, no. 1 (2020): 12–24.

[77] *Bollywood and Beyond: Analyzing the Indian Film Industry through Irfan's Guftagoo Interviews* (database), eds. Nitin Rao and Sudev Sheth, University of Pennsylvania, 2020,

Emerging Markets project (hereafter CEM) established at the Harvard Business School. This project involves lengthy interviews by Harvard faculty with highly impactful leaders or former leaders of for-profit businesses based in emerging markets. The interviewees are required to have had at least three decades of experience in their respective industries. A total of 150 interviews are available as of March 1, 2021, including 38 interviews with individuals based in India.[78] A sub-set of these interviews, with prominent Indian media figures, was used in this study. These interviews provide personal testimony on how Bollywood worked. There is plentiful evidence confirming the role of stars. "Bollywood stars know that they are commodities. They themselves are being sold," the veteran actor Naseeruddin Shah observed. He added, "they are not a medium for reaching a message to the audience. They are themselves the product."[79]

An important part of the process of an actor being commodified pertains to skin color. This also had implications for casting. The noted Bollywood actor Nandita Das, active in the industry from 1989, recalled her own experiences as a darker-skinned actor. "My parents never made me feel bad about my skin color, and now I see around the country young girls lose their confidence due to this. I myself faced this, with uncles and those in the extended family, and later in the film industry, saying you could certainly play a slum dweller or a village girl, but if playing an urban upper-middle class or educated girl, the director or makeup artist would come and say 'I know you don't like wearing makeup, but could you lighten your skin a little with makeup, since this role is that of an educated person.'"[80] There are many similar personal testimonies from other darker-skinned Bollywood actresses, similar instances in which they were denied the opportunity to play heroines and faced personal abuse because of their skin color.[81]

Interviews with actors provide personal testimony about the gendered portrayal of women, and more importantly explain in a more nuanced fashion how such stereotypes became embedded in Bollywood. As was the case with Hollywood, the issue facing actresses in Bollywood was not a lack of female roles, but rather that the majority of these roles

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https://web.sas.upenn.edu/bollywood-and-beyond/. All quotations from this database have been translated from Hindi and Urdu by Sudev Sheth.

[78] *Creating Emerging Markets*, Harvard Business School, https://www.hbs.edu/creating-emerging-markets/Pages/default.aspx.

[79] Interview with Naseeruddin Shah, interviewed by S. Mohammad Irfan, October 17, 2018, Guftagoo, Rajya Sabha Television (RSTV), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3-4VjMgnnRQ.

[80] Interview with Nandita Das, interviewed by S. Mohammad Irfan, February 4, 2014, Guftagoo, RSTV, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fOzJaUAQCeE.

[81] Robert Fornter and P. Mark Fackler, *World Media Ethics: Cases and Commentary* (Hoboken, 2017), 86–88.

were highly stereotyped, portraying women as lacking significant agency. In the words of Shabani Azmi,

> A lot of [films] were being made with women protagonists. . . but these were in stereotypical [roles]. So, you have the sacrificing mother, you have the forgiving wife, you have the understanding sister. All of it was within the concept of what traditional society actually wanted. And I think women were the worst sufferers in that because if I tell you the name of a film in the 1960s, for instance, which was very popular, which was Main Chup Rahoongi, translated [it] is "I will remain silent"—remaining silent being considered a virtue for women.[82]

However, there were worse things than stereotyping. Physical violence against women was often portrayed casually. There is ample evidence that Bollywood glamorized violence and degraded and humiliated women through images.[83] Azmi recalled:

> Violence against women was portrayed in a way which was absolutely shameful. . . and within the mainstream cinema where just the act, for instance, of a rape was so prolonged that it would become almost vicarious. The business of cinema is the business of images, and how the camera lingers over the female body decides whether it is commodifying or whether it is sensitizing. So, rape scenes—for instance, there was this villain who would just go on for about five minutes and it was totally disgusting and blood curdling.[84]

Another noted Bollywood actor Jaya Bachchan, active in the industry from 1963, recalled in her interview how she was expected to be stripped naked and sexually assaulted in a film called *Ek Nazar* (1972). Despite her protests, her co-star coaxed her to shoot the scene of gross transgression that was later included in the film.[85]

Although many female actors evidently objected to what they were expected to do on screen, there were many obstacles to changing how gender was portrayed in Bollywood. Like Hollywood, the industry structure was male dominated and practically guaranteed to replicate the male gaze issue. "[India] is largely a patriarchal society, and the industry is completely male-dominated," Nandita Das noted in her Guftagoo interview. "There are jobs like editing, music composing, music

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[82] Interview with Shabana Azmi.

[83] Amit Rai, *Untimely Bollywood: Globalization and India's New Media Assemblage* (Durham, 2009), 123; Volga, "To Censor or Not to Censor: Film and Public Policy," *Economic and Political Weekly* 35, no. 18 (2000): WS18-WS20.

[84] Interview with Shabana Azmi.

[85] Interview with Jaya Bachchan, Interviewed by S. Mohammad Irfan, April 24, 2014, Guftagoo, RSTV, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y2FIqZJIBFY. The co-star was the prominent actor Amitabh Bachan, whom Bachchan later married.

direction, and thousands of other jobs that women can do apart from acting. But, we never hear of those because there are hardly women in the industry."[86] As often in Hollywood, powerful male directors and actors engaged in affairs with female actors. Raj Kapoor, for example, earned a reputation as a serial adulterer.[87]

There could also be violence if actors challenged gender norms. Azmi recalled how her playing the role as a lesbian in the film *Fire* (1996), some years after the era of liberalization had begun, provoked violent outbursts.

> I felt it was very important that I acted in that film, because it is a film about a lesbian relationship between two sisters-in-law and before that nothing of that kind had been attempted in Hindi cinema at all, in Indian cinema. Now when the film gets released there is one section [of the public] that really loves the film and says this is a really bold film to do. On the other hand there is a group of people that says that these are antinational people, they are anti-Hindu people, and they are doing this to desecrate Indian culture. A political party, [the]right-wing Shiv Sena, decides that they [will] make hay while the sun shines. [They] pulled the film out of the theaters, start[ed] breaking furniture.[88]

By the time of *Fire*, the level of physical violence against women in Bollywood was on the decline, but gender stereotyping was not. The cabaret dancing sequences of former years had evolved into the phenomenon of the "item song." The item woman was tall, beautiful, toned, and highly commodified. She moved in sexually suggestive ways on screen and had little to do with the main plot of the film.[89] Reflecting on the phenomenon of the item song, Azmi noted, "what is actually happening is that the way the camera moves on the women's body in fragmented images of a heaving bosom, a shaking navel, a swiveling hip, the woman is robbed of all autonomy and becomes an object of the male gaze. . . You have these horrible lyrics where a woman is actually commodifying herself by saying that, you know, 'I am a tandoori chicken and why don't you just swallow me along with a glass of alcohol.'"[90]

As previously discussed, it is easier to demonstrate that Bollywood portrayed women as "tandoori chicken," and light skin people as elite,

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[86] Interview with Nandita Das.

[87] Kapoor's son Rishi discusses his father's sexual habits at length in Rishi Kapoor, *Khullam Khulla: Rishi Kapoor Uncensored* (New York, 2017).

[88] Interview with Shabana Azmi.

[89] Big song-and-dance numbers performed by the female actresses have existed since the start of Bollywood. See Amita Nijhawan, "Excusing the Female Dancer: Tradition and Transgression in Bollywood Dancing," *South Asian Popular Culture* 7, no. 2 (2009): 99–112.

[90] Interview with Shabana Azmi.

than to prove that film content substantially emboldened pre-existing gender and skin color norms. Indeed, even within the industry opinions differ widely on the matter. In his *Guftagoo* conversation, the noted Bollywood lyricist and scriptwriter Javed Akhtar, active in the industry after 1971, took a diametrically opposed view from Azmi.

> Who is a protagonist, and how is that image made? The image reflects a society's ambitions, dreams, and moral values. When your ambitions and moral values shift, so does the nature of the protagonist. People do not derive values from film, it is the other way around. Over time as society changes, the hero image – and films themselves – undergo transformation. Today, if you have any complaints against movies and their content, you will not be able to rectify it by simply tweaking them. You will have to fix the very society which is being reflected in cinema first. Then the films will surely follow.[91]

The debate whether to "fix" society or "fix" cinema, which was also a recurrent topic in debates about content in Hollywood, has evident legitimacy. However, the following section will discuss the opinions of actors and directors outside mainstream Bollywood, who saw the cinema as part of the problem rather than part of a solution. In support of their critical views, it is significant that cinema occupied a uniquely important position in the media during the post-Independence decades. The first television broadcast in India was only in 1959. As late as 1975, only seven cities had television service, which was limited to a single state-owned channel, Doordarshan. Doordarshan introduced a second channel in 1984. In 1985, India ranked at the bottom of the world's television markets with only 10 million TV receivers compared to 190 million in the United States.[92] Private television channels were only permitted in the early 1990s. Cinema, then, was the major form of entertainment throughout this period. As a result, Bollywood exercised a significant influence on the nature of gender relations, including male perceptions of female bodies and idealized love, and reinforced ideas of the archetypal beautiful person as light skinned.[93]

It is possible to build a more specific case on the negative impact of Bollywood during the post-Independence decades. The widespread violence against women portrayed in Bollywood cinema took place in a

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[91] Interview with Javed Akhtar, Interviewed by S. Mohammad Irfan, November 30, 2013, Guftagoo, RSTV, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aXMfu5yMy2A. Akhtar's wife is Shabana Azmi.

[92] Colin Hoskins, Stuart McFadyen, and Adam Finn, *Global Television and Film: An Introduction to the Economics of the Business* (Oxford, 1997), 38.

[93] Rachel Dwyer, "Bollywood's India: Hindi Cinema as a Guide to Modern India," *Asian Affairs* 41, no. 3 (2010): 381–398; Kabita Chakraborty, *Young Muslim Women in India: Bollywood, Identity and Changing Youth Culture* (London, 2015).

society in which sexual violence and the legal response to it was a long-standing problem. Colonial laws placed a heavy burden on women seeking judicial remedy in courts. These laws were carried over into independent India, and continued to make rape convictions difficult. The issue was highlighted in the Mathura case in March 1972, when a sixteen-year-old tribal girl was repeatedly raped and molested by police in their station in Maharashtra. When the case came to trial two years later, the judge described Mathura as a "loose woman" who must have consented in the first place. When the case ultimately came before India's Supreme Court, it ruled that the girl's failure to sound an alarm during the alleged rape, along with the absence of injuries, constituted evidence of consent. The case caused an outpouring of protests and resulted in some changes in the law, however the problem persisted over the following decades.[94] The repeated depiction of sexual assault in cinema was hardly conducive to combating the country's problem with sexual violence against women, the underreporting of rape, and the frequent disqualification of victim testimonies in court.[95]

In addition to espousing violence against women, Bollywood also became involved, towards the end of the period covered by this article, in the business of skin lightening creams. The two became closely related, as they reified women as the site of sexual fantasy. The iconic *Fair and Lovely* skin cream was launched by Unilever's Indian affiliate in 1978. It was advertised explicitly on the platform that fair skin provided women with greatly enhanced opportunities for romantic relationships and successful careers.[96] Bollywood actors became important celebrity figures used in advertising such creams, although the close connection between actors and skin lightening creams only scaled after liberalization began.[97] This was the start of a new era in Bollywood, beyond the scope of this article, in which cinema became deeply integrated with the sale of ancillaries, especially fashion.[98]

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[94] There was nearly a 700 percent increase in rape between 1971 and 2006, making rape India's fastest growing crime over that period. In 2008, India ranked third in the world in terms of the number of registered rape cases. Elizabeth Kolsky, "The Body Evidencing the Crime: Rape on Trial in Colonial India, 1860–1947," *Gender & History* 22, no. 1 (2010): 124–5.

[95] Nira Gupta-Cassale, "Bearing Witness: Rape, Female Resistance, Male Authority and the Problems of Gender Representation in Popular Indian Cinema," *Indian Journal of Gender Studies* 7, no. 2 (2000): 231–248; Pratiksha Baxi, "Justice is a Secret: Compromise in Rape Trials," *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 44, no. 3 (2010): 207–233.

[96] Jones, *Renewing Unilever*, 174; Aneel Karnani, "Doing Well by Doing Good - Case Study: 'Fair & Lovely' Whitening Cream," *Strategic Management Journal* 28, no. 13 (2007): 1351–1357; Jha and Adelman, "Looking for love."

[97] Shehzad Nadeem, "Fair and Anxious: On Mimicry and Skin-lightening in India," *Social Identities* 20, no. 2–3 (2014): 224–238.

[98] Rajadhyaksha, *Indian Cinema,* 62–68.

Post-Independence Bollywood, then, inherited a society in which gender norms and attitudes to skin color had been conditioned by history. However, as an industry that tended to avoid complexity, and even the recruitment of professional actors, it collectively chose to accept conventional norms rather than to contest them. In contrast to the impact of the Hays Code on Hollywood, this was not so much imposed on the industry, but it was rather the product of a desire to sell tickets to people with low discretionary incomes. Meanwhile, the dominance of Punjabi business families as leading producers, directors, and actors perpetuated preferences for lighter skin. Women in Bollywood movies in this period were almost a parody of the male gaze problem, and there was a more sinister aspect. The frequent use of violence against women occurred in a society in which there was widespread sexual violence against women, as evidenced by the underreporting of rape and the law's laxity towards offenders.[99] The repeated use of the same format drove home the "sense making" about gender and skin color, as did the dominance of the industry by a small group of family dynasties, which meant that values were transmitted across generations, rather than being contested by newcomers. Bollywood certainly emboldened pre-existing prejudices and behavior, and probably contributed significantly to the problem of violence against women.

The Different Paths of Parallel and Tamil Cinemas

The Bollywood paradigm has been so prominent for understanding Indian cinema that it has often overshadowed both the heterogeneity of parallel Hindi cinema, and regional cinema produced in other parts of the country.[100] There were parallel and regional cinemas that addressed different audience segments that sometimes, but not always, overlapped with mainstream Bollywood moviegoers. In other words, the categories of "parallel" and "regional" are not absolute, but they do provide an analytic differentiation of the Indian cinema industry as a patchwork quilt composed of different film spheres. This section examines in particular how Indian cinemas other than Bollywood treated gender and skin color.

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[99] The legal laxity towards sexual assault was seriously challenged only after the outrageous 2012 Nirbhaya rape case. The Penal Code of India was amended to widen the definition of rape to include non-penetrative sex, and even to sentence minors to capital punishment. See, *The Criminal Law Amendment Act of 2013, Section 375 on "Rape" and Section 376 on "Punishment for Rape"* (New Delhi, 2013).

[100] Sara Dickey and Rajinder Dudrah, eds., *South Asian Cinemas: Widening the Lens* (London, 2018). The neglect of alternative and regional cinemas is certainly not true of the works of Rajadhyaksha. On regional cinema, see for example Rajadhyaksha, *Indian Cinema*, 73–83.

The first category considered here is parallel cinema. Films in this category were usually in Hindi, although major blockbusters in other languages sometimes fell under this category. Parallel cinema was driven by a number of visionary filmmakers and actors who sought to contest restrictive societal norms, including concerning gender and ethnicity, rather than play to them.

The origins of parallel cinema have often been traced back to the iconic postwar film producer Satyajit Ray, although he can also be regarded as an example of regional cinema given that his films were distinctly Bengali in language, style, form, and location.[101] Ray and others made films that shifted attention from romance and middle-class anxiety towards films straddling the rural-urban divide, with coming of age films, films about religious superstition, and later detective films and historical dramas. An example was *Mahanagar* or "The Big City" (1963) in which the filmmaker narrated the domestic conflict a young woman faced with her in-laws, children, and husband after joining the workforce selling sewing machines door-to-door to support her unemployed husband and the family. Ray stands out as a male director for his strong female characters, the way in which he explored their complexities, and for the absence of patriarchic assumptions in his films.[102]

Ray's contemporaries in parallel cinema included Mrinal Sen, who directed films primarily in Bengali and Hindi. Sen was an ardent Marxist, who, in the final interview before he died, said, "I've tried to connect cinema to my life. I'm a social agent, I'm a social being. I've been trying to say something about the society to which I belong. This is possible only when I have done something about it."[103]

Building on these earlier antecedents, an official "art cinema" developed in India, where films were funded partly though state subsidies and through promotion at international film festivals. The director and screenwriter Shyam Benegal became an important force for using film as a medium for shaping social views. Benegal himself made an unconventional entry into the cinema industry, working as a writer and film maker in the advertising industry in Mumbai before moving to a major advertising distribution company called Blaze, whose founders independently financed his first films, including *Ankur*, released in 1974.[104]

[101] Ashish, *Indian Cinema*, 65–70; Bhaskar Sarkar, *Mourning the Nation: Indian Cinema in the Wake of Partition* (Durham, 2009): 148.
[102] Darius Cooper, *The Cinema of Satyajit Ray: Between Tradition and Modernity* (Cambridge, 2000): 75–133.
[103] Interview with Mrinal Sen, Interviewed by S. Mohammad Irfan, August 20, 2017, Guftagoo, RSTV, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2PArG_WGHuI.
[104] Ashish, *Indian Cinema*, 92.

Benegal explicitly sought to confront stereotypes, especially concerning gender. He observed:

> We have always felt, traditionally speaking, that the woman's place is in her home. Her role in society is either as a daughter, wife, or mother. Her kingdom is the home. Her job is to be a dutiful daughter, a faithful wife, a giving mother. This is her job, and if she fulfils that role, she is as good as goddess. This is the traditional view. Now, in a situation like this, how do you achieve equality? One of the things I did in my films was to challenge that notion from the very beginning. . . The traditional view has to go, because otherwise there will be no equality.[105]

Benegal's films addressed issues such as gang-rape, corrupt politicians, rural empowerment, women's exploitation, children's themes, interracial love, prostitution, and the unique plight of Muslim women in India.[106] *Ankur*, for example, had a heroine who was married to someone who was both deaf and mute, and had an affair and got pregnant with the landlord's son. He recruited the young Shabana Azmi to play the heroine. Azmi later recalled in her CEM interview that people thought that it was a bad career choice because the heroine would have been portrayed in traditional cinema "as a villain and somebody who broke the moral ethical code."[107]

Azmi was not the only actor promoted by Benegal. Over the years, he introduced actors like Naseeruddin Shah, Om Puri, Kulbhushan Kharbanda and Amrish Puri, many of whom were trained at FTII or the NSD. Not surprisingly, Benegal did not indulge fair skin preferences. He discovered the darker-skinned Smita Patil, a prominent speaker about women's issues who became acclaimed as an actor during her tragically brief career. He also introduced other darker-skinned women like Deepti Naval, Zarina Wahab, and Pallavi Joshi who were all active in parallel cinema from the 1970s. These and other actors built their careers acting in roles that challenged conventional Bollywood norms rather than conforming to them. Indeed, after her appearance in *Ankur*, Azmi continued to play controversial roles. "Art should be used as an instrument for social change," she noted, "and I think film is a very important medium through which we can bring about changes, particularly in the characterization of women."[108]

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[105] Interview with Shyam Benegal, interviewed by Rohit Deshpande, Mumbai, India, November 16, 2017, CEM (hereafter Interview with Shyam Benegal).

[106] Robert Cross, "Shyam Benegal's Ankur and the Nehruvian Woman," *Doshisha Studies in Language and Culture* 13, no. 2 (2010): 89–115.

[107] Interview with Shabana Azmi.

[108] Interview with Shabana Azmi.

Although their budgets and outputs were more modest than mainstream Bollywood, "art films" received disproportionate interest because they appealed to film critics, educated classes, and discerning international audiences. This created a chasm between the two industries, where actors and directors who were involved in "art films" were often typecast and their opportunities in mainstream Bollywood were limited. It seems highly unlikely that parallel cinema in this period could have exercised any influence beyond urban elites in India. There was a further challenge when television service began to spread in the 1980s. "Then television came," Benegal noted wistfully in his interview. "And the moment television came, it all collapsed, because people didn't have to go out to see films. They sat at home, they could get themselves entertained with anything that came on television."[109]

Regional cinema was a second category of films beyond Bollywood. While these might run alongside Bollywood films in their absolute number of viewers, they were specifically geared to audiences at the state level, especially because these films were in languages that were not mutually intelligible across the vast subcontinent. In 2001, only 40 percent of the India's population identified Hindi as their mother tongue.[110] Even in the areas where the language was spoken widely, such as across much of northern India, dialects varied to such a degree that mutual comprehension and conversation was difficult. In southern India, encompassing the states of Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and Telangana, regional languages had no affinity to northern Indian vernaculars.[111]

The first Tamil and Bengali talkie films were released in 1931, and films in other languages soon followed. As these regional industries developed, small budgets and the need to cater along specific linguistic lines prompted filmmakers to develop aesthetics for highly segmented markets. In some ways, however, these film producers also had more latitude compared to the fledgling Bollywood industry, as directors could shape regional preferences by adapting existing popular genres such as mythologies, regional folk stories, and even stage theater to suit limited audiences.[112]

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[109] Interview with Shyam Benegal.

[110] Office of the Registrar General and Census Commissioner, India, "Abstract of Speakers' Strength of Languages and Mother Tongues – 2001," archived 29 Oct. 2013, accessed 26 May 2020, https://www.censusindia.gov.in/census_data_2001/census_data_online/language/statement1.aspx.

[111] For example, see Selvaraj Velayutham, *Tamil Cinema: The Cultural Politics of India's Other Film Industry* (London, 2008); S. V. Srinivas, *Megastar: Chiranjeevi and Telugu Cinema after NT Rama Rao* (Oxford, 2009).

[112] Jenson Joseph, "Regional Cinema or Products of Bricolage? An Introduction to Malayalam Studio Film of the Early 1950s," *BioScope: South Asian Screen Studies* 4, no. 1 (2013): 31–49.

Some contemporary observers believed that the constraints of regional cinema gave them a "greater sense of reality and cultural integrity."[113] The themes explored in early regional cinemas often included the evils of caste, anxieties about premarital love, widow remarriage, self-desire versus collective good, religion and secularism, and after 1947, ideas of democracy oriented towards nation building.[114] Moreover, while mainstream Bollywood cinema cultivated characters with recognizable generic characteristics—such as being broadly urban or rural, rich or poor, upper or lower caste—regional cinema could present characters with greater nuance, with traits suggestive of a particular identity and locality, and therefore with more complexity. A closer look at how the Tamil film industry, which was based in Chennai (formerly Madras), developed shows some of this complexity, and demonstrates how regional cinema took its own path on issues of gender and skin color.

During the postwar decades, Tamil cinema was a prolific producer of films. Between 1984 and 1988 a total of 843 Hindi language films and 811 Tamil language films were produced, and in two of those years, more Tamil films were produced than Hindi films.[115] However, while Bollywood lacked strong political connections, and indeed earned the skepticism of the ruling Congress Party, Tamil cinema became entwined with the non-Brahmin movement and Dravidian nationalism. "Brahmin" refers to upper caste Hindu elites, while "Dravidian" refers to proponents of anti-Hindi and Tamil-language chauvinism. Both movements dated back to the early twentieth century, when resentment grew in the south of India at the dominance of Brahmins in colonial government jobs. The Tamil non-Brahmins began building a narrative that equated the powerful Brahmins with the Aryan civilization of northern India, which became associated with caste and inequality, while the non-Brahman Dravidian past was portrayed as egalitarian and democratic. These years saw a surge of interest in ancient Tamil classical books, which apparently supported this interpretation of history.[116]

Politics became intertwined with regional cinema soon after Independence with the founding of the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam

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[113] Chidananda Das Gupta, "Indian Cinema Today," *Film Quarterly* 22, no. 4 (1969): 31.

[114] Scholarship on regional cinema remains limited. Ratnakar Tripathy, "Bhojpuri Cinema: Regional Resonances in the Hindi Heartland," *South Asian Popular Culture* 5, no. 2 (2007): 145–165; Veronique Benei, "Globalization and Regional(ist) Cinema in Western India: Public Culture, Private Media, and the Reproduction of a Hindu National(ist) Hero, 1930s–2000s," *South Asian Popular Culture* 6, no. 2 (2008): 83–108; Ratheesh Radhakrishnan, "Thiruvithamkoor, Malabar, Kerala: Speculations on the Regions in 'Regional Cinema'," *BioScope: South Asian Screen Studies* 6, no. 2 (2015): 126–144.

[115] Pendakur, "India," 231.

[116] Nambi Arooran, *Tamil Renaissance and Dravidian Nationalism, 1905–1944* (Madurai, 1980).

(DMK) party in 1949. The DMK was a Dravidian party that advocated principles of social justice, anti-caste discrimination, and Tamil linguistic nationalism.[117] While Tamil films were initially largely mythology-based, the DMK began using cinema to launch film stars, progressive story lines, and regional nationalism.[118] Tamil cinema from the 1950s, one study suggested, "actively contested what they viewed as an exclusionary north Indian construction of nationhood."[119]

An early film, *Parasakthi* (1952), was scripted by M. Karunanidhi, a leader of the DMK, and a future chief minister of Tamil Nadu, a major state in southern India. The film focused on the trials and tribulations of a middle-class Tamil family's fall to poverty, especially the female lead, Kalyani, who was orphaned, widowed and impoverished. Reduced to selling rice cakes on the streets, Kalyani is a strong female protagonist who works as hard as her male colleagues. Through narrative, the film critiques the alleged sorry state of the Congress Party's policies.[120]

Despite such progressive themes in early films, Tamil cinema did not really contest gender stereotypes. In *Parasakthi*, the protagonist struggled to maintain her chastity throughout the film, and she was only safe once her brothers returned to town and protected her from the public. According to one scholar of Tamil culture, the film's critique operated largely within the realm of government and economy, not society.[121] Tamil movies were more political than their Bollywood counterparts were, and were more socially progressive, but they were not far ahead in breaking gender norms.

Indeed, one of the longer-term consequences of DMK-inspired films was a progressive degradation of women in Tamil cinema. At the outset, one study suggested that DMK films treated women as a "subset within the larger category of the downtrodden."[122] By the 1960s, however, the DMK had identified Bollywood-style escapism as the primary way to gain viewership. The chief strategy was through portraying the typical male hero as the savior of women.[123] Typically, these male heroes were

[117] For an overview of the non-Brahmin movement, see M.S.S. Pandian, *Brahmin and Non-Brahmin: Genealogies of the Tamil Political Present* (New Delhi, 2007).

[118] Robert Hardgrave, "Politics and the Film in Tamilnadu: The Stars and the DMK," *Asian Survey* 13, no. 3 (1973): 288–305; Rajadhyaksha, *Indian Cinema*, 74–75.

[119] Ravi Vasudevan, "Dislocations: The Cinematic Imagining of a New Society in 1950s India," *Oxford Literary Review* 16, no. 1–2 (1994): 93–124.

[120] M. S. S. Pandian, "Parasakthi: Life and times of a DMK film," *Economic and Political Weekly* 26, no. 11–12 (1991): 759–770.

[121] C. S. Lakshmi, "Seduction, Speeches and Lullaby: Gender and Cultural Identity in a Tamil Film," *Economic and Political Weekly* 30, no. 6 (1995): 309–311.

[122] C. S. Lakshmi, "A Good Woman, A Very Good Woman: Tamil Cinema's Women," in *Tamil Cinema: The Cultural Politics of India's Other Film Industry,* ed. Selvaraj Velayutham (London, 2008), 16–28.

[123] Lakshmi, "A Good Woman," 33.

cast with female actors who were much younger than them. In films like *Rickshakaran* (1971), *Urimaikkural* (1974) and *Dr Siva* (1975), these young female actors were primarily employed as vehicles to depict the virility of the lead actors—and by extension, those in the audience.

Sometimes, as in Bollywood, sex was more explicitly conveyed through the cabaret dancer cast opposite to the female heroine.[124] As norms in Bollywood and Tamil cinema continued to converge, the latter started to feature scenes of sexual assault. The ideal Tamil woman transitioned, in the words of one film historian, from a "traditional, sari-clad, docile protagonist" to a "modern, scantily clad, mischievous woman, indicative of a pleasure object."[125]

As striking was the sudden appearance of light-skinned female actors in the Tamil film industry, which had previously highlighted the variety of skin tones of the region. From the 1990s, light skinned actors from Mumbai and other parts of the country were brought into the industry, their voices dubbed into Tamil. The industry also started casting lighter-skinned female Tamil actors.[126] International beauty pageant winners who were invariably lighter-skinned, like Aishwarya Rai, also entered the Tamil industry.[127] It would seem that regional cinemas as a whole began to converge with Bollywood norms after liberalization began in 1991. Bengali regional cinema, for example, before the 1990s was broadly not characterized by cheap thrills, scenes degrading women, and the propagation of gender and ethnic stereotypes, but thereafter, convergence with Bollywood norms became evident.[128]

Bollywood's stereotypical treatment of women and its preference for light skin color was not, then, fully representative of Indian cinema between 1947 and 1991. The directors and actors in parallel cinema directly contested restrictive norms, and emphasized their negative social impact. They had no doubt that mainstream cinema was emboldening what they considered negative norms in Indian society. Meanwhile regional cinemas had their own narratives that did not always align with Bollywood. Yet Bollywood's setting of norms, and its success among Indian audiences left parallel cinema to court a more international audience. Indeed, parallel cinema films frequently won international prizes. The importance of language meant that regional cinemas were to some

[124] Lakshmi, "A Good Woman," 34.

[125] Sathiavathi Chinniah, "The Tamil Film Heroine: From a Passive Subject to a Pleasurable Object" in *Tamil Cinema,* ed., Selvaraj Velayutham, 29–43.

[126] Neeraja Ramesh, "How Cinema Stoked Tamil Nadu's Fair Obsession," *Times of India*, 22 July 2020.

[127] Chinniah, "The Tamil Film Heroine," 37.

[128] Srimati Mukherjee, *Women and Resistance in Contemporary Bengali Cinema: A Freedom Incomplete* (London, 2016); Sharmistha Gooptu, *Bengali Cinema: 'An Other Nation'* (London, 2010).

extent better placed to hold their audiences and offer alternative views, yet the success of Bollywood ultimately helped erode regional producers' willingness to do so. The appearance and eventual dominance of fair-skinned female actors in Tamil cinema was indicative of the forces of convergence let loose in the era of economic liberalization.

Conclusion

During the second half of the twentieth century, Bollywood and its American twin Hollywood were the world's largest producers of movies. It is a sad commentary, therefore, on the societal responsibility of the mass entertainment industry that both mainstream cinemas privileged paler skin over darker skin, and both cinemas presented women in stereotypical ways, lacking agency. In both cases, directors and many others behind the camera were paler skinned men. Although the screen was recognized as having the capacity to shape societal perceptions, the entertainment business in both Bollywood and Hollywood largely focused on confirming, and probably emboldening, inequitable prejudices. This article has confirmed through interviews with past actors and producers in Bollywood the existence and persistence of such patriarchal narratives and preferences for light skin color during the post-Independence decades.

Bollywood reflected views on skin color and gender long prevalent in Indian society, but this article has argued that serendipitous developments in the organization of the industry, as well as its regulation, helped shaped what happened on screen. The entry and dominance of Punjabi directors and actors, such as Raj Kapoor and his family, facilitated lighter skin tones becoming a prominent characteristic of stars. By constraining access to legal avenues of finance to cinema, and through censorship, the Indian government incentivized Bollywood directors to adapt simplified story lines that appealed to generic urban audiences, rather than contesting widely accepted views. Like Hollywood, but unlike most cinemas in the emerging world, as well as regional cinemas within India, there was no state subsidy or protection that might have encouraged norm-breaking experimentation.

This article has adapted the narratives and sense-making approach employed in Hansen and Magnussen's study of Hollywood and perceptions of American business to the case of India. It has argued that what was shown on screens in India during the post-Independence decades was more than just a reflection of societal views: it emboldened prejudicial societal attitudes on gender and skin color. Given the challenges of demonstrating impact, this conclusion has to be regarded as tentative, but the context in which Bollywood movies were shown

makes it more robust than attempts to assess media influence in developed countries. Audiences exposed to cinema were provided a consistent diet over decades that showed pale skin as elite, women in highly stereotyped roles, and violence against women as a regular occurrence. The reputation of the format over generations by the small groups of families that dominated the industry had a strong reinforcing effect on societal attitudes to gender and skin color in the new nation.

It was left to parallel, and to some extent regional, cinemas in India to contest such stereotypes. Producers and actors in parallel cinema articulated both a strong belief that Bollywood cinema was replicating restrictive social norms and that cinema had a responsibility to contest stereotypes. However, their audience was highly constrained. Regional cinemas, which often had support from state governments, had different agendas than Bollywood. The article has examined the case of Tamil cinema, which became entwined with Dravidian nationalism. However, over time, the roles of women became more restrictive, and by the end of the period covered here, light-skinned female actors had begun to populate Tamil screens. Over time, Bollywood also exercised an isomorphic influence on other cinemas in the country, especially after policy liberalization from 1991.

This article has offered methodological innovation by making extensive use of interviews with producers and actors captured in two publicly available databases. It has demonstrated how such material can bring both testimony and nuance to topics that, especially in the case of skin color, are often hard to document from other sources. The authors believe that the use of such material has applicability that is more general. In studying the last half century at least, business historians must harness such alternative sources of data or risk marginalizing huge informal business sectors of many emerging economies where formal archival records are not kept, or if they are, are not accessible to external researchers. This void is particularly serious in an industry such cinema, which can have such a profound impact on social attitudes across many emerging markets, and not just in India.

This study ends in 1991, and much changed subsequently. Bollywood has opened to more global influence. New media technologies have facilitated the rapid diffusion of Bollywood movies to the Indian diaspora and beyond. In 2000, the Indian government finally reclassified cinema as a legitimate industry, enabling Bollywood to raise funds externally. Post-2000s, as regulations relaxed and economic growth intensified, films started diversifying storylines and themes. However, Bollywood is still highly influenced by film scions and nepotistic family networks. Gender stereotyping continues as a noteworthy feature of films, while bias towards light skin has only intensified as the silver

screen has converged with the multi-billion-dollar skin lightening industry.[129]

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[129] "Does Indian cinema have a problem with skin colour?" *BBC World News,* 2 Jan. 2020, https://www.bbc.com/news/av/entertainment-arts-50866537/does-indian-cinema-have-a-problem-with-skin-colour.