“From Bihar to Manhattan”: Bollywood and the Transnational Indian Family

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In June 2003, I received an invitation to attend the New York media event of *Main Prem Ki Diwani Hoon* (*MPKDH*, I’m Crazy for Prem, 2003, Sooraj Barjatya). The event was part of Rajshri Productions’ promotional campaign and was designed to give journalists and film critics in the United States a glimpse of the film before its worldwide release. Given Rajshri Productions’ reputation as having reintroduced the “family film” in India with box-office hits such as *Maine Pyar Kiya* (1989), *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun* (1995), and *Hum Saath Saath Hain* (1997), and these films’ popularity among diasporic audiences, I was excited at the opportunity to attend the event and perhaps even ask Rajat Barjatya, the marketing manager, a few questions.¹

The event, attended by well over thirty journalists, began with a screening of the trailer of *MPKDH* and three song sequences from the film. Following this, Rajat Barjatya fielded a range of questions about the film’s plot, the stars, and the music. Toward the end, he delivered his marketing pitch: “Everyone knows that Rajshri has made family films that appeal to viewers in every strata of society across India. . . today, we wish to appeal to families all the way from Bihar to Manhattan. From Bihar to Manhattan, Indian families everywhere.”

About half an hour later, I had an opportunity to meet Barjatya and ask him to explain what he meant by saying Rajshri Productions wished to appeal to families “from Bihar to Manhattan.” “If you’ve seen films like *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge*, *Pardes*, and *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham*, you know exactly what I mean,” he began. Pointing out that Bollywood films and film music had become an integral part of life in the Indian-American diaspora and asserting that films such as *K3G* spoke to the sentiments of people in the diaspora who remained “Indian, deep down,” Barjatya went on to suggest that viewers in Bihar also enjoyed NRI-centric films partly because they too recognized that NRIs remained “Indian at the end of the day.”

with viewers in India and abroad and count among the most successful films of the past decade. These films, among several others, explored the cultural space of Non-Resident Indians, and as Barjatya observed, affirmed that the expatriate community remained “Indian, deep down.” It is this sentiment of remaining “Indian, deep down” and its problematic articulation in Bollywood narratives that I interrogate in this chapter. I do so by exploring what families of Indian origin in North America bring to bear upon their engagement with Bollywood films that grapple with the politics of claiming “Indianness” outside the territorial boundaries of India. Bringing together ethnographic detail and a thematic reading of K3G, I demonstrate how narrative and representational strategies, viewing practices, and patterns of socialization in diasporic spaces intersect to create a discursive realm of consensus regarding Indianness.

I focus on K3G for two key reasons. First, K3G was the film that was referenced most often by the families I interviewed. With one exception, these families had all watched the film multiple times and drew on specific instances in the film to articulate what Indianness meant to them. Second, K3G’s narrative marks an important departure from earlier efforts in Bollywood films to recognize and represent the expatriate Indian community. By exploring and cautiously legitimizing the cultural space of Indian life in the diaspora, K3G renders the diaspora’s version of Indianness less transgressive or impure and more as an acceptable variant at a historical conjuncture when territorially bound definitions of identity in relation to a singular national community have become unimaginable. This process of mediation involving Bollywood, the Indian state, and the diaspora is best understood in terms of a transitive logic involving Bollywood’s narrative and representational strategies, first-generation Indian immigrants’ emotional investment in the idea of India, and the state’s attempts to forge symbolic and material ties with the expatriate community. In other words, I demonstrate how Bollywood’s mediation of diasporic life played a crucial role in setting the stage for the state to reterritorialize Non-Resident Indians, position the Non-Resident Indian as a privileged
and model citizen-consumer in a global nation space, and remap the sociocultural boundaries of the “national family.” It is important to recognize, however, that the Bombay film industry’s output in its entirety does not reach or succeed in overseas territories—it is a specific kind of cinema that has, since the mid-1990s, “brought the NRI decisively into the center of the picture as a more stable figure of Indian identity than anything that can be found indigenously” that is at issue here.⁢

Before embarking on the analysis, let me provide a brief outline of K3G. K3G is the story of an affluent Indian family: Yashvardhan “Yash” Raichand (Amitabh Bachchan), his wife Nandini (Jaya Bachchan), and their two sons, Rahul (Shahrukh Khan), who is adopted, and Rohan (Hrithik Roshan). The family splits when Rahul falls in love with and marries Anjali (Kajol), a girl from the working-class neighborhood of Chandni Chowk in Delhi, instead of marrying the girl his father had chosen. Yashvardhan disowns Rahul, and Rahul and Anjali move to the United Kingdom. Anjali’s younger sister Pooja (Kareena Kapoor) and Rahul’s nanny (Farida Jalal) accompany them to London. Years later, Rahul’s younger brother Rohan learns about these incidents and sets out to London, promising to reunite the family. After graduating from college, Rohan moves to London and manages to make his way into Rahul’s family under an assumed name. With Pooja’s help, he reconciles the divided family. In the process, Rohan also falls in love with Pooja, and transforms the sassy “Westernized” Pooja into a virtuous “Indian” woman.

Viewing Practices as Rituals of Cultural Citizenship

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Preeti Arora and her husband, Kuldip, were one of several enterprising families in North America and the United Kingdom who screened films for the expatriate Indian community during the late 1960s to the 1980s. Screenings were usually held in university halls during the weekend, with films screened off 16-mm, and later, 35-mm reels. These weekend screenings, with an intermission that
lasted thirty to forty-five minutes, were an occasion, apart from religious festivals, for people to wear traditional clothes, speak in Hindi or other regional languages, and participate in a ritual that was reminiscent of “home.” In cities with a significant concentration of South Asian immigrants, these weekend screenings gradually expanded to include a radio show that broadcast Hindi film songs and various community-related announcements. Families who screened films also organized live shows with film stars from India performing for the community. As one interviewee explained:

Preeti: We used to inform people by post. They used to come, buy tickets, get samosas and a cup of chai, Coke for the kids, and chitchat with their friends, exchange news, gossip, everyday things, you know, that one starts missing when one is away from home. I remember, even when there were snowstorms, people would come and say, we wait the whole week to watch a Hindi film, don’t cancel it.

As other families who moved to the United States and the United Kingdom during the late 1960s and early 1970s recalled, there were no cultural institutions in place, and little offered in mainstream media that resonated with their emotions, nostalgic longing, and cultural values, not to mention addressing the difficulties of life in a new cultural space. Importantly, these screenings were marked as an exclusively Indian space, away from mainstream society, where families could meet and participate in a ritual of sharing personal and collective memories of life in India. These weekend screenings also became a key ritual in the diaspora because of the difficulties involved in maintaining connections with India. Not only was air travel limited and expensive, but the only means of contact for most families was letter writing and a monthly phone call.

This communal gathering around Hindi cinema was reduced drastically with the entry of the VCR in the early 1980s. Hindi films were available on video cassettes within a week of two of their
release and led to dwindling audiences for public screenings. Although this did not happen until the early 1980s in the United States, things changed faster in the United Kingdom. For instance, by the late 1970s, the BBC had begun telecasting Hindi movies as part of a six-week program targeting immigrants from the Indian subcontinent. In the United States, an important factor was the change in migration patterns. Until 1965, the Asiatic Barred Zone Act of 1917 and the Asian Exclusion Act of 1924 did not allow Asians to immigrate to the United States. In 1965, these laws were changed to permit “occupational migration,” primarily to address the shortage of highly educated and skilled labor in the American economy. Thus, the first wave of migration from India was comprised of highly educated professionals and their families. However, by the mid-1980s, people from a less educated, largely merchant-class background also began immigrating to the United States. The spurt in the number of Indian grocery stores all over the country during this period can be attributed, in part, to this demographic shift. And it is these grocery stores that served as initial points of distribution for the videocassettes and, now, DVDs. Grocery-store owners also served as intermediaries as families sought their opinion on the latest films. Further, by this time, both in the United Kingdom and the United States, there were weekly, hour-long television shows comprising film songs, interviews with visiting actors and actresses, movie trailers, and so forth that were broadcast on public access and community television channels. Not only were these shows widely watched, but they determined rental choices as well.

Over the past decade, the establishment of satellite television networks such as Zee TV and B4U (Bollywood for You) has made it easier to access films and television programming from India. Further, with the addition of an India-specific radio station that plays film songs and the establishment of cinema theaters that screen Bollywood films in several cities in the United States, engagement with Bollywood has become, simultaneously, highly diffuse and intense. My intention in
tracking changes in viewing practices in terms of access and setting from the late 1960s to present times is twofold. Let me illustrate with an excerpt:

Vinod: You’ve grown up watching the movies and you continue, that’s all. You like the songs, you listen to them here also. You enjoy particular kind of drama . . . you see crowded streets, keeps you in touch with the way of life in India.

Mythili: It doesn’t matter what the story is like, I like to see the dresses, the salwar designs, everyday life, even if it seems like a fantasy, you know.

Vinod: And you see, you want to keep that link with India even if you don’t live there. Even though we’ve lived outside for many years, it’s where you’re from, isn’t it?

It is clear enough that Hindi-language Bombay cinema, as a dominant storytelling institution in postindependence India, has come to possess tremendous cultural and emotional value for expatriate Indians who grew up watching these films. Vinod’s comment indicates that the ability to continue a cherished ritual that is associated with being Indian is, in and of itself, reason enough to watch Hindi films. Secondly, although advances in communications have facilitated contact with India, over a period of time, work and other social engagements in the diaspora result in most first-generation Indians gradually losing touch with day-to-day developments in India. Vinod’s remark about “seeing crowded streets” and Mythili’s comments about “seeing India change” and watching films to keep up with the “latest salwar designs” thus point to “an everyday, concretized instance of maintaining temporal continuities with the imagined homeland.”

Over the years, the act of viewing, Bollywood’s role in defining various social rituals, and interactions within sociocultural networks that such viewing practices created have helped sustain
expatriate Indians’ desire to perform their Indianness and remain, at least culturally, residents of India. Furthermore, it is important to recognize that such need for contact is only a starting point. In shaping how the “home” is remembered, Bollywood films reconfigure memory and nostalgia in important ways. It is to this question--of how Bollywood film narratives and first-generation immigrants’ emotional investment in the idea of India come together to frame narratives of being and becoming Indian-American--that I shall now turn.

Designer India for Suburban Homes

In newspapers, magazines, and several websites, critics have penned scathing reviews of K3G. Paying close attention to the extravagant lifestyles that the characters lead, they have asked: Is this really India? One critic declared: “It is a chilling film. Chilling because here is India, Hinduism, and Jana Gana Mana made into glossy laughable commodities to be purchased for a high price. The film is designed to make NRIs thankful that the Old Country is as beautiful, as backward, and as resoundingly traditional as he wants it to be.” Such critiques, exaggerated as they may appear, point to two important sites of negotiation between the film and audiences in the diaspora. The first concerns K3G’s not-so-subtle efforts to naturalize a comfortable coexistence of tradition and modernity. In the space of the first few minutes, viewers are left with no doubt as to the transnational-yet-Indian-at-heart status of the Raichand family. In this respect, K3G can be situated alongside a series of films such as Hum Aapke Hain Kaun, Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge, and Kuch Kuch Hota Hai that “reinvent tradition in easily recognizable terms to suit the exigencies of capitalist production.”

Related to this, a second crucial act of reconfiguration is K3G’s erasure of class through the rescripting of working-class space (Chandni Chowk) into a commodified sphere of ethnic authenticity. Changes in colors, background music, dialect and mannerisms, the use of “ethnic”
clothes, and the presence of street performers all work to mark differences between the upper-class residence of the Raichand family and Chandni Chowk, where Anjali lives. However, for viewers in the diaspora, these encodings function not so much as systematic erasures of class differences but as referents of “tradition” and “home” whose consumption is critical to sustaining and performing ethnicity, particularly at community events. As one interviewee pointed out:

Aparna: When my friend’s daughter graduated high school, she got a dress made in the same design as Madhuri Dixit’s . . . so I like to watch out for these designs too for my own daughter. When I go back to Delhi, I just have to tell the tailor that I want a design from such and such movie and he knows exactly what I want. The dress was a great hit in last year’s Diwali function here.

In fact, the Chandni Chowk mela (carnival) sequence in K3G can be read as a tactical response to diasporic viewing practices of the kind that Aparna described. Consumption aside, there is another set of deliberations involved in this mode of viewing. Consider the following excerpt:

Ajit: It is up to us to keep things Indian here and movies help.

Aparna: See, we know that Hindi movies are this la-la-land, nothing realistic about them. I’m from Delhi, I went to college there, but why would I want to see the real Chandni Chowk in a movie? I like to see movies that are well made, that are in foreign locations . . .

Ajit: Exactly, movies that show the real India are not what we want here . . . we don’t want to see the gandhi (filth) all the time . . .
That certain visual elements in films such as *K3G* acquire a materiality that enables the performance of identity in the diaspora is not inherently problematic. What the comments above indicate, however, is the embeddedness of such practices of consumption and performances of citizenship within two larger discursive terrains. First, they signal the investment that first-generation Indian immigrants have in imagining an India that is no longer associated solely with poverty and corruption but rather an India that is shaping a transnational economic order. As Rajagopal points out, NRIs are acutely conscious of their position as “an apotheosis of the Indian middle class, exemplifying what ‘Indians’ could achieve if they were not hampered by an underdeveloped society and an inefficient government.” I would argue that the visual economy of films such as *K3G* is an important source of cultural capital for NRI families that belong in a particular class bracket, with the requisite education and job opportunities to live and work in countries such as the United States.

Second, Ajit and Aparna’s comments also point to middle- and upper-middle-class Indian immigrants’ position as racialized minorities in the United States, and the manufacturing and sustenance of a “model minority” image over the years. Ajit’s desire for a diasporic India that has no *gandhg*, that projects an image of success, competence, and cultural stability, also needs to be seen as a refusal to acknowledge the presence of third world-ness, so to speak, within this picture-perfect world of diasporic Indians.

It is instructive to note that this “naturalization of plenitude” in Bollywood films did not go unquestioned by working-class NRIs that I met during the course of my fieldwork. Consider Balwinder Sodhi’s experience. Sodhi left his village in Punjab during the early 1980s and first migrated to Vienna, Austria. Working at a newspaper stand in Vienna for nearly five years, he saved enough money to pay an agent who would arrange for his immigration to the United States. Abandoned on the east coast of Mexico instead of the United States, Sodhi made it into southern California after a dangerous and grueling trek. After two more years of living and working in the
margins as an “illegal” immigrant, he eventually made his way to Boston. It took him four more years to arrange for his wife to join him in the United States. Sodhi now works at a hotel and supports both his immediate family in Boston and an extended family in India.

Not only did Balwinder Sodhi indicate a deep-rooted dissatisfaction with NRI-centric Hindi films such as *K3G*, he informed me that he had also stopped watching Hindi films altogether. Speaking wistfully of movies such as *Deewar* (1975) and *Zanjeer* (1973), movies in and of a very different social order in 1970s India, he dismissed my questions, saying I would never be able to understand what it meant to be in his position.

Balwinder: Whatever they show in movies about people and life, it is always the good aspects, only moments in life that work out well; they hardly show or speak about the hardships and difficulties that one faces and goes through in life. One has to really struggle to experience a good life in America . . . and why do movies not bother to depict the struggles Indians like me go through? Just our everyday life . . . it is not like the families in the suburbs who only think of us when they go to a restaurant or take a cab in the city.

Balwinder Sodhi’s story is not just a strikingly different narrative of being “Indian” in the United States. His comments assume great importance when considered in light of the fact that none of the middle- and upper-middle-class families I interviewed mentioned successful films that were not in any way “family-centric.” It is not so much that these men and women chose not to watch a diverse range of films. Rather, it is their choice of extravagant family melodramas to speak about their life experiences and notions of *Indianness* that points to how a “designer India” becomes the first step
in the transactions between Bollywood and NRI audiences who work to negotiate belonging and circumscribe participation in the new “transnational family.”

**Rehearsing, Reworking, and Remaining Indian**

In a famous sequence in *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge*, the hero (Shahrukh Khan as Raj) and heroine (Kajol as Simran), having missed their train on a trip across western Europe, end up spending the night in a small town, with Simran swilling a bottle of cognac before falling asleep. When Simran wakes up on Raj’s bed wearing his clothes, panic-stricken and unable to recall what had transpired, Raj holds her close and growls, “You think I am beyond values, but I am a Hindustani, and I know what a Hindustani girl’s izzat [honor] is worth. Trust me, nothing happened last night.” Mishra recounts this scene to argue that Hindi film consumption in the diaspora speaks to first-generation Indians desperately trying to sustain a value system and inculcate the same in their children in order to set them apart from mainstream society in countries like the United States and the United Kingdom. “These differences,” Mishra writes, “are generally about tradition, continuity, family, and often, the importance given to arranged marriages.”

*K3G* is no different from NRI-themed films such as *DDLJ* and *Pardes* in its heavy-handed depictions of a patriarchal family, the upholding of conservative gender norms, and conflicts surrounding the institution of marriage. In *K3G*, several scenes in the Raichand family home clearly establish Yashvardhan’s position as the head of the household. Once the narrative moves to London, the role that married women are expected to play in an expatriate context is also detailed in no uncertain terms. In London, Anjali is clearly responsible for maintaining an “Indian” home, including ensuring that the son is well schooled in Indian traditions. In addition to performing an elaborate Hindu *puja* (prayer) at the crack of dawn, she is ready to serve breakfast for her husband and son. As she mills around, she begins singing a patriotic Hindi film song, chastising her son for
not being attached enough to India ("mere desh ki dharti," the land in my country, from Upkar, 1967). The scene borders on the comical, but Kajol's riposte to her son's indifference to all things Indian is worth noting. Turning to her husband, she retorts: “He’s already half English (angrez), don’t complain to me if he becomes completely English.”

In every family I interviewed, it is the mothers who watch Bollywood films with their children, translating for them and explaining, as one woman said, “all the Indian customs and traditions.” The “woman’s question” becomes particularly pronounced in relation to raising daughters in the diaspora. English-language films and music, television programs, and stereotypical assessments of modes of socialization (dating, for instance) and other sociocultural phenomena (divorce rates, single-parent households, and so on) are all marshaled as evidence of a debauched West and situated in sharp contrast to the traditional and morally superior values of Indianness in several Bollywood films and by the families I interviewed. The first-generation immigrants I interviewed were willing to negotiate some common ground with their daughters, without necessarily “reverting to petrified templates of dating and sexual norms in India.”

However, their discomfort is revealed when they draw parallels to K3G, as the following excerpt illustrates.

Mythili: You see, the Western community is very different from our culture. Like respect for parents and elders, how to behave, basic things . . . and when children go to school and make friends, you don’t know the families that those children come from, what problems they may have. So your child will get influenced by all that.

Vinod: With Hindi movies, there is no question of influence. But they portray nice moral values . . . like K3G, we can get lessons for life from it.

Mythili: We have to make sure our children do not get too much into this culture.

Things like that happen here, and there are parents who are very orthodox and will
not accept children making their own choices. But we talk to our daughter and work out things.

Vinod: But you see, things have changed in India also. Like our niece in Bombay, she is very modern. So we have to change with times, but we should still hold on to some values. I think parents everywhere have such concerns and if they are not aware from the beginning, they pay the price in the end.

Vinod and Mythili’s comments were partly a function of Neeti, their daughter, opting to move out and live on her own, something first-generation Indian families have had to grapple with in the diaspora. It is revealing to note how K3G creates a space for viewers to rehearse and reflect on their hopes and anxieties, particularly through lighthearted moments in the film involving Poo (Pooja, played by Kareena Kapoor), Kajol’s younger sister raised in London. Scenes involving Poo echo informants’ comments that vividly articulate the difficulties faced by parents wrestling with desires to preserve an authentic “Indian” self, fashioned on the basis of their own upbringing in India, and an acknowledgment of the influences of the starkly different cultural field that their children encounter in schools and colleges in countries like the United States.14

This rehearsal and testing of values, ideals, and norms becomes even more pronounced with questions concerning marriage and the imminent threat of interracial marriage.15 Let me illustrate this point by juxtaposing a comment made by Preeti when I asked what she felt about her son growing up watching Hindi films, and a few lines that Yashvardhan Raichand delivers in K3G on hearing about his son’s falling in love with Anjali, a woman from Chandni Chowk, a working-class neighborhood.
Preeti: It was very good, he was imbibing his culture. During the week, at school, he was learning the culture of this place and while watching Hindi movies, singing Hindi film songs, he was learning about Indian culture. No one can tell that Sandeep is American, he can speak Hindi so well. It makes it easier as he thinks about marriage, you know. I know Indians married to others, but whatever people say, it will be easier if he marries someone Indian . . . they can share so much . . . they can understand each other’s culture. It is important.

Yashvardhan: Raichand. The name and respect has been given to us by our ancestors, [and] to honor and respect them is our foremost duty. And I will never tolerate an ordinary girl becoming a hurdle. You didn’t think even once, about the background of the girl, her status, her upbringing. You didn’t spare a single thought . . . whether the girl will be able to understand our culture and our traditions (sanskar aur sanskriti).

Will she ever understand our rituals, our rites? (riti, riwaz)

Will she understand our ethics and principles?

Will she adhere to the values of our family?

How did you even dare to think that she could be a part of our family?

This scene speaks to first-generation Indian parents’ fears that their son or daughter might marry a non-Indian who, in all likelihood, will not possess the cultural capital to participate in and ensure the continuance of the India that they have so assiduously constructed and sustained over the decades. More importantly, K3G’s erasure of class, as discussed in the previous section, serves a crucial purpose in terms of how viewers in the diaspora disassociate the dialogue from its context within
the film and insert it into their own viewing positionality. While Yashvardhan’s dialogue is directed at Anjali’s working-class status, for viewers in the diaspora already conditioned to recode class referents into commodities signifying tradition, such scenes serve as a liminal “talking space” that permit reflection on their own reaction in the eventuality of their children entering into a relationship with a non-Indian, and enable, as we saw with Mythili, Vinod, and Preeti, a rehearsal of values that form the foundation of Indianness.^

Further, this rehearsal is accompanied by a gradual reworking of ideas and values concerning cultural institutions such as marriage and in the process, a questioning of India’s status as the sole arbiter of Indianness and, most crucially, a sense of confidence in their own diasporic version of Indianness. Consider this argument from Kuldip and Preeti:

Kuldip: Our two married daughters are here, and our son. All our close relatives are here and we have so many close family friends, some we met when we first came to this country.

Preeti: See, people like you, born and raised in India, come and ask us how we are Indian after all these years. But you know, these days we have everything here. Temples, gurdwaras, other kinds of cultural places, dance and music school, language classes which our grandchildren attend . . . everything.

Kuldip: Let me tell you something--it is people in India who want to become Western. My grandchildren may not speak Hindi fluently, but they can teach their cousins in India about Indian traditions. I think people like you should stop calling kids here ABCDs [American-Born Confused Desis].
Kuldip and Preeti’s comments echo an important narrative departure that sets **K3G** apart from earlier films such as **DDLJ** and **Pardes**. **DDLJ** and **Pardes** sought to fold the diaspora into the nation by insisting on a return to India to resolve familial conflicts, where NRIs were asked to demonstrate their cultural competence to belong in the nation. In contrast to these earlier films, **K3G** inaugurates a new imagination of a transnational family in which the flow of cultural elements that lend authenticity is no longer a heavy-handed one-way flow from India to its expatriate Other. In exploring and legitimizing the cultural space of expatriate Indian families, **K3G** renders the diaspora less of a transgressive Other and more as an acceptable variant within the fold of a “transnational family.”

**The Nation Seeks Its Citizens**

**K3G**’s negotiation of India’s relationship with the diaspora is also, as discussed earlier, related to a growing sense within India of the “relocat[ion] of what we might call the seismic center of Indian national identity somewhere in Anglo-America.”¹⁷ Hrithik Roshan’s character in **K3G**, Rohan, the quintessential cosmopolitan who can navigate multiple cultural spaces with consummate ease, needs to be understood in relation to this. Rohan is, in fact, an embodiment of a “super-Indian” whose Indianness transcends both that of the resident and Non-Resident Indian.

Rohan arrives in London to the strains of a remixed version of **Vande Mataram**—a nationalist song invoked possibly to remind viewers in the diaspora of an irrevocable link that they have with their homeland. Although billboards and storefronts of international labels and chain stores frame the first five to ten seconds of his arrival, in subsequent frames, women wearing saffron-white-green (the colors of the Indian flag) **dupattas** walk by Rohan, he is greeted by a group of Bharatanatyam dancers (the preeminent classical dance form that is highly popular in the diaspora) in the middle of
busy traffic intersection, and he sashays down a boardwalk flanked on both sides by a bevy of white English girls also sporting clothes colored saffron, green, and white.

We then see Rohan in a cybercafé, looking up a directory listing for his brother’s contact information. As the address is pulled up, and the song in the background changes to Saare Jahan Se Acha, Hindustan Hamara (Greater Than Any Place in the Universe, Our India), we see Anjali folding her hands in prayer in front of her parents-in-law’s framed picture. Not only is the diasporic family rendered inextricable from the nation, it is an explicit acknowledgment, both to viewers in India and the diaspora, of the diaspora’s abiding desire to stay in touch with India. In a subsequent scene, we witness Rohan speaking with his parents (in India) on the phone. Sporting a tricolor T-shirt, he assures his parents that he is happy to have found accommodation with an Indian family instead of staying in a hotel: “They’re very nice people, papa. When I met them, I felt like I have known them for years, a laughing, happy, contented family, like we used to be.” This piece of dialogue needs to be read not just as a reference to the rift within the Raichand family but also as an allusion to commonly held views of NRI families struggling to define a sense of cultural identity, and as a comment that India, as a transnational family, is unimaginable without the inclusion of the diaspora. Although one can point to several other instances that hint at an impending rapprochement between India and the diaspora, it is the singing of the Indian national anthem by Anjali and Rahul’s son (Krish) at a school function that serves as the pivotal event that legitimizes and mitigates the “Othered” status of the diaspora’s version of Indian-ness, and reconstitutes the NRI as the ideal citizen-to-be of a transnational family.

Having learned about Krish Raichand’s participation in a school function, and Anjali’s disappointment at her son not being able to sing the same songs she sang growing up in India, Rohan decides to intervene. As Anjali, Rahul, Pooja, and the rest of the audience wait to hear Krish lead his classmates into “Do Re Mi,” he steps up to the mike, says “This one is for you, Mom,” and
sings the Indian national anthem. A close-up of the visibly moved diasporic family cuts to a long shot of the kids singing, followed by pans and cuts to different parts of a surprised yet respectful audience. Anjali is reduced to tears as she runs down the aisle to embrace her son, and the background music reverts to Vande Mataram, finally fading into Saare Jahan se Acha Hindustan Hamara.

This entire sequence functions both as reassurance for a vast majority of first-generation immigrants that they can live in the United Kingdom or the United States yet belong and claim cultural citizenship elsewhere, and as a paradigmatic moment of India embracing the diaspora and defining the NRI as one of its own. It does not matter that Anjali’s son, a second-generation diasporic Indian who has never experienced life in India, sings the national anthem with a British accent, his mispronunciation toward the end is forgotten (the anthem is completed by Anjali), his being “half-English” is not a concern anymore--every anxiety of negotiating a sense of Indianness is erased in those fifty-two seconds that the national anthem is sung. The diaspora is no longer different and threatening. In Rajat Barjatya’s words, the diaspora is “Indian, deep down.”

**Between Bollywood and the State: Fashioning the Transnational Family**

I have shown here that Bollywood’s role in reimagining the national family and the diaspora’s emotional ties to India can be used to read families’ engagement with NRI/family-centric narratives such as K3G, the articulation of cultural citizenship as belonging in a “transnational family,” and most crucially, the reconstitution of the NRI as a model citizen-consumer in a global and deterritorialized nation-space. This process of mediation is best understood as a transitive logic--that the interactions between the diaspora and Bollywood, and between Bollywood and India, set the stage for India to remap symbolic and material relationships with the diaspora. Such a reading is
useful because it allows us to locate our analysis of Bollywood narratives and their reception in
diasporic spaces within a broader historical conjuncture and to grapple with the implications of the
state’s efforts to redefine its relationship with the diasporic community and articulate a new idea of
citizenship that is, as Rajadhyaksha puts it, “explicitly delinked from the political rights of
citizenship.”

It is critical to recognize that the NRI, as a category of selfhood defined in relation to the
nation, carries both spatial and temporal dimensions. As Aditya Nigam observed, in inhabiting the
space and time of the future in countries in like the United States and the United Kingdom, the NRI
did not only come to be seen as someone inhabiting India’s present-to-be. The NRI, as someone
who inhabited the time and space of global modernity and who played a part in shaping the global
information economy in sites like Silicon Valley in the United States, emerged as the model citizen-
consumer who could address and bridge the disjunctures and anxieties that lay at the heart of India’s
efforts to participate fully in a global economy and redefine citizenship in the language of
consumption. To grasp this shift in the terms of Bollywood’s mediation of the national family and
the figure of the citizen-consumer, consider the differences between Raj Kapoor’s articulation of a
cosmopolitan self in a newly independent nation in Shri 420 (1955) and that of Hrithik Roshan in
K3G. A quintessential 1950s social film, Shri 420 laid bare the enormous difficulties of sustaining a
vision of postcolonial development while a vast majority of the population was struggling to make
ends meet. In the film, Raj (Raj Kapoor) migrates to Bombay from the small town of Allahabad, is
drawn into a world of deceit and dishonesty, and eventually, regains his innocence and his imaan
(integrity). Toward the end of the film, we see Raj attired in the same tattered clothes he had on
when he first migrated to Bombay, and back on the very same highway he had taken to travel to the
city. He begins walking away from the city and his troubles, singing the famous song:
Raj Kapoor’s *Shri 420* is, without doubt, a celebration of a cosmopolitan Indian identity and also one that articulates citizenship to the ideal of sacrifice and the deferral of pleasure through consumption in the interest of nation building. It is this contract between citizenship and consumption that has been rewritten over the past two decades in India and that finds expression in films such as *K3G*, where avowedly “global” NRIs affirm their belonging in the national family and demonstrate that no matter what, their *dil* remains Hindustani (the heart remains Indian).

It is in relation to these imaginative shifts that we need to understand negotiations between the state and the diaspora, and Bollywood’s role in setting the stage for these negotiations. Thus, the following quote from Sushma Swaraj, the union minister of broadcasting and information, points to more than just the fact that the importance of the legitimization of diasporic versions of Indianness by cinema is not lost on the Indian state: “Perhaps geographical divisions between Indians in India and the Indian diaspora is blurring if not disappearing altogether. And with the announcement made by the Honorable Prime Minister at yesterday’s inaugural session, the dual citizenship will bring the diaspora closer to us not merely due to our cultural bonds but also by a legal system.”

Lavish transnational rituals such as the *Pravasi Bharatiya Divas* (Day of the Diaspora) signal a qualitative shift in the state’s relationship with the NRI. The Indian state is no longer content with wooing foreign currency into nationalized banks, no longer ambivalent about celebrating NRI successes, and no longer hesitant about claiming the NRI as one of its own. What we are witnessing, then, is a state that seeks to capitalize on the work already done by its central mediating institution in

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*My shoes are Japanese, these trousers are from England,
A red Russian cap on my head, yet my heart remains Indian*
reterritorializing the NRI and defining Indianness as a “global jugalbandi (fusion) between Bharat vasi(s) (those living in India) and Bharat vanshi(s) (those who belong to the civilization of India).”

It is critical, however, to keep in mind the exclusionary nature of these negotiations, the state’s differential response to Indian diasporas worldwide, and the hegemony of this configuration of the NRI as an ideal citizen-consumer that marginalize other imaginations of India and Indianness. As Balwinder Sodhi’s comments and K3G’s representational strategies indicate, this new “transnational family” is constructed by both “exoticizing” and dispensing with class differences that a neighborhood—such as Chandni Chowk in New Delhi or an apartment complex that houses working-class Indian immigrant families in Boston—represents.

Citizenship, as critics have pointed out, involves an element of obligation (both material and imagined); in the case of first-generation immigrants, this obligation is worked out in relation to the family and through the family’s metonymic relationship with the nation in Bollywood narratives. What emerges in family-centric Bollywood narratives such as K3G is an adherence to a social order that normalizes patriarchy and consistently erases class, caste, regional, and religious difference in favor of an upper-class, North Indian, heteronormative, and Hindu way of life. After Balwinder Sodhi refused to talk about K3G and expressed his frustration with Bollywood films, I asked if he had heard about the Pravasi Bharatiya Divas and the Indian government’s plan to offer dual citizenship. He responded: “Do you think I will be able to attend? They don’t want NRIs like me.” For people like Sodhi, and those diasporic Indians who do not inhabit the transnational circuitry that films such as K3G and events such as the Pravasi Bharatiya Divas celebrate, citizenship in the newly constructed transnational family is deferred.

Although Bollywood films tend to speak for and about Indianness, we need to keep in mind our lack of understanding of how viewers in diverse diasporic contexts (Malaysia, for instance) engage with regional-language films and how the politics and pleasures in those cases intersect with
Bollywood’s “transnational” narratives. Furthermore, the rapidly expanding space of film culture—online fan communities, new arrangements for distribution and exhibition worldwide, non-Indian audience communities, the performative reception of Bollywood in cultural shows staged by second-generation South Asian youth in different parts of the world, and so on—highlights both the provisional nature of efforts to define and circumscribe the “transnational family,” and the need to examine the role of media and communications in enabling and shaping this process.

Notes

1. All three films were directed by Sooraj Barjatya and are generally known for their conservatism and focus on the ideals of a large, joint Hindu family.


4. Migration from India to the United States can be traced to the early 1900s, but the most significant wave of migration can be dated to 1965 following the Immigration Act of 1965, often referred to as the Hart-Cellar Act.


8. Chandni Chowk (moonlit square, or silver square), located in central Delhi, is a congested bazaar (marketplace) of narrow lanes packed with shops selling a range of consumer goods. The area dates back to 1650 a.d.


15. See Patricia Uberoi, “The diaspora comes home,” for an analysis of these themes in DDLJ.


17. Prasad, “This thing called Bollywood,” n.p.


