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Book Review

Theorizing Bollywood

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Producing Bollywood: Inside the Contemporary Hindi Film Industry by Tejaswini Ganti (Hyderabad:Orient Blackswan), 2012(Reprint of Durham, North Carolina:Duke University Press) pp 440, Rs595

“The biggest problem today, therefore, before our cinema appears to be the bourgeoisie who rule the country, as well as the cinema. After the bombshell Garam Hawa, Sathyu is still to make another Hindi film. In their factory in Bombay they make films as a factory makes soap and sells it, wholesale or retail. The masses want them that way, they say. In reality they have manipulated the masses to a state of cultural prostration .They have exploited the vacuum left by imperialists and turned the full force of their propaganda machine to reduce the people to a state of cultural bankruptcy.....I have a feeling that films mass-produced in Bombay have the same object in view as the linguistic outrages of the ruling classes of India .It is not just a prank or merely a play for profits. It is a kind of cultural imperialism, a juggernaut designed to crush the individuality and distinctiveness of the various nations ‘cultures of this country.’”¹

It is an unequivocal speech by famous Indian actor Utpal Dutt that defines the context while talking about transforming Bombay-based Hindi Film industry into Bollywood. The year 2013 will be celebrated as a centenary milestone to showcase the cinematic heritage of the Indian film industry in the last 100 years. Indian cinema has an identity that is very unique and unmatched. We have moved from the black and white silent films to 3D, but our cinema continues to retain its basic essence - to thrill. It was Phalke who introduced India to world cinema at a time when working in films was taboo. But time has now changed radically.



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Bollywood films are overly intended for mass entertainment, though one must not rule out the underpinnings of awareness campaign and viewer sensitisation about the corruption, hypocrisy and violence in various aspects of lived experience. This blend of smartness, defines the success of films such as Raang de Basanti, Kurbani, New York, My Name is Khan, the works of Madhur Bhandarkar like Fashion, the productions of Aamir Khan such as Dhobi Ghat and Peepli Live, among many others. The films cited here are just a few examples, the list is an ever-expanding one, such as the very recent Dirty Picture, Cocktail, and English Vinglish which have earned recommendations from reputed film critics. In fact, in Dirty Picture Naseeruddin Shah, who plays the role of the predator-hero of blockbuster films, announces with undisguised arrogance that the agenda of films is essentially “entertainment, entertainment, entertainment”. This as a candid confession, which is an alegoric mantra for profit-making.

This success in mainstreaming alternative film scripts deconstructs the conservative notions about producers being interested in just profit-making. In this scenerio, Tejaswani Ganti’s Producing Bollywood provides complete insights into the making of Bollywood films. Her earlier book Bollywood: A Guidebook to Popular Hindi Cinema is also a commendable and praiseworthy work. This book is a story of how the Bombay-based Hindi film industry became Bollywood. Facts, data, dates and statistics, conversations and interviews with filmmakers, actors, producers, distributors and film critics. The nine chapters in the book address crucial parameters that define the map of the Bollywood film industry. In fact, Ganti identifies the use of the signifier “industry” to describe the production of Bollywood films as a historically significant. Recognised as an industry, Bollywood or the Mumbai-based Hindi film industry extended the dimensions of its marketing ambitions, giving it a global presence while not ignoring the local domestic market. As a result the Bollywood film industry has become the model of Indian regional cinema.

However, its restricted market base, due to the use of a regional language or state language, unlike Hindi used in Bollywood films, which is recognised as the national language, is one of the chief reasons for the limited market and distributorship of regional language cinema. As a result, producing a Bengali, Oriya, Marathi or Assamese film that may have the promise of winning national and international awards is considered to be less lucrative .Ganti’s book is divided into



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three parts. Part I deals with the Social Status of Films and Filmmakers. Part II explores the practices and processes of film production, focusing on the uncertainties, risks and work culture of the industry. Part III deals with Discourses and Practices of Audience-Making.

Ganti's book is about filmmaking and makers. The Introduction makes some observations about the paradigm shifts in targets and trade practices, and emphasises the systemic prioritisation of middle class value systems and the transitions therein, ranging from the conservative to the modern. Ganti describes this as the concerted attempt at gentrification of the Hindi film industry, which would soon be known to the world as Bollywood.

This metaphor of gentrification ushered in three crucial paradigm shifts from the mid-1990s. First, instead of the working class and the subalterns, the upwardly mobile elite classes became the integral part of film narratives. Second, a more sophisticated, trained, skilled, affluent educated classes seemed to have taken over the reins of filmmaking. Also to be noticed is the fact that circulation and distribution now seemed to be aimed towards overseas markets, though provincial markets were not to be ignored.

Remarkably, provincial markets have now started focussing on regional language films with remarkable success, as we know about commercial Bhojpuri, Punjabi and Bengali. The South Indian commercial film industry is credited as a formidable revenue earner. Understandably, the target viewers of these films are the rural masses, which, after all, constitute about 70 per cent of India's population.

Needless to say, this implies economic class differences that define target viewers. Hindi films are regarded as national cinema and Bollywood and India have even been regarded as synonymous in their social and cultural paradigms Hindi films have acquired a status of representing the nation, while films produced in other vernacular languages such as Bengali, Oriya, Assamese, Tamil or Malayalee, among others, are categorised as regional films. This linguistic divide is region and culture specific too. Also, in another simultaneous development, Bollywood film narratives in the last decade or even somewhat earlier brought into focus the trials and triumphs of the Indian diaspora, who struggle to make a home in a strange land with diverse cultures, practices and



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languages. Location shooting in Europe, Australia, the UK and USA has emerged as a seamless normative practice and though production costs are high. Third, Ganti observes that along with gentrification, the corporatisation of the film industry led to the integration of the process of production, distribution and exhibition in a more high-skilled professional manner since 2000. In the earlier decades, such aspects of filmmaking were lacked organised initiatives and relied on subjective responses. In order to reach out to the typical working of the Hindi film production, part II of the book begins with an unusual ‘thick description’ of a film set, films like Bollywood calling (Nagesh Kukunoor, 2003) Om Shanti Om (Farah Khan, 2007) and Luck By Chance (Zoya Akhtar, 2009). The author uses this description to argue later the significant differences in what is believed to be an American style production and those produced in India. The unfair comparison of different woods becomes apparent but the process of Bollywoodisation also needs investigation in its moments of production. The author draws attention to the changes in the workspaces of Hindi film production wondering if it is just ‘old wine in new shiny bottles’ (p 270).

In part III this is an interesting insight into the audience imaginaries that compel the film narratives and also direct audience expectation. The first chapter in this part is suitably titled ‘pleasing both aunts and servants: the Hindi film industry and its audience imaginaries’. The commercially successful Bollywood film formula that includes item numbers, violence, comic sequences, familial conflicts, song and dance sequences packaged as ‘masala movies’ which is also called ‘parallel cinema’ attract eyeballs, according to young filmmakers, though many of them prefer alternative narratives that have also become Bollywood blockbusters., such as the use of songs in films, considered to be indispensable for the success of a Hindi film. Ganti states, As music is absolutely essential to the marketing and financing of popular Hindi films, on certain occasions distributors have pressured filmmakers to include songs. Interestingly, though young filmmaker Nagesh Kukunoor had moved the audience with such alternative Hindi films as Iqbal and Dor. films are now produced more for the classes than the masses, more for the global Indian rather than the local Indian — that is, audience who watch films in multiplexes and, as a result, the closure of single-



screen cinema halls in leading cities underscores this trend. It is necessary to recognise that each film bears the hallmark of the filmmaker's vision, re-vision, creativity and skill. Ganti has researched her focus area very well, but she could have emphasised that despite the formulaic compulsions of the Hindi film industry as part of the larger entertainment industry intent on profit, Bollywood productions have enabled filmmakers to experiment with forms, themes, characters, scripts and special effects, often successfully deconstructing stereotypes. In the conclusion, Ganti tries to come to terms with the latest film texts such as *Ishqiya* (Abhishek Chaubey,2010), *Dabangg* (Abhinav Kashyap,2010) and *Peepli live* (Anusha Rizvi,2010) and the developments threatening the industrial organization of film-making to examine what has changed and what has not since 1996. These niche films produced with remarkable slickness, such as, say, *Rockstar*, *Rajniti*, *Khelei Hum Jiye Jaan Sey*, *Taalash*, *Heroine* or *Ferrari Ki Sawaari*, are as much part of mainstream Bollywood commercial cinema as *Ravan*, *Dhoom*, *Ghajini*, *Sarkar*, *Kites*, *Gangs of Wasseypur* *Bodyguard* and *Shootout at Wadala*, among others. Ganti would have beautifully theorized the Bollywood before us. Bollywood film productions are not just about spectacular profit but are simultaneously cultural productions that register India's cultural and social tradition, transformations and trends. Ganti's book is a commendable initiative that critiques, exposes and analyses the making and makers of Bollywood films. Ganti's book about one of the world's largest producer of films will be useful for students, researchers and those interested in sociology, anthropology, cinema ,media, communication, cultural studies, development. This pioneering work adds a new dimension for South Asian film studies.

Notes:

Extract from a speech delivered as a keynote address in a seminar held in connection with the international film festival of India, Delhi, in 1979. documented in Utpal Dutt, 1994, pp.25-26.