FREEDOM SONGS

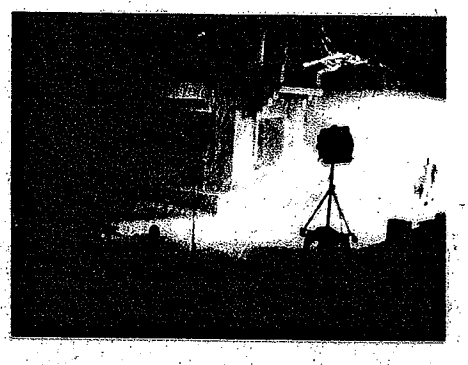
REDISCOVERING BOLLYWOOD'S GOLDEN AGE

BY JACOB LEVICH

It's zany, extravagant, kitschy. It's delightfully (or fabulously) cheesy (or tacky). It's mad, wild, wacky, over-the-top. Campy. Exotic. Transgressive. Liberating. Et cetera. Et cetera. Et cetera.

Film critics always reach into the same bag of breathless adjectives when trying to sell Bollywood movies to non-Indian audiences. If the words ring a bell, it's because you're hearing the vocabulary of cult-movie special pleading, equally handy for touting direct-to-video horror, chopsocky extravaganzas, and all-midget musical Westerns. It's the language of bad faith. We use it to hedge our bets when we're not confident that our particular obsessions will stand up to serious critical scrutiny. At the same time, we use it to praise ourselves: Aren't we special for loving this unconventional, demotic, multicultural stuff? And aren't we, well, ever so slightly *superior* to it?

Some years ago, when I found myself proselytizing for Hindi films in America, I too made use of this idiom, albeit with a certain queasiness about describing a great national cinema in terms cribbed from an Ed Wood user's manual. Then things changed. As Bollywood "went global" in the wake of GATT and WTO, quality suffered terribly. Seemingly overnight, the typical Hindi musical was no longer a giddy, densely layered celebration of difference like *Khuda Gawah* (*God Is My Witness*, 92) or *Mr. India* (87), but a blandly formulaic hymn to the values of the transnational bourgeoisie, like *Dil To Pagal Hai* (*The Heart Is Crazy*, 97) or *Dil Chahta Hai* (*The Heart Desires*, 01), slickly produced and seasoned with just enough worldbeat exoticism to interest the affluent global audience to which it was now addressed. For the first time, Bollywood was a bore, and the rare exceptions—Mani Ratnam's excoriating political psychodrama *Dil Se* (*From the Heart*, 98) or Khalid Mohamed's burnished cri de coeur *Fiza* (00)—merely proved the rule. In its long-awaited moment of international recognition (or, at any rate, its acknowledgment by high-profile pastiche specialists Baz Lurhmann and Andrew Lloyd Webber), Bollywood no longer seemed worth talking about.



But as global commerce closed a door, it opened a window. Over the past several years, a number of key historical titles—prime specimens of Bollywood's consensual Golden Age, roughly the Fifties—have become accessible on DVD. The result has been a revelation. No longer is it necessary to extrapolate from shoddy pirated videotapes, indifferently subtitled and brutally cropped, in order to experience Hindi commercial cinema in its prime. Viewed in a reasonable approximation of their original state, films like

All scenes from *Kaagaz Ke Phool*

Mehboob Khan's epic *Mother India* (57), V. Shantaram's eerily beautiful *Jhanak Jhanak Payal Baje* (*The Anklet's Jingle*, 55), or Guru Dutt's near-sublime *Kaagaz Ke Phool* (*Paper Flowers*, 59) can now be seen for what they are: landmarks of commercial world cinema, comparable with Hollywood's most enduring works.

And that's just for starters. Golden Age titles now readily available disclose a cinema of astonishing depth, variety, and maturity. If you're looking for indisputable auteurs, you'll find Guru Dutt's complete oeuvre, ranging from the delightful romantic comedy *Mr. & Mrs. 55* (55) to *Sahib, Bibi Aur Ghulam* (*Master, Wife, and Servant*, 62), an anatomization of sexual politics among Bengal's declining aristocracy. Alternately, you can now compare Bimal Roy's relatively well-known neorealist experiment,

In the opening sequence of Mehboob's *Mother India*, for example, the aged peasant Radha (Nargis) is summoned by Congress functionaries to bless a newly constructed irrigation canal—and, by implication, Nehru's Community Development and Rural Extension Program, a mid-Fifties Ford Foundation initiative aimed at undercutting Communism's appeal to the rural poor. But the final shot invites a very different reading:

Madhumati

as Radha watches, the water pouring from the sluice gates turns blood-red, evoking the deaths of three of her children, the crippling of her husband, and more generally the relentless physical misery that is the price of farming under feudalism. The sequence, like the film as a whole, dramatizes social ills far more deeply rooted than anything mere reformism would seem able to address. In similar fashion, Guru Dutt would challenge the nation to live up to its professed ideals in *Pyaasa* (*The Thirsty One*, 57), in which the poet-protagonist's tour of Calcutta's sordid brothel district is coupled with stinging lines from Sahir Ludhianvi's poem *Chakle* (*Brothels*): "Jinhen naaz hai Hind par woh kahaan hai?" ("Those who take pride in India, where are they?")

Relatively few films, to be sure, were overtly political. Entertaining the broadest possible audience was critical to box-office success, and the basic elements of the Bollywood *masala* film (music, dance, comedy, romance, and family melodrama) took shape during this period. Yet the freedom struggle was never far from consciousness—it was, in the words of film historian Gautam Kaul, "always in the air . . . as if the colour of life itself"—and so apparently superficial entertainments were nevertheless deeply informed by issues of social reconstruction and national identity. That's why the Dev Anand detective story *Kala Pani* (*Life Imprisonment*, 58) turns out to be a thinly disguised allegory that pits its enlightened hero against recalcitrant feudalism; it's also why the ghosts that haunt *Madhumati* force a confrontation with repressed memories of historical injustice (specifically, the violent dispossession of tribal peoples by emergent capitalism).

Aesthetic choices, too, were shaped by political idealism. Because Islamic forms of music, dance, and poetry are woven into the very fabric of Golden Age films, regardless of subject matter, an implicit but powerful anti-communalist stance is unmistakably assumed. Muslim characters, meanwhile, are never figured as The Other, let alone the enemy, but are treated as naturally integral to Indian life. Even the critique of *purdah*—the veiling and seclusion of women—in the "Muslim social" *Chaudhvin Ka Chand* (*Moon of the Fourteenth Night*, 60) is clearly meant to address an *Indian* problem; in other respects Indo-Islamic culture is embraced and celebrated, notably in the opening song "Yeh Lucknow Ki Sarzameen" ("This Land of Lucknow"). The normative effect at work here is arguably more powerful than overt propaganda ever could be.

Nor were social progress and artistic excellence regarded as incompatible goals. Nehruvian liberals and IPTA leftists alike perceived a pressing need to rebuild, even reinvent, a rich cultural heritage that had been devastated by colonialism and Partition. Elevating the artistic content of commercial cinema was therefore viewed as a political end in itself. On the occasion of Bollywood's Silver Jubilee festivities in 1956, the governor of the state of Bihar charged the industry with "diving into the very soul of India, [making a] deep study of the all-sided as well as varied culture of this great land [with] full utilization of colour and poetry that is profuse and inherent in the Indian scene, developing technical skill on all fronts and, above all, [with] high idealism."

What's striking about these remarks in retrospect is that they were addressed to *commercial* filmmakers. Within two decades, as the government-sponsored "Parallel Cinema" entered its brief period of prominence, only art-house directors (Ray, Benegal, Gopalakrishnan, et al.) would be asked to carry the torch for cultural uplift; Bollywood would effectively be written off as a fantasy machine for the poor. During the Fifties, however, the great rift between bourgeois art cinema and mass entertainment—kicked off by the international succès d'estime of *Pather Panchali* and the attendant cult of Satyajit Ray—still lay in the future. Neither filmmakers nor filmgoers acknowledged any bright line between high and low; critics had yet to advise them that mass culture needed to be meretricious in order to be successful.

Consequently, the best Golden Age filmmakers felt empowered to pursue the highest kind of artistic excellence in a wholly popular context. Elements of folk art, classical tradition, and Western modernity could be blended with a free hand; highflown verse could exist side-by-side with Hollywood-style narrative strategies. (Audiences didn't seem to mind: Karimuddin Asif's *Mughal-e-Azam*—scripted in a self-consciously poetic Urdu that's about as close to colloquial Hindi as Shakespeare is to the evening news—was a nationwide smash.) At times these films display a degree of aesthetic complexity that eluded even Hollywood in its heyday—a near-total integration of music, language, and visual meaning, painstakingly wrought and sensually stunning. This happens most obviously in "song picturizations" (musical sequences), where typically, as critic Partha Chatterjee has written, "were hidden the film's message: the director's true intentions."

For an especially vivid example, you could do no better than to screen the "Waqt ne kiya" song sequence from Guru Dutt's *Kaagaz Ke Phool*. Equally evocative of *The Bad and the Beautiful*, *Citizen Kane*, and P.C. Barua's seminal apotheosis of romantic masochism, *Devdas* (35), this tortured, semi-autographical melodrama tells the story of a film director destroyed by the conflicting imperatives of sex, family, and commerce. It is both an affecting romance and an intricate, exquisitely calculated palimpsest that alludes freely to Urdu and Bengali literature as well as Bombay cinematic history, industry lore, and real-life scandal. As in Hollywood's better movie-movies, the interplay of artifice and reality is a central preoccupation. Dutt himself plays director/alter ego Suresh, who is in the midst of filming a remake of *Devdas*; his leading lady, Shanti, is

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played by Dutt's real-life protégé Waheeda Rehman.

The "Waqt ne kiya" sequence unfolds as Shanti and Suresh find themselves alone on a shadowy soundstage after a day's shooting. (This set is rendered in prodigious depth and detail by cinematographer V.K. Murthy, who contrives the impression that a single brilliant shaft of natural light, slanting from ceiling to floor, is the sole source of illumination.) During five minutes of elegant montage, the characters neither speak nor touch. Yet it's made quite clear that Suresh and Shanti have committed themselves to an adulterous love affair, even as they apprehend its inevitably disastrous conclusion.

The scene is well remembered in India, primarily because the accompanying song has achieved a life of its own on radio and audiotape. Wedded to a solemn, haunting melody by S.D. Burman, the lyric (originally in the rich literary Urdu of poet Kaifi Azmi, here translated by Ziauddin Sardar) simultaneously summarizes the narrative and elaborates its themes:

Time has inflicted great cruelty on us.
You are no longer yourself;
I am no longer myself.
I can think of no place to go now;
I would walk away but no path is open to me.
What do I seek? The answer escapes me.
I cannot stop my heart from weaving a tapestry of dreams.

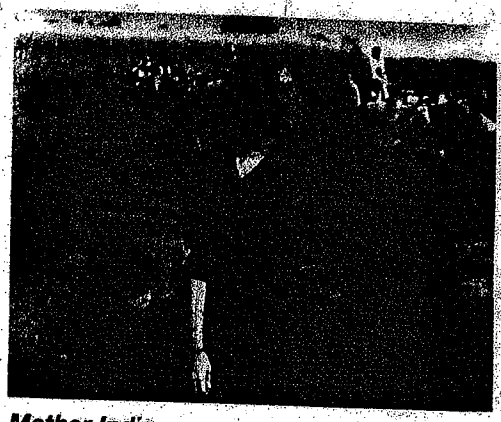
The words are resonant in themselves, but Dutt's handling of the sequence creates additional levels of meaning through a deliberate conjunction of lyric, sound, and image. In the scene's essential moment, Rehman's face is at first lit harshly from below, creating the startling effect of a mask or corpse. (Rest assured that no Bollywood movie queen, let alone the great Waheeda, was ever lit so unforgivingly before or since.) As she walks slowly toward a visibly agonized Dutt, her face slips briefly into darkness, and then re-emerges—utterly transformed. She is now seen under classic Hollywood glamour lighting, her beauty rehabilitated by the comforting illusion of depth. Owing to movie magic, she once again seems "real."

It's one of the most remarkable lighting effects I've ever seen, but there's more: it is synched, with consummate shrewdness, to the song; specifically, to the phrase "Hum rahe naa hum" ("I am no longer myself"). In this context, Azmi's line is heard not simply as a conventional expression of love's transformative power: rather, it is subsumed and transfigured by Dutt's critique of cinematic artifice and the dehumanizing effects of celebrity. At the same time, the lyric illuminates the inner lives of the characters, underscoring Suresh's fatal inability to distinguish between Shanti and the star image he has fashioned for her. Add to this a healthy dose of dramatic irony—Rehman and Dutt were widely rumored to be real-life lovers; the song is dubbed by his wife, Geeta Dutt—and you've got a moment that's almost infinitely suggestive.

This exemplary piece of Fifties filmmaking is what Indian cinephiles have in mind when they speak of a Golden Age. It would be easy to list more of them. But that would be missing the point. What's *really* remarkable about the era is not so much its towering peaks of artistic achievement, as the surprisingly high ground that surrounds them. Acknowledged masterworks aside, even the now-accessible run-of-the-mill A-pictures—from histrionic crime melos to assembly-line star vehicles—consistently exhibit qualities that were to become rare as hen's teeth in subsequent decades: literate dialogue, superior song lyrics, first-rate music and dance, intelligent cinematography, and a kind of star power that feels organic rather than mass-produced. And that, perhaps, is the best evidence for a plausible Golden Age—not an era when giants walked the earth, but a time when, due to complex but identifiable historical circumstances, typical mainstream films were made with great craftsmanship and animated by a spirit of idealism.

The language of idealism is of course profoundly unfashionable in this era of post-modern sophistication, but in Fifties India it helped to create a better kind of cinema. For a time, it may also have helped to preserve a better world. Golden Age films did not conquer self-interest or religious hatred, but they undoubtedly contributed to an ideological atmosphere in which the worst excesses of greed and communalism could be more easily denounced and resisted.

Look at it this way: In 1959 the earnest "social" *Dhool Ka Phool* (*Flowers of the Dust*, 59) appeared, a sentimental but intermittently powerful melodrama about the victimization of illegitimate children. Ironically, this was the directorial debut of talented hack Yash Chopra, a professional synthesizer of



Mother India

the zeitgeist who was later to give us the excruciating *Dil To Pagal Hai*. Yet, in keeping with the spirit of the times, *Dhool Ka Phool* featured an unforgettable anti-communalist lyric by Sahir Ludhianvi:

You shall be neither a Hindu nor a Muslim.
You are the child of a human being
A human being you shall be.

By contrast, Bollywood's biggest hit of 2001 was the cynical, openly communalist *Gadar: Ek Prem Katha* (*Rebellion: A Love Story*), which flattered BJP ideologues by painting Indian Muslims as a Fifth Column in league with Pakistan. As I write, the crypto-fascist fantasies of *Gadar* et al. are being played out in the cities and villages of Gujarat, where organized gangs of Hindu thugs are exacting a terrible blood price for the Godhra train massacre. In this case, we might like to pretend there's no connection between the import of popular culture and the realities of human experience. But we would be wrong.

Jacob Levich has previously written for FILM COMMENT *about Ritwik Ghatak,* Khuda Gawah (God Is My Witness), *and* Dead Man. *Several of the good ideas in this article are owed to Girish Srinivasan, who is not responsible for the bad ones. References to quoted material are available on email request to jlevich@earthlink.net.*

BULLETS OVER BOMBAY

EXPOSING THE UNDERWORLD OF HINDI CINEMA (BOTH ONSCREEN AND OFF) BY TRAVIS CRAWFORD

When most Western devotees of Asian popular cinema begin to develop the addiction, it often seems to be the crime thrillers that serve as their gateway drug. (Remember, kids—John Woo and Takeshi Kitano can only lead to stronger stuff.) Curiously, however, this phenomenon has yet to emerge with Indian crime films, even though Bollywood has a long tradition of gangster-themed thrillers and action movies, and the genre is every bit as pervasive in Bombay as it is in Tokyo and Hong Kong. Yet most Bollywood novices undoubtedly persist in identifying Hindi cinema with song-fueled romances and family melodramas, lamentably unaware that the real thrills can be found not with Aishwarya Rai twirling and lip-synching to Lata Mangeshkar vocals atop a Swiss mountain range but with Amitabh Bachchan brandishing a .32 and prowling the mean streets of Bombay.

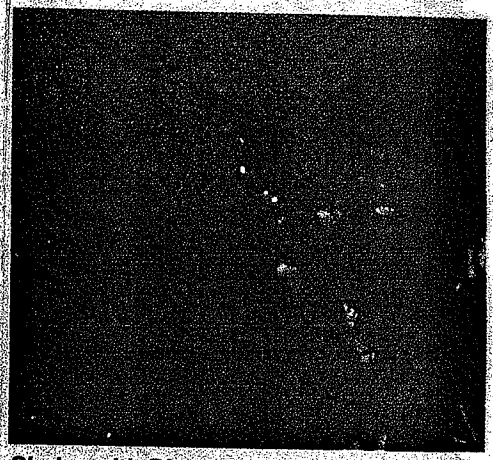
Hindi filmmakers with an interest in organized crime don't have far to turn for inspiration—underworld involvement in Bollywood production is far more

ubiquitous than similar movie/mob marriages with the Triads and the Yakuza. The demands of Bollywood film financing have contributed immeasurably to such a union. Until recently, the motion picture trade was not recognized as a legitimate "manufacturing industry" by the Indian government, which essentially prohibited banks and other institutions from lending funds to producers and bankrolling film shoots. Until the Sixties, this was not a great handicap, but as the studio system collapsed and star salaries began to skyrocket, budgets soared, and producers often relied on unsavory connections to obtain financing.

Organized crime infiltration in Bollywood was quietly tolerated as a necessary evil, but after the 1993 Bombay terrorist blasts triggered a rupture between Muslim ganglord Dawood Ibrahim and his former Hindu henchman Rajenda Nikralje (a.k.a. Chhota Rajan), the face of that city's underworld became more violent, and film industry involvement suffered greater scrutiny. Within a period of just a few years, the troubled marriage of Bollywood and the *bhais* (brothers, or dons) would become a media spectacle: film producers Mukesh Duggal, Gulshan Kumar, and Ajit Dewani were assassinated, producer Kewal Sharma was kidnapped and assaulted, many stars were interrogated regarding their underworld connections (actor Sanjay Dutt was indeed arrested and briefly incarcerated), several careers were ruined, and it was revealed that Chhota Shakeel (Ibrahim's number-one goon, and the alleged killer of Duggal) was the principal financier of the hit "surrogate-mother" melodrama *Chori Chori Chupke Chupke* (*Secretly Quietly*, 01). Welcome to the Hindi dream factory, ladies, and don't forget to pick up your Kevlar saris at the studio gates.

Bollywood crime films would grow more brutal just as underworld involvement with their production would intensify—the earliest examples of the genre, predictably genteel by comparison, established protagonist archetypes and standard plot lines that would often remain unchallenged over the decades. Gyan Mukherjee's *Kismet* (*Destiny*, 43) is the most significant early representation of the socially marginalized anti-hero, the key figure for the crime drama. Ashok Kumar's portrayal of a pickpocket estranged from his family helped make *Kismet* one of the longest-running titles in Indian film history, and his character would emerge as the central influence on many of the earliest crime-themed productions, including director Guru Dutt's debut *Baazi* (*Risk*, 51), in which debonair Dev Anand transformed his career through the first of many complex "outsider" characterizations.

Many of the Golden Age crime films would barely qualify for the categorization by contemporary standards. The minimal crime elements exist to underline the anti-hero's societal alienation and his desire for rehabilitation. Dev Anand appeared with Waheeda Rehman in the slick mystery *C.I.D.* (Raj Khosla, 56), in the noir role of a cop framed for murder, and



***Sholay* with Dharmendra (left) and Amitabh Bachchan**

teamed with her again in *Kala Bazar* (*Black Market*, 60), directed by brother Vijay Anand. Although the story begins by portraying the Anand character Raghu's immersion into the world of illicit movie-ticket scalping (this comparatively mild-mannered criminal enterprise would be treated lightly in later fare like Ramgopal Varma's *Rangeela* [95]), the focus soon shifts to a classic love triangle formula, which fuels Raghu's quest to expel his underworld past (the theme of spiritual redemption makes *Kala* a precursor to the Anand brothers' later masterpiece *Guide* [65]). The notion of absolution for the anti-hero is still strong in these early films, though this concept would erode by the time of the Amitabh Bachchan classics, in which it is presented as an unattainable fantasy.

Nitin Bose's moving *Gunga Jumna* (61), written by its star Dilip Kumar, is a critical title in the development of the crime film. Kumar was among the most gifted talents of Bollywood's Golden Age, renowned for his portrayals of sensitive souls engulfed by personal tragedy, e.g., the failed lovers

Left to right: *Gunga Jumna*, *Don*, *Kismet*

of Mehboob Khan's *Andaaz* (*Style*, 49) and Bimal Roy's 1955 *Devdas* remake—Kumar admitted that he actually had to seek psychiatric counseling as a result of the barrage of luckless loser parts. If the dapper and oft-triumphant Dev Anand resembled a Hindi hybrid of Cary Grant and Gregory Peck (Anand's acknowledged influence), then it would not be inaccurate to draw comparisons between Kumar and Brando, particularly as Kumar's tragic heroes became increasingly fueled by confusion and rage, as in *Gunga Jumna* and the previous year's historical epic *Mughal-e-Azam* (*The Great Mughal*)—performances that would influence the following decade's Bachchan roles (Kumar and Bachchan also appeared together in Ramesh Sippy's *Shakti* [82]).

One of the few examples of the genre to unfold in a rural environment, *Gunga Jumna* cultivates several crime drama paradigms that would become canonical, and it also displays a boldly expressionist use of color that would be right at home in a Douglas Sirk melodrama. Poor laborer Gunga (Kumar), falsely accused of a crime by a jealous village leader, is forced into a bandit lifestyle—yet Gunga comes to accept his marginalization, and (after flirting with surrender) his righteous anger makes him defiantly criminal by the denouement. But *Gunga Jumna*'s greatest contribution to the crime drama is in its storyline of brothers on opposite sides of the law: Gunga's brother Jumna (Nasir Khan, Kumar's real-life brother) becomes a cop, one who must ignore family ties in pursuit of his lawless sibling, and this narrative device would become arguably *the* crime plot for Bollywood thrillers in *Gunga*'s wake.

As the studio system collapsed and star salaries began to skyrocket, budgets soared, and producers often relied on unsavory connections to obtain financing.

Yash Chopra's *Deewar* (*The Wall*, 75)—inspired by the life of smuggler (and film financier) Haji Mastan—is perhaps the most powerful exploration of the "divided brothers" theme, aided immeasurably by one of Amitabh Bachchan's greatest performances. The Big B stars as Vijay, who enthusiastically enters the underworld as an alternative to the poverty he has endured with brother Ravi (Shashi Kapoor), following their abandonment by a disgraced father. Ravi becomes a cop, and along with their mother (an extraordinary Nirupa Roy) disowns the tormented Vijay, until they are reunited in a tragic climax.

The figure of the scornful mother would become more prominent in the crime drama (undoubtedly inspired by Nargis's role in *Mother India*). While the taint of crime was enough to literally kill the matriarchs of *Gunga Jumna* and *Kala Bazar*, later productions promoted the mother to the role of the film's indignant moral conscience, while the father would become ever more peripheral: dead, absent, or wrongly accused of criminal acts and ostracized by the community. Fifteen years after *Deewar*, this theme even returned in director Mukul Anand's bombastic and bloody Bachchan gangland vehicle *Agneepath* (*Path of Fire*, 90), which, like many Bollywood crime films of the past two decades, owes a considerable debt to the De Palma/Pacino *Scarface* remake.

"Vijay," as an unrelated recurring archetype, would become the key Bachchan persona, initiated by the cop Vijay in the actor's breakthrough *Zanjeer* (*The Chain*, 73). This "angry young man" anti-hero would make Bachchan an iconic presence. Yet one of the performer's most entertaining "Vijay" incarnations deviates from the typical portrayal: in the wildly entertaining comic crime epic *Don* (78), Bachchan is both an ultra-cool crimelord, "Don," and Vijay, a naïve doppelgänger recruited to impersonate The Boss. From its psychedelic opening titles sequence to its kung-fu culmination, *Don* is a Bachchan fan's dizzying delight, though its bell-bottoms and disco-dancing camp aesthetic is far removed from the emotional impact of a masterwork like *Deewar*, which along with *Don* was penned by the powerhouse duo of Salim Khan and Javed Akhtar (aka Salim-Javed), also responsible for writing the Bachchan land-

mark *Sholay* (*Flames*, 75). Possibly the most famous Hindi film of all time, Ramesh Sippy's *Sholay* is less a crime film than a Leone-inspired Curry Western, but tyrannical rural bandit Gabbar Singh (Amjad Khan) has become one of the classic Bollywood villains (incredibly, Javed initially wanted Khan fired for his allegedly weak speaking voice), and the film is filled with masterfully orchestrated action setpieces.

The "divided brothers" storyline would receive its best A.B. (After Bachchan) treatment with Vidhu Vinod Chopra's exceptional *Parinda* (*Pigeon*, 89). Elder brother Kishan (Jackie Shroff) joins the Bombay underworld to fund the U.S. education of his exuberant kid sibling Karan (Anil Kapoor), but upon returning to India, Karan rejects his brother's criminal lifestyle. Much to Kishan's horror, Karan later joins the gang to secretly avenge a friend's murder. Chopra's violent melodrama is a potent fusion of gritty realism and operatic histrionics, never more surreal than in the film's genuinely shocking final moments. And the director uses music more poetically than any of his contemporaries working within the crime-drama genre. While the standard Bollywood reliance on musical numbers often functions beautifully within other genres, it can occasionally be an awkward compromise for the crime film—yet Chopra employs song breaks as stylized Brechtian reflections on his condemned characters' final illusions of happiness (an approach perfected in the director's terrorist action film *Mission Kashmir* [00]). While Shroff and Kapoor are both commanding presences, it is the startling Nana Patekar, as the shrieking, pyromaniac crime boss Anna, who makes the strongest impression, creating a loathsome yet perversely sympathetic character who seems personally disgusted at his own participation in crimes from which he still derives great pleasure. Along with *Sholay*'s Amjad Khan, this *bhai* deserves his own action figure.

Just as the post-intermission half of *Parinda* experiments with the "divided brothers" theme in innovative ways, the climactic sequences of director Mahesh Manjrekar's *Vaastav* (*Reality*, 99) reexamine the relationship between the ganglord and his long-suffering mother. *Vaastav* is initially notable for the production's Bombay crime connections: star Sanjay Dutt had recently been imprisoned for underworld associations, and *Vaastav* was largely financed by gangster Deepak Nikhalje (brother of Chhota Rajan), who embarrassed the Bollywood community by personally accepting a Filmfare award given to the film. But anyone expecting a romanticized thug-life apologia from a film with such close underworld ties would be in for a shock: *Vaastav* is among the most jaundiced, cynical examinations of gang life yet produced by Bollywood. It also integrates ruthless cruelty and musical episodes in deft and surprising ways—particularly in the obsessive sequence that finds Raghu bullying a queue of nightclub performers to continue dancing as he and his goons pummel a group of men on the stage. The song bluntly terminates with the spectacle of two bodies landing with a climactic thud onto the dance floor: a male rival with Raghu's bullet embedded in his skull and an unconscious showgirl who finally faints from all the carnage.

Like Dev Anand's Raghu in *Kala Bazar*, Dutt's gangster Raghu begins as an honest working man driven into crime, but there is no hope of redemption here, with Manjrekar establishing a corrupt society that breeds only predator and prey. "Good brother" Vijay (Mohnish Behl) is now an emasculated sycophant who purports to disown Raghu, only to later grovel for mob favors. And while Raghu's prostitute girlfriend (another Bollywood stock character) may be the proverbial saintly whore, that doesn't prevent this coked-up Hindi Tony Montana from shoving a gun in her face and forcing her to have an abortion. Raghu's mother (Reema Lagoo) is again the moral voice, and *Vaastav* returns this archetype full-circle back to *Mother India*, now wickedly updated to the gangsta era—let's call her *Mutha India*. Ram Gopal Varma is one Bollywood director who does not embrace traditional musical interludes: his thrillers *Kaun* (99) and *Raat* (92) are wholly devoid of such alleged distractions, and he (awkwardly) inserted songs into his crime dramas *Satya* (*Truth*, 98) and *Company* (02) only to placate commercial interests. Despite such apparent concessions, *Satya* remains an uncompromisingly grim, stark analysis of the Bombay underworld, as Varma strips away the clichés of gangland loyalty and honor to focus on the violence that propels criminal life.

Satya's basic narrative trajectory is familiar: an ex-con ascends through the mafia ranks, struggling to keep this life hidden from his playback-singer girlfriend. But Varma elevates the material by minimizing melodrama and foregrounding the brutality and poverty that motivates his characters' amoral life choices. And by casting an anonymous everyman like J.D. Chakravarthy as Satya (rather than a star like Dutt or Bachchan), Varma denies his audience an easy anti-hero identification figure, forcing the viewer to confront the inhumanity inherent in the material.

It's difficult to see the Bollywood crime film advancing further than *Satya* and *Vaastav*, though obtaining inspiration from real life is certainly a viable (if dangerous) option: Varma's new *Company* is allegedly based on the war between gang lords Rajan and Ibrahim. The director has denied this, though he also admits that the denial is partially for reasons of personal safety.

But in the meantime, the Indian government has finally recognized film production as a legitimate "industry," minimizing the need for financing from the *bhais*. Yet it's difficult to see this development having much of an impact in front of the camera. Somehow, the prospect of seeing Anil Kapoor and Jackie Shroff as brothers on the opposite side of an investment banking scandal just doesn't carry the same cathartic frisson.


Gunga Jumna

Travis Crawford is a film programmer for the Philadelphia Festival of World Cinema (www.phillyfests.com) and a regular contributor to Filmmaker *magazine.*

WHERE TO START

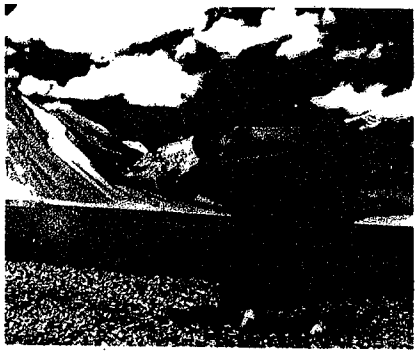
FEARLESS BOLLYWOOD PICKS FROM OUR CONTRIBUTORS

We've asked each of our writers (plus respected English Bollywood authority Rachel Dwyer) to contribute a brief capsule review of a film that in their judgment you might enjoy, even if you've never seen a Hindi movie. (For a solid thumbnail overview of popular Indian cinema to refer to as a video guide, Ashok Banker's *Bollywood*, from the British Pocket Essentials series, lists no less than 50 key movies, from *Alam Ara* in 1931 to *Lagaan* and *Gadar* in 2001.) —D.C.

AMAR AKBAR ANTHONY (Manmohan Desai, 77) The director-entrepreneur most closely associated with the super-genre known as the "masala movie" pushed the format to unfore-

seen extremes in this high-Seventies action comedy. The result is not quite a parody, although as the subplots and setpieces proliferate it does exhibit a knowing awareness of its own absurdity. Desai supplies not just two but three "lost and found" brothers: Separated in childhood and raised by ethnically diverse foster parents, the three grow up to become a Hindu cop (handsome stiff Vinod Khanna), a Muslim *gawali* singer (dumpy charmer Rishi Kapoor), and a Catholic petty criminal (Amitabh Bachchan). Add two scene-stealing bad guys and three slinky heroines and you have a recipe for delirium that feels more improvised than orchestrated.—D.C. *Subtitled DVD release from DEI (Digital Entertainment, Inc.)*

DIL SE (*From the Heart*, Mani Rathnam, 99) Opening with an exhilarating dance routine atop a moving train and closing with a prefiguration of nuclear apocalypse, this final chapter in Rathnam's "terror trilogy" (see *Roja/The Rose*, 92; *Bombay*, 95) is his darkest, finest, and least conventionally satisfying work. Shahrukh Khan plays an Indian journalist fatally obsessed with a beautiful, sexually dysfunctional terrorist cadre (Manisha Koirala). Rathnam uses five remarkable musical sequences to explore his hero's subconscious, which is dominated by sadomasochistic fantasies of revenge, rescue, power, and submission. Unmistakably an allegory of the Indo-Pakistani conflict, its psychoanalytical argument—that India's increasingly belligerent nationalism is rooted in a death-driven, erotically charged fixation on a feminized, Islamic Other—if not wholly convincing, is weirdly compelling. —J.L. *Subtitled DVD release from DEI (Digital Entertainment, Inc.)*



DILWALE DULHANIA LE JAYENGE (*The Brave-Heart Will Take the Bride*, Aditya Chopra, 95) The East is heir to legends that treat romantic love as an obsession that transcends all boundaries—and here, whiz kid Aditya Chopra makes Love Blessed by the Family the chic new dictum for yuppies and yokels alike. London-bred Simran (Kajol) and Raj (Shahrukh Khan) are in love, but the girl's stern father, Baldev (Amrish Puri),

promises Simran to an old friend's son back home in Punjab. Simran, all innocent sensuality, is ready to run away, but Raj urges her father to seal their marriage with his blessing. A tight screenplay puts a charming gloss on the film's patriarchal values, while shrewdly acknowledging the injustice done to women via the film's sensitive portrayal of the mother-daughter relationship.—M.R. *Subtitled DVD release from Yash Raj Home Entertainment.*

JEWEL THIEF (Vijay Anand, 67) The perfect Bollywood movie for the *Swingers* crowd, with clotheshorse superstar Dev Anand (the director's brother) cast as a suave undercover cop with two secret identities and a walk-in closet full of mod fashion accessories. Its pop-art colors, labyrinthine criminal conspiracies, and creaky "high-tech" gadgets have earned the film enduring cult status in India. Anand was a famously deft song picturizer, and *Jewel Thief* features some of the most popular and life-affirming Hindi film music ever recorded, including the infectiously jaunty guaranteed blues-chaser "Yeh Dil Na Hota Bechara" ("If my heart were not so poor and lonely"). —D.C. *Subtitled DVD release from Eros International*

MOHABBATEIN (*Loves*, Aditya Chopra, 00) Aditya Chopra's sophomore effort is often derided as a hackneyed holiday release aimed at Indian teenage girls and NRI families eager for a sentimentalized fantasia of traditional values. But to reject *Mohabbatein* is to deny the appeal of two of Bollywood's greatest attractions: sheer star-power charisma and spectacular musical numbers. This Hindi *Dead Poets Society* features Shahrukh Khan as the new music teacher who tutors a trio of students in romance against the wishes of stern headmaster Amitabh Bachchan. It's low-wattage, but the maddeningly catchy Jatin-Lalit songs are some of the most memorable in contemporary Bollywood, and the sweeping crane shots of a hundred picture-perfect teens dancing in Farah Khan–choreographed unison will travel

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DEEPER INTO BOLLYWOOD
FURTHER RESEARCH FOR THE CURIOUS

Indian popular cinema is no longer a distant rumor, the private preserve of academic specialists or diasporic local communities. It has become readily available and can be experienced directly


Kabhi Khushi Khabhie Gham

and on its own terms. The last few years have seen a flood of Indian film releases on DVD, aimed primarily at Indian viewers outside the Motherland, but accessible to the Hindi-impaired because almost all are subtitled in English.

There is already a flourishing Bollywood theatrical circuit in North America, with venues ranging from dedicated cinemas like the Bay Area's **Naz 8** in Fremont to occasional four-wall engagements in other major cities. But for most non-Indians the scene is a tough nut to crack. The events often feel more like community get-togethers than film screenings, so perhaps it's understandable that the organizers seem ambivalent about reaching out beyond their base audience. The prints screened are not always subtitled, and when they are the fact is not always advertised. Even if you frequent a *desi* video emporium and pick up one of the locally published NRI newspapers (like the excellent **India-West**), there's always a fair amount of anxiety involved. Will the print be subtitled as promised? Will the screening be oversold? For most of us, video and DVDs remain far more comfortable options.

As recently as five years ago you were lucky to stumble across even a second-generation VHS dub of a Bimal Roy film imported from Dubai, with barely legible subtitles in both Arabic and English. The current Indian video scene is idyllic in comparison, although there is certainly room for improvement. Piracy is rampant, aspect ratios are not always respected, and the failure to subtitle song lyrics as well as dialogue is an ongoing frustration. But there is world-class work being done by the best Indian DVD companies—like London's **Ayngaran International** (http://e-sales.ac/ayngaran), which specializes in high-quality, no-zone releases of Tamil films. The class acts of the Hindi-language market, **DEI** (indianfilmsdvd.com) and **Yash Raj Films Home Entertainment** (yashrajfilms.com), have separate "classics" labels devoted to reissuing Golden Age work.

It will always be more fun shopping for DVDs in a real Indian video store, especially in well-equipped NRI neighborhoods like Jackson Heights in Queens or Artesia's Little India in Orange County. But every Sweets & Spices shop in America now seems to have a few DVDs available, and on-line sources abound, notably **IndiaPlaza.com** and the *India Weekly* site at **panindia.com**. My current source of choice is the all-Indian rent-by-mail service **IndoFilms.com**, which is modeled on NetFlix and offers fast turnaround times.

Although there are dozens of websites that track and rate Indian DVD releases, my favorite is the labor-of-love fan site **zulm.net**, which posts super-picky videophile reviews illustrated with frame grabs. There are far too many Bollywood-related websites and chat rooms to list here, but for starters try **upperstall.com**, a prickly smart (and beautifully designed) resource on the Golden Age classics, **BollyWhat.com**, which offers song-lyric translations and language resources for the non-Hindi speaker, the lively fan site **Planet Bolly-Bob** (dazzled.com/dangermuff/bollybob/index), and the entertainment pages at **rediff.com** and **indiaexpress.com**, solid mainstream news sources for upcoming film (and film music) releases.

It's still possible to get a fair amount of information the old-fashioned way, from books printed on actual paper. Indian popular cinema has become a hot academic topic in recent years, both in India and the U.K., and a dozen new books on the subject are readily available either from **Amazon.com** and **Amazon.co.uk** or from specialized sources like **firstandsecond.com** (in India) or **indiaclub.com** (in exotic New Jersey). Only a few of these volumes contain what a friend calls "primary source criticism," writing that directly implicates the critic in the movie experience. After plowing through several of them I swore a solemn oath never to use the words "liminal" or "imbricate" in polite company.

One could never accuse midsection contributor Nasreen Munni Kabir of pretending that she has not herself been seduced by the immediate experience of watching Hindi movies. The great strength of her lucid and thorough book **Bollywood: The Indian Cinema Story** (Channel 4/PanMacMillan, 01) is that it's the work of a lifelong scholar-fan who is not too proud to admit (to paraphrase Robert Warshow) "that in some way she takes all that nonsense seriously." (Kabir's biography of Guru Dutt and her book-

AFTERWORD

Are the terms "Bollywood" and "Hindi cinema" interchangeable synonyms? Not necessarily. Bombay is the production capital of Hindi-language cinema. And the movie scene in Bombay *is* Bollywood, to the extent that anyplace is. But the Bollywood idiom is employed by the Tamil, Telegu, and Malayalam commercial cinemas as well. One reason I persist in using the term "Bollywood" is that it can be used loosely to refer to the work of influential Tamil directors like Mani Rathnam and Ram Gopal Varma even when they aren't working in Hindi. These ambiguities probably help to account for the fact that the designation of choice in academic circles is "Indian popular cinema."

length interview with *Sholay* screenwriter Javed Akhtar, both from Oxford India, are also excellent.) Other crucial basic texts include Ashish Rajadhyaksha and Paul Willemen's **Encyclopedia of Indian Cinema** (BFI/Oxford, 99; second edition), an indispensable reference book, and Yves Thoraval's 500-page **The Cinemas of India** (Macmillan India, 00), the definitive soup-to-nuts history of the entire field.

Among the new wave of serious Bollywood scholars, London's Rachel Dwyer is a rare bird: an earnest academic openly delighted by her subject. Her book **All You Want Is Money, All You Need Is Love: Sex and Romance in Modern India** (Cassell, 00) is a trailblazing study of India's emerging middle class and its shape-shifting impact on popular culture. Dwyer has also written a full-dress biography of producer-director **Yash Chopra** (BFI, 02) and co-written (with Divia Patel) the ravishing **Cinema India** (Reaktion Books, 02), a lavishly illustrated study of the major visual "attractions" of Hindi cinema, from its characteristic approaches to set and costume design, to such distinctive pictorial motifs as song sequences arbitrarily filmed in Switzerland. (Patel's chapters consider the garish splendors of Bombay's giant-billboard ad culture.)

My favorite writer on Indian popular culture and cinema is the Delhi-based "political psychologist, sociologist of science, and futurist" Ashis Nandy. Even in books that are not primarily about movies, like **The Tao of Cricket** (Oxford India, 00) and **An Ambiguous Journey to the City** (Oxford India, 01), Nandy raises the subject so often, and in such surprising contexts, that he ends up clarifying themes that have animated Indian cinema from the outset. The anthology **The Secret Politics of Our Desires: Innocence, Culpability, and Indian Popular Cinema** (Oxford India, 98), which Nandy edited, contains his influential essay "Indian Popular Cinema as a Slum's Eye View of Politics," which is primary source criticism of the highest order. Nandy invites his readers to think about "cinema and the politics of cultures in less conventional ways, unencumbered by formal film theory and trendy hermeneutics of the kind that, for reasons of academic correctness, sucks all life from one of the most vigorous expressions of the selfhood of the Indian caught between the old and the new, the inner and the outer, the local and the global."

M. Madhava Prasad's **Ideology of the Hindi Film: A Historical Construction** (Oxford India, 98), which is knee-deep in the clotted turf language of academic film studies, may strike you at first as exactly the kind of enervating "secondary source" criticism Nandy dismisses. But Prasad is a muscular thinker who wields the cumbersome socio-critical apparatus of ivory tower Marxism with surprising delicacy. He makes a strong case for the proposition that Bollywood's filmmakers are not attempting to adhere to Hollywood's codes of "seamless realism" and somehow bungling the job. Prasad insists that they are in fact quite adept at making a different kind of movie altogether, exactly the sort of movie their audience wants. His chapters on the primordial "root" genre of Hindi cinema (which he identifies as "the feudal family romance"), and on key aesthetic concepts like "frontality" and the "heterogeneous mode of production," enrich our experience of the films by helping us understand how their creators work and think—the highest standard to which any critic can aspire. —David Chute

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directly to any Bollywood enthusiast's neural pleasure centers. —T.C. *Subtitled DVD release from Yashraj Home Entertainment*

WAQT (*Time*, Yash Chora, 65) An early example of the "lost and found" genre, which deals with sundered and reunited families, and of the "multi-starrer"—its then-unprecedented cast included Raj Kumar, Sunil Dutt, and Sharmila Tagore. Although *Waqt* shows a Muslim family separated by an earthquake, it requires only a little imagination to see this as a Partition story, with the natural disaster as a metaphor for far greater human upheaval. The film spares the viewer no details of the lifestyle of the super rich, who own motor boats and American cars, throw lavish parties, and live in houses adorned with fountains, circular beds, and grand pianos. It also contains several enduringly popular songs, including "Ai meri zohrajabeen" ("My beauty"), sung by Manna Dey and picturized on Balraj Sahni, and "Aage bhi jaane na tu" ("You don't know what's in the future"), sung by Asha Bhosle for Sadhana. —RACHEL DWYER *Subtitled DVD release from Yashraj Home Entertainment*