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# ***100 Essential Indian Films,*** **by Rohit K. Dasgupta and Sangeeta Datta.** **Rowman & Littlefield, 2019, 283 pp.**

Darshana Chakrabarty

Among the many film industries of South Asia, the Indian film industry is the most prolific, specifically Hindi language film, more commonly known as Bollywood, which produces almost four hundred films annually. Bollywood films dominate the national market. These films have also been exported successfully to parts of the Middle East, Africa, and the Asiatic regions of the former Soviet Union, as well as to Canada, Australia, the UK, and the US. The success of these films abroad is largely down to the presence of Indian communities living in these regions; as the conventional melodramatic plot structures, dance numbers and musicals tend to deter Western audiences. Within India and abroad “the traditional division between India’s popular cinema and its ‘art’ or ‘parallel’ cinema, modelled after India’s most prestigious film-director Satyajit Ray, often produced the uncritical assumption that Indian films are either ‘Ray or rubbish’” (Chaudhuri 137). Recently, Indian film criticism has begun focusing on popular Indian cinema, assessing the multi-discursive elements of the cinematic creations. Bollywood “gained prominence within academia due to its growing popularity and unique manner of glorifying Indian familial values” (Sinha 3).

From a history and origin of Indian motion pictures to selecting films that best represent the diversity, integrity and heritage of the nation, *100 Essential Indian Films* by Rohit K. Dasgupta and Sangeeta Dutta is a concise book on Indian cinema for connoisseurs and for film enthusiasts taking an interest in India’s classic and contemporary cinema. This book not only deliberates on popular Bollywood cinema, but also Indian New Wave/Parallel Cinema and regional films. Going beyond the delineations of contemporary cinema, it also surveys the advent of “mindie” films, a combination of “mainstream and independent cinematic aesthetics” (14). The one hundred selected films cover a vast array of genres: from conventional tragedies, comedies and musicals to hybrid genres like the melodramatic telenovela, gangster comedies, dark comedy thrillers and many more. The volume traces the route of Indian cinema from the silent era to present times, focusing on “historiography, regionalism, genres and themes, and global markets” (12). The book delves into the social, political, economic, and cultural circumstances of India, as well as discussing the aesthetics, narrative and formal qualities of the selected films.

The book begins with a brief history of Indian cinema which emerged from the Indian theatre culture of colonial times. From the release of Dadasaheb Phalke’s *Raja Harishchandra* in 1913, the first Indian silent film, the book traces the progress and spread of Indian cinema of different categories before and after independence from British rule; from popular Bollywood

cinema to the art-house films of Indian Parallel Cinema, as well as various regional cinematic movements, comprising films in a variety of languages such as Malayalam, Tamil, Bengali, Assamese, Punjabi and Marathi. These films are discussed, analysed, and interpreted, giving the reader a general overview of the films and their background. The introduction mentions the work, style, technique and intent of various prominent filmmakers and auteurs like Dadasaheb Phalke, Satyajit Ray, Mrinal Sen, Raj Kapoor, Bimal Roy, Rituparno Ghosh, Mani Ratnam, Vishal Bhardwaj, Ram Gopal Verma, Anurag Kashyap and many more. Moving away from just melodrama, romance, film noir and tragedy, modern Indian films are seen as a medium for representing authentic and real issues like drug abuse, gender mobility, gender empowerment, dysfunctional families, unusual friendships, and LGBTQ issues. The introduction also discusses the global market of Indian films and gives detailed information about the international awards earned by outstanding and extraordinary Indian films and filmmakers. Stepping beyond the national border, globalisation has made Indian cinema move “from the periphery of world cinema to its very centre. Indian cinema has indeed broken into the world circuit and, within a short period of time, has established a considerable presence within transnational filmgoing audiences” (16).

Following the introduction, the book goes through, in alphabetical order, each of the one hundred films. The films range from Bollywood to Indian Parallel Cinema, classics to contemporary, and romantic musicals to serious social issues. The full cast and crew, as well as technical specifications, are listed for each film, followed by a brief synopsis. This is followed by a contextual positioning of the film in social, political, economic, and broader cultural terms. The book incorporates critical analysis with well selected still pictures from the films, which lends the book an undoubted visual richness. The authors include such Bollywood classics as *Bobby* (Raj Kapoor, 1973), *Sholay* (Ramesh Sippy, 1995), *Mother India* (Mehboob Khan, 1957), *Amar Akbar Anthony* (Manmohan Desai, 1957), and *Umrao Jaan* (Muzaffar Ali, 1981) as well more contemporary entries to the Bollywood canon, such as *Lagaan* (Ashutosh Gowariker, 2001), *Maqbool* (Vishal Bhardwaj, 2003), *Uda Punjab* (Abhishek Chaubey, 2016) and *Queen* (Vikas Bahl, 2013). From the first set of films mentioned above, *Mother India* and *Sholay* stand out as classics of Indian cinema. The authentic yet melodramatic portrayal of the ideal, chaste, woman, a single mother surviving through hardships to raise her two sons, in *Mother India* has always fascinated audiences as well as students of cinema, through its exploration of the empowerment of women and cultural changes taking place in Indian society. Through appealing and memorable music and dance numbers, *Sholay* represents the true friendship portrayed through Jai and Veeru while bringing “a new stage in the evolving dialectic between violence and social order to India cinema” (203), which is in keeping with Priyam Sinha’s assertion that “internal fissures within the Indian cinema industry started to gain prominence in attempting to make films that provide content and not mere entertainment” (208).

In recent years Bollywood has begun tackling more contemporary social issues. For example, *Uda Punjab* deals with the problem of drug trafficking and drug abuse as a serious obstruction to progress for individuals as well as the state, while *Queen* criticises Indian societal constraints, focusing on the need for women living in twenty-first century India to be independent and self-reliant. *Maqbool*, an adaptation of Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* updated to contemporary Mumbai’s gangster underworld, highlights the lasting impact of colonisation on Indian culture. Alongside these, Bollywood has also worked to bring to the fore LGBTQ issues, which are still considered taboo in contemporary Indian society. The LGBTQ community in “queer Indian

cinema has always faced objectification and are victims of satirism and taunting” (Pooja and Rekha 2854). The book features films like *Fire* (Deepa Mehta, 1996), *Dostana* (Tarun Mansukhani, 2008), *My Brother...Nikhil* (Onir, 2005), and *I am* (Onir, 2010), which portray gay and lesbian characters, questioning the homophobia that is prevalent in Indian society.

Bollywood has always been criticised for its reliance on melodrama, over-the-top dance and musical sequences along with its sometimes flippant dialogues, which can undermine the seriousness of the issues and themes it is attempting to tackle. Bollywood has also been condemned “for its absolutist gaze through its melodramatic imagination” (Sinha 2). India Parallel Cinema, inspired by Italian Neorealism and French New Wave cinema and pioneered by the internationally acclaimed filmmaker Satyajit Ray, is a counterbalance to this. Moving away from the studio culture to the open city streets, fields and rural villages, Ray’s films, such as *Pather Panchali* (1955), *Devi* (1960), *Mahanagar* (1963) and *Charulata* (1964), comment on the various social issues that India was facing under the post-independence leadership of Jawaharlal Nehru. Not only do Ray’s films highlight genuine lives, stories, and emotions, but they are also a vehicle for Ray’s advocacy of gender mobility and the improvement of education in India: the two pillars of a progressive society. The book also features films by Indian Parallel filmmakers like Mrinal Sen, Aparna Sen and Ritwik Ghatak, whose films, like Ray’s, portray the real emotions of individuals who are entangled in complex social relationships, while commenting on the flaws in human nature and civilisation. The work of these filmmakers have “gained critical acclaim both in India and abroad, media attention, and substantial government patronage, and has, of late, broken out of the ‘art-house’ circuit to enter the domain of India’s burgeoning television culture” (Dass 194). In the section on *Masaan* (Niraj Ghaywan, 2015), the authors highlight the film’s tackling of issues like “identity in flux, aspirations of social mobility, and the forces that regiment [the protagonists’] moral universe” (147). The award-winning film *Halodhia Choraye Baodhan Khai* (*The Catastrophe*, Jahnu Barua, 1987) captures the life story of a farmer suffering under oppressive feudal structures. The entry of *Elippathayam* (*Rat Trap*, Adoor Gopalakrishnan, 1982) explores the collapse of a feudal family as an effect of modernity. The entry on *Mouna Ragam* (*Silent Symphony*, Mani Ratnam, 1986) comments on women’s agency, conjugal reconciliation, and marital breakdown.

Despite the analytical writing and film stills, which provide substantial understanding of Indian cinema in general, the authors neither categorise the films in popular, regional or parallel sections, nor do they discuss in detail the theories espoused by the films featured in the book, their differentiations or their problematic intersections. Compared to a large number of Bengali language films mentioned in the book, few other regional language films have been included; this could have been addressed in order to give a more balanced representation of other cultures and backgrounds. The subject of internal hegemony of Bollywood is underlined but not considered in detail. At times, the analysis provided for each film seems insufficient and inadequate, leaving out many essential themes and topics, thus potentially losing the interest and enthusiasm of readers. A reader’s expectation of a thorough engagement with cinematography, visual politics and semiotics of the films is not met by the book. Although it provides a synopsis and the themes covered by the films, it stops short of thorough observation, interpretation and aesthetic evaluation.

Nonetheless, the book provides good examples of films that best portray the culture and heritage of Indian cinema. It serves as an instrumental guidebook for film scholars and students to

delve into the scholarship of visual philosophies and film studies. By creating a wide-ranging bibliography from various sources, the readers' knowledge and intellectual understanding of the films is enlarged. This book aids readers to acquaint themselves with current scholarly discussions and creates a space for academic examination.

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