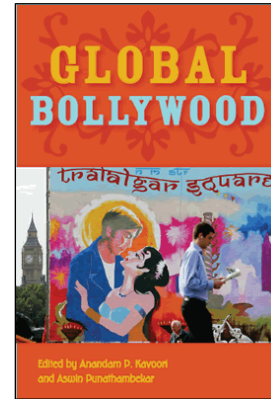


Anandam P. Kavoori and Aswin Punathambekar (Eds.), **Global Bollywood**, New York University Press, 2008, 314 pp., \$24.00 (paperback).

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It is often claimed that the two things that unite the Indian nation are cricket and Bollywood. Anandam Kavoori and Aswin Punathambekar's *Global Bollywood* is particularly timely given the success of the Oscar-winning film, *Slumdog Millionaire*. Media scholars Kavoori and Punathambekar edited this collection of essays which seeks to examine the transnational character of Bollywood, India's Hindi film industry. It is a measure of Bollywood's growing popularity that the authors can assume knowledge of the storytelling conventions of Hindi cinema on the part of their international audience. Those conventions, at least, are pan-Indian and increasingly known beyond South Asia. Although the term "Bollywood" technically refers to the Hindi film industry based in Mumbai (formerly Bombay), there are active film industries based in Punjab, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and West Bengal. The editors use the term to encompass the entirety of Indian cinema, though they acknowledge that most essays "grapple with . . . Bombay-based Hindi cinema" (p. 3).



Bollywood's engagement with the world is not a new phenomenon. However, the editors make the case, quite persuasively, that its engagement with the rest of the world post 1991, when India liberalized its economy, was quite different from what came before. Kavoori and Punathambekar note that "films from India have always traveled to different parts of the world" (p. 3) but that "it is only recently, with the gradual institutionalization of the overseas, diasporic box office, that Bollywood has acquired international dimensions" (ibid). Certainly, the pace of integration with the world after the opening up of the economy in 1991 intensified, and may have led to filmmakers exporting their films to tap the lucrative overseas Indian market. However, in choosing to focus on the diaspora, or the Non-Resident Indian (NRI) factor in the globalization of Bollywood, the editors risk excluding geographies where Bollywood has made a strong cultural impact, particularly in Japan, Malaysia, and East Africa.

There are some important questions they address: How much of Bollywood's newfound popularity in the West rests squarely on immigrant communities in countries such as the United States, the UK and Canada? Has Hindi film culture moved into the American or British mainstream? Is this a one-sided exchange, or have expanded foreign markets affected and enhanced the Indian film industry? *Global Bollywood* attempts to answer these and several other questions in this collection of scholarly essays that "focus on a range of questions dealing with the industry, film and star texts, social contexts, reception, and participatory culture" (p. 6) in three sections.

The first section, Framing Bollywood, places the concept of "Bollywood" in a larger sociocultural and economic context. Ashish Rajadhyaksha, in his essay "Bollywoodization of Indian Cinema," distinguishes between cinema as it has existed in India for the last 50 years and the Bollywood industry

that triumphed after the millennia. According to Rajadhyaksha, Bollywood caters primarily to NRIs, while traditional Indian cinema “is only occasionally successful in [tapping into that market] . . . and is in every instance able to do so only when it . . . *Bollywoodizes* itself” (p. 23, original emphasis).

Other essays in the section recapitulate this theme and separate Bollywood from the Indian film industry. M. Madhava Prasad’s essay, for example, says that in the last 10 years, “Indian popular cinema has undergone some major changes, and indeed could be said to have developed a new genre of sorts” (p. 44).

There is considerable repetition in these essays—they bemoan the corporatization of the film industry after it was formally accorded the status of an industry by the federal government in 1998 (when, according to Rajadhyaksha, “Bollywood” came into being). The shift in dynamic that allowed filmmakers to turn to institutionalized sources for financing and to halt its reliance on organized crime and personal funds to finance productions has meant that the range of stories that directors and screenwriters can now tell has been expanded. Production values have improved as a result, and there is far less interference in the filmmaking process. There is now also greater diversity and willingness to experiment than in the past; the move from single-screen theatres to multiplexes could be one reason, but making films for smaller, more niche audiences can now be profitable, too. But most of our authors mourn the loss of the kind of cinema that was produced without corporate finance, with seemingly little justification.

The second section explores Texts and Audiences. The opening two essays, Vamsee Juluri’s “Our Violence, Their Violence: Exploring the Emotional and Relational Matrix of Terrorist Cinema” and Kalyani Chadha and Anandam P. Kavoori’s “Exoticized, Marginalized, Demonized: The Muslim ‘Other’ in Indian Cinema” attempt to address the problems of representation of the Muslim minority in Bollywood film. Juluri offers a Gandhian critique of the ideology of violence as seen in mainstream Hindi cinema, while Chadha and Kavoori argue that Hindi cinema has systematically excluded Muslims, which has “contributed to the production and maintenance of social and cultural difference” (p. 134). While the authors have a point when they claim that “‘normalcy’ in popular Hindi cinema has been reserved for Hindu characters” (p. 143), the essay appears dated, particularly with reference to the Indian film industry’s secular, inclusive nature, which they maintain is a mirage. They state that “barring their names . . . they [Salman, Saif, Aamir and Shahrukh Khan, the most popular actors in Bollywood today] seem to have avoided any type of identification with a Muslim identity or even the Muslim community” (p. 144). Particularly after the terrorist attacks on Mumbai in 2008, this is not a valid criticism. Shahrukh Khan, for instance, reiterated that Islam was a peaceful religion, while *My Name is Khan*, a film on the experience of Indian Muslims in the United States after 9/11, was released earlier this year.

The third and most enjoyable section, Beyond Film, explores fan participation in Bollywood. Rachel Dwyer, in the Indian film magazine, *Stardust*, uses *Stardust* as a motif to examine the rise of the film magazine in India. She ably chronicles its effect on the expanding middle class, particularly in the context of family dynamics and sexuality, while celebrating its main attraction, i.e., gossip. Dwyer states that “the pleasure in *Stardust* is found in the melodramatic mode in that the stars have everything—looks, money, fame—yet they still have to worry about romance and they are still not happy” (p. 260).

Ananda Mitra and Aswin Punathambekar's essays, "Bollyweb: Search for Bollywood and the Web and See What Happens!" and "We're Online, Not on the Streets: Indian Cinema, New Media, and Participatory Culture," respectively explore an overlooked aspect of Indian cinema and are best read together. They inform different aspects of the new Bollywood fan's engagement with cinema and more significantly, with other fans. Mitra examines where and how Bollywood exists on the Web. He claims that the "real" Bollywood is "encrusted by a significant 'virtual' Bollywood on the Web, or Bollyweb" (p. 268), which isn't merely a product of supply-side economics, but is driven also by people constantly looking for information about Bollywood on Bollyweb. He argues that the Internet "has had a significant and welcome effect on the commercial interests on Bollywood" (pp. 279–280) and that Bollyweb can offer Bollywood a global space to pave the way for a "global Bollywood" (p. 280).

Punathambekar, by contrast, seeks to rework the notion of fan culture in India and argues against framing the narrative as either one of devotional excess or limiting it solely to political mobilization as has been seen in Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, and Karnataka, where film stars have effectively used their star cachet to contest and win elections. He attempts, successfully, to "situate fan practices in relation to the experience of cyberculture in India" (p. 296).

The most persuasive essays in the volume shed light on previously unexplored terrain in Indian film culture. These include Natalie Sarrazin's essay "Songs from the Heart" that examines music's centrality to the Bollywood film narrative and not just as an isolated art form (a subject astonishingly ignored thus far), and Punathambekar's piece on participatory culture that adds a new dimension to the study of fandom in India. Unfortunately, other writers—Tejaswini Ganti and M. Madhava Prasad, to name two—succumb to clichés and reiterate the old cultural memes that have stifled the study of film in India for so long.

The authors also assume quite different levels of their readers' familiarity with Indian cinema. As an Indian, I was acquainted with most references; however, several movies and stars were named without attendant side notes, while in other cases, their relevance to the argument was explained in great detail.

So while the book serves well as a primer on Indian cinema, it ultimately fails to shed any new light on its central premise of a *global* Bollywood. I did not come away with a new understanding of the globalization of Bollywood, whether of its impact on non-South Asians in the West or of how storytelling conventions have changed to account for new audiences. There is much examination of the NRI's centrality in what films are made but this continues to be conducted in a tone that is borderline culturally protectionist. In castigating the "Western" as thoroughly as most writers do, the essays fail to take a view of what these changes might actually mean for Indian society.