

# Studying Bollywood

## Globalization, isolation, couples, and changing gender roles

Sangita Gopal, recently tenured associate professor of English, grew up in Calcutta and moved to the United States to attend graduate school at the University of Rochester in upstate New York, where she studied literary theory and film studies. She joined the University of Oregon faculty in 2004. Her book *Conjugations: Marriage and Form in New Bollywood Cinema*, is due out in fall 2011 from the University of Chicago Press. She coedited the book *Global Bollywood: Travels of Hindi Song and Dance* (Gopal & Moorti, University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

### **Q: Can you talk a little about your interest in studying film?**

My interest in film is linked to my long-standing interest in theatre arts and performance. I did a lot of acting and directing in college. In between finishing up coursework for my PhD and writing my dissertation, I took three years off and managed an off-off-Broadway troupe in New York. I managed the budget, set the schedule, did publicity, liaised with the press, oversaw the nitty gritty of productions—we had big-budget productions such as Brecht, Shakespeare, Ibsen. I loved that job.

### **Q: How does song and dance factor into your work?**

I have always been interested in theatricality and certain types of performance, especially those tied to music and dance. My first scholarly book was on Hindi film music, a collection of essays that I coedited, and for which I wrote a long introduction based on original research I did in the National Archives on Hindi film music. Song and dance is such an invariable part of Hindi popular cinema and has been since the beginning of sound. It is the one factor that people associate with the cinema but

that also becomes the hardest impediment for Western viewers attuned to thinking of the musical as a separate genre. It is also an impediment for middle to upper middle class Indian viewers, who see the excesses of song-dance as remnant of a degenerate, pre-modern mass form that only appeals to naive viewers. That's what got me interested—the persistence in song-dance on the one hand and the resistance to song-dance on the other—this push and pull.

### **Q: How do the processes of globalization affect Indian filmmaking?**

I came to believe that one reason why the Indian film industry has been so successful in warding off the competition, i.e. Hollywood, is precisely because it has crafted its own unique form that borrows on the Hollywood model but is quite distinct from it. Only 5 percent of the Indian market has been penetrated by Hollywood in its 110-year film history ... 95 percent of the Indian film market watches the domestic product, and Hindi cinema is one of the dominant cinemas among Indian popular films.

So if you're looking for an example of a popular industrial film culture that is equal to Hollywood, you have to look at Bollywood. Bollywood fought off the cultural imperialism of the U.S. film industry within its own domestic context. France and Germany failed. They had highly sophisticated and early film cultures. Japan failed. The only other film industry that comes close as far as numbers go is South Korea. More than 60-65 percent of South Korean cinema is domestic cinema. The other example is Iran where imports are effectively banned. Under situations of extreme protectionism it's not that interesting why the domestic film industry flourishes, it flourishes because no other cinema is imported into the culture. But in the case of India, the Indian film industry took off during the colonial period, when the British administration was flooding the market with western film, particularly Hollywood film.

The Indian film industry specifically erected itself as an industrial product that was part of the fight against anti-colonial images that the British and the Hollywood film industries were propagating. Part of that package of an anti-colonial cultural product was finding a unique cultural form that drew on the song and dance traditions already existing in Indian theater at the time. This alternative—crafted out of a marriage between a modern technology, film, and an already existing more pre-modern form—provides a really exemplary instance of a kind of post-colonial cultural formation that offers an effective counterpoint to Hollywood. It does so by offering its viewers what matters to them, as far as images, as far as cultural codes, and as far as the form itself, including song and dance. As I got into researching the project, I found that it also did really well in other societies like India that were battling between tradition and modernity.

### **Q: When did Bollywood films hit this country?**

In the late '90s through two routes: one was a sort of hipster route of music, primarily. DJs began to be interested in Bollywood music because it had a kind of kitschy, exotic quality that then got remixed by DJs as part of a global club scene. Another was through the immigrant population: ex-pat Indians for whom these movies represented a kind of contact with home, and their children, who might have been born in the U.S. These films represented their one viable window into that world.

### **Q: You have a new book coming out. What is the focus of your research?**

The time period of the last two decades. Hindi cinema starts out being



At a 2010 CSWS reception, Sangita Gopal (left) talks to colleagues Gabriela Martínez and Cecelia Enjuto Rangel while her daughter, Mohini, looks on (photo by Jack Liu).



primarily a domestic product, made for Hindi-speaking people within India, and develops a kind of global following in all kinds of unexpected places—the Middle East, North Africa, China, South America, and Greece, particularly among Turkish immigrants. All sorts of fandoms. But the product is not for these other people at all. They like it, because it has some resemblance to their own situations. We notice in the 1990s the increasing sort of visibility of people of Indian origin living in the west and their greater buying power. The greater the say they begin to have in the cultures where they live begins to give greater visibility to Indian cinema, which is intimately tied to its reception in the Indian diaspora globally and the prominent position of that diaspora. If they were struggling illegal immigrants Indian cinema wouldn't necessarily see this kind of upward mobility. It's tied to the fact that these are wealthy, professional groups. The film industry begins to incorporate these non-resident Indians, or NRIs, as a part of its own storyline and plots.

Here is where I got really interested because of the kind of gender politics around issues of the nation, nationalism, who belongs, and who doesn't that we see being effected through these movies. The stakes for Indian people who have grown up in another country often becomes, How do you hold on to that home culture? These stakes are visited upon the children in a very intense way—how do you still be Indian despite having been born in America and lived here all your life? How can you continue to have a relationship with your parents that resembles Indian family relations? How do you conduct dating and sexual life that resembles a more traditional way of being?

The movies began to play a critical role. They provide models of behavior—how to be Western and Indian. They do so often in an interestingly gendered way whereby not only are women often the carriers of this sort of national identity—that is to be expected; we see that in all cultures to some extent—but what I find even more fascinating is a certain rethinking of the issue of patriarchy itself.

We notice in these films a father who begins by being extremely rigid but over time comes to accommodate the desires and wishes of his children on condition that they respect certain cultural norms ... a negotiated settlement between the generations. This playing out of generational conflict on the one hand doesn't really destabilize gender roles in any serious way, but nonetheless calls for a rethinking of patriarchy. We see the emergence of a hyperemotional hero—this hero to some extent has always existed in Indian cinema but gets really front and center in the '90s. He cries easily; he will go to the ends of the earth to get his lady love, and so on. A hero who almost resembles a woman in certain performance rubrics and in the way that his body and facial expressions are used—a melodramatic female figure. The emergence of this type of hero, almost an hysterical figure, trying to work out these conflicting demands, simultaneously disturbs the traditional gender arrangements and reinforces them in that women are pushed somewhat to the sidelines, and men begin to assume the emotionality and the affects of women. Something similar is going on in American comedy.

The '90s Hindi NRI films really did this in a kind of concerted way, both to soften patriarchy up and in softening it to extend its reach—and women have to cede representational space to men. This kind of screen politics is closely linked to real politics. If on the one hand we don't want women to be objectified or to be primarily creatures who are crying or throwing a fit, we at least want to see them. In these films we barely ever see them. Hindi films of this era have done this, and I see this becoming more and more a trend in global cinema. The girl becomes pregnant but all the attention of—Oh my god, what's going to happen—is on the guy. The girl is the sensible one who is okay, who believes things will work themselves out. It's great that she's reasonable and rational, but it relocates the problem and all the attention onto the male figure. You wonder, Why am I feeling sorry for *him*? He got *her* pregnant.

**Q: Can you tell me more about the importance of couples, romance, and evolving gender roles as reflected in your new book?**

My book is interested in a reformulating of the romantic. The marital relationship that we see ongoing in Bollywood film of the last ten years is intimately linked to certain broader developments. I look at the industry and changes coming about in the industry, including changes in produc-

tion, exhibition and consumption of film, and how movies are watched. That on the one side and society on the other.

I start with the argument that in Hindi film for many decades, we have a peculiarly hybrid couple formation, where the couple has the right to choose his or her own partner, but may only do so after seeking the blessings and sanction of the family and society. This sort of compromised form of modernity is the normative form in Hindi film up into the '90s. As a result, movies are not so much about the heterosexual couple as a private entity, but more about this modern mode of partner selection, which stands in for all kinds of other relations, like the notion of capitalist choice itself, and other aspects of consumer modernity. Issues of romantic choice get invested with these other issues, including leaving the traditional family, village life, and so on. How the couple chooses, and what kind of accommodation the couple makes to these larger social frameworks, is the most important matter of investigation in these movies. Even at its most private moment, the couple is providing a public role, this negotiated form of the modern. This is in commercial Hindi film. Art cinema, and alternative cinema, pushes it at the same time.

**Q: Are there women writers or directors who are making artistic films that are more truly feminist?**

Some... the industry itself is not particularly known for this. The only film industry in the world that has lots of women directors is Iran.

The percentages in India are comparable to anywhere else in the world. They are not like Iran, but they are not below or over. Women do lots of editing. Women directors are found more in art and alternative cinema. Lately there have been more commercial filmmakers who are women. I would say a handful. I looked at several in my book. In other chapters, I write about movies made by women filmmakers who work in the commercial film industry. But traditionally, art movies and alternative film have had several female directors who continue to work in the present. Mira Nair is one. She started her career as a documentary filmmaker in India and has returned there to make her movies from time to time. There are others like Aparna Sen.

In these other films, women are shown to have much greater autonomy; or at least the struggle for autonomy is a big part of the thematic of these films, where there are women directors and more alternative main directors. Commercial Hindi cinema does not show that to the same extent. Until the last two decades or so, but significantly the last decade, this older, negotiated couple form is completely dissolving and yielding its place to what we understand as the modern nuclear couple. In the modern couple, the main struggle is not between the couple and society or the couple and the family, but in between the two figures, the man and the woman. They struggle for autonomy and respect, or for psychological reasons as you might have in any other situation where two people are so different from one another but trying to live together, or because of the sexual past that they've had. Another thing rare in Hindi film is the idea that either the man or the woman might bring with them a sexual past. So, from a situation where you have a couple trying to form itself as an autonomous unit against all these pressures of community and tradition, that struggle seems to have yielded place to the couple itself as a site of individuals struggling. I call this the privatization of the couple. The couple is now a private unit with its own psychology, its own history.

**Q: You were saying because of the diaspora, the movies are appealing to people who are no longer in India and who feel isolated.**

They are isolated, and for them the family is a kind of autonomous unit; it doesn't really have reference to the bigger societies that they inhabit because those societies have other norms. That is one of the reasons why this has developed. But the other reason, which I try to show in my book, is that private couple struggling to define itself vis-à-vis each other—this bid for greater individuality on the part of the women, but also on the part of the men, really. It is linked to issues like the diaspora, but it's also linked to privatization as a model for the arrangement of social and economic life under globalization.

One thing that India was required to do in order to globalize was give up public sector enterprises, so all companies like utility companies or

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water companies that were owned by the government had to be deregulated and opened up to the free market. The education system had to be rendered over to the free market and to private agencies.

This privatization of the society and the economy from a welfare, socialist state to a fully capitalist, free market state also has a reflex at the micrological level of the family and the couple. We see these concerns reflected repeatedly in the films, reflected as urbanization, reflected as the fact that one of the reasons why the couple seems to struggle so much is that they no longer have those social nets to rely upon and be answerable to. At the same time they don't necessarily even have the welfare state to provide the place of the missing social net. So when a child is lost, that child is truly lost. They no longer have grandparents and an extended family. Nor do they have good, state-run, funded childcare. So this utter isolation—from the governance of the family or of the state, from both these networks—is precisely one of the emerging realities of globalization everywhere. Hindi cinema via the couple and its radical isolation enables us to track this.

I have a chapter that looks at the rise of a genre of horror movies that focused on couples. Horror is a genre that helps us to isolate what a culture sees as problems of the family. Children who are imperiled, who return to haunt, who return to kill—is a typical trope of horror. Urbanization and nuclearization, it almost seems, makes horror possible. Whereas in the old horror films, horror occurred in the context of the countryside, or some deserted lake, or temple, or ruin, here, repeatedly horror occurs in the heart of the urban metropolis. Restoration of normality often involves calling upon the extended family from the village who come in and help to restore order.

A film *Bhoot*, which means ghost, is really fascinating. This couple is out househunting, rejects a bunch, but takes one that is really modern, totally chic. It turns out to be haunted by the ghost of a woman killed by her lover when she was pregnant. The woman becomes haunted by the ghost of this sad tragic figure who had lived there before. What is so interesting is that the solution of the mystery and what is ailing the woman is linked to leaving the city, going to the village and finding an ancient reli-

gious, shamanic figure—a woman, again—who comes and says, Here is what is going on and here is how we are going to heal you. The film says repeatedly this type of isolated living is not enough. You have to retie the bonds that were broken, return to the village and the belief systems that you have lost, and only then can you secure your household. In some ways, horror as a form and its emergence as a form at this moment, in this particular instantiation, which is urban and nuclear, is both a diagnosis of a particular condition and also a nostalgia for a different mode of life.

**Q: Would you tell us a little about the ways in which CSWS support has helped you?**

CSWS provided me with an excellent community of other colleagues and students, with whom I discussed my work, and from whose work I learned so much. Coming here in 2004 as a young faculty member, I found that intellectual community right away at CSWS. I attended a reception, met these women, and we became friends over the years. We met formally through RIGS—I was part of two different RIGS, but I would say even more significantly we met informally. Also, I was fortunate to win a fellowship—a CSWS Faculty Research Grant—and that aided the writing at a time when I really needed the time, because our department doesn't have that much support. I was able to take off one term when I didn't have to teach. I benefited from being a part of those two RIGS, and also the big conference that Professor Lamia Karim and I organized on media, gender, and empire. That allowed me as a junior scholar to meet senior people in the field, to interact with them at a wonderful level, and to become quickly abreast of the main currents of thought in my field, this broad field to which we belong that we might call feminist studies.

This is my great hope for something like CSWS. I know it plays significant roles on campus by supporting faculty and student research. But these broad conversations—we all get really involved in our book projects and so forth, and very rarely do we have the chance to step back and say what are the big questions animating feminism today. This I feel is incredibly helpful for you regardless of your discipline and regardless of what stage of your career you may happen to be in. ■

—Alice Evans interviewed Sangita Gopal in June 2011.