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The Strange Disappearance of Bombay from its Own Cinema

A Case of Imperialism or Globalization?

Jyotsna Kapur and Manjunath Pendakur

Coinciding with the Indian government's initiation of neo-liberal economic "reforms" in 1991 a new phenomenon started to appear in popular Hindi cinema: The actual city of Bombay disappeared as a location giving way to an entirely fictitious Bombay. This paper explains the connections between the textual disappearance of Bombay and the contemporary integration of India into global capital; the political economy of the changing audience and revenues for Hindi cinema and its textual representations of public and private space; and finally the contradictory ways in which capitalism both integrates the globe and fragments it. Our analysis is located in recent theoretical attempts to understand the changing nature of urban spaces in contemporary capitalism, the emergence of a transnational bourgeoisie, and draws attention to the continuing relevance of the term imperialism in analyzing global capital.

Beginning in the 1990s, a peculiar absence started to show up in popular Indian cinema: the city of Bombay, the hometown of this very cinema, disappeared as a location. Even when films were supposedly set in Bombay they showed not Bombay but a studio set, a generic city dressed up in the brand names of late twentieth century capital. Meanwhile, in that very decade, Bollywood (so named, by combining Bombay and Hollywood) appeared suddenly, as if out of the blue, as the new sexy style in international filmmaking and fashion based primarily in the U.S. and Britain. By the end of the decade, Bollywood stars such as, Aishwarya Rai, were advertising L'Oreal hair products, being interviewed on prime-time US television such as Late Show with David Letterman and 60 Minutes; and Hollywood had "discovered" Bollywood with films such as *Moulin Rouge* (Baz Luhrmann, 2001) and filmmakers of Indian origin, such as Mira Nair (*Monsoon Wedding*, 2001) and Gurinder Chadha, (*Bend it Like Beckham*, 2002 and *Bride and Prejudice*, 2005). The Hindu fundamentalist movement, under the BJP-Shiv Sena state government, responded to this internationalizing by renaming Bombay as Mumbai in 1995, referring to the name of the city in Gujarati and Marathi, the two most widely spoken vernacular languages in

the city. In the language most commonly spoken in Bombay, *Bambiyya/tapori*, a mix of several Indian languages including English, the name of the city is Bombay. We have chosen to retain the name Bombay because its renaming represents a narrow chauvinist response; one which is not opposed to the practices of neo-liberalism but presents itself as such by a cultural politics that denies the history of Bombay as a city integrated into global capital for at least three centuries since the British East India Company received it on rent from Charles II in 1688.¹ The 90's were a watershed. Beginning in 1991, the Indian government announced the policy of structural adjustment or neo-liberal "reforms" starting to privatize key sectors of the Indian economy.

What might this curious displacement of Bombay, this simultaneous leap into global attention and its severance from the existing city, tell us about the workings of capital in our times, about understanding where we are located in what everyone claims has become an increasingly globalized world? In contrast to the wide-eyed wonder of those who manage and own the global economy, the business and state leaders, who tell us that we now suddenly live in a small new world, Marxists have insisted on what is at once both new and old in our world today, pointing to both the continuities and contradictions of capital. We have insisted that in spite of certain new features--such as new technologies, the increasing dismantling of the welfare functions of the state, and the growing strength of multinational corporations--the fundamental logic of capital, i.e., capital accumulation via imperialist and class exploitation has remained intact (Tabb, 1997).

Yet, the repeated use of the term globalization instead of imperialism serves strategically, David Ruccio (2003) explains, to deflect attention from capitalism and its historical opponent, socialism—because while the former appears as a new term out of nowhere the latter is rooted in Marxist analysis such as Lenin's (1917) who claimed that imperialism was the last stage in capitalism. In contrast, the term globalization insinuates that we now live in a new international configuration, making it difficult to wrap our heads around class and imperialism as constitutive of this moment. Put simply, the problem is: how to speak about systematic global inequity and exploitation, the drain of wealth from the South to the North through military, economic, and political means while at the same time recognize that the two blocs are rid by internal systematic exploitation of class, compounded by gender, race, and sexuality? While this assertion of class is crystal-clear within a Marxist framework, it is well-worth repeating because the invention of a term such as globalization is an attempt to rewrite our history and subsequently our future.

Take India as a case in point. Here, the common-sense view emerging across a range of discourses, from popular culture to policy announcements, that Indians are now in a new phase, as global subjects and not objects of imperialism runs somewhat like this: the British empire was thrown out half-a-century ago and now, finally, India has come into its own in the global economy as a powerful player—its hallmarks are military might (nuclear power), economic strength (computer education and information technology), and cultural dynamism (Indian beauty queens, authors, and Bollywood are suddenly in fashion). In this paradigm, which casts itself as nationalist, the enemy within the nation, i.e., the ruling class, can disclaim its collaboration with international capital and represent itself as the heroes not the

traitors of the nation. This ideological sleight of hand, this simultaneous disavowal of imperialism in the present while reclaiming the nationalism from the past, is achieved by erasing class as a component both of the anti-imperialist struggle of the past and of the violent integration of India into global capital in the present. One way in which this is achieved is by constructing a new global space in the imaginary; one in which class and politics are erased by a new uncritical emphasis on consumer culture.

Every society, every historical mode of production produces its own space. In fact, as Henri Lefebvre remarked, a society that fails to produce its own space would be a very strange entity, one that could make no claims to be real (1991, 53). Moreover, these spaces are not only physical or concrete, such as, the architecture now categorized as postmodern, or theme parks and shopping malls that fill the landscape of the affluent nations, but are also spaces built in the imagination produced by cultural products, such as, films and television. It is in these physical and imaginative spaces that the ruling ideas of the ruling class are naturalized. Popular Bombay cinema is currently involved in creating exactly such a discursive space—erasing the particularity of Bombay only to replace it with a generic city. This may, at first, appear as a small detail of the *mise-en-scène*: a film term which literally means “putting into the scene,” i.e., all those elements, such as lighting, setting, costumes, and actors that are set in front of the camera to stage the action. However, *mise-en-scène* is important because it is repeated over and over again and in doing so naturalizes hierarchies.

A clarification: this is an analysis of the discourse of globalization, not a claim about the effects of this discourse, of how audiences actually interpret or internalize it. Furthermore, we are not critiquing the new image of Bombay from the standpoint of realism. Commercial Bombay cinema has never made any pretenses of realism. Its aesthetic, characterized as the “cinema of interruptions” by Lalitha Gopalan (2002), or the *masala* film by Pendakur (2003) following the industry’s own label of choice, blatantly flouts rules of transparency and verisimilitude. It is perfectly logical within the realm of Bombay film aesthetics that lovers would break into a song in the midst of a conversation and be transported to locations completely unrestrained by material or physical constraints. Rather, we have tried here to understand the historical and material reasons for the disappearance of Bombay from within this cinema’s own aesthetic.

Recasting Bombay

Both in the art and mainstream commercial cinema, Bombay in the decades after Independence had come to stand for the problems and possibilities of the city as opposed to the village, symbolizing both Indian modernity and industrial development.² The landscape of Bombay, marked by sites such as the Victoria Station, the Gateway of India, Marine Drive, Chowpatty and Juhu beaches, a slum, a chawl, and middle class high rises were important elements of the narrative structure of these films.³ For example, in the films of the fifties and sixties, the anonymity and dislocation of urban living would be indicated by a standard shot of the new arrival

from a small town or village, lost amidst the crowds outside the Victoria Terminus railway station. The romantic comedies of the seventies and eighties, centered on the middle class, were set against the Bombay high rises. Similarly, the male action films from the same period starring Amitabh Bachchan, with their strong overtones of urban proletarian anger, were staged against the lower middle class housing of the chawls and working class slums. First, beginning in the nineties, public places that had previously served as familiar landmarks of the city started to disappear. Now, instead of arriving at Victoria Terminus or singing by the beaches of Bombay, lovers started to perform their song and dance routines in exotic locations: in Singapore, London, Switzerland, New Zealand, Australia, Mauritius, and Canada. The lingering shots of the Gateway of India that had previously signified arrival or departure were replaced by the interior of an undistinguished airport. Marine Drive, Bombay's well-known sea-facing street, disappeared, to be taken over by unidentified streets in a generic city without a name.

Second, even when Bombay came to be referenced by name what got shown was not Bombay at all. Rather, it was a mishmash of a South Asian city with some American flavor thrown in. *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai*/A Certain Feeling (Karan Johar, 1998), for example, was set in St. Xavier's College, Bombay but shot on location in Scotland and Mauritius. Besides one brief shot of the outside of the college that was used to quickly establish the location the rest of the film was shot indoors. The set inside paid homage to Disney and the American teenage film genre à la *Grease* (Randal Kleiser, 1978) or *Saturday Night Fever* (John Badham, 1977). The college courtyard, where the students sang and danced, had vending machines (yet to appear in Bombay college campuses at that time) and people parading in Disney costumes. The classrooms, done up in shiny bright new colored tiles were quite a contrast to the actual college's old architecture.

Third, while any resemblance to the real Bombay was rapidly disappearing from its filmed image it became almost mandatory to take audiences to cities that it *should* look like. The lifestyle of the wealthy, as represented in these films, included weekend shopping trips, vacations to foreign locations or multiple residences across continents. For instance, in *Jeans* (S. Shankar, 1998), the young lovers went to all the Seven Wonders of the World as part of their honeymoon. The proletariat could, of course, travel in their dreams. In *Rangeela*/Flamboyant (Ram Gopal Verma, 1995), the film's hero is a poor but bold street-smart survivor who makes a living selling movie tickets in the illegal black market. When he falls in love and breaks into the usual romantic song and dance number in which the lovers make their escape from the crowds of Bombay they end up in Manhattan on a couch flying past the skyscrapers, the Statue of Liberty, and the Hudson River. A literal translation of the shifting view of the world that now regularly comes into Indian homes via the Television set since the privatization of Indian television!

This global imaginary also overturned another popular motif of Bombay cinema from the seventies and eighties. A theme common to these films used to be that two or sometimes even three brothers, fallen upon hard times, would be separated in childhood only to be reunited at the end of the film. In these films, one brother would become a criminal driven by the grinding poverty of Bombay while the other would turn into a law-abiding citizen strongly evoking the dilemmas that



Figure 1. The college courtyard in *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* flanked by balloons and Pepsi.

working class immigrants experienced in Bombay. In the end, the criminal brother would be killed. However, his end would be mourned as the death of a brave and ultimately honest man whose poverty and social alienation had forced him into turning violent. In the recent *Kaho na Pyaar hai/Tell Me That You Love Me* (Rakesh Roshan, 2000), this motif is updated. The film's protagonist is killed and his beloved finds his look alike, not brother, in far away New Zealand. Furthermore, the story stays clear of situating the protagonist's dilemmas in social circumstance. Instead, the film is cast as a psychological thriller setting up individuals as driven by their internal psyches rather than their social situations. The fictitious world of Bombay film was beginning to get smaller, atomistic and privatized!

Finally, these 90s films redefined the nature of the city itself—homogenizing cities as spaces of consumption rather than the production of goods, services, or political associations. The streets of Bombay were turned into an assortment of landscape and tourist spots, malls, neon signs, and global brand names making Bombay undifferentiated from any other city. The changed mise-en-scène of Bombay is, ultimately, an object lesson in being a consumer. Historically, even prior to the days of product placement, mise-en-scène has served the crucial function of socializing consumer culture. After all, it is the setting—what the stars wear, how they do their hair, where they live, the cars they drive—far more than the narrative or character development that teaches us what to aspire for.

The big fat Bollywood wedding

The question is: what made it possible for these films to skirt the well-known public spaces of Bombay and to invent a nonspecific city in its place? The answer lies in the new importance which these films placed upon consumption and the fact that in capitalism consumption is incessantly privatized. These films were predominantly set in spaces of consumption—either in the private spaces of bourgeois homes or the “public” ones of shopping malls, discos, bars and such like. This eliminated the need to refer to a publicly recognizable Bombay. The interior decors



Figure 2. The lovers fly over New York City: *Rangeela*

of these new film-homes continued to be as fantastical as before but with two added features: a swimming pool in the living room and, if there was a child character in the film, a playroom filled up with cuddly toys. The playroom invented the child as a consumer, with its own room and possessions, while the swimming pool launched the new image of the large extended family—as fun-filled and open to consumption rather than authoritarian and constraining, one disciplined for production. The patriarch in this new fun-filled family is still tied to the disciplinary regime of production—the industrialists and their elder sons still run the businesses—but the women, children and the grandparents revel in an endless celebration of rituals and merrymaking.

The film that brought the Hindu joint family into vogue was *Hum Apke Hai Kaun* /How are we Related? (Sooraj Barjatya, 1995). The film's major narrative attraction was the Hindu wedding, of which it had not one but two. Since then, popular Indian films took to showcasing a wedding or two, each raising the stakes for ostentatious spending higher by inventing new rituals around marriage and pregnancy. A curious case of the invention of tradition! In this genre, loosely characterized as the romantic family melodrama, the household with its various relatives and servants live happy, self-absorbed lives, each in their assigned place in the patriarchal hierarchy—so busy celebrating Hindu rituals that they have no desire or time for any public engagement. Some films extended this image of the benign patriarchal family globally showing white domestic workers serving wealthy Indian families abroad. This inward-looking family, the subject of the glossiest films of the last fifteen years, obsessed with spending and showing off its wealth, can of course exist in Delhi, London, or New York or in all three places at different times. Chaddha or Nair's wedding films, which brought the exotic Bollywood wedding to North American multiplexes, were thus *following* a trend, not setting one.

The family or the wedding is certainly not necessary to consumption because, as we have seen in the advanced capitalist nations, capitalism is not vested in the family. Rather, turning us into consumers is a constant process of atomization. Consequently, a new trend in Bollywood can be spotted, one in which the romantic story takes place without families, in which the individuals are upwardly mobile and traverse continents. A new genre, the psychological thriller in which bourgeois narratives of individual protagonists who face others as personal threats—as psychopaths and stalkers—is also beginning to make a niche in popular Indian cinema. However, as of now this is still a minority trend with the family melodramas remaining the most popular.

The image and profit making

The question is, why now? Part of the explanation for this new fascination with seamless global travel to generic interchangeable cities of consumption (whether of families or individuals/ whether cast as obviously fictional or real) that has taken over Bombay cinema lies in the political economy of the film industry itself, its unprecedented success with and reach into a global audience amidst rising costs of filmmaking. Measured by the number of films produced every year—800 features in more than 20 languages—India's film industry is the largest in the world. The reported turn over, according to *The Economist*, is about \$1.3 billion a year with ticket sales of approximately 80 million a week. An estimated 6 million people are employed in various aspects of film production, distribution, exhibition, and marketing (2002).⁴ There are, as Pendakur recounts, approximately 13,000 theaters in the country and unlike in the US-Canada markets, vertical integration of production with distribution and exhibition is not common (2003).

The Bombay film industry is dominated by entrepreneurial capital. So far there has been no obstruction in that flow of money--i.e., money made in various industries including construction, hotel industry, diamond business, mining, and even agriculture--into the movie industry. Exhibitors do not necessarily invest in production except for advancing money to acquire these star-driven movies. After all, since start-up money for films is flowing well there appears to be no reason to have organized finance. Moreover, banks have been slow to get involved in the risky business of production, concentrating instead on theater construction. Banks understand brick and mortar and appreciate getting possession of titles to land rather than cans of exposed celluloid if something goes wrong! Although, there has been a greater degree of de-regulation in the movie industry since the 90s, particularly with Disney, Fox, and Sony interested in the Indian market that entry is still relatively new and unable to change the basic structure of filmmaking.⁵

In the 1990s, there were critical changes in India's domestic market for films that have, in our view, further increased the risk for investors at all levels (production, distribution, and exhibition). Foremost is the escalation of production costs (Pendakur, 2003, 29-30). No one keeps systematic data on costs but all indications are that production costs have tripled. An average Hindi language film in the 1990s cost Rs. 50 million and a high budget film cost Rs. 300 million.⁶ There

are many complex reasons for this development. Star power, which lures the mass audience into the theaters, is at the heart of this problem. New producers arrive on the scene every day and launch a film based solely on a star signing a contract. The script, music, location scouting, and other technical details are usually worked out after a star is signed up. Taking stars to foreign locations makes financial sense for producers since it gives them exclusive ownership of the star's time, which otherwise would have to be shared with other competing projects in Bombay. The other principal reason mentioned by producers, directors, actors, and others is that the mode of production is chaotic at best. Lacking the necessary discipline, principal photography may last a year or more, which contributes to interest accumulation, waste, and higher total cost of production.

Finally, much of the money that circulates in the Bombay film industry appears to be money that was never subjected to taxes. In other words, it is money from the shadow world of tax dodgers, thieves, and international racketeers. In their report on the arrest of Bharat Shah, the leading diamond merchant of Bombay, who had reportedly invested some Rs. 1000 million in film production, Sheela Raval and Anupama Chopra broke open this well-known secret (2001)! The glamorous lifestyles of the stars and the promotion of conspicuous consumption in these fantasy films has been linked to an international network of murderers and racketeers dominated by underworld dons who have global businesses that connect Karachi, Bombay, Dubai and New York. They see the Bombay film industry as a convenient conduit for their profits and an easy way to launder those illegal funds. Extravagant sets, locations, cars, hotels, costumes, 70mm film stock, costly gifts, gala openings, and press shindigs become a way to spend money and Bombay's popular cinema is caught up in this frenzy to spend.

Given these rising costs, international markets assume even greater importance to profitability. There are five domestic distribution territories in India and the international markets are lumped under one category. Until the 1990s, the United Kingdom, the Middle East, and North America were the key areas for Hindi language films abroad. Since 1998, the US-Canada market has grown in importance for Indian filmmakers, not just in Hindi but in all other languages as well. One major distributor in North America estimated that 40% of total international box office revenue for Hindi films comes from the US-Canada market, 25% from the Middle East, and the rest of the world makes up the remaining 15%.⁷ According to a major distributor, share of revenues produced by international markets in 1990 rose from 1/6 to 1/3 of the total revenues for Bombay cinema.⁸

The most difficult market in the world to enter is the United States. Indian cinema has cracked this market through the back door—that is, by developing an audience of South Asians on the periphery of the mainstream, Hollywood cinema. The huge success enjoyed by three Hindi films in the 1990s—*Hum Aap Ke Hain Kaun/ Who am I to You* (Sooraj Barjatya, 1994), *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge/ The Lovers Will Take Their Brides* (Aditya Chopra, 1996), and *Taal/ Rhythm* (Subhash Gahi, 1999)—set a new trend.

The growing population of South Asians worldwide is now estimated at 20 million. While there has been relatively little growth in the traditional areas of South Asian migration—Middle East, Africa, UK—North America, particularly the

US, has attracted larger numbers of South Asians because of the growth of the information technology (IT) industry. Under Bill Clinton, Indians were given preference in the issuance of visas to work in the IT sweatshops in the US. In a deal made with the IT industry in 2000, the Clinton administration issued 600,000 visa numbers out of which 450,000 were slated to go to India. These new immigrant workers and their families from India further strengthened the already large South Asian population in North America wishing to consume popular films made in Bombay.

As stated earlier, the overseas market for Indian films constitutes 1/3 of total revenues for Hindi language films. Bombay releases approximately 120-130 titles a year. 50-60 of those films find entry into the theatrical markets in North America.⁹ Given the recent successes, simultaneous release in 55-60 screens is becoming common for major pictures. From Toronto to San Francisco, Vancouver to Washington, DC there are regular theatres showing Bombay films. Sony Entertainment Television, an arm of the Sony Corporation, bought the North American theatrical rights for *Mission Kashmir* (Vidhu Vinod Chopra, 2000) and with their market power in the US-Canada markets, Sony released the film in regular multiplexes. This new trend has become established practice. Karan Johar's *Kabhi Kushi Kabhi Gam*/ Sometimes there is happiness other times sorrow, opened on 73 screens in December 2001 and grossed over a million dollars in three days in the North American market alone.¹⁰ Several other films in the last five years have been listed in *Variety's* top 20 box office hit list. Popular Indian films have increasingly become available in well-equipped theaters with better sound and projection technology and a better environment compared to the ones that were usually used by the importers before the 1990s.

Another important reason for Bombay cinema going global is the changes in the ancillary markets for Hindi films. While video rental and their outright sale are nearly dead, DVD rental and outright sales and music rights grew in the 1990s. These sales have brought in considerable hard currency from North America. An estimated 60,000 South Asian households in North America have subscribed to satellite delivered channels, paying \$20 a month for Indian produced entertainment. Naqvi reported that according to Jawahar Sharma, the CEO of Yashraj Films, USA, the Indian film industry generated approximately \$100 million annually in North America from theatrical, music, and video distribution in 2002. The exponential growth of revenues for imported film-related entertainment from India in North America has prompted the major producers and distributors of Bombay cinema to deliberately go after the South Asian diaspora audiences. Eros International, Video Sound, Sony Entertainment, and Yash Raj Films have confirmed this observation and it is likely that more and more Indian production companies will set up their own direct distribution offices in the US in the near future.¹¹

Imaginative spaces/ real lives

The seamless traveling around the globe that is represented in these films confirms the lives and aspirations of the upper sections of the Indian international professional and managerial middle class, a group that services global business, travels frequently, and consumes the same brands as their international counterparts.

Known as NRI (non-resident Indian) this group has achieved a new significance in Indian political and economic life, courted by the Indian government as a broker to international capital and celebrated by popular culture as the epitome of the “good life” of neo-liberalism. Commenting on the rise of this class, Praful Bidwai (2000) gives the example of L.M. Singhvi, the chairperson of a government-appointed committee set up to court the wealthy diasporic Indian population, who bragged in London in September 2002, that “the Sun never sets on the Indian Diaspora”—thus, inverting the British imperialist boast that the sun never set on the British empire.

The favored genre for this Indian elite, as Ravi Vasudevan (2000) has suggested, is the romantic family melodrama, precisely the kind of film we have discussed in the previous section. The failure of the other staple of the current Bombay film—the action genre—in the North American market is a further indication, Vasudevan adds, of this elite’s discomfort with the sordid and violent aspects of contemporary Indian mass culture. In fact, Madhava Prasad (2003) is entirely correct in pointing out that it is only recently that the term Bollywood has become part of common parlance, entering India via non-resident Indians, who have embraced this cinema in the U.S. and U.K. as a cultural marker of difference from Hollywood, in turn raising its status in India. Previously, the term Bollywood was limited to the English press in India patronized by the Indian bourgeoisie who derided this cinema as low art, kitschy entertainment that had nothing of original value to offer. Several in the film industry resented the term Bollywood because of the status it conferred upon Hollywood, dismissing popular Indian film as a poor wanna be.

What is being redefined here is the categorization of the national elite itself. The NRI (who was earlier, sometimes contemptuously referred to as the Not Required Indian) has moved on to become the hero of the nation, part of the upper bourgeoisie, who might have primary residences in India, but travel abroad with residences thrown across the globe.¹² However, this transnational elite is struck by a fundamental dilemma. It must straddle an imperialist and racist international market as a junior partner and a deeply antagonistic and divided nation as its ruling class. Feasting on extravagant consumption around family and private rituals where the hierarchies of caste and gender can be kept intact provides an escape and imaginary resolution.

There is a direct correlation between opening up the Indian economy to global capital and the assertion of national superiority—the greater the pace of integration into global capital the greater the resurgence of rabid nationalism, one that insists in the voice of Hindu fundamentalism on retaining the traditional hierarchies of caste and gender. The soft form of this assertion is the glossy, fun-filled Bombay film and its terrifying form is the nuclear bomb and the systematic killing of minorities by the Hindu fundamentalist forces. Furthermore, the problem that will not go away is, how to propagate a consumerist life-style in an economy that is predominantly a Third World economy geared towards production for the First World?

Arjun Appadurai has characterized the global imaginative spaces of the late 20th century as “mediascapes,” which, according to him, have challenged “the traditional or material givenness of things” (1990). For Appadurai, fantasies derived from global media have become driving forces in geographical mobility. Liberals

love to celebrate new media technologies and the internationalization of culture—this is the buzz around globalization and an eternal spring for optimism that “eventually, things will get better.” What they choose to ignore or see as unconnected from cultural and technological change is the structure of ownership of wealth, that which enables or restrains and directs geographical mobility.

Henri Lefebvre suggests instead that we think like Marx and see the present in terms of a contradiction between new means of production and older social relations, in which the latter include the social imaginary, i.e., how we, as a society, think about this change (1991). While new technologies have made it possible to imagine space on a global or worldwide scale that space is fragmented and even erased when it comes to representing it from the material reality of the lived experience of people’s lives (Lefebvre, 1991, 353-55). Doreen Massey (1994) has further clarified that geographical mobility is differential and dependent on two factors: first, the ability to move and second, the ability to control that movement.

Disintegrative integration

For the majority of people living in Bombay global mobility is only a virtual reality as they are integrated into global capital not as consumers but as labor; a fact that rips through these fantastical images of Bombay as a glittering city of malls and tourist spots generated by the Bombay film industry. Beginning in the seventies and eighties, Bombay began to be restructured from a manufacturing city into a commercial and financial center. Its major industry, textile manufacturing, was dismantled compelling increasing numbers to seek work in the informal sector. When textile workers went on an eighteen-month long bitter strike in 1982 mill-owners responded by shutting down the mills, choosing to profit through the skyrocketing rise in the value of real estate. In place of the textile mills, Bombay now has textile workers producing piecemeal in their homes. New labor legislation, such as the Industrial Disputes Act (2000) has granted small industrialists (those employing less than one thousand workers) the freedom to hire and fire at will while new technologies have integrated Indian labor into the global market. Leela Melawani, in a report on “virtual immigration” documented the case of 12 Technologies of Dallas, a corporation which runs software development centers in Bombay and Bangalore, paying its Indian workers a third of their American counterparts (2002). In short, 21st century technologies of capital accumulation are pushing Bombay into the unprotected labor relations of 19th century sweatshops.

As India’s foremost metropolis, Bombay is now in the midst of another transformation-- into what Saskia Sassen (1991) has termed a “global city”. According to Sassen the global economy is a network of some forty global cities oriented towards a global market. They house concentrations of corporate headquarters, services, and asset management institutions. Typically, they have central “glamour zones” with fancy offices, hyper-urban professionals living close by, and shopping areas. Together, they provide the management, coordination, and services needed to move goods and capital around the world. Their interdependence distinguishes them from the spoke-of-the-wheel capitals of the empires of the late nineteenth-

early twentieth century. Bombay's glamour zone is the New Bombay area and the financial district around Navy Pier. However, Sassen emphasizes, this does not mean that the cities are equal players. The network has a distinct hierarchy, with New York, London, Tokyo and Frankfurt in the top tier, whose importance to global finance capital is unmatched by other cities, including Seoul, South Korea; Bangkok, Thailand; Santiago, Chile; and Bombay, India.

The fantastic claim that Bombay is a player in the first tier and the free market a harbinger of new opportunities sometimes erupts in films, particularly popular with the urban male proletariat, where the imaginary geography of Bombay is taken to an excess. Take for example, *Kunwaara/Bachelor* (David Dhawan, 2000) starring Govinda, a male star, known for his song and dance comedic routines. In keeping with the trend to glamorize global brands, this film takes on McDonald's and subverts the chain's own self-sell as a family restaurant, showing it instead as an upscale bar! In the following two frames from the opening scene of the film, the heroine walks into a McDonalds to find two men holding up the "bartenders," who she then rescues.

In order to shift Indians from the periphery (as labor and service-providers) to the center of global capital (as consumers and owners), Indian cinema has had to erase signifiers of its own location and retreat into private spaces of consumption. Bombay is simply too crowded, too dirty, too poor-- in other words, too Third World to represent the glamour, wealth, and affluence imagined of a city of advanced capitalism. The other option is to show India as pastoral, located in a pre-capitalist past commodifying its history and specificity as "ethnic" chic, with minute attention paid to designing period costumes and sets. This is a trend--already started in *Dilwale...*, where the Indian landscape remained unchanged for the twenty years the protagonist had spent in England—we expect will continue.

The attachment to locality and place is often, as Doreen Massey points out, seen as a reactionary or nostalgic move, best expressed in religious fundamentalism and ethnic movements. However, the opposition to global capital can also be articulated from a position that is strongly attached to place but critical of capitalism—one that calls upon the class nature of its anti-colonialist struggles. Indian nationalism has its roots in anti-colonialism and subsequently, the nation can be a powerful ideological weapon in resisting imperialism. But only if, as Randhir Singh (1999) demands, that we remember that the end of the British Empire in 1947 was only a stage, not the goal, the beginning not the end, of the struggle against capitalism. Consequently, recalling that historic victory from a Marxist position in this latest phase of imperialism requires, Randhir Singh continues, to insist on the class struggle within the nation, on what he has calls the "anti-nation within the nation." While it is to be expected that liberal nationalists will emphasize the nation as a way to mystify class this emphasis also finds its way in Marxist critiques, such as Fredric Jameson's (1986) claim that all Third World literatures are national allegories. Aijaz Ahmed's response to Jameson (1987) is well-worth reading in its entirety for recalling the importance of class as India is "globalized" once again.

Restoring politics to public spaces rather than turning public places into sites of consumption invariably stirs up memories of those earlier anti-colonialist assertions of people's power. Consequently, cinematic texts are filled with such contra-



Figure 3. Opening shot establishes the location as a McDonald's: *Kunwaara*.

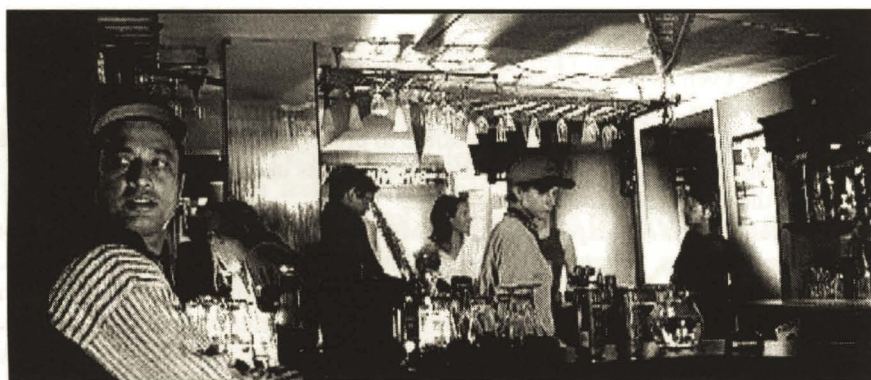


Figure 4. Followed by an inside shot of McDonalds: *Kunwaara*

dictions. Here we would like to indicate the dilemma of the few commercial films of this last decade that have turned their attention to Bombay as a site of collective action. One of these is *phir bhi dil hai Hindustani*/Ultimately We Are Indian (Aziz Mirza, 2000). Very much in the tradition of the nineties films, its central characters are young people—television reporters, whose ambitions are centered on making and spending money. However, they are disillusioned by their consumerist lifestyle and come to fight for the life of a man wrongfully sentenced to death by a corrupt government. At the end of the film, they get people out into the streets to prevent the hanging—and this is where we see Bombay again. While the imagery is strongly nationalist—with people waving flags—nationalism is interpreted as the ability of people to organize and act politically and *take charge of the nation*, to set it back on the original promise written into the constitution: secular, socialist, de-

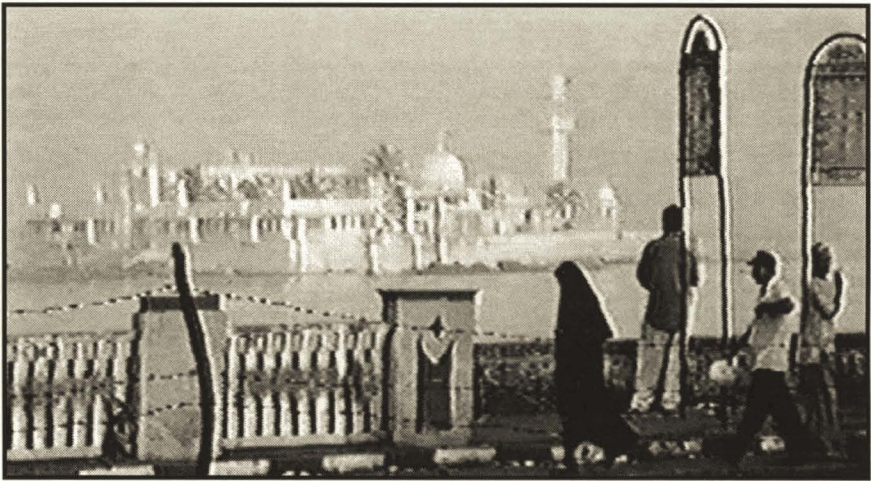


Figure 5. Frame from *Fiza*

mocratic, republic. The film can be critiqued on several grounds. It celebrates consumer culture even as it denounces it; it is sexist and assumes a harmonious nation undivided by class. The point, however, is that the film's move into the public, political spaces of Bombay makes it impossible to present Bombay as a generic global city—proving a contradiction that the text cannot cross unless it were to entirely move into the private spaces of consumption.

Similarly, *Fiza/An Expanse* (Khalid Mohammad, 2000) set in the 1991 riots against the Muslims, returns at crucial points in the film's plot to the Haji Ali mosque in Bombay, a place of worship for both Hindus and Muslims. Since the plot is set in the midst of the riots the film cannot but refer to the gritty reality of Bombay torn apart by poverty and religious fundamentalism, a reality glossed over by the films set in the private places of consumption.

Films like these highlight the contested nature of global capital from the standpoint of the cultural politics of representing a Third World city. When Bombay appears as a landscape it cannot but draw attention to itself and stand in opposition to these glittering fantasies. Thrusting a run down, conflict-ridden landscape in the face of global capital is a way to draw attention to its vast majority and at the same time their refusal or inability to disappear. In the face of a generation, still active, that came of age during India's independence, including the promises that the nationalist movement held for a life of dignity for the weakest and the poorest, it is still a powerful question to ask: is this the nation we set out to build? If we give up on the contest over this question we do so at our peril, for the right is actively reinventing nationalism as collaboration with international capital abroad and a fascist regime at home.¹³

Having said this we want to clarify that filming the public spaces of Bombay does not in itself qualify as the fiercest resistance to global capital. Resistance has to take place in the streets as well as in images, in political and economic structures

as well as cultural. Nevertheless, the image as ideology can teach an important lesson about the workings of capital. It is, that just as capitalism unites the world, bringing it within its grasp, it also fragments and divides it, sharpening the inequities and rendering the losers invisible. The dazzling spectacle of the world as a mall, filled with tantalizing commodities that are equally accessible to all can only be built on erasing the Third World cities on whose labor it is built. The disappearance of Bombay from its own cinema is, therefore, not accidental. It is in every way coincidental: the ideological product of imperialism, which has a history and logic, a beginning and an end, losers and victors. Globalization, on the other hand, appears to come out of nowhere, driven by economics and technology (with a life of its own, apparently independent of human action). The problem with this discursive strategy is that it has to erase history, memory, and render invisible those who are on its losing end—which, in the end, is an impossible task.

Notes

1. Charles II had, in turn, received Bombay as part of his dowry from the Spanish in 1661 when he married Catherine of Braganza.
2. India overthrew the British colonial rule in 1947 after a long anti-colonialist struggle.
3. *Chawl*, a Hindi word, refers to a building with several apartments of different sizes, often a shared bathroom or toilet, occupied by the lower middle class. This was a common feature of Bombay housing until the high rises. The chawls used to be more horizontal structures with relatively more open places for interaction among the residents.
4. "Ashok Kumar Obituary", *The Economist*, (December 22, 2001-January 4, 2002):, 108.
5. The entry of banks in financing films has opened up newer ventures, often characterized as middle cinema, that, unlike the big budget films which are the subject of our discussion here, tell more localized narratives, often about the middle to upper middle class Indian and explore relationships and themes new to Indian cinema.
6. The exchange rate has fluctuated between Rs. 40-50 to the U.S. \$ in the last ten years.
7. Lal Dadlani, President, Video Sound, New Jersey, personal interview with Manjunath Pendakur, November 7, 2000.
8. Jawahar Sharma, CEO, Yash Raj Films, USA, personal interview with Manjunath Pendakur. New York, November 8, 2000.
9. Ken Naz, CEO, Eros International USA, Seacacus, New Jersey, personal interview with Manjunath Pendakur, November 7, 2000.
10. Aseem Chabra, "K3G Grosses Record \$1 Million Opening for Bollywood Film." *India Abroad*, New York, December 28, 2001, 1- 6.
11. Ken Naz, CEO, Eros International USA, Seacacus, New Jersey, personal interview with Manjunath Pendakur, November 7, 2000.

12. We speak here about the imaginary that is premised upon the transnational capitalist class, not all Indian immigrants belong to this class. In fact, many work blue collar jobs. See Biju Mathew (2005).
13. Contrary to Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt's claim (2000) that Empire has diffused the power of the nation state, anti-imperialism is fought within and against the nation-state just as imperialism relies on the military, economic and political power of the dominant nation states.

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