

The Cinematic ImagiNation: Indian Popular Films as Social History

by Jyotika Viridi

The place of “popular” media in the imagination of the Indian nation has only recently received scholarly attention. Over the last decade an increasing number of scholars and students have turned to cinema as a profoundly important “national-popular” domain that has negotiated various transitions and conflicts in the sociocultural and political fabric of India ever since the medium entered the country in 1895. In conversation with these efforts—such as Madhav Prasad’s *Ideology of the Hindi Film* (1998), Ravi Vasudevan’s *Making Meaning in Indian Cinema* (2002), Vijay Mishra’s *Bollywood Cinema* (2002), and Lalitha Gopalan’s *Cinema of Interruptions* (2003)—Jyotika Viridi’s book aims to “claim a place for film in the domain of South Asian cultural history” (xii).

The overarching question that frames Viridi’s project is how Hindi cinema constructs and maintains the fiction of a unified Indian nation in the face of many disruptions and challenges. Drawing on film theory, cultural studies, and postcolonial theory, Viridi examines postindependence Hindi cinema by juxtaposing a reading of films’ narrative and representational strategies with the sociocultural and political context within which they were produced, circulated, and debated. Tracing a number of key periods of transition—postindependence euphoria of the 1950s, modernization and the shift from a feudal to a democratic social order, disillusionment with state-led development in the 1970s, liberalization and Hindu revivalism in the 1980s and 1990s—Viridi demonstrates that it is on the terrain of the family that Hindi cinema dramatizes social conflicts. It is by narrating the “nation and/as family” (34) that Hindi cinema constructs and maintains the fiction of an “Indian” nation, successfully negotiating and containing various faultlines of religion, language, region, class, and caste. Throughout, she pays close attention to the ways these discourses of nation, class, caste, and (religious) com-

munity hinge on “the sharp hierarchy of institutionalized gender inequality” (12) and how women’s agency is at once enabled and domesticated in Hindi film narratives.

The first chapter tackles films that celebrate independence and narrate the tensions inherent in the project of modernizing a new, postcolonial nation. Viridi’s analysis of *Aan* (1952) and *Madhumati* (1958) illustrates how Hindi cinema served as a staging ground for contradictions between several constituencies in a newly independent nation, particularly between feudalism and democracy, and a questioning of the project of “development.” Reading films of this period as embodying a critique of both colonialism and feudalism, Viridi points out the differential positioning of men and women in these narratives and how they are called upon to serve the “nation” in different ways. The creation and sustenance of an “idealized female figure” is examined in greater detail in the second chapter, where Viridi explains how powerful forces of Victorian values and Brahminic ideals converged to position the “Indian woman” as a repository of tradition, as “different from everything Western” (85). Reading Guru Dutt’s *Mr. & Mrs. 55* (1955) in relation to the debate surrounding the Hindu Code Bill and Maniratnam’s *Bombay* (1995) in relation to controversies stemming from discussions of a Uniform Civil Code, she underscores the ambivalence inherent in Hindi cinema’s use of an idealized figure of the “Indian woman.” Mobilized for different articulations of identity (national, community) at different times, these representations signal not only elisions of crucial differences (class, caste, religious) but “a wishful desire for a utopian nation” (86).

Employing sociological and psychoanalytic techniques, chapter 3 (“Heroes and Villains”) presents an analysis of constructions of masculinity in Hindi cinema. Viridi first examines villains, the threats to the nation that these villains represented, and shifts in heroic ideals as these threats

were successfully countered. She suggests that these films, spanning several decades, are more than just “treatises on masculinity” (109) and goes on to analyze mother-son relationships in “maternal melodramas” such as *Mother India* (1957) and *Deewar* (1975) to argue that it is critical to understand heroes-fighting-villains in relation to the hero as “mother’s savior” (92). She reads these films as indicative of “changing family politics” in India, particularly the emergence of nuclear family units that necessitate a “regeneration of patriarchy” (120). Hindi cinema’s male-centric narratives are questioned in the very next chapter (“Heroines, Romance, and Social History”), in which Virdi examines “women’s films” as spaces of “resistance and unintended leaks,” urging us to look closely in the margins in order to “extricate women’s resistance from [dominant] cultural representations” (123). To achieve this, Virdi not only reads films such as *Sahib, Bibi, Aur Ghulam* (1962) and *Gumrah* (1963) to analyze struggles between women’s desires and societal norms but also examines star texts (in newspapers and film magazines) to understand how public discussions of the private lives of heroines were critical to “challenging, bending, and repositioning the old *laxman rekha* [mythical line proscribing women’s behavior]” (143).

In the next chapter (“The Sexed Body”) Virdi analyzes the emergence of the avenging heroine and the reconfiguration of women’s roles from that of the suffering victim to a position defined in terms of rights and not reforms. The antipatriarchal stance of films such as *Teesri Manzil* (1966), *Seeta Aur Geeta* (1972), and *Insaaf Ka Taraazu* (1980) is analyzed in relation to the emerging women’s movement in India to underscore gradual narrative shifts from women-as-victims to women-as-avengers. Virdi also points out that it is imperative to keep in mind how rape (or the threat of rape) as a narrative device in these films not only served “male gaze and desire” but also naturalized certain myths of body/beauty that continue to influence popular understandings of the female “body as a site of intimacy, pleasure, and desire” (174).

In the last chapter (“Re-reading Romance”) Virdi focuses her attention on the return of the romance genre in the context of economic liberalization and the growing importance of the Indian diaspora to constructions of a “global” Indian identity. Examining films such as *Qayamat Se Qayamat Tak* (1988) and *Dil* (1990), she reads the transition to bourgeois individualism, challenges to parental and patriarchal authority, and a change in the sites of romance

(college campuses emerging as key spaces in sharp contrast to the use of nonspecific, often foreign locales in countless Hindi films prior to this period) as indicative of larger sociocultural shifts engendered by economic liberalization. While these films satirized “capitalism and patriarchy’s imbrication in a new phase of capitalist development in India” (185), Virdi shifts her focus to films such as *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun* (1994) and *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (1995) to argue that politicized representations (in films such as *Dil*) soon gave way to a neoconservative assertion of the “Indian family” as the site to defend against transnational forces. In these films constructions of the “Indian woman” remain a key realm of negotiation. Once again, women are expected to participate in the nation’s tentative entry into a transnational economy while simultaneously preserving all that is unique and authentic about “Indian culture.”

As Virdi herself admits, the “history” presented in the book is far from linear and, at times, strikes one as arbitrary in the choice of films, genres, and time periods. It is also replete with a number of omissions in terms of key films and film genres. A lack of attention to industry forces that may have shaped some of the genres that Virdi analyzes is another criticism that can be leveled at the book. However, given that this is the first systematic, book-length attempt to read Indian popular films as social history, it serves as an excellent starting point to develop more focused histories of specific periods of Hindi cinema. It should also be noted that while Bombay-based Hindi cinema does affect to speak of and for the Indian nation, it is impossible to ignore the politics and pleasures of regional cinemas (Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, etc.), particularly when considering axes of identification such as language and caste. Overall, this book is an important addition to the growing body of work on Indian cinema. Virdi’s emphasis on reading Hindi cinema as negotiating the social and cultural politics of postindependence India is a significant move away from more formalist approaches, particularly in her use of a range of sources (from official histories to “unofficial” film magazines) to understand how the Indian nation has been narrated in and through popular cinema.

Viridi, Jyotika. *The Cinematic ImagiNation: Indian Popular Films as Social History*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2003. 256 pp., 26 black and white illustrations. \$22.00 (paper). ISBN 0-8135-3191-8.