

Reviewing the National vs. Regional Debate in Indian Cinema

Indranil Bhattacharya

Film and Television Institute of India, Pune

Email: prof.ftii@gmail.com

Abstract: As scholars and researchers, we encounter popular, journalistic or, occasionally, even scholarly writings which conflate the term Indian cinema with Hindi Cinema, more specifically with the Hindi cinema of Bombay, now labeled as Bollywood cinema. The fact that Indian cinema is constituted by films produced in 14 different languages is sometimes conveniently overlooked. Hindi film focused research and scholarship has largely overshadowed Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam, Ahomiya, Bangla, Bhojpuri, Odiya, Marathi, Punjabi, Gujarati, Konkani, Khasi, and others. These vernacular films are often lumped into a category called ‘regional cinema’ or ‘Kshetriya Cinema’ in Hindi. Thus, an example of regional film would, ordinarily, be a film produced outside the production context of Bombay, and in a language, which is not **Hindi**. Interestingly, there are non-Hindi films which are often produced in Bombay, if not the entire film, but significant parts of its production are completed in Bombay. Thus, regional films could also be ‘Bombay films’, but such instances have reduced more and more with the adoption of digital technologies in film production.

In this article I have reviewed the discourse of regional cinema in India and have argued why this concept national and regional is fraught with unresolved conceptual problems, as well as political complexities. I have argued here that the prevailing notion of national and regional in Indian film scholarship needs to be critically reevaluated for better understanding of film production in India, and for a renewed critical examination of the cultural and linguistic diversity of cinema in India. I have signposted theoretical problems which arise because of the national/regional paradigm and emphasize the need for scholars and historians to go beyond this well-entrenched schema of national/regional. In conclusion, I will propose a category which I would like to call “the Hindi regional cinema” – a category separate and distinct from Bombay films, having surfaced in the 1970s, and argue that this marginal form needs to be reinvented in the 21st century. In doing so I will highlight certain thematic concerns and research questions in Indian film studies which future scholars of cinema might want to engage with.

Key words: National Cinema, Regional Cinema, Hindi Literature, Film Theory, History

A significant majority of film and cultural Studies scholarship, especially in the Anglo-American academia, has persistently represented Bombay Cinema as India’s national cinema – drawing our attention to a key role played by Hindi cinema in creating a powerful national imaginary in post-colonial India. I have referred to the cities of Kolkata and Mumbai by their colonial/old names in view of the historical material I am dealing with in this article. The expressions such as Bombay cinema and Bollywood have a particular import which, I feel, is crucial to the argument I am making here.

A 2003 monograph published by Jyotika Virdi titled “**The Cinematic Imagi-Nation: Indian Popular Films as Social History**” surveys the complex discursive terrain of Indian cinema scholarship through the idea of nation and nationalism. In her study Dr. Virdi entirely focusses on Hindi cinema, choosing a range of Hindi film texts from Bombay while theorizing the notion of the ‘popular’ vis-à-vis the aspirations of the post-colonial national bourgeoisie (Virdi, 2003). In the introduction to her book she states ‘Hindi cinema performs the function of building a national-popular culture, sustaining the notion of an “Indian” nation against diverse regional, linguistic, class, and city-country disparities...’ This notion of Hindi cinema as the cultural cement that binds the nation together has recurred time and again in scholarship, albeit in slightly different words and contexts.

Film commentator, M.K. Raghavendra, in the introduction to his book “50 Indian Film Classics” draws our attention to the difficulty he faced trying to forge a conceptual unity among the various *Indian* film texts that he is looking at, as according to him, they are a result of different impetuses (Raghavendra, 2009). So, by his own admission, while analysing his chosen film classics, he struggles to define their Indianness – a quality that brought them together in the first place. Raghavendra even goes to the extent of coming up with a rhetorical question on whether the films of Satyajit Ray ‘should be categorized as “Indian” or simply as “Bengali”?’ For him Ray’s cinema is more Bengali than it is Indian raising equally pertinent question about both Indianness (national identity) and Bengaliness (regional identity). It is ironic that Satyajit Ray felt that his talented contemporary from Bengal Ritwik Ghatak, was more Bengali than Ray. According to Ray Ghatak’s film had a form of indigeneity, which Ray’s films could never attain. So, should we for example, study Bengali Cinema of India together with the Bengali language cinema of Bangladesh, or Punjabi cinema together with Punjabi language films made in Pakistan, knowing that Pakistani and Bangladeshi films have a completely different cultural and national context. While transnational flows and connections pertaining to Indian films have been extensively studied in the recent past, national cinema has still remained a category which cannot be wished away. In reference to the dominance of Bombay films among Indian diaspora in the west, Rajinder Dudrah, describes Bollywood as a ‘hegemonic referent’ – largely for its global footprint, and its formidable popularity among millions of members of the Indian community in living outside India (Dudrah, 2012). For the diasporic Indian community, it is often Bollywood films that become the cultural referent for ‘home’ or ‘India’, rather than Punjabi, Gujrati or

Bengali films. According to Dudrah this dominance of Bollywood is linked to the various ways that Bombay Hindi films have managed to circulate around in the global media landscape, especially in the last 15 years.

We see book after book, staking claim and theorising the ‘national popular’ in India through the prism of Hindi Cinema, and in a way confirming the hegemonic status of Bollywood. Apart from this, scholars have also cited practical problems in carrying out rigorous and engaged scholarly study of regional cinema. This is largely due to the absence of good, subtitled copies of regional films. For example, a scholar from Bengal can easily access and study Hindi films, but not Tamil and Malayalam films, as Hindi still remains the most understood language in north and eastern India. This has resulted in this tilt towards Hindi films as domain of scholarly study, as opposed to films in other Indian languages, even dominant ones like Tamil and Telugu.

In the recent past there has been some critical voices which have pointed out this imbalance and the inherent problem of the tilt towards Hindi, and Hindi films being represented as the default “national cinema.” Sharmistha Gooptu observes in a recent essay, “for these writers, Bombay or Bollywood cinema was synonymous with Indian cinema, and the normative ‘Indian nation’ was the only available trope for understanding and meaningfully speaking about the cinema in India” (Gooptu, 2011, p767–775). Gooptu also draws our attention to the ambivalent relationship some regional language films have with the concept of ‘Indian’ nation. She cites the fact that the emergence of Dravida movement, anti-Hindi and anti-North India politics gave rise to a more complex idea of the nation in Tamil Nadu. Underlining this Gooptu observes:

At times it (Tamil Cinema) has constructed a hermetically closed and homogenous version of the nation (and nationalism) where Tamils are represented as an entity embodying and embracing the singular identity of the nation. Conversely, the figure of the nation is contested through counter narratives, which celebrate an essentialized notion of Tamil cultural and linguistic identity and which serve to challenge Hindi-centred nationalistic discourses.

This counter-narrative of Tamil Cinema, according to Gooptu, is a signal that it is incumbent upon scholars of Indian Cinema to pluralize the concept of national cinema into ‘national cinemas’ – different interlinked discourses of national imagination and identity, sometimes complementary,

sometimes contesting each other. But before we can establish that in the scholarly domain, we need to take a detailed look at the production and distribution context.

In the cultural scenario, the dominance of Bollywood has been so extreme that regional film makers and their distributors find it difficult to release their films in multiplexes, especially around the time huge Hindi films are released. Confronting this problem states like Maharashtra have come out with a legislation making it mandatory for theatres to show Marathi films during prime hours. Interestingly, with the emergence of subscription-based OTT streaming services such as Netflix, Amazon Prime, Hotstaretc regional films have found a new way of reaching audiences, including those audiences who are located beyond the geographical confines of the region. Non-Hindi films, often neglected by the theatrical distribution system now have the option to reach audiences and recover costs, because of the streaming services.

So, in short, this is the discursive and the industrial context within which regional cinema is produced, exhibited, watched, discussed and critiqued. Now, within this complex matrix, I will try to interrogate a specific notion of the ‘regional’ and discuss how this limited understanding of regional cinema, has not only shaped non-Hindi films, but Hindi films, as well.

Scholars of Indian film history are conscious of the distinction between hindi/national cinema on one hand and the regional/local on the other, is a much later development and did not exist in the early days of Indian cinema. *Raja Harishchandra* by D.G. Phalke – the first feature-length narrative films had intertitles in Hindi, Marathi and English, although some Maharashtrians do stake a claim on Phalke as the first Marathi filmmaker, film historians do not usually consider *Raja Harishchandra* as the first Marathi film. The assumption behind using multilingual intertitles was that silent cinema was pan-linguistic in nature and could be viewed across the country and abroad. When it comes to early sound cinema in India of the 1930s, we find that this cinema was dominated by the production of the three major studios, Prabhat Studio in Pune, Bombay Talkies in Bombay and New Theatres in Calcutta. A large number of films produced by Prabhat and New Theatres were bilinguals – in Prabhat it was made simultaneously in Marathi and Hindi, and in Calcutta it was made in Bangla and Hindi. For example, the 1936 Marathi film *Kunku* (V. Shantaram) by Prabhat Talkies is known as *Duniya Na Mane* to the Hindi speaking world. The bilingual film *Aadmi/Manoos* (V. Shantaram, 1939) was similarly a regional film, which had a national circulation as a popular Hindi film. The Hindi adaptation of the Saratchandra Chatterjee’s

Bengali novel *Devdas*(P.Baruah,1935), with Kundan Lal Saigal playing the protagonist, is equally or perhaps more famous as the Bangla version of *Devdas* which featured Pramathesh Baruah in the lead role. These films were regional/national at the same time. So, Hindi and regional films were embedded in the same cultural milieu, took its inspiration from the same literary, social or mythological material and were created by the same artistic team. In short, they were indistinguishable as films, barring the language of the dialogue. The end of the studio era, also marked the end of this practice of Odiya films, being made in Calcutta, or Hindi films being made in Pune or Telugu, Malayalam films being made in Chennai. This was the period that the idea of the regional cinema, as we know it today, was born.

Hindi cinema ironically, is centered not in Hindi speaking region of India, but in the capital of the Marathi speaking province of Maharashtra. In the colonial era Bombay or Bombay was a part of the Bombay Presidency and other than Marathi, Gujrati was the main language. Script writers, song writers, music directors, actors did come to Bombay from various parts of the Hindi heartland. The migration still continues. The various historical and cultural forces, which over the years, turned Bombay into a hub of Hindi Cinema has been recorded by film historians and I do not want to repeat them here. Instead, I confront a more pressing question. Can we go beyond the regional/national binary to look at non-Hindi cinemas of India? I feel that recent scholarship has put this paradigm under legitimate conceptual strain and opened up new trajectories for looking at and theorizing non-Hindi films.

One new conception that I propose here is a concept of 'regional Hindi cinema,' as being distinct from the Hindi cinema of Bombay. This is Hindi language cinema which is markedly distinct from the Bollywood style and aesthetic, and draws its inspiration directly from the culture, language, literature of the Hindi speaking regions of India.

Ideally these would be films either produced in or embedded in the cultural milieu of Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Punjab, Haryana, Rajasthan, Bihar, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Chhattisgarh – states known as the birthplace of a rich body of Hindi and Urdu literature. But this raises an obvious question – where are these films? It is true that the category of films I describe as regional Hindi films have remained as an extremely sparse and marginal form. Unfortunately, the cultural movement in the Hindi states did not give rise to a film industry, as it had done in Tamil Nadu, Kerala or West Bengal. The dominant reason was that Hindi film

production was centralized in Bombay, and most film workers migrated to the city to be part of it. So, stories by Phanishwarnath 'Renu' (*Teesri Kasam* dir. by Basu Bhattacharya, 1966), or Vijaydan Detha (*Duvidha* dir. by Mani Kaul, 1973, and *Pahelidir* by Amol Palekar, 2005) or by Munshi Premchand (*Godandir* by Trilok Jetley, 1963, *Satranj Ke Khiladi*, Satyajit Ray, 1977, and *Sadgati*, Satyajit Ray, 1971) were made in the Bombay industry. Bombay filmmakers, also, adapted novels and stories by Bhagwati Charan Verma, Mohan Rakesh, Rajinder Singh Bedi, Kamaleshwar, Rajendra Yadav and others. Most of these films alluded to here, despite being adapted from Hindi literary classics, were produced within the context of Bollywood, deploying Bollywood actors, technicians, production designers and were, filmed in Bombay studios, and deploying what can broadly be described as a Bollywood aesthetic. Some of these films are now considered part of the Indian parallel cinema movement, some part of mainstream Bollywood, and a few like *Dastak* (written and directed Rajinder Singh Bedi, 1970) and *Pati, Patni aur Woh* (written by Kamaleshwar and directed by B R Chopra, 1978).

To explain this idea of regional Hindi films I refer to the works of filmmakers such as Mani Kaul and Kumar Shahani in the 1970s and 1980s. This was the period when the state government of Madhya Pradesh, under the aegis of Bharat Bhavan and later by the Madhya Pradesh Film Development Corporation was producing feature films and documentaries. Madhya Pradesh Kala Parishad produced Mani Kaul's 1980s film "*Satah Se Uthta Aadmi*" (*Arising from the Surface*) which took inspiration from multiple writings of Gajanan Muktibodh. While borrowing the title from a particular story by Muktibodh—the film by Kaul eschews normative fictional construction and adopts a combination of narrative, lyrical and discursive modes. The film puts together multiple strands, characters, including the authorial voice of Muktibodh and explores aesthetic issues such as the relationship between an artist and his creation, but more importantly the disenchantment with the world experienced by creative individuals. Similarly, the 1989 film *Khayal Gatha* (*The Story of Khayal*) was directed by Kumar Shahani and was funded by the Madhya Pradesh Film Development Corporation. The film narrates the history of the Khayal form of *Shastriya Sangeet* by adopting the voice of a fictional music student in ancient India who takes us through a complex saga of Khayal form of music. *Khayal Gatha* combines multiple narrative strands gleaned from legend of Nala Damayanti, Heer- Ranjha, Rani Rupmati and Baaz Bahadur and others. The film borrows the idea of *Nayika* and the *Sakhi*, from the classical dramaturgy of Bharata's *Natya Shastra*. In terms of music, the film brings together renditions by

key exponents of Gwalior gharana including Krishnarao Shankar Pandit, Sharatchandra Arolkar, Jal Balaporia and Neela Bhagwat. Pandit Birju Maharaj, the great exponent of Kathak, also appears in the film. It was, thus, a film deeply rooted in the narrative, folklore, musical traditions of North India.

Madhya Pradesh Film Development Corporation – theoretically a public sector company is now defunct and is going through the liquidation process. However, while searching the internet, I came across the website of Uttar Pradesh Film Development Council (filmbandhu.in). The Council has come out with a comprehensive film policy to promote film culture and production in the state. The policy describes a whole range of endeavors – from reviving and reopening closed film theatres to setting up film institutes, to creating a film city to be used by both local and national filmmakers.

Echoing a similar approach, the state government of Haryana has come up with a detailed film policy. It proposes the setting up of a Film Council, which according to the agency, “will channelize energy of youth in creative field like cinema, to promote and preserve the culture, folk, music, heritage and traditions of Haryana, to explore and participate in the employment opportunities and skill development related to film field, building brand identity of the state, to promote Haryana as a favoured destination for films, and development of Haryanvi Film Talent, with special emphasis on gender equality and promotion of women active participation.” The goals are described in a bureaucratic language, but the crucial point is that the policy talks about promotion of local film production. In fact, it is the first state to create a University dedicated to film and performing arts located in the city Rohtak, close to Delhi. This institution at Rohtak has now developed into well-equipped film education centre and students have started graduating. The issue remains whether Haryanvi Film Talent is expected to join Bollywood or contribute towards the creation of a local Haryanvi regional Hindi film movement.

Conclusion

Given these efforts of regional authorities of in these states, one is hopeful that after 72 years of independence, the Hindi speaking states have a stronger scope to develop and nurture an authentic

regional cinema. As argued in this article, for aregionally authentic and culturally indigenous Hindi cinemas to flourish, it needs to grow out of the cultural milieu of Hindi speaking parts of the country. Whether a move towards Hindi regional cinemamaterialize in the distant future remains to be seen.

For scholars and historians, it is important not to lose sight of the fact that the categories of regional and national have been an impediment towards the study and dissemination of history of language cinemas in India. Revival of ‘Hindi regional cinema’ could possibly be able to correct this imbalance and generate fresh discourses and new ways of theorising Indian cinema.

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