BOLLYWOODIZING DIASPORAS:

Reconnecting to the NRI through Popular Hindi Cinema

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This project explores the recent shift in focus of popular Hindi (Bollywood) films from domestic characters encountering social issues, to members of the South Asian diaspora (primarily in the West) negotiating their ethnic identities. This project offers insights into the evolution of the Bollywood narrative where identities are being renegotiated and connections with traditional Indian culture are being challenged. Acknowledging the economic liberalization of India as catalyst, this paper examines the representation of the Non-Resident Indians (NRIs) and their connectedness with the diasporic reality in which they live. The representation is discussed in terms of the impact that religion, gender, sexuality, and regional/national politics have on the creation of a hybridized ethnic identity. Moreover, recent NRI-centric films are openly utilizing the diasporic characters as a safer experimental platform to negotiate these complex issues. The 2003 release of Kal Ho Naa Ho acts as the central example of a film that follows all the Bollywood conventions, yet due to its complete focus on the diaspora, can also be seen as non-Bollywood. The film's multiple subplots, tackling a wide range of issues among the diaspora, offer an engaging explanation of India's portrayal of its expatriates as a socially liberal, affluent, culturally liminal, and hybridized ethnic population within their host societies. Finally, the project delves into the visible shift of Hindi cinema from a dominantly India-centric industry to the realm of transnational cinema via images of the NRI.
DEDICATED TO...

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INTRODUCTION

Far from willing to be categorized as just another national cinema, the Indian film imagination is a diverse, resilient, and extraordinarily popular medium of entertainment. Its bond with the Indian cultural, political, and religious institutions is not just passably noticeable – it is an unshakable and blatant existence. India’s movies remain the greatest distraction for, and a major influence on, the everyday lives of the people, so much so that a major part of being “Indian” stems directly from the movie theatres. For millions of Indians, these films have become “the most readily accessible and sometimes the most inventive form of mass entertainment” (Rajadhyaksha and Willemen 1999: 10).

The world’s largest film industry is a legacy of the British Empire that has molded itself into Indian society and now presents itself as the pride of a billion people. India has always been a mélange of amazingly diverse nationalities and races, a great continental mass, the people of which practice almost every religion that exists, and who speak more languages than all of Europe put together. The common ground found in this mixture is the existence of a vaguely defined Indian-ness – loyalty to the flag and to the Indian cricket team, a pride in the nation’s democracy, a love for Bollywood movies, and a loose sense of shared culture and identity (Chandra 2000: 1). This diversity of the population nurtured the growth of regional film industries all over the nation; from Punjab (north) to Tamil Nadu (south), and from Gujarat (west) to Assam (east). Such is the craze for films all over the country that by the end of the twentieth century, films in India had been made in fifty-five different languages and dialects (Rajadhyaksha and Willemen 1999: 32).
The sheer enormity of India’s film establishment has only recently been receiving the worldwide attention and respect it has been demanding for decades. Producing the largest number of films each year, the “industry” is an amalgamation of films produced all over the country, in various languages, catering to one of the most diverse audiences in the world. While the film output of the nation stands at an average of 800-900 films each year, in 2003, “1100 full-length feature films were produced in India compared to 593 made in Hollywood; Indian films reached 3.4 billion viewers while 1.6 billion audiences saw Hollywood movies” (Elder 2005, in Srinivas 2005: 320). Furthermore, in addition to the entertainment value, Bollywood films offer a deep insight into the “cultural flows between and within post-colonial societies and between home countries…and the diaspora” (Srinivas 2005: 320).

Stemming from the economic liberalization of India as well as the recent surge in investment by the diaspora into their homeland, Hindi Cinema (the much less controversial title than ‘Bollywood’ for the industry) since the mid-1990s has embraced the expatriate community. Along with telling the expatriate stories to the burgeoning audience for these films, Hindi Cinema is also openly utilizing the diasporic characters as a safer experimental platform to negotiate complex issues of identity, gender, sexuality, religion, and regional/national politics that affect its domestic audiences. At the same time, these films are establishing popular representations of the diaspora and questioning their cultural connectedness to their homeland. Because of the socio-political impact of these films, this analysis will explore how the Non-Resident Indian (henceforth, NRI) is defined within the conventions of Hindi film narratives, and how the growing visibility of the diaspora within the cinema has begun changing those very narratives. Using the film
Kal Ho Naa Ho ("Tomorrow May Not Be," dir. Nikhil Advani, 2003) as a case study, this analysis will also delve deeper into the visible shift of Hindi cinema from a dominantly India-centric industry to the realm of transnational cinema via images of the NRI.

At this juncture, it is important to emphasize a few points that pertain specifically to this project. First, it is important here to add that ‘Bollywood’ itself is a disputed term, mostly by the artists directly involved in the cinema, and also due to the connotations of the Indian film industry being seen as an inferior imitation of Hollywood. The term ‘Bollywood’ is therefore used in this project in a positive manner that defines it as a globalized multicultural film tradition. Accordingly, it is used strictly in reference to the Mumbai-Hindi film industry which has dominated India’s film-going culture and is making its mark on the international stage via diaspora-themed movies. Therefore, films produced in all of the other regional centers and languages do not fall into the operational definition of Bollywood, even though they may exhibit styles and structures similar to this cinema. In this project, I use the terms ‘Bollywood’ and ‘Hindi Cinema’ interchangeably. It is also important to highlight in this study the use of transliterated spellings of film titles and other Indian words throughout the project. Because of the general lack of standardization and the need for clarity and consistency in transliteration of Indian languages into English, the spellings of Indian words in this project have been standardized according to the most frequently used transliterations in the research. For example, while Dulhaniya and Dulhania are both acceptable spellings, the former form of the word would be used since it was the spelling used on the publicity posters of the film Diwale Dulhania Le Jayenge.
The names of certain cities that are mentioned in this project are the current official names. The cities of Bombay, Madras, and Calcutta were renamed in the late 1990s to Mumbai, Chennai, and Kolkata respectively. Therefore, the current names are used to refer to these cities, even in the historical sections of this project. This is to avoid any confusion for the reader when the project moves through various time periods. Additionally, an updated map of India, highlighting the major regional film industries, is provided as the Appendix.

As for terminology, various expressions will be used in this project to refer to members of the Indian diaspora; most common will be Non-Resident Indians (NRIs), Persons of Indian Origin (PIOs), and simply Indian diaspora. The term South Asian diaspora, when used, is a collective reference to persons belonging to, or holding claim to, Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Nepalese, Sri Lankan, or even Afghan heritage. These various ethnic groups merge into one general film going demographic to form the Bollywood audiences in certain countries in the West such as the U.K and U.S.A. Finally, a glossary of key terms specific to Indian history, culture, and language is provided at the end of the project for reference.
PART 1

ESTABLISHING BOLLYWOOD AND THE DIASPORA
CHAPTER ONE
Unwrapping Indian Cinema

The movies that sing. The movies that show beautiful people suffering glamorously, wrestling with dilemmas of family honor and filial loyalty and, when words can’t express the ache or ardor in their hearts, dancing vigorously with a couple of hundred of their best friends. The movies that enthral, enrage and obsess a billion Indians, on the subcontinent and around the world. The ones that almost no serious film critic west of Suez notices, let alone cherishes.


Indian cinema has developed its own unique identity over the century of its existence. Despite being a foreign import, film has been embraced and adapted significantly by Indians, much more so than most other national film industries can boast. The birth of Indian cinema followed closely with the premiere of the first moving images created and shown by Auguste and Louis Lumiere in Paris in 1895, most notably the short documentary film L’arrivée d’un train en gare de La Ciotat (The Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat Station). The first Lumiere films were shown in India on July 7, 1896, an event that the Times of India excitedly labeled the “miracle of the century” (Gokulsing and Dissanayake 2002: 11). After this screening, entrepreneurs from the West were quick to recognize the “value of India as a site of filmmaking both because of its natural beauty and its ‘exotic’ culture…” (ibid.). This inspired the production of numerous films that made use of Indian locales and culture, such as Our Indian Empire (1897), Coconut Fair (1897), Poona Races ‘98’ (1898), and A Panorama of Indian Scenes and Procession (1898).

Realizing the potential mass appeal of cinema with the population, Indians soon entered the profession of filmmaking. Starting with Harischandra S. Bhatvadekhar (The
Wrestlers, 1899) and F. B. Thanawala (Splendid New View of Bombay, 1900), Indian filmmaking was born and launched into the production of a series of short “topical” films along the patterns of the first Lumiere shorts (Gokulsing and Dissanayake 2004: 12). Even with its early success, the widespread Indian passion for cinema didn’t begin until over a decade later. In 1913, photographer and poet Dhundiraj Govind “Dadasaheb” Phalke premiered the first all-Indian feature film – Rajah Harishchandra. Phalke based the film on a widely known mythological excerpt from the epic Mahabharata, and “launched a new art form on the subcontinent, an imported form that he at once connected to tradition” (Binford 1989: 1). In 1917, the first feature film was produced in the south, also based on the Mahabharata – Keechaka Vadham (“Battling the Demon”) – thereby foreshadowing the branching of the Indian national film industry almost two decades later.

The growth of Indian cinema and its messages under British colonial rule greatly paralleled the political and societal atmosphere of the country at the time, i.e. that of asserting historical and cultural identity. There was a strong concentration on themes of Indian identity, traditional values, and a budding indigenous aesthetic, as was evident in most of the feature films produced. The next major milestone in India’s cinematic history was the release of the first motion picture with sound, or a “talkie.” In 1931, successful entrepreneur and filmmaker Ardeshir Irani released his film Alam Ara (The Light of the World), just four years on the heels of The Jazz Singer (1927) – which was the first sound film in the world. Alam Ara signaled a revolutionary linguistic development for Indian cinema (see ‘The Regional Branches of Indian Cinema’).
Serving as an overarching introduction to, and a foundational basis for this project, this chapter provides an overview of the expanse of India’s cinematic identity. The following sections on the regional cinemas of India, and the evolution of Bollywood, its genres, significant early filmmakers, and the globalization of the cinema, aim to establish this foundational basis and provide a lens through which to understand the analysis and case study that form the primary subject of this project.

The Regional Branches of Indian Cinema

The sense of Indian culture derived from its films is just as diversified as the demographic it caters to. Contrary to most national cinemas, the Indian film industry is a conglomeration of numerous smaller cinemas each with its own language and center of production. Serving one of the most diverse multi-lingual, multi-religious, and multicultural populations that exists, the cinema of India underwent an inevitable branching process in its early years. After the release of the first picture with sound – Alam Ara (1931) – language became one of the most dominant forces in the evolution of Indian cinema. In the year 1931 alone, the first 28 sound films were produced across three different languages – Hindi, Bengali, and Tamil. Within the next few years, film production centers sprang up in ten distinct linguistic regions of India, catapulting India’s total film figures to larger numbers each subsequent year (Rajadhyaksha and Willemen 1999). Film as a popular medium began to delve deep into the consciousness of Indian society, as was evident in the increasing number of films being produced, as well as the growing value and popularity of those involved in filmmaking.
The sustenance, growth, and protection of the Indian film industries were furthered by the Indian government regularly. One of the first instances of the government’s involvement in the film arena was in 1927. To tackle the global domination of American films especially after World War I, the Government of India (under the auspices of the British government) established the Indian Cinematograph Committee. The mission of this committee, in their own words, was to protect the Indian film market from the hegemony of American-Hollywood films:

We have seen several […] Press comments from 1923 onwards [about the harm being done in India by the widespread exhibition of Western films]. The general trend of them is that, owing to difference of customs and outlook, Western films are misunderstood and tend to discredit Western civilization in the eyes of the masses in India. Such criticism was chiefly directed against “cheap American films.” To give an example of this sort of criticism, a well-known Bishop intimately acquainted with India stated (as reported in the Press) in a speech at a conference in England in 1925: “The majority of the films, which are chiefly from America, are of sensational and daring murders, crimes, and divorces, and, on the whole, degrade the white women in the eyes of the Indians” (quoted in Barnouw and Krishnaswamy 1980: 43).

As the various regional film branches of India were bolstered by subtle government backing, so was the spread of regional censorship boards and committees across the country. In 1951, in an attempt to federalize the censorship of films and to end the regional boards that were established during colonialism, the Indian government established the Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC). The government realized the ever growing popularity and significance of films on the daily lives of Indians and the national identity, and consequently established key constitutional legislation over the production of this entertainment medium. Designed to be a regulatory body overseen by the government, the CBFC became the mandatory and therefore primary agency through
which all films produced in India would have to pass before public viewing. Explaining
the role of the CBFC in the censorship of films, the Supreme Court of India declared,

Film censorship becomes necessary because a film motivates thought
and action and assures a high degree of attention and retention as
compared to the printed word. The combination of act and speech, sight
and sound in semi darkness of the theatre with elimination of all
disturbing ideas will have a strong impact on the minds of the viewers and
can affect emotions. Therefore, it has as much potential for evil as it has
for good and has an equal potential to instill or cultivate violent or good
behaviour… Censorship by prior restraint is, therefore, not only desirable
but also necessary.

(‘Introduction’ Accessed 2007: www.cbfcindia.tn.nic.in/)

While almost every significant linguistic group in India laid claim to its own
cinema, certain production centers began to lead the way in terms of size and market
reach. By 1935, the dominant film centers in India were Mumbai (making films in
Hindi), Chennai (making films in Tamil), Kolkata (making films in Bengali), and
Kolhapur (making films in Marathi). What surfaced then was the “discord of tongues”
where each of the regional industries suddenly carried very limited potential in reaching
out to the wider audience across India (Barnouw and Krishnaswamy 1980: 59). The
Marathi films, for example, could only be understood by the 21 million people that were
Marathi-speakers in the early 1930s. Similarly, the Bengali films from Kolkata reached
out to only 53 million Indians, and were incomprehensible to the rest of India and
beyond. Interestingly, there was no major film center located in the largest linguistic zone
of India: Hindi. Encompassing the majority of northern, north-eastern, and central India
with an approximate population of 140 million people (in the early 1930s), the Hindi
heartland was instead receiving its films from Mumbai, a city located at the core of the
Marathi-speaking population (Barnouw and Krishnaswamy 1980). The Mumbai-Hindi
film industry developed primarily due to Mumbai’s status as India’s financial hub and
also owing to the fact that the pioneers of Hindi sound pictures were of Marathi origin and from around Mumbai area. Consequently, Mumbai took the lead in filmmaking right from the beginning of the talkie era, and then especially as Hindi was declared the official national language in 1949. Two decades after the first sound films were released, India produced a total of 221 feature-length films in twelve languages, and by 1971, films made in eighteen languages brought the national count to 432 (Rajadhyaksha and Willemen 1999). The year 1971 was also highly significant as India surpassed its film rival Japan to finally become the largest producer of films in the world.

Despite the rapid establishment of regional production centers, Indian film as a whole managed to collectively maintain a unique identity. The essential song and dance sequences that have been wholeheartedly embraced by the audiences, and until recently heavily derided by most academics, serve as the bonding force for the unique Indian film aesthetic. As Binford stated, these song and dance sequences are “a striking example of indigenous aesthetic principles shaping the use of imported technology. From the first talkie right until 1954, every theatrical film released, regardless of genre or theme, contained such sequences” (1989: 2). Barnouw and Krishnaswamy reinforce this notion by stating that having the spoken or sung word in domestic languages gave Indian films the potent weapon of “natural protection” to win over foreign films entering the Indian market. They argue that the immediate profusion of songs into the film narrative (Alam Ara reportedly had twelve songs, while an early Tamil film boasted of over sixty songs) gave Indian cinema its unique stamp. “The Indian sound film,” they conclude, “unlike the sound films from any other land, had from its first moment seized exclusively on music-drama forms. In doing so, the film had tapped a powerful current, one that had
given it an extraordinary new impetus” (1980: 69). This was a current that can be traced back to over two thousand years to Sanskrit theater, a cultural artifact that is discussed further in the next section of this chapter.

Another crucial thrust for the popularity of the homegrown films was the patriotic and nationalistic fervor especially in the films produced before India’s independence in 1947. The films, regardless of the language of production, became a voice for the freedom struggle and asserted the nation’s own identity. Examples of such films include; the Hindi revolution saga Farzande Watan (Leatherface, dir. Vijay Bhatt, 1939); the nationalistic allegory of the Tamil film Mathru Bhoomi (Motherland, dir. H.M. Reddy, 1939); the Telegu film Gharana Donga (Honest Rogue, dir. H.M. Reddy, 1942) that was based on Gandhian principles; the Marathi spoof of the feudal nobility in Sarkari Pahune (State Guests, dir. Master Vinayak, 1942); and the Hindi “realist” film Dharti Ke Lal (Children of the Earth, dir. K.A. Abbas, 1946). The characters portrayed in the films before independence reflected the struggles of the ordinary Indian much more than recent film narratives. Due to this grassroots connection to the audience, films had swiftly become the major source of entertainment for the nation and created an independent identity for themselves, one that was very distinct from American, European, and even other Asian films.

In addition to the immense diversity of the national population, the films produced in India also cater to the expanding numbers of people of Indian origins living in Bangladesh, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Singapore, Indonesia, Malaysia, East and Southern Africa, Australia, the Middle East, Europe, the Caribbean, and North America. As Gokulsing and Dissanayake stated, “although the vast majority of Indians settled
overseas regard their countries of settlement as home, they invariably consider India as their spiritual and cultural home” (2004: 8). This extremely broad emigrant demographic is also another reason the various regional language film industries are sustained. For example, due to the large numbers of Tamil and Malayalam-speaking Indians settled in the various nations of the Middle East, films produced in the two languages have a thriving market in this region. The evolution of the connections between the diasporic audience and Indian films is what forms the crux of this project and is therefore discussed in detail in the next chapter.

While the various regional film centers continued to serve their local markets, the competitive nature of film business inevitably began to surface. By 1955, it was evident that Bengali, Marathi, Hindi, and the four southern languages (Tamil, Malayalam, Kannada, and Telegu) were the dominant vernacular of filmmaking in India. The various industries began expanding beyond their previously defined realms of geo-linguistic categorizations. The Bengali film industry, at that time the greatest competitor for the Hindi films, suffered immensely from the political events in the region. Due to the 1947 division of Bengal, the Indo-Pak war of 1965, and then the creation of Bangladesh in 1971, the Bengali film industry suffered tremendous financial losses. When the Ayub Khan government of Pakistan (which then included Bengal as East Pakistan) placed a ban on the import of Indian (primarily Hindi and Bengali) films during the 1965 war with India, the Bengali industry could not rely solely on the market in the Indian state of West Bengal. The subsequent upholding of the ban by the independent Bangladesh government after 1971 furthered the decline of the Bengali films (Raju, in Ciecko 2006: 124). Consequently, the Bengali film industry dwindled rapidly out of the major competition.
For these reasons and more, the Mumbai industry, making its films primarily in the national language of Hindi, quickly succeeded in achieving the greatest prominence, both within the country and internationally. The films made by Mumbai have recently taken strides in global recognition and have subsequently been rechristened ‘Bollywood,’ a term that essentially cements Hindi Cinema’s status as the dominant popular culture exported from India. It is this same branch of the national industry that has swiftly become the sole representative of the Indian film world in its entirety.

**Becoming Bollywood**

Despite its continued success in the face of omnipresent competition from Hollywood, Hindi Cinema has long been neglected by film and cultural theorists, often derided by film critics, and minimized by global film academia. Regardless, Bollywood films offer a deep insight into the “cultural flows between and within post-colonial societies and between home countries…and the diaspora” (Srinivas 2005: 320). In the wake of rampant globalization, Bollywood’s evolution in the new millennium provides ample material for a study of demographic trends and their representation in a way that the domination of Western culture on such analyses does not satisfy.

Historically, the popular films of Mumbai quickly gained nationwide prominence, owing foremost to the language of production being Hindi. Additionally, as Gokulsing and Dissanayake (2004) discussed, the most widely accepted set of cultural influences on popular cinema include the Hindu epics, Sanskrit theatre, folk dramas, Parsi theatre, and Hollywood musicals. First, the non-linear narrative structures and cultural imagination of the films came from the two Hindu epics Ramayana and the Mahabharata. Second was
the contribution of classical Sanskrit theatre, which inspired stylized musical drama and emphasis on spectacle. In ancient India and in Sanskrit theatre, music existed as an inseparable element of drama. Barnouw and Krishnaswamy quote Sanskrit dramatist Bharata as stressing that “instruments are the very bed of a performance” and that the numerous songs in his plays “delight the hearts of the audience and establish the emotional continuity” (1980: 70). The Sanskrit theatre then gave way for the regional folk theatres that added various ethno-linguistic traits to Hindi cinema, becoming the third influence. Fourth was the much celebrated Parsi theatre that stimulated the infamous song-and-dance routines and melodrama, while Hollywood has been the fifth major influence, due to its technical finesse and varying storylines (Gokulsing and Dissanayake 2004: 97-8). It was therefore the fusion of these five different influences that thus went on to create the unique Hindi film experience.

As the Mumbai industry gained more popularity around the country, the filmmakers developed a formula unique to Indian films that proved to be very successful over the decades. Server (1999) attributes the narrative and technical structure of the films to an entirely different aspect of society than the five influences mentioned earlier. The *masala* films have been at the core of the Bollywood filmmaking process. These films employ a heterogeneous structure in which the right quantities of several conventions - a love story, a comedic segment, traditional values, some dramatic or physical conflict, and the infamous song-and-dance sequence - are fused to the central backbone of intermingled narratives, creating a blend comprehensive enough to appeal to the desires of the vast majority of Indians. However, the central storylines almost always diverge into a number of subplots of varying relevance. “While some of [the] genres
[typical to British and American films] are present in [Hindi] cinema…Indian filmmakers have created genres and styles that are distinctively their own” (Gokulsing and Dissanayake 2004: 12). Consequently, Indians have enthusiastically accepted the role and purpose of these *masala* films in their lives. Furthermore, according to Server, the *masala* film is influenced by the film industry’s reaction to the countless numbers of rural peasants that moved to the cities during the economic depression of the 1930s. As a result, “to entertain and take the rupees from this huge, uneducated mass, the studios crafted busy, colorful, circus-like movies, with simple, repetitive stories and archetypal characters – the *masala* was born” (Server 1999: 122).

Another interesting perspective on the roots of the Bollywood imagination is offered by Rajadhyaksha and Willemen. In their narrative analysis of the cinema, they state that the history of India, and in turn the cinema, was influenced largely by the “extraordinary variety of ideological movements, from Orientalists to Utilitarians, Evangelists, Reformers, Nationalists and religious revivalists…” that filled Indian society from the mid-19th century through to the late colonial period (Rajadhyaksha and Willemen 1999: 10). They also suggest that the Hindu epics *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* have been instrumental above all else in the evolution of Indian film narrative, through their non-linear structure, sub-plots, and a somewhat circular pattern of storytelling.

Similar to the issue of from where the Bollywood narrative structure is inspired is the question of *how* to label the narrative style of the industry. Raghavendra disagrees with the widespread notion of popular Indian cinema being fantasy or fairy tale due to their Western connotations, and asserts instead that the films subscribe to “a deterministic
viewpoint” with realistic emotions, but through an escapist lens (2006: 26). A disparaging view of Raghavendra’s assertion is presented by Valicha, who favors the neo-realist branch of Indian cinema (most exemplified by Satyajit Ray) over the popular cinema, stating that the former is more appealing over the latter due to the “rejection of songs, juvenile melodrama and cheap romance,” and the portrayal of “plain, ordinary people who correspond more closely to the actual world we live in” (1988: 7). An ethnographic perspective on this issue links the cinema directly to the audience it entertains. Prasad (1998) argues that popular cinema represents realistic escapism in the way that it serves as evidence of the persistence of Indian culture over the centuries, and especially in the face of encroaching modernity. He further adds that the audiences for these films are perceived as a satisfied, closed group that are hesitantly tackling modernity, and finds their cultural needs fulfilled by these films. A more comprehensive suggestion is offered by Chakravarty, who concludes that the cinema’s “distinctive signature” is the idea of impersonation, which addresses notions of changeability and metamorphosis, and where characters impersonate real men and women, and the film–viewing experience impersonates dream (1993: 4). Gokulsing & Dissanayake offer a somewhat similar view, stating that “the stories may be filmed in a realistic setting, but the styles of presentation are products of cultural stylization” (1998: 96).

This evolution, combining the various influences and creating an all-encompassing genre, has rapidly made Bollywood an obsession that has gripped the majority of the Indian population, which is “an achievement in India’s polylingual society for which the [Hindi] film itself has claimed its fair share of credit” (Chakravarty 1993: 5). Bollywood’s position at the forefront of Indian film production has therefore
been cemented for numerous reasons. Adding to this eclectic mélange of influences and narrative as well as technical styles, Bollywood filmmakers have also maintained an interest in reaching out to the audiences beyond India. Using India’s growing sense of liminality between the traditional and the modern as a stimulus, Bollywood films have been tackling issues surrounding globalization and modernity with regular consistency over the decades. As a result, the Mumbai film industry has far surpassed its regional rivals by taking cautious yet optimistic steps into the globalizing world.

**Globalizing Bollywood in the Early Decades**

Themes and images of globalization in Bollywood are not a recent emergence. For decades, Hindi films have alluded to transnational identities within the context of maintaining Indianness. A much quoted song from the 1955 film *Shree 420 (The Gentleman Cheat)*, dir. Raj Kapoor) is perhaps the earliest most symbolic example used by recent film analyses. The most popular song from the film (which was hugely successful in India and the Soviet Union), goes as following:

My shoes are Japanese,
My trousers English,
The red hat on my head is Russian,
But my heart remains Indian. (Kaur and Sinha 2005: 11)

The song, enacted in the film by Raj Kapoor merrily strolling down the road with a backpack, became a symbol for classic Bollywood; i.e. “assert[ing] an Indian identity in the face of global consumerism” (Srinivas 2005: 321). By foreshadowing the widespread economic shifts to come in later decades, the song became a “narrative about the production of nationalism through its intricate entanglement with the global, that even
though the Indian nation is swamped with all kinds of foreign influences on products, this does not need to undermine the strength of patriotism” (Kaur and Sinha 2005: 11-12).

Bollywood in the sixties and seventies owed much to the intense patriotism and nationalism fuelled by India’s independence from the British, as well as conflicts and wars with its neighbors Pakistan and China. While India was going through a phase of non-alignment and self-isolation during the bipolarization of global politics, Bollywood fell in line to support this notion. Films of this era include the gangster-crime drama China Town (dir. Shakti Samanta, 1962), Guru Dutt’s commentary on decaying feudalism Sahib Bibi Aur Ghulam (Master, Mistress, Servant, 1962), the nationalist propaganda film Haqeeqat (Truth/Reality, dir. Chetan Anand, 1964), and the literary adaptation of writer R.K. Narayanan’s commentary on India’s growing capitalist culture in the film Guide (dir. Vijay Anand, 1965). The liberation of Goa from Portuguese rule in 1961, and the Indo-Pak war of 1971, which brought the U.S. and India worryingly close to their own armed conflict, all contributed to cementing the Indian nationalist identity. Bollywood reacted in these decades by further reinforcing the representation of “foreigners” or even Indians living abroad as villains or as “harbingers of the bad ways of the West – a corrupting influence, or counter-reference to Indian values” (Dudrah 2006: 67).

The Bollywood notion of the ‘60s and ‘70s that all NRIs were outrageously wealthy, morally corrupt, and had no sense of Indianness, resulted in the creation of a long-lasting and damaging synonymous relation between the characteristics of affluence, lack of morals, and compromised sense of culture. More visible than the corrupt NRIs
were the foreign locales, which were given much more importance and esteem. As Rajan and Sharma (ed.) noted,

…Bollywood films frequently employed the West (for example, Switzerland) as beautiful and exotic foreign backdrops documenting and displaying the production costs of the films as well as promoting a reverse exotic tourism of the metropolises; but seldom were the films concerned with the subjectivities, experiences, or oppressions of those who lived elsewhere. (Rajan and Sharma 2006: 124)

This dichotomy between reverence for the foreign locales and the unflattering representation of the diaspora continued for several years. Few films from that era of Bollywood stand out as a comprehensive text for analysis of this representation. One such example is a very successful film called *Pu·rab Aur Paschim* (*East and West*, dir. Manoj Kumar, 1970). A director known for injecting patriotic and nationalist fervor in all of his films, Kumar’s *Pu·rab Aur Paschim* was about Bharat (which means ‘India’), the son of an Indian freedom fighter who goes to Britain to study. Upon his arrival, he realizes that the NRI population shuns India and Indian culture, attempting to assimilate completely into British life. He then takes it upon himself to change their way of thinking and to teach them to embrace their ethnic heritage. In an iconic song in the narrative, Bharat tells a gathering of NRIs about the wonders of his homeland,

So maternal are the rivers, that we call them ‘mother’,
Not only is there respect for man, we worship rocks as well,
I have been born on such a land, that I fill with pride at the thought,
I am from India, and let me tell you more about it.
(Translated by Datta 2007)

The verse translated above is one of many in the song that highlights the nationalistic pride one must have in being Indian. The film perpetuated the dominant notion about NRIs during that era, especially in its depiction of the female lead Priti (played by Saira Banu) as an Indian with blonde hair, who smokes and drinks, and wears
tight and revealing clothes. Hence, these NRIs were Indian by their origin, but weren’t close to being such in their values or morals. For the representation of NRI women, saris and demure etiquette had been tossed aside for eccentric hairdos, a mini skirt, and even a cigarette in the mouth. The Indian men from abroad wore gleaming white suits and extravagant accessories, flaunted their wealth and power, and were far from respecting family values or pride in the homeland. Therefore, as director Govind Nihalani concluded in a magazine interview, “they had lost their Indianness and become alien” (Jain and Chowdhury, in Dudrah 2006: 67).

The late seventies and early eighties continued to reassert the negation of the West in the form of angry heroes fighting against government and societal corruption, and trying to adjust India’s role in the changing dynamics of global politics. In addition to the reasons mentioned earlier, India’s political instability under the rule of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi triggered the wave of “angry young man” films that equated devious foreign governments with the corrupt domestic government. These films told the story of the “common man” rising from the social underclass to fight the corruption and injustices that existed in society. The genre completely eclipsed Bollywood in the 1970s and early 1980s, and gave the cinema its legendary star Amitabh Bachchan along with the infamous scriptwriting duo Salim-Javed. Prominent films of this time period include the story of a heroic vigilante in Zanjeer (The Chain, dir. Prakash Mehra, 1973), the pseudo-
biography of Indira Gandhi in *Aandhi (The Storm*, dir. Gulzar, 1975), the familial good-evil drama *Deewar (The Wall*, dir. Yash Chopra, 1975), and the struggles of Mumbai’s industrialized proletariat in *Muqaddar Ka Sikandar (Master of Destiny*, dir. Prakash Mehra, 1978). However, Bollywood was less scathingly critical of the NRI and foreign influences, a trend that gained significant momentum in the nineties.

**Bollywood Going Global - Transitioning to the Transnational**

The nineties proved to be a landmark decade for India. The nation’s economy had for the first time been opened up to foreign investment, and the economic boom ushered in more positive notions of the West. Bollywood in the ‘90s saw a string of big budget melodramas aimed at both the burgeoning Indian middle class and the diasporic Indian audiences, who the producers quickly recognized held the potential to make the film industry bigger than it already was (Kaur 2002: 206). This new breed of films termed “urban tales,” “diaspora films,” or “NRI films,” were “glossy, consumerist fantasies featuring middle-class worlds and transnational lifestyles” that “captured the imagination of audiences within India and abroad” (Srinivas 2005: 321). Soon, the biggest producers began financing films focused to some extent on the NRI.

In 1995, Aditya Chopra, son of producer/director Yash Chopra and heir to the Yash Raj Films empire, made his directorial debut with *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* or *DDLJ (The Braveheart Will Take The Bride)*. This youthful love story follows Raj, a rich and spoilt British Asian boy who falls in love with Simran, a modern British Indian girl who is still firmly rooted in her traditions, on a tour across Europe. Realizing that she has already been betrothed to her father’s friend’s son back in India, he follows her back to
her native Punjab to win over her family in accepting their love for each other. In his film Chopra shows that despite the male protagonist being a NRI, he still respects the Indian family values in the end and even shuns the idea of eloping with the woman he loves (Dwyer 2005: 76-8). The popular theme of countless romantic films prior to *DDLJ* had involved the lovers rebelling against their families to be together, along the lines of and inspired by Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*. Chopra, in an attempt to add a new twist to this Bollywood formula and NRI characters, created a very westernized hero for whom parental consent is vital to the success of his relationship with the woman he loves. With this reformed portrayal of Bollywood lovers, and NRIs at that, Chopra created a film that was young and universal in its appeal, yet with very traditional roots.

The film released to unprecedented hype, and became one of the biggest grossing and *the* longest running films in Indian cinematic history. As of April 13, 2007, *DDLJ* entered its 600th week of continuous run in theatres, a record perhaps unmatched anywhere in the world. Consequently, the film catapulted its lead pair Shah Rukh Khan and Kajol to instant superstardom. For many film historians and sociologists, *DDLJ* essentially marked the beginning of diasporic Bollywood films, and has since been the subject of many a film analysis. With this success, Yash Raj Films accelerated ahead with churning out mega-budgeted films aimed at the diasporic audiences and the increasingly wealthier Indian middle class. They followed suit with blockbuster films such as *Dil To
Pagal Hai (The Heart is Crazy, dir. Yash Chopra, 1997), Hum Tum (You and I, dir. Kunal Kohli, 2004), and Salaam Namaste (Greetings Greetings, dir. Siddharth Anand, 2005), all films that involved diasporic characters in the leads. This new trend also encouraged many other celebrated filmmakers to present their own NRI stories.

In 1997, right in time for the fiftieth anniversary of India’s independence, director and producer Subhash Ghai gave his tribute to the fast changing Indian identity in the form of Pardes (Foreign Land). With a cleverly crafted publicity campaign declaring the theme of the film to be about “American dreams, Indian soul,” Ghai, in his trademark mass entertainment style, told the story about a righteous village girl Ganga who is arranged to marry Rajiv, a born-and-bred Indian American. Ghai builds up the odd yet promising romance surrounded by the constant debate over modern Indian identity until it all goes wrong; Rajiv turns out to be a man whose morals have been corrupted by a Western upbringing and his cousin Arjun (also a NRI) swoops in as the true Indian hero to save the helpless Ganga.

Right from the opening scene of the film, Ghai establishes the overarching point of the film; nothing is purer than the Indian moral and value system, and that while Western society is centered on money, Indians are all about love. This is reinforced in various ways, from the constantly recurring song “I love my India,” to dialogue centered on what Indian traditions and values are, and how they contrast greatly from American ideologies. However, Ghai does shift somewhat from his usual black-and-white characters. Rajiv, despite his smoking and drinking habits, and the attempt to rape his own fiancée before the wedding, is very respectful of his family and Indian heritage. And Arjun, whilst firmly rooted to his Indian identity and culture, does end up falling in love
with and winning over his own cousin’s fiancée, presenting a romanticized form of familial betrayal.

Another significant film released around the same time was *Aa Ab Laut Chalen* (*Come Let Us Return*, dir. Rishi Kapoor, 1998). The highly-reputed R.K. Films, known for their social dramas, thus cautiously entered this new realm of diasporic Bollywood. Aiming to keep the domestic masses appeased, the film tells the story of Rohan, a recent graduate who migrates to New York in search of a job. Upon arriving there he finds “crass materialism amongst the South Asian bourgeoisie, and love and simpleton ways, albeit in clichés, amongst the migrant working classes in New York’s Jackson Heights” (Dudrah 2006: 67). The film’s concluding message opens a debate on the pros and cons of leaving the homeland in search of riches.

Aside from the three pioneering films mentioned here, there were other films around this time that addressed very similar issues but were not necessarily about the diaspora directly. Therefore, when addressing the emergence of transnational Bollywood, it is important to acknowledge other films that were not directly about the diaspora, but still had a significant impact on this new trend in the cinema. Dudrah (2006) suggests that *Hum Aapke Hain Koun…! or HAHK (Who Am I To You?,* dir. Sooraj Barjatya, 1994) offered the preliminary steps into making films about diasporic characters, even though it was set entirely in India among the upper-middle class. Barjatya’s fairly thin yet highly entertaining plot revolved around a grand middle-class wedding and all the surrounding events. Uberoi (1998) somewhat agrees with Dudrah, and adds that while *DDLJ* does self-consciously reiterate the “HAHK formula,” it did pioneer Bollywood’s exploration into the lives of Indians settled abroad, the negotiation of family values, and the essence
of being Indian. Chopra, in her critical study of *DDLJ*, agrees with Dudrah stating that “*DDLJ* turned Bollywood’s NRI stereotype on its head… [where] the protagonists weren’t Indians temporarily placed abroad by plot or song but second-generation NRIs” (Chopra 2002: 12). Alternatively, Chakravarty (1993) suggests that there were a string of films in the late 1960s and early 1970s that first made Bollywood and its audiences aware of the diaspora. Highlighting the shift during this period to Western locales, she argues that these enabled the hero and heroine to act out their fantasies and push the boundaries of traditionally censored courtship and romance. Chakravarty therefore claims that through iconic films such as *Purab aur Paschim* (1970) and *An Evening in Paris* (1967), Bollywood ushered in the beginnings of the “domestication” of the West albeit in a skeptical fashion.

While the films of the nineties mentioned above began the transitioning phase of Bollywood, other factors soon began to play larger roles in this growth. As an increasing number of global corporations began entering the country, they too discovered one of the most effective ways of publicity in India – the film industry. With global brands flooding into the markets, eminent film celebrities began signing lucrative offers to endorse various products. The most notable strengthening of the bond between Bollywood and global corporations has been evident in the cola wars. The rapid expansion of both PepsiCo and the Coca Cola Company throughout India owes much to the endorsement of Bollywood’s A-list stars. While actors Aishwarya Rai, Hrithik Roshan, and Aamir Khan have become the face of Coca Cola, Pepsi now boasts of Shah Rukh Khan, Kareena Kapoor, and John Abraham as its brand ambassadors (Kripalani 2006). The endorsements have now reached the extent of product placement within films, the most obvious
example of which is the repeated appearance of Coca Cola merchandise in Subhash Ghai’s *Taal* (*Beat*, 1999) and *Yaadein* (*Memories*, 2001). With this liberalization of the economy, a growing number of NRIs, primarily from the United States and United Kingdom, have also begun investing in their cultural homeland. Thus, with more open distribution channels, especially with the diaspora, Bollywood filmmakers realized the potential of their films in the international markets.

India’s popularity in the international arena started to soar during the decade. In conjunction with becoming a much welcomed open market economy, the nation was also taking noticeable strides in the international beauty pageants. Within the decade, three Miss World titles (Aishwarya Rai, 1994; Diana Hayden, 1997; Yukta Mookhey, 1999) and one Miss Universe title (Sushmita Sen, 1994) came to India. The year 2000 marked an Indian triumph as the top three Miss India winners - Lara Dutta, Priyanka Chopra, and Dia Mirza – brought home the Miss Universe, Miss World, and Miss Asia-Pacific crowns, respectively. In a swift move to bank on their international fame, Bollywood producers offered all seven of the abovementioned models leading roles in various films. Simultaneously, Bollywood rapidly became the “new cool in international cinema” (Kaur and Sinha 2005: 17), as posters of Bollywood productions adorned London Underground stations and billboards around the U.K.; *Lagaan: Once Upon A Time in India* (*Tax*, dir. Ashutosh Gowarikar, 2001) was nominated for an Oscar; actor Amitabh Bachchan was voted the film star of the millennium on a BBC Online poll in 2000, pushing Sir Lawrence Olivier down to second place; director Baz Luhrmann paid tribute to the conventions of Bollywood cinema in his hugely popular *Moulin Rouge* (2001); and Sir Andrew Lloyd Webber roped in Indian film composer A.R. Rahman for the West End
and Broadway musical success *Bombay Dreams* which played from 2002 to 2004 (Creekmur and Virdi 2006). “For India’s various diasporas…connections with Indian cinema replaced its incomprehension” (Kaur and Sinha 2005: 19). The NRIs began enthusiastically embracing the films, and it was time for Bollywood to embrace them back.

What has followed since is an unfailingly regular offering of mainstream Bollywood films set in foreign locales, and based on South Asian emigrants. These films aim to bridge political divides between the various South Asian populations by presenting stories that can be universal to the issues and traditional psyches of this demographic. The most recent example is the film *Dhan Dhana Dhan Goal* (dir. Vivek Agnihotri) released on November 23, 2007 by rising powerhouse UTV Motion Pictures. A big-budget sports film, *Goal* is set in London’s South Asian hub Southall and traces the story of a failing soccer club, its players from diverse South Asian backgrounds, and the team’s transformative rise to glory. Noted filmmaker and writer Subhash K. Jha writes about the film,

The ideas on inequality and on-field aggression occupy centre stage in Vivek Agnihotri’s film...The war between football teams and among members of the same team, are aligned with acidic remarks and barbed comments that bring into notice the slanted racist slurs that operate beneath the spirit of sportsmanship in a country that has many kinds of cultures and people co-existing uneasily under the prosperous veneer.  

(Jha 2007: indiamf.com)

Hailed by critics as a powerful example of cultural integration at a time of rising tensions among the various South Asian diaspora in the United Kingdom, *Goal* has also succeeded in bridging political gaps back in the “homeland.” The film “received clearance from the Pakistan Censor Board, making it the first Indian film to get a
[simultaneous] release in that country” (Bushan 2007: uk.reuters.com). The simultaneous release of an Indian film in Pakistan marks a landmark achievement for two countries that placed bans on each other’s films more than three decades ago. Partly produced by a British studio, the film presented itself as a truly international Bollywood film, a publicity strategy that is being widely adopted by the various Bollywood film studios.

**Conclusion**

A background on the birth and development of the Indian film industry is by no means a simple or concise task. In a history that spans almost the entire existence of the technology of film itself, Indian cinema has clearly emerged as one of the most inimitable forms of popular culture seen anywhere in the world, and one that constantly attracts its masses of loyal patrons globally. A historical overview such as this allows one to understand and set the foundations for a much more contemporary analysis of Bollywood as it is evolving. The emergence of uniquely Indian film genres such as the mythological and the socials during the sound era triggered an irreversible movement towards a narrative and technical identity that stands distinct from most national cinemas around the world. It presents the Bollywood enthusiast, as well as those showing the faintest interest, with a comprehensive context of why the cinema exists the way it does, something that is crucial when attempting to understand the Indian film imagination. The chapter that follows will shift focus from film to population migration, where the movement of the South Asian diaspora is followed, which thereby establishes another key lens through which to understand the primary analysis of this project.
CHAPTER TWO
The Diaspora and its Representation

The story of the Indian diaspora, and the rise and fall of the British Empire almost go hand in hand. During the colonial period, the British sent Indians across their empire for various reasons – be it as indentured laborers, civil service workers, or small merchants. After World War II, many Indians have begun migrating across the globe for reasons such as education, work, and so on. Stuart Hall says of the growing trend of diasporic populations:

The Diaspora experience…is defined, not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of ‘identity’ which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by hybridity. Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference (1990: 401).

It is this same reproduction of identity that the Indian Government has used to define and relate to the Indian diaspora. On an official government website, the term ‘Indian diaspora’ is defined as “the people who migrated from territories that are currently within the borders of the Republic of India. It also refers to their descendants” (indiandiaspora.nic.in: Updated 10/05/04). The Government estimates the total diaspora population to number over 20 million, with a significant percentage in almost 33 different countries. The diaspora is composed of NRIs (Non-Resident Indians) and PIOs (Persons of Indian Origin). NRIs are Indian citizens living outside of the country, whereas PIOs are those who have acquired the citizenship of another country. The largest communities of the Indian diaspora are settled in Malaysia, the USA, Saudi Arabia, the UK and the UAE (Lal et al. 2006)
Commenting on India’s Dual Citizenship (Amendment) Bill adopted in 2003 and its significance in establishing the “new” Indian identity, Bailey and Dickinson state,

Membership [of the diaspora in India] revolved around professional success through participation in global networks that connect to India, the adoption of an ecumenical Hinduism, and an embrace of multicultural incorporation. Underpinning these constructs is independence and partition as key historical moments. Pre-independence emigrants are seen as temporally distant, belonging to the ‘old’ India of British subjugation. In contrast, post-independence emigrants are seen as part of the ‘new’ India, defined by their emigration for independent economic aspirations and their ability to negotiate cultural practices in de-territorialized networks. (2007: 770)

Thus it is evident, according to Bailey and Dickinson, that the Indian government is strategically attempting to reconnect with the diaspora in a way that would enable it to establish a desirable image of “India” within the global sphere. This creation of, or attempt to establish, the “ideal” NRI image is therefore perceived as a re-imagining of the past “to affirm a desired future” that at the same time attempts to dilute the growing struggle between cultural nationalism and religious nationalism that surround current debates about Indianness (Bailey and Dickinson 2007: 771).

Historically, the Indian diaspora has struggled to maintain a comfortable relationship with the homeland wherein physical and ideological disconnect often overshadowed any traditional commonality. Nevertheless, the media has consistently remained a tool the diaspora has used to connect with their Indian heritage and culture. The expansion and global broadcast of premier Indian television channels such as Zee TV, Sony Entertainment Television, Doordarshan, and Star Network have consistently brought homegrown cultural entertainment to the diaspora. These media channels have delivered popular serials such as the hugely successful television adaptation of Ramayana, and then the onslaught of family saga soaps in the ‘90s such as Kahani Ghar
Ghar Ki (The Story of Every Home), Ghar Ek Mandir Hai (Home is a Temple), and Kyunki Saas Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi (Because a Mother-in-Law was once a Daughter-in-Law too). These shows were designed for the burgeoning middle-class in India and also served as a bridge to the growing thirst for Indian culture among the diaspora. Similarly, the diaspora established various publications in their host countries to create a sense of common cultural unity. Examples of these include Asian Bride, Asian Woman, Little India, BizIndia, The Asian Age, and Eastern Eye. The Hindi film industry has visibly been a prominent part of this bridging, despite its own unflattering portrayals of the diaspora and the West during the 1960s and 1970s.

As stated earlier, the NRI portrayals in Hindi films were stereotyped as outrageously wealthy cultural traitors. The pursuit of wealth figured prominently in the reputation given to the diaspora. As Malhotra states, the NRI was seen as a materialist subject, and considered “a bit of a sell-out as s/he has supposedly abandoned his/her homeland, culture and family in order to get ahead in life” (Malhotra 2004: 26). She further argues that this quest for wealth is subsequently seen as an articulation of a common identity between Indians in India and the diaspora. While this idea of wealth has been desirable as a sort of fantasy for much of the Indian population (increasingly so in the post-1990 liberalized economy), “it allowed the diasporic Indian who had been chastised for amassing wealth in earlier film eras a way to become the celebrated hero of the 1990s saga” (ibid.). This common ground, according to Malhotra, is an indication that if an all-encompassing Indian identity can be established through Hindi films that appealed to Indians both within and outside India’s borders, the groups can find a common tie to unite them in an ideology of nationhood.
In a similar vein, a pertinent issue to be discussed is what this shift in narrative and ideology is signaling for the Bollywood film. Hu asserts that the increasing presence of NRI characters in the new wave of Bollywood films is signaling an obvious break from the traditional themes of nationalism and citizenship, while the notion of “Indianness” is still evident, albeit in a different form (2006: 95). Creekmur & Virdi, however, approach the issue from a contrary perspective, arguing that the revived romance and family films ingeniously resurrect “the idea of the national against the global through sagas of the diasporic Indian family under cultural siege in the West, desperately seeking moorings by returning to extended families in India” (2006: 135). Therefore, the dichotomous relationship between nation and world, tradition and modernity, and individualism and community, continues even within the diasporic contexts. Dudrah (2006) however suggests a more harmonious relationship between the East and the West in the films. Stating that while struggles and tensions obviously exist, recent films such as DDLJ and Pardes attempt to offer a hybridization of the Indian identity instead of a dichotomy. He uses the tagline of Pardes as a prevailing example: “American Dreams, Indian Soul.”

Besides significant shifts in the narrative structure, consumerism is increasingly permeating from a liberalized economy into mainstream films, with the NRI being portrayed as the epitome of this liberalized economy. Rao suggests that this commercialization is having positive financial benefits. She believes that “the overt hypersexualization of the song-and-dance sequence is a kind of ‘MTVization’ of Hindi film music; the song is packaged as a 5-minute video which can advertise the film and be sold as an independent commodity” (Rao 2007: 71). Alessandrini (2001), however,
disagrees with this notion and asserts that the new Bollywood is losing its sentimentality and emotional core, and is instead replacing it with taken-for-granted affluence, capitalist consumption, and financial security for characters that in turn dictates their emotional state. Kaur (2002) on the other hand argues that the increased portrayal of consumerism in Bollywood films is rather an update to the reality of the times instead of pure financial greed. She concludes that the prosperous surroundings and characters of recent Bollywood films are a reflection of the diasporic shifts in which the emphasis is on Indian tradition and family values hybridized into a modern and consumerist culture.
CHAPTER THREE
“A Story of a Lifetime, in a Heartbeat”
Building up to Kal Ho Naa Ho

A recurring reference in most texts dealing with diasporic representation in Bollywood is the film *Diwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (*DDLJ*, dir. Aditya Chopra, 1995) which is seen by many as a pioneering film. *DDLJ* has become the centerpiece of the canon in the growing academic focus on Hindi cinema. The film also brought Yash Raj Films, the production house run by Aditya Chopra and his father Yash Chopra, to the forefront of the new globalized Bollywood. Their films have since then set the trend of big-budget productions based on diasporic characters.

The films of Yash Chopra have consistently utilized Western locales as spaces for Indian characters to live out their fantasies. In his films, primarily in the 1980s and 1990s, Chopra has led the way in exoticizing the West and even paving the way for Hindi films to completely shift their narrative base to foreign locations. He is most noted for filming his escapist romantic ballads in Switzerland, thereby dramatically increasing Indian tourism to the European nation. Along with Swiss locales, Chopra is also known for injecting immense gloss and glamour into his productions, with increasingly wealthy characters, and consequently playing very successfully into the post-independence Indian dream. His son Aditya’s depiction of the affluent British-Indian character Raj as the protagonist in *DDLJ* was a comfortable transition to the NRI domain. The exoticization of Western locales continued, however, with the European trip the two protagonists embark upon, including spending a week or so in Switzerland. This style of glossy escapist fantasies that clandestinely challenge social issues proved to be contagious for Bollywood filmmakers. *DDLJ* essentially gave birth to the new genre: globalized
Bollywood. This distinct departure from earlier nationalist dramas influenced many filmmakers since then.

One such filmmaker from the Chopra “school” of film production is Karan Johar. Son of the late producer/director Yash Johar, and creative director of Dharma Productions (a very close filmmaking ally of Chopra’s Yash Raj Films), Johar has emphatically emulated this NRI movement. His first film, *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* (*Something Happens*, 1998), a college love triangle, was set entirely in India among the upper-middle class. However, the second female lead, Tina, is a woman who was born and raised in England but decides to transfer from Oxford University to come to Mumbai’s Xavier College, where the first half of the story takes place. Johar’s second film, *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham*, or *K3G* (*Happiness and Sorrow*, 2001), was a grand family saga in which the narrative starts with an unimaginably affluent family in India and then continues to the wealthy suburbs of London. *K3G* released to record-breaking box-office collections not only in India, but especially in the U.K. and U.S. It climbed to third place at the British box-office, and also broke into the U.S. top 10. Furthermore, *K3G* was the first ever Indian film to see a mainstream theatrical release in Germany, and subsequently consolidated its position as the highest grossing Indian film overseas until 2006. As a result, it went on to join the list of landmark neo-Bollywood films that formed the canon of NRI-centric films.

In 2003, Johar wrote and produced a film, directed by his assistant Nikhil Advani, called *Kal Ho Naa Ho* (henceforth *KHNH, Tomorrow May Not Be*). In a vibrant, standard Johar-Chopra style of escapist fantasy filmmaking, the movie tells the story of Naina Catherine Kapur who lives in a suburban New York house with her grandmother, mother,
younger brother, and sister. Through a complex series of character introductions, the film establishes numerous subplots that weave through the film. The primary storyline, however, is of the boring and dull Naina who is shown the meaning of life by the eccentric Aman, with whom she eventually falls in love. Aman, however, has a fatal heart condition, and realizing Naina’s feelings and his own towards her, develops a plan to shift her focus from him to her evening MBA classmate, Rohit. In the spectacle typical to Johar productions, the film tells an emotionally charged story as the various subplots begin to intertwine.

*KHNH* became a big box-office success, and firmly rooted Karan Johar as a formidable filmmaker. It swept the major awards for the year, including Best Film, and Best Actress at the Filmfare Awards. Furthermore, and perhaps more fittingly, *KHNH* towered above the winners list at the International Indian Film Academy (IIFA) Awards, winning in 17 categories. Despite the popular success and accolades, however, the film was derided by some critics for having “little notion of restraint” and “dramatic climaxes extended to the breaking point and beyond” (Kehr 2003: nytimes.com). However, I argue that despite the lack of critical success, the film presents a diverse palette of issues and ideas that many critics seem to have overlooked. Through a multi-faceted storyline, Johar presents issues of regional politics, sexuality, generational divide, communal tensions, and disability, all under the overarching umbrella of a dysfunctional NRI family. The
storyline steers away from established view of the NRI, as presented by Chopra in *DDLJ*, wherein the characters long for the homeland. In contrast, the three primary characters in *KHNH* are quite satisfied with their setting by balancing their NRI identities, and are instead surrounded by peripheral characters that fall into the traditional extremes of NRI representation. Naina’s grandmother, for example, wishes that “New York becomes a part of Punjab,” and is constantly nostalgic for her roots. Naina’s best friend “Sweetu” and her sister “Jazz” are placed on the opposite extreme as over-the-top eccentric women who fall for every other man they see. These overly sexualized NRI characters echo and even mock the Bollywood practice in the ‘60s and ‘70s of depicting the Anglo-Indian woman as an immoral vamp.

Johar’s foray into a completely NRI-centric narrative brought significant attention to the “new” Bollywood, where contemporary issues are negotiated in creative and entertaining ways. The following analysis of *KHNH*, therefore, builds upon this foundation and analyzes the subplots of the film from various perspectives. Since the film tackles significant issues pertaining to religion, national and regional identity, sexuality, and gender, the following chapters use specific examples from the film’s text to analyze its impact on the cinema, and in turn the audiences.
CHAPTER FOUR
Filmy Faith: The Role of God in Bollywood

What is central to our present turmoil is, of course, religious diversity, and there again our position is fairly unique...I don’t believe there exists another country the religious diversity of which begins to match ours.
- Amartya Sen

Multi-religiosity is one of the key fabrics of Indian society. The cultural history of which this fabric is a part has evolved over an eventful history of over five thousand years, of which three hundred years were spent in the Mughal Empire, two hundred as part of the powerful British Empire, and just over sixty years as an independent country. As the birthplace of Hinduism, Jainism, and Buddhism, religion has played a crucial role in forming the essence of being “Indian.” According to the 2001 census, India’s religious makeup was 80.5% Hindu, 13.4% Muslim, 2.3% Christian, 1.9% Sikh, and 1.9% other or unspecified (‘India: CIA World Factbook,’ Updated 03/20/08: cia.gov).

In Kal Ho Naa Ho (KHNH), an underlying religious debate is presented literally from the very first close up shot of the female protagonist, Naina. At the very end of the opening credits, which also serve as her introduction to New York City and her life, she says: “I am Naina Catherine Kapur, and this is my story.” Within the Indian context of multi-religiosity and due to the social framework, her middle and last names provide direct clues to her religious background. While ‘Catherine’ clearly serves as a common Christian name, ‘Kapur’ is an archetypal Punjabi name, used both by Hindus and Sikhs belonging to that culture. In subsequent scenes, the religious dichotomy of her family is solidified through the constant bickering between her Catholic mother Jennifer (Jenny) and her staunchly Sikh Punjabi grandmother, Lajjo.
The religious background or beliefs of various groups within the Indian or subcontinental diaspora has helped to shape the identity of the NRI within their host society. Various opinions of this assimilation or adaptation of religion into ethnic identity exist, along with if, and how, faith is used as a tool to establish a common space to which the diaspora may connect. One dominating stance in this area is that religion is the primary dividing factor between most Indian Americans and all non-Indians. Joshi (2006) states that most South Asian immigrants in the U.S rely on their religion – especially in its practice – to establish a concrete ethnic identity within the host country. Petievich (1999), however, offers a differing opinion, stating that the creation of an ethnic and religious identity is a way to add a new facet to the cultural blend of the host country, so everyone can partake regardless of background. In exploring the various religious imports of the South Asian diaspora, primarily Hinduism, Islam, and Sikhism, she argues that while each religion is re-established within the new milieu, it is all still incorporated into the larger picture of South Asian culture and bigger yet, the diversifying Western culture. In a similar vein, Kottak & Kozaitis describe religion among the disporic communities as “malleable and adaptive” (2003: 121). The religion that a particular immigrant group brings with them into another country responds to the change, so the diaspora is able to express their native religions in ways that reflect life in the new society.

An alternative explanation for the role of religion among the diasporic community is that Hinduism – the religion practiced by the majority of the South Asian immigrants – limits itself to being just a faith system and not a cultural influence. Clarke et al. (1990) argue that unlike the clearly defined structural hierarchy of Christianity, Islam, and Sikhism, the practice of Hinduism remains to a great extent individual-oriented rather
than congregational. Therefore, the Hindu immigrants often do not have religion to help shape an ethnic identity. This stance is subsequently refuted by Joshi, and Kottak & Kozaitis, who stress that religion, combining with other ethnic factors such as language and culture, creates the necessary sense of belonging, shared experience, and historical continuity among the South Asian diaspora.

Just as in the core of Indian society and diasporic spaces, religion has played a fundamental role in the Indian film narrative. The earliest Indian productions were based on religious mythologies, and over the decades, religious identity has been ingrained into the framework of the Bollywood narrative. A prominent example of religious pluralism in the Hindi film narrative is the film *Amar, Akbar, Anthony* (dir. Manmohan Desai, 1977). The popular film, with yesteryear stars Vinod Khanna, Rishi Kapoor, and Amitabh Bachchan, tells the story of three long-lost brothers who are raised as Hindu, Muslim, and Christian respectively. They meet after several years and, through various comedic events, attempt to reunite the broken family. The film serves as an important commentary on the notion of an Indian identity fragmented along religious lines. Numerous films have dealt with India’s deep connection with religion and faith systems. Even films that do not have a direct narrative or plot emphasis on faith include a devotional song or a religious occasion of some sort. Additionally, with the recent emergence of animated films in Bollywood, the industry has almost come full circle. Just as the first silent or sound films were based exclusively on mythologies, recent animated features (Bollywood’s first mainstream foray into the genre) have resorted to the same narratives. Examples include *Hanuman* (2005), *Bal Ganesh* (2007), *Lord Krishna* (2007), and *Ghatotkach* (2008), all animated films based on Hindu mythology. Due to this resilient connection between
Bollywood narratives and faith, a religious analysis can be applied to almost any film with significant results. Even the most mainstream entertainers have noteworthy references to religion. These range from inserting a scene where a character fervently prays to a statuette of Lord Krishna in *Hum Aapke Hain Koun* (1994) thereby literally bringing about the twist in the plot, to the lovesick Ganga in *Pardes* (1997) who is feverishly searching for her lover in an Islamic shrine with a *Qawwali* song in the background.

**The Discord of Faiths**

The religious subtext in *KHNH’s* narrative is developed systematically through spurts of visuals and dialogues. Starting with Naina’s full name, to the tensions in her household, to the development of Rohit’s Hindu Gujarati family, and eventually the resolution of religious differences between the characters. Naina then ends her narration of the story at the very end of the film with, “I am Naina Catherine Kapur Patel, and this was my story.” By adding the typical Hindu Gujarati last name “Patel” to her identity, the film not only ends the story but also comments on the emergent interweaving in the religious identity of the diaspora.

The narrative therefore reflects and supports Brown’s analysis of the religious pluralism of the diaspora. He suggests that South Asian migration in the mid-twentieth century was primarily to societies that were already undergoing significant transitions and had growing religious pluralism. In the western world, the relatively minimal obstruction of the religious beliefs of the new immigrants nurtured the establishment of spaces of worship, extensions of domestic practices linked to spirituality, and the creation
of numerous religious organizations to connect with other entities or address common
issues (Brown 2006). At this stage, the South Asian diaspora within the major Western
nation-states such as U.K., U.S.A, and Canada began to enjoy a much calmer religious
pluralism in their host societies than that in their homeland. The Partition of India in 1947
left its religious diversity in anxious disarray. In the sixty years since independence, the
country has witnessed numerous internal conflicts based on religion, and has consistently
struggled to maintain a secular government while political parties (mainly Hindu) on the
religious right have attempted to assert an overarching Hindu identity for the nation.
These struggles have therefore served as one of the factors behind migration of Indians to
Western societies, where hopes of finding a life without religious tension are high. At the
same time, however, much of this historical tension is also carried into the host societies.
It is diluted to an extent, but with the growing reconnection of the diaspora back to the
homeland, NRIs are increasingly getting more involved in the societal issues of India.
Moreover, these religious conflicts also present debates on the racialization of religion in
pluralist societies. Chakrabarty (1994) comments on this deliberate lack of connection
between religious difference and racism, as a conscious effort to separate the issues. He
states,

The possibility that the current Indian Hindu-Muslim or upper versus
lower-caste conflict may be, in a significant sense, a variant of a modern
problem of ‘ethnicity’ or ‘race’ is seldom entertained ... ‘racism’ is
thought of as something the white people do to us. What Indians do to one
another are variously described as ‘communalism’, ‘regionalism’ and
‘casteism’ but never ‘racism.’ (Chakrabarty 1994: 145)

This side of religious identity is also depicted in KHNH, serving as a commentary
on, or a reflection of, the continuing underlying tensions between various groups. While
the film doesn’t touch upon racism issue directly (except for mild anti-Chinese comments
discussed in the next chapter), it does subtly equate being a Catholic Indian with being “white” and being a Sikh or Hindu as “real” Indian. A key example is during the scenes that involve the family dining together. In a breakfast scene early in the film, Naina’s grandmother Lajjo passes snide remarks about how frequently she has to eat cereal and how she craves an Indian breakfast. This is an attack on Naina’s mother Jenny as the provider of the family, since she is seen as Westernized due to her Catholic beliefs. In a later dinner scene where Aman has helped to cook all the Indian food, Lajjo expresses her delight and states “I’m sure [Jenny] hasn’t made all this.”

The imagery and subtext of religious discord continues throughout the film. A brief yet notable instance of inter-faith tensions between Naina’s staunchly Sikh Punjabi grandmother Lajjo and the Catholic mother Jenny is the juxtaposition of two shots. During a montage over which Naina is narrating the problems of her household, the viewer is shown a glimpse of Jenny and the children praying in front of a wall-mounted image of Jesus while the grandmother looks away and scoffs. This shot is juxtaposed immediately with one of the grandmother and the children praying in front an image of Guru Nanak mounted on the facing wall, while Jenny looks away in disagreement. Although these two shots are incredibly brief and are almost missed if not
watched closely, they are nonetheless significant in displaying the religious tensions that exist in Naina’s household. While the discord between the two stems from a severe misunderstanding and lack of communication over the truth behind Jenny’s husband’s death (a male figure constantly referred to but never shown), the religious tensions overtake and give rise to cultural stereotypes used by both characters. Jenny is therefore seen by Lajjo as the morally corrupt, un-Indian woman who ruined the family she married into, while Lajjo is seen by Jenny as the super-conservative, ethnocentric, mother-in-law who is impossible to please. Yet the religious friction between Lajjo and Jenny is actually resolved towards the end of the film, which could perhaps serve as a foreshadowing on Johar’s part to show a utopian world where the various members of the diaspora can overcome such differences. The scenes depicting the final resolution show Lajjo coming to Jenny’s church and sitting down with her in a pew to pray together. There is also a scene in which Jenny finally joins Lajjo and the children in praying to Guru Nanak. While this is an obvious attempt at “sugarcoating” the issues to give them a happy ending within the film, it can also be seen as a clear commentary on the possibilities of a conflict-free religiously pluralist society.

Johar injects various other instances in which religious imagery plays a significant role in the subtext. One example is the morning after the song *It’s the Time to Disco* where Aman goes to Sunday church service with Jenny and Naina. The purpose of this scene is for Aman to encourage Naina to smile more and to appreciate her life instead of being miserable. However, the church setting plays an important role here as Aman is given the angelic status in constantly trying to make Naina happier. Also, the wedding sequence towards the end of the film serves as perhaps the most blatant use of religion to
cement identity. It is the first time that all the characters in the film are shown in traditional Indian attire (after the engagement ceremony scene) and the film is thereby brought to a very Hindu middle-class ending. Naina’s identity absorbs her extravagant Hindu wedding, and her life settles down significantly after getting married.

The portrayal of religious identity is also significant in the representation of the NRI family. The recent films about members of the diaspora have addressed the familial structures of NRIs through various ways. The family structures in the diaspora no longer simply embody the archetypal traditional extended family headed by the patriarch, but instead suggest dramatically differing forms that the family can take.

**The (Hindu) NRI Family**

The representation of the Indian family unit has been an integral element of Bollywood sagas over the decades. There have been countless films depicting near perfect families with fully ingrained patriarchal power structures that then go through some challenges, but eventually end up together and content (Dwyer 2005: 113). The ‘90s shift to diasporic films has given audiences an insight into the less perfect families, usually with a single parent or foster families. Regardless of this suddenly widening spectrum of family structures in films, the great Indian wholesome family has always been placed on the higher platform. In Aditya Chopra’s *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge (DDLJ)*, Raj lives with his father, a widowed millionaire. From the onset, the father-son duo is shown to celebrate failure, encourage drinking and indulge in luxuries. In sharp contrast, Simran has both parents and a younger sister, comprising a religious and traditional family that falls comfortably into the middle-class. The slight twist that
Chopra injects into this formula is that of Raj and his father sharing a very close, buddy-like bond with each other, whereas Simran has an almost devotional respect for her father that seems to stem from fear. Johar, in his magnum opus *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham* (*K3G*) began to develop the idea of the NRI family further by fully engulfing it in the notions of the traditional Indian Hindu family. Mounted on a gargantuan scale that invalidates any sense of realism, *K3G* begins by showing a family, headed by the patriarch (Amitabh Bachchan), who according to the narrative is supposedly living in India (in a house that is unmistakably a stately home in England). Toward the second half of the film, the story actually moves to London, where the son (Shah Rukh Khan) has settled with his wife, and her sister. Aswin Punathambekar, in his analysis of Bollywood in the Indian diaspora, noted:

In exploring and cautiously legitimizing the cultural space of Indian life in the diaspora, *K3G* renders the diaspora’s version of Indianness less transgressive and/or impure (as in a long line of movies from *Purab Aur Paschim* to *Pardes*) and more of an acceptable variant of Indianness. In positioning and drawing the diaspora into the fold of a ‘great Indian family’, *K3G* articulates everyday struggles over being Indian in the diaspora to a larger project of cultural citizenship that has emerged in relation to India’s tentative entry into a transnational economy and the centrality of the NRI figure to India’s navigation of this space. (Punathembekar 2005: 152)

It was perhaps due to this reformed representation of the diasporic family that *K3G* became the highest grossing Bollywood film ever in the UK, and also the first from the Indian film factories to enter the US box office top ten and the UK top 5. This
representation of the NRI can be seen in Johar’s first film, *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* (*Something is Happening*, 1998), in which Tina (played by Rani Mukherjee), the third lead in a college romance triangle, moves to India from England. In a college hazing scene, initiated by the male lead Rahul (Shah Rukh Khan), Tina is challenged to sing a Hindi song to prove her Indianness. She then stuns everyone around her by singing *Om Jai Jagdish Hare* (a Hindu prayer) proving that she hasn’t lost her Indianness just because she has lived outside of India. One should also note that the proof of Indianness in this instance lies in reciting a Hindu prayer and not in something more secular or nationalistic such as the national anthem or a patriotic song. Stemming from this, Johar took a leap when writing *KHNH* by shifting the story’s focus entirely onto NRI characters, thereby providing a larger space in which to experiment with portrayals of the NRI family (Bessman 2003: 64).

The family in focus in *KHNH* is that of the female lead, Naina. Through the introductions provided by Naina in the narration, the film develops the primary family as very dysfunctional, constantly arguing, with each member battling their own hidden secrets and insecurities. The film provided perhaps the deepest psychological characterization of a Bollywood family ever seen; a script that echoed the sensibilities of previous blockbusters made by Sooraj Barjatya, Aditya Chopra, and Johar himself. Films such as *Hum Aapke Hain Koun..!* (*Who Am I To You?*, dir. Sooraj Barjatya, 1994), the record-breaking box-office blockbuster about a wedding and all the events around it, especially an innocent romance between the groom’s brother and the bride’s sister, began redefining the meaning of having an “Indian” identity. For the male and female protagonists (Salman Khan and Madhuri Dixit) being Indian meant bearing allegiance to
an idealized middle-class Hindu Indian family, which also became the trademark for most Barjatya films (Dwyer 2005: 113). Barjatya films have consistently asserted religious rituals and traditions primarily from a Hindu perspective. The very few peripheral Muslim characters in his films serve as mere tokens of religious diversity or to provide comedy. Malhotra comments on this trend in these films,

...Unfortunately, we find the diversity, multiplicity and secular constructions of Indian identity being systematically narrowed into monolithic portrayals of rich, Hindu, and patriarchal cultural identity. This cultural conflation further marginalizes and often erases the experiences of religious minorities and the poor who do not fit this constructed norm. (2004: 20)

The protagonists in *DDLJ* as well as *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* loosely carried the same ideals, where having family, whatever its form, was more Indian and more important than questions of class and caste (Gangoli, in Kaur and Sinha 2005: 160). Therefore it is this same evolution of family allegiance being connoted with Indianess that *KHNH* carries forward into the world of the diaspora. In the film it eventually takes the hero Aman to enter the story and make each person in Naina’s family (including her) face up to their fears and secrets, which eventually results in them bonding more with each other. So, by the end of the film, the audience is presented with a very content NRI family that comprises a staunchly Hindu Punjabi grandmother, a Catholic mother, a very independent older daughter, a second daughter who is the illegitimate child from the deceased father’s affair, and a physically-disabled son. In the sweeping emotional rollercoaster about various NRIs, *KHNH* successfully redefined the idea of family in Bollywood films. The NRI family no longer had to be exclusively Hindu or suffocatingly conservative.
CHAPTER FIVE
Desi Differences: Regional Politics, Nationalistic Fervor, and Bridging Divides

*I do not want my house to be walled in on all sides and my windows to be stuffed. I want the cultures of all the lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible. But I refuse to be blown off my feet by any.*

- Mahatma Gandhi

After Bollywood was given its boost by changing economic trends, filmmakers continued to develop their fascination with NRI-centric narratives. Now, instead of simply having the good and bad NRIs, or those who assimilated completely into their host culture versus those who always long for their motherland, filmmakers began developing more hybridized representations of the diaspora. As Jenny Sharpe argued, Bollywood itself has been a hybrid form from the beginning, developing a style of its own based on a mix of melodrama and musical from classic Hollywood, and Hindu mythology, “Orientalist exoticism, and the visual and aural overload of Indian culture” (Sharpe 2005: 59). Therefore, the shift to portraying hybridized identities was significantly delayed, but natural nonetheless. Subsequently, Karan Johar became one of the first to exhibit such characters to Bollywood audiences, with *Kal Ho Naa Ho* (*KHNH*). With the multi-layered plot of the film, Johar brought to the surface many issues and debates surrounding this reformed, more hybridized, representation of the NRI. Now that these diasporic characters in Bollywood have been welcomed back into the fold of being “Indian,” the roles of ethnicity and heritage in shaping these NRI lives also gain importance.
The issues of ethnicity and national identity are complex. They are being constantly debated in every society, and almost every realm of academia. Gone are the eras where ethnicity meant homogenous nationalism, of staying within one’s boundaries and maintaining an unchanging notion of a cultural group. Both the U.S and India are an intricate mesh of cultural identities, and it is this hybridization that KHNH displays valiantly. This chapter therefore addresses the issues of ethnicity and identity at three different levels. Firstly, the rivalries between the sub-cultural groups of India’s heterogeneous society are important, especially since they carry over into the diasporic makeup. Next is the evolution and exhibition of Indian nationalist pride, as demonstrated by the expatriate community. Finally, this chapter addresses the development of hybrid identities among the diaspora, and the ways in which these are facilitated by institutions that aim to bridge cross-cultural divides.

**Regional Politics**

The pluralism of Indian culture and ethnicities is an uncontested fact. It is also common knowledge that this very pluralism is both India’s greatest strength and its weakness. While the nation boasts of a long-standing and stable democracy (the largest in the world) built upon its diversity, regional rivalries within the country are also rampant. With twenty-eight states divided along sociolinguistic lines, the tensions and rivalries among the various sub-cultures form the crux of the challenge to a coherent Indian identity. A recent example of these tensions is presented in the violence in the cosmopolitan financial hub of Mumbai. Capital city of the state of Maharashtra, Mumbai is home to the country’s major financial institutions, a major international port, as well as
the Bollywood industry. The state of Maharashtra, however, is also known for very strong ethnic pride. On February 3, 2008, activists of a local political party – the Maharashtra Navirman Sena (MNS) – clashed violently in Mumbai with organizers of a rally for a popular north Indian party – the Samajwadi Party – blaming the latter for disrupting the regular routine of the city. This incident quickly spiraled into a larger issue when MNS supporters attacked movie theaters playing films made in north Indian languages, non-Maharashtrian taxi drivers and vendors, and the home of Bollywood superstar Amitabh Bachchan, who is originally from the northern state of Uttar Pradesh. After nationwide condemnation of these acts, especially from the federal government in New Delhi, the MNS leader Raj Thackeray subsequently threatened to prevent trains coming into Mumbai from north India, and declared “When in Maharashtra, they must act like Maharashtrians” (Times of India, 3 Feb, 2008).

This incident serves as an example of the regional tensions simmering in various parts of India. While this particular event directly involved federal politics, various other long-standing tensions exist between the dominant sub-cultures of the Indian nation. Particularly well known is the rivalry between the Punjabi and the Gujarati cultures. The Punjabi culture originates from the bifurcated northwestern state of Punjab, part of which is in India and part in Pakistan. The Gujarati culture hails from the western state of Gujarat. These groups are two of the most culturally dominant regional groups in India. Among the NRI population, the majority are of Punjabi or Gujarati descent, and like the rest of the sub-cultures of India, these two groups have different languages, cuisines, traditions, etc. Within the Hindi film industry, Punjabis have traditionally been a leading force, both in terms of the backgrounds of prominent filmmakers and actors, and also the
characterizations in most narratives. However, the Gujarati culture has also had a significant influence on the films, especially with the growing presence of Gujarati financing. While relations between the two groups have never reached the point of hostility, the rivalry exists mostly due to immense competitiveness in the economic, academic, and popular culture arenas.

In *KHNH*, Johar points to the regional rivalry between Punjabis and Gujaratis. The character of Naina hails from a primarily Punjabi family (even though her mother is Catholic), with a grandmother embodying the stereotype of cultural superiority and loudness. Her grandmother, Lajjo, is desperate to get Naina married to a Punjabi man (with the help of a marriage bureau specifically for Punjabis), so she can go on to have Punjabi children. Naina, however, is constantly fighting this pressure, waiting to fall in love with her ideal man. Her best friend Rohit is the son of a wealthy Gujarati businessman. Johar plays on the Gujarati stereotypes as well when first introducing the parents; they live an opulent life, indicative of the astute businesspeople of which the community is supposed to have in abundance; they also sing a catchy jingle along with their friends about the greatness of Gujarati culture. Moreover, they too are keen on arranging their son with a traditional Gujarati woman, so as to continue the lineage. However, Rohit, an eligible womanizer living by himself, is determined to find his own match. With these two families, Johar makes a statement about the rigidity of the older generations in struggling to embrace the new hybridity of the younger generations. A primary example of this is in the scene where all the characters are discussing how to overturn the bad fortunes of Jenny’s restaurant. When Aman includes Rohit in the discussions, Lajjo immediately retorts, “Are we in such bad times that we have to borrow
money from a Gujarati?” This Punjabi-Gujarati rivalry continues throughout the film, often during the comic moments. The two sides are finally swayed when Naina and Rohit decide to marry each other, and eventually everyone accepts this mixing of cultures, justifying it as “just geography.” Furthermore, during the engagement ceremony sequence, the Punjabi family watches the Gujaratis sing their jingle, and immediately afterwards Aman bridges to the forthcoming Maahi Ve song by announcing to the crowd, “If that was the Gujaratis’ show, now watch how the Punjabis do it.”

Werbner may in fact support the earlier rigidity and disagree with notions of hybridity when he says that “trans-ethnicity obscures discrete national belongings [with regional allegiances being as important] and even religious identity.” He further states, “This erasure of national belongings…can then bring into question exactly how representative these cultural products are of the people they portray” (Werbner 2004: 900). KHNH thus provides a rebuttal to Werbner’s argument. Instead of falling back into the earlier portrayals of nationalism, or absolute alienation of the NRI, Johar provided a much more realistic display: the NRIs are not heartless and immoral, but instead embrace a “melting pot” society whilst still respecting their Indian heritage. In addition, the overwhelming response to KHNH amongst the diasporic audiences (almost half the film’s budget was earned back from the U.S and U.K within 10 days) further proved that the representation was wholly accepted.

**Nationalistic Fervor**

Karan Johar’s film repertoire displays an obvious pattern of asserting nationalist pride through the characters. In his first film, Kuch Kuch Hota Hai, there is a comical
summer camp manager Mr. Almeda who is very vocal about his love for all things British. However, he is quickly shown the “right” way by the lead character Rahul’s mother who forces a conversion from Christian British influences on the summer camp to Hindu Indian. The symbolic sequence of events starts with the replacement of a portrait of Queen Elizabeth I with one of the Goddess Durga, the hoisting of the Indian flag, and then a modernized rendition of the Hindu prayer *Raghupati Raghav*. In his second film, *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Ghum*, the character of Anjali epitomizes Indian pride, with her cricket fanaticism, singing patriotic classics to her Anglicized son, and eventually inspiring the character of Rohit to teach an elementary class of all-white British students the Indian national anthem.

By working in the regional rivalries of India into the NRI characters, Johar again cemented the continuing statement in *KHNH* that reshaped the representation of the diaspora. Although the multiple sub-plots of the film were seen as a hindrance to the overall story by some critics, it is evident upon a deeper analysis that they were, in fact, included to act as pillars to re-creating the NRI identity. As with the Gujarati-Punjabi regional rivalry, *KHNH* also injected a more Indian patriotic zeal into its characters. The most notable example is that of the diner run by Naina’s mother Jenny and her best friend Jazz. From the outset, the diner is a failing venture and cause for much worry for Jenny, until of course Aman proposes the solution: it should be converted into an Indian restaurant. Aman’s inspiring rationale goes as follows:

*Aman*: Just tell me what is available in this restaurant that isn’t available anywhere else on this street? Nothing. Zero. Why does that Chinese restaurant across the street do so well? [Their restaurant] is so successful because they have brought their culture and their country to this place...We should do the same. We have a great advantage which we must make use of, that of being Indians. We must bring India to New
York. [Turns to Rohit] Yes, including Gujarat. We have to bring India here…bring it to this small street…spread it in all directions…Because India can do anything, anywhere, anytime. [Points at the Chinese restaurant] So then who are they? (Translation by Datta 2008)

What follows is a parody of the motivational *Chale Chalo* (Keep on going) song from *Lagaan*. The Café New York is re-christened Café New Delhi, and the customers begin flooding in. Furthermore, the new Indian establishment proves to be tough competition for the Chinese restaurant right across the street. The long, winding line previously shown outside the Chinese restaurant suddenly moves to Jenny’s new Indian restaurant. Clearly, this sequence serves to address and resolve the Indo-China rivalry as well.

With all this multi-layering of various issues and elements of Indian and Western societies, *KHNH* can be seen to portray a more confused NRI, according to Rajan and Sharma. In their exploration of the cosmopolitanisms of South Asians in the US, they suggest that *KHNH* “provides one indication that South Asian/American cosmopolitanism is deeply rooted in ambivalence, an ambivalence that reflects an imbricated and unsatisfying relation to imperialism, modernity, globalization, racialization, citizenship, and migration” (Rajan and Sharma 2006: 133). However, one could argue that these same imbrications are nothing more than the indicators of the new hybridity that is being discussed here. The purported ambivalence could instead simply be a much more open attitude, embracing the effects of globalization instead of shunning it. It is not crucial to the NRI characters depicted in *KHNH* to constantly demarcate the
various aspects of their identities. As Ananda Mitra noted in an analysis of the representation of the Indian diaspora,

There are two primary ways in which the Indian is shown to define his or her identity in the West – either reject the Western ways completely and embrace the residual practices of India, or attempt to become American by abandoning most of the Indian practices and adopting the Western ways as far as possible. In the end, both these processes result in marginalization and further sharpening of the crisis over identity. (Mitra 1999: 207)

It is this very same dichotomy of representation that the hybridized NRI counteracts. In KHNH, Naina’s grandmother rejects Western ways, while Jenny’s friend Jazz can be placed on the opposite end of the spectrum. However, with the rest of the characters fitting comfortably in the middle, these two ends are neutralized. The ambivalence and unsatisfying relation to facets of the NRI identities that Rajan and Sharma pointed to are in fact symbols of the new “non-aligned” nature of the diaspora.

Bridging Divides

A vital issue associated with establishing an ethnic identity among the diaspora is that of integration into the mainstream of the host country. Various anthropologists and sociologists have gauged the levels of success the diasporic communities have had in becoming a part of the mainstream. Most authors highlight the U.S. Immigration Act of 1965 as the key turning point that opened up more doors for South Asian skilled immigrants. Kottak & Kozaitis (2003) discuss the increased multiculturalism within mainstream American society after 1965, a shift that acknowledged the variation, gave space for diversity to thrive, and sought economic, political, and cultural equality for all the minority diaspora groups. Within this space, as Helweg (2004) explores, the Indian diaspora first has to organize among themselves and develop kinship networks to
establish the group’s identity before attempting to engage with the mainstream and contribute to it. This stance is furthered by Shukla (2003) who states that it has been the segmentation of big western metropolises like New York or London into ethnic enclaves that has in turn made these immigrant cultures part of the mainstream. She suggests that the “Little Indias” work to affirm as well as challenge the idea of the nation, particularly by exhibiting fundamental aspects of the host culture while at the same time asserting their own traditional culture. This is challenged by the argument of internal divisions offered by Clarke et al. In their study of the South Asian diaspora in Britain over the decades, they suggest that at the surface level South Asians have integrated and even defined the new post-industrial upwardly mobile and affluent class. However, there is still a significant portion of the immigrant group that is not as fortunate and finds itself “progressively undermined by social and economic change,” and is therefore perhaps moving further away from the mainstream of western society (Clarke et al. 1990: 294).

The issue of integration into the mainstream is also inextricably linked to that of stereotypes of the South Asian diaspora, and how the second and/or new generation of the immigrants is dealing with it. Reyes (2007) addresses this issue, and although her focus is on a diasporic group that doesn’t necessarily include the Indian subcontinent, she offers a general conclusion that there is an obvious divide between the second generation immigrants versus those who have just arrived in the U.S. She states that instead of integrating the new diaspora into the ethnic community, the youth distance themselves, often using derisive terms such as F.O.B (Fresh off the boat), thereby establishing an “us” and “them” dichotomy. An alternative viewpoint is that the divide exists more visibly between generations of already settled immigrants instead of between new versus old
immigrants. Petievich (1999) argues that the Indian diaspora is struggling where the development of hybridized or assimilated cultural identities by the children is met with anxiety by the migrant parents, who see it as a loss of culture. Helweg labels this position as a misconception, attributing the generation gap to media hype. He argues that an underlying respect for the migrant elders and the native culture still exists, and the family and kinship network is still strong, albeit somewhat morphed from the first generation diaspora. Shukla offers a view that acts as the middle ground between Petievich and Helweg, where she states that the second generation of the diaspora represents a transformed relationship to the homeland and the host country, one that is more comfortably established between two or more cultures. She further argues that the generations invariably benefit from each other because of the cultural wisdom of one, and the modern integration of the other.

This identity of the NRI or Anglo-Indian (since the focus in the ‘60s and ‘70s was only on the diaspora living in England) had many reasons to exist, and be propagated. As a result, Bollywood’s practice of representing westernized characters as the ‘other’ began to echo the debates around Orientalism in Western/Hollywood film representations, albeit in the opposite direction. In addressing this notion of “othered” identities in film, Gangoli states:

Cinema does more than reflect existing values in society. It also plays a vital role in creating, legitimizing and entrenching identities. By constructing the Anglo-Indian and the westernized as the ‘other’, the boundary between ‘us’ (the moral east/good Hindus) and ‘them’ (the immoral west/the Anglo-Indians) is more sharply etched out. It also aids in integrating a group and transgressing conflicts within the group. (Gangoli, in Kaur and Sinha 2005: 145)
Although the filmmakers of the ‘90s did much to begin changing this representation, it was still perpetuated to an extent by some, particularly Subhash Ghai. In his “trilogy” dealing with NRI characters – *Pardes*, *Taal*, and *Yaadein* – “it is the super-wealthy NRIs, rather than the modest middle class that most often lose their path in maintaining their ‘Indianness,’ as here Westernization is [again] equated with a selfish capitalism, one that seemingly rejects emotional and financial investment in the homeland” (Rajan and Sharma 2006: 126). In contrast, the Johar-Chopra productions (*DDLJ*, *K3G*, *KHNH*) show their NRI characters invested in the high consumerism of Western designer clothing, expensive sports cars, and palatial homes, yet they still maintain the religio-cultural behaviors of “being Indian.”

The character of Naina has been positioned as the epitome of the hybridized NRI. She lives the hectic life of a New Yorker, interacts with people from all backgrounds, but also speaks her ethnic language (Hindi, and often Punjabi), and only swaps her skirts and tops for more traditional clothes when she is getting engaged and then married. She is more “neutralized” than her eccentric friend Sweetu, and can therefore swerve effortlessly between her Indian and Western identities. Regarding this new idea of ethnicity, Hall noted:

> I think it is very important the way in which some people now…begin to reach for a new conception of ethnicity as a kind of counter to the old discourses of nationalism and national identity…It insists on difference – on the fact that every identity is placed, positioned, in a culture, a language, a history…But it is not necessarily armored against other identities. It is not tied to fixed, permanent, unalterable oppositions. It is not wholly defined by exclusion. (Hall 1995: 46)

Alongside Naina, the character of Rohit also embodies the hybridized identity, albeit one that is more cosmopolitan and “metrosexual.” The film’s success among the
diasporic communities thus owed itself to giving the NRI characters such depth and displaying them as vehicles of social change.

The Hindi film industry as an institution is also increasingly playing a fundamental role in the evolution of the hybrid NRI identity. One such example of bridging are the various award ceremonies dedicated solely to members of the diaspora. The largest among these are the International Indian Film Academy (IIFA) Awards. Spearheaded by the event management agency Wizcraft International Entertainment Pvt. Ltd., the IIFA aims to promote Indian cinema globally, by “propelling Indian cinema to glorious pinnacles beyond Indian shores” (iifa.com, Accessed: 03/28/08). Starting in 2000 at the Millennium Dome in London, the awards have since been held in Sun City, Kuala Lumpur, Johannesburg, Singapore, Amsterdam, Dubai, and Yorkshire. Each year, the IIFA plans a series of events built around the main awards ceremony, including celebrity cricket matches, film premieres, exhibitions, film festivals, and events specific to the host country. Therefore, by bringing Bollywood to the fans outside India (chiefly the diaspora), the IIFA serves as a major institution in building bridges between the homeland and the host country of the NRI.

Additionally, the film industry has been reaching out to the diaspora in various other ways. London-based entertainment entrepreneur Farhath Hussain has since 1986 led the way in bringing the biggest Bollywood stars to their fans through extravagant concert shows. Now regularly presenting shows at twenty-five venues in over ten countries, Hussain’s enterprise is the largest provider of live Bollywood entertainment outside of India (ethnicnow.com, Accessed: 04/10/08). Most recently, he has produced the London stage musical Miss Bollywood, with actress Shilpa Shetty. These shows, just
like the IIFA awards, serve to actively draw the diasporic audiences into the Bollywood fold. The fan base living outside of India’s borders have thereby been made an integral part of the growth of the cinema, where they are able to share a physical space with their favorite stars, and contribute to their celebrity status.

In these circumstances, the industry essentially comes to the diaspora to interact with them. However, there is also a growing attempt by the members of the diaspora to participate actively in the Bollywood industry, and as a result build a bridge in the opposite direction. Pertinent examples are budding stars Katrina Kaif and Upen Patel. Born to a British Caucasian mother and a naturalized British Indian father, Kaif grew up in Hawaii and London. After a brief modeling career, she was approached by director Kaizad Gustad to star in his fashion-industry tale *Boom* (2003). Since then, she has achieved considerable success, especially with all four of her 2007 releases being declared box-office hits. Similarly, Upen Patel is a rising Bollywood star who was born in India and raised in the U.K. After modeling for international fashion brands, Patel made his Bollywood debut with *36 China Town* (dir: Abbas-Mustan, 2006), and is gradually gaining popularity with Bollywood audiences. While neither Kaif nor Patel serve as iconic individuals, their successful foray into Bollywood demonstrates the expansion of the cinema’s influence and efforts to absorb an ever-increasing audience.
CHAPTER SIX
Arranged Love and Being "Normal":
Gender & Sexuality in KHNH

Isn't it amazing? We're so bound by customs and rituals. Somebody just has to press my button, this button marked Tradition, and I start responding like a trained monkey...

...There is no word in our language that can describe us. How we feel for each other.

- Sita to Radha in Deepa Mehta’s Fire (1996)

In 1996, Canadian-Indian film director Deepa Mehta released the first film in what was to become her highly controversial trilogy dealing with the role of women in various aspects of Indian society. Fire told the story of two middle class housewives, stuck in failed arranged marriages, who fall in love with each other. The film first released to an encouraging response from critics and ran uncontested at the box office for three weeks until Hindu fundamentalist groups began violent protests against it. This spurred a raging debate within Indian media and society over the issue of homosexuality and its acceptance, with various women’s movements and advocates for freedom of expression mobilizing against the furor of those opposing the film. As a quick solution to the violence, the Indian government placed a ban on the screening of Fire in major cities such as New Delhi and Mumbai (Phillips 1999: wsws.org). The film was eventually banned across all of India. The response to Fire, which was by no means a Bollywood production, reminded the popular filmmakers in India of a highly sensitive issue regarding sexuality that was perhaps best left untouched on celluloid.

In addition to religion and geo-cultural issues, Kal Ho Naa Ho (KHNH) provides significant insights into the portrayal of gender and sexuality in Bollywood films. KHNH’s much more open portrayal of these issues was, however, the result of almost a decade of cautious progression. After 1996, Bollywood filmmakers continued with their
longstanding portrayal of homosexuality as a comic element in their films, with peripheral characters that were flamboyant, exaggerated, and supposed to be mocked. Examples of these include celebrated actor Anupam Kher playing the very effeminate uncle “Vicky” to the female lead in Dulhan Hum Le Jayenge (We Will Take the Bride, dir. David Dhawan 2000). Actor Bobby Darling has also become a staple of the homosexuality stereotype in Bollywood. Born Pankaj Sharma into a middle class Delhi family, Darling’s foray into films made him the effeminate and sexually ambiguous best friend to the macho hero or the glamorous heroine. Within these confines, Darling has acted in numerous popular films such as Taal, Style (2001), Chalte Chalte (2003), and Kya Kool Hain Hum (2005). The change in this representation occurred very slowly and cautiously, with “offbeat” Indian directors broaching issues surrounding homosexuality with growing sensitivity. Actor Rahul Bose, known for liberally experimenting with a spectrum of roles in both mainstream and alternative cinema, joined this subtle revolution to remove prejudice from the portrayal of gay characters. He acted in the openly homosexual short film Bomgays (dir. Riyad Wadia, 1996), and became a prominent part of other films that were openly dealing with the issue. In an interview in 2005, Bose observes “We hardly have any films on the theme [of homosexuality]. Nor do we respect the gay community's space in the way we show them on screen” (santabanta.com, Accessed: 04/09/2008). Subsequently, Indian film audiences witnessed a rising number of films that began to blur the line between offbeat and mainstream cinema, with Bollywood directors producing smaller budget films with themes of sexuality. Onir’s My Brother Nikhil (2005), about a swimming champion who is shunned by his community after he contracts AIDS from his male partner, and Madhur Bhandarkar’s Page 3 (2005),
which included the surprisingly unprejudiced depiction of a gay costume designer, were films that essentially brought homosexuality to Bollywood and the mainstream consciousness.

**Negotiating Sexuality**

Within this context, the portrayal of homosexuality in big-budget Bollywood productions becomes a key point of analysis. Although *KHNH* was released before the sexually “mature” films such as *My Brother...* and *Page 3*, it tackled the issue from an altogether different perspective that commented directly on the Bollywood stereotype. A significant example is the way in which Aman and Rohit’s buddy relationship is given an overtly homosexual nature. The first of such instances is the morning after the song *It’s the Time to Disco*, when Aman and Rohit are found in the same bed by the latter’s ultra conservative sari-clad Gujarati housekeeper Kantabehn. While Aman’s excuse is that he stayed the night since Rohit was too drunk and had to be escorted home, this scene plays explicitly on Kantabehn’s horrified reaction, as she stands at the foot of the bed holding a breakfast tray shaking vehemently. Aman then acts on her reaction by deliberately

*Figs.7a (above), 7b (below): Aman and Rohit are found in the same bed by a shocked Kantabehn.*
caressing his friend and indulging in double entendres. The character of Kantabehn is introduced into the narrative simply to serve as the rigid and conservative opposition to the underlying homoeroticism that has existed in almost all Bollywood buddy characterizations. In making her social conservatism a comic element, the film leans perceptibly towards emphasizing the new “modernity and cosmopolitanism of Bollywood cinema” in the overt homoeroticism of Aman and Rohit’s friendship (Gopinath 2005: 163). In addressing such attitudes towards homosexuality, Hu (2006) agrees that bonding and sexual tension between male characters is often used as a comic element of the narrative, but in a way that it can be addressed or quickly avoided if need be. Kavi adds further that this focus on male relationships has also had a damaging effect on the role of women within these narratives:

…the Bollywood hero has been (particularly in the past three decades) the focus of increased homoeroticization, with his body becoming a spectacle at every turn. Unfortunately, what has facilitated this is a veiled (and sometimes not-so-veiled) form of misogyny, in which the heroine’s role is minimized such that, rather than another filmic character falling in love with the hero, the audience itself is invited to see the macho (and perhaps narcissistic) hero as unattached and therefore available for homoerotic desire. (Kavi 2000: 307)

Another key example of the underlying homoeroticism of the buddy relationship is during the six-day plan, during which Aman guides Rohit through several steps to court Naina. However, whether it is due to predictability or just hope, the viewer is expecting Naina to fall for Rohit by the end of it, making the plan successful. This sequence is fascinating for the viewer, however, due to the increased bonding between Aman and Rohit. Kavi’s observations about the role of the heroine are therefore visible here too. In the six days that they spend trying to court a woman, they become much closer with each other. One begins to find more interest and fascination in the bonding
between Aman and Rohit than the progress of their plan to court Naina. Dudrah explains this male bonding through Waugh’s arguments,

…Waugh outlines how the cultural devices of khel (play/playfulness) and dositi (friendship) between the on-screen heroes (which involves the use of sexual innuendos, phallic symbols and the close proximity of male bodies in intimate postures) can be understood as illustrating an implicit social sphere that operates within and yet beyond the predominant heterosexual reel and real life. Waugh usefully posits the devices of same-sex khel and dositi as challenging and redefining the rules of heterosexual gazes and desires as the dominant and only modes of seeing and interacting that allow queer audiences to view themselves as their heroes and heroines as visible, invisible, polyvocal and ambiguous (Dudrah 2006: 127).

In addressing the portrayal of female sexuality, Gangoli (2005) offers a dichotomy. She simplifies the divided image of the Bollywood woman by placing sexuality in films into one of two extremes: nurturing, devoted, demure, virginal vs. seductive, experimental, unreliable, and liberal. Chopra, in her analysis of DDLJ, instead suggests that sexuality in the new Bollywood is a blend of the two extremes, with diasporic characters that are incandescently pure despite living in the West. She further asserts that the women are much more sexual but still virginal, adding that “the fantasy has a school-girl innocence” (2002: 61). Hu argues that sexuality and desire is used extensively and purposely in films about the diaspora to assert a particular representation. He suggests that the sexualized song-and-dance routines in recent films set abroad act as “mimicry of American popular cultural forms with South Asians as the sexual aggressors,” which is in turn “able to communicate to the diasporic audience the extent to which they have been excluded from the production of their own images of desire in [Western] society” (Hu 2006: 101). Stemming from the views on sexuality in Bollywood is the portrayal of the romance or love. Uberoi (1998) states that while the women exercise much more sexual freedom than in the past and the men are perhaps more
independent, the Bollywood romance has settled on the idea of self-control. In this situation, the men have to exercise self-control, whereas the women require control for their sexuality, which in most cases is decided by the male.

Perhaps Hindi cinema experiments most with sexuality in the song videos for which the films are so notorious. The picturization – an Indian English term commonly used in reference to the way a song is filmed – of Bollywood songs has evolved dramatically since the ‘90s. A consistent trend in Karan Johar productions is the world he creates in the picturization of his songs. Johar overtly fashions a sense of multicultural utopia in his songs, with various dimensions of sexuality exhibited. Perhaps the best examples of this in KHNH are during the songs Pretty Woman and Kuch To Hua Hai (Something is happening). The very first song in the film, and the biggest hit from the soundtrack, is a tribute to the 1964 Roy Orbison classic Oh, Pretty Woman. Placed in the film where Aman sees Naina for the first time, this Indianized and specifically “bhangra-inflected version…captured everybody’s imagination [and its picturization] reasonably well thought-out in keeping with the basic essence of the song rather than just [a stereotypical Bollywood couple singing] on the slopes” (Subramaniam, in Bessman 2003: 64). The eccentric Aman brings in a whole host of people to sing and dance with him on this occasion in a suburban neighborhood. Moving away from the popular practice of having a dozen or more uniformly costumed white dancers perfectly in-sync with each other, Aman here dances with a real slice of the New York demographics; a large group of multi-ethnic break dancing teenagers, African-American gospel singers, children from practically every corner of the planet, and of course the resident Indian population, including the Sikh cab driver who joins the party at the end of the song. It is,
therefore, “a pretty tongue-in-cheek ‘pretty woman’ thing, with an English melody and English hook—but set in Hindi. It's quite a mishmash” (ibid.). The overt multicultural nature of the song, coupled with the narrative situation of love at first sight, shows the maturing of the open sexuality of Bollywood’s characters. Even though the song falls into a heterosexual situation, the declaration of the love amidst a heavily globalized setting is a major step within the Hindi film narrative.

The song *Kuch To Hua Hai* continues in the same vein. This song is placed in the narrative when Rohit realizes his love for Naina, and she for Aman, and it acts as a tribute to love in general. As Naina and Rohit sing and dance their (separate) ways proclaiming their love, we see love in New York City where racial and ethnic differences don’t exist. A young white girl is shown kissing an African-American boy on the cheek, and a white man puts a flower in the hair of an Indian woman. Even homosexuality is shown to be part of the love montage, with two men hugging and kissing. Thus the viewer is shown the atmosphere in which these NRI characters live. New York is devoid of social stigmas and taboos against interracial or same-sex relationships, and Naina and Rohit sing along embracing it all.
In the song picturizations, Johar seems to be commenting as much on the place of the NRI within a diverse United States as on the actual demographic shifts in many American metropolises. Whether done intentionally or not, the New York of *KHNH* is not just a foreign land (to Indian audiences) with a dominantly white population; it reflects what is, according to many sociologists, and in fact the U.S. Census, the most “racially and ethnically diverse, and least Caucasian generation” of Americans (Howe and William, in Beltran 2005: 55). It is therefore in the midst of this incredible diversity that Johar injects “modern” perspectives on sexuality.

A similar example is the song *Tumhi Dekho Naa (Do You See?)* from Johar’s latest film *Kabhi Alvida Naa Kehna (Never Say Goodbye, 2006)*. The song serves as an overly romantic ballad between Dev and Maya, who are involved in an illicit extra-marital affair with each other. The color-coded aesthetics of the song aside, the two characters are shown romancing in New York City amidst bustling multicultural diversity. Through this song picturization, Johar therefore makes a bold statement by glorifying an extra-marital romance, especially considering the immense social taboo he is challenging.

**Being the Hero and the Heroine**

When analyzing the portrayal of sexuality in the cinema, it is also important to understand the gender roles and representation. Particularly noteworthy is the drastically altering image of the male hero – both in terms of the actors and the characters – and how this has signaled change in film narrative. Deshpande (2005) argues that the new hero has transformed from being angry and anti-establishment to liberalized and largely
conforming to the new market economy social attitudes. Yet only certain actors in the new Bollywood have the ability to create a successful relationship with both urban India and the South Asian diaspora. Dudrah suggests that actors such as Shah Rukh Khan revel in superstardom due to their ability to strike a balance between the domestic and international audiences as the “esteemed global ambassador of Bollywood cinema through his dress and performance that mediate homeland, diasporic and transnational sensibilities” (2006: 92). Chopra suggests instead that the crucial balance is not between two regional groups, but between the “material comforts of the West and the spiritual comforts of the East” (2002: 55). The new hero is therefore created out of a seamless fusion between conforming to tradition and being a liberalized consumer.

Kavi addresses the critical shift in the image of the hero, and his relation to the heroine,

[The Bollywood actors starting in the late 1950s] not only brought freshness to [their] roles, but externalized the character of the hero himself. The hero now was no more the repository of the traditional value system, which had shaped the Indian Renaissance and the struggle for India’s freedom; he was instead a fragile, faithful symbol of the younger Indian, born post-Independence. This post-Freedom persona of the hero lays more stress on the physicality of the young man himself. The heroine was not only no longer the vehicle wherein desire was addressed, but she also slowly shifted erotic values away from herself and back to the male by sometimes sexually teasing and touching the hero on his chest and back. (Kavi 2000: 309)

In discussing the dramatically evolved image of the hero, especially in films about the NRI community, it is impossible to ignore the superstardom and influence of actor Shah Rukh Khan. Prior to his central role as Aman in \textit{KHNH}, Shah Rukh has epitomized the rags-to-riches phenomenon. His rise from a lower middle-class man from New Delhi who lost both his parents in an accident to the most powerful film megastar in Indian
history is an unforgettable element of Bollywood history books. Starting with a successful stint in television, Shah Rukh entered Hindi filmdom in the late 1980s as part of the Khan triumvirate. Unrelated to each other, Aamir Khan, Salman Khan, and Shah Rukh Khan stormed into Hindi cinema as the three good Muslim boys who monopolized the male leads in most of the major Bollywood productions through the 1990s. Unlike Aamir and Salman, who thrived with the highly prized and comfortable romantic leads, Shah Rukh instead chose to enact roles of the anti-hero. In films such as Baazigar (Gambler, dir. Abbas-Mustan, 1993) and Darr (Fear, dir. Yash Chopra, 1993), Shah Rukh fit comfortably into the obsessed, jealous, and murderous lover roles. The two films were big box-office hits, and gave Shah Rukh the counter image to Aamir and Salman’s lover boy reputations.

*Baazigar* and *Darr* changed the rules for what constituted a Hindi film hero. It was no longer necessary to be a gentleman. Amitabh Bachchan’s Angry Young Man wasn’t heroic in the traditional mold, but he was, whether as cop, smuggler, coal miner, or alcoholic, an honorable man. There was nobility in his actions. Amitabh was the permanently lonely outsider who single-handedly took on dozens of baddies, the corrupt establishment, an indifferent universe with dignity and grace. Shah Rukh’s characters made these seem like old-fashioned virtues. “The Hindi film hero has changed,” Shah Rukh said. “He can die in the film and lose the girl. He can kill people. We don’t have to like him, just the story he is telling. (Chopra 2007: 128)

The release of *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge (DDLJ)* in 1995, however, reversed Shah Rukh’s on-screen image completely. In his first “romantic hero” lead, he delivered a charismatic and crowd-pleasing performance as the global Indian who is a brat but also firmly rooted to his cultural roots.

Like fusion clothes and fusion food, *DDLJ* suggested a fusion lifestyle. Shah Rukh as Raj was the best of the East and the West. He became all things to all people. He was a yuppies hero whose cool clothes and cooler personal style made him a youth icon. But he also unabashedly celebrated
the perpetuated homespun *swadeshi* values. He was moral without being tediously pious. Like millions of urban Indians in the 1990s, Raj negotiated between tradition and modernity. (Chopra 2007: 142).

Through *DDLJ*, Shah Rukh managed to triumphantly achieve what his contemporaries had failed to accomplish until then: the status of Bollywood superstar globally celebrated by the Indian expatriate community. In a landmark film that triggered films about the diaspora, Shah Rukh successfully became the “NRI hero.” Therefore, his role in *Kal Ho Naa Ho* is hardly a surprise. His character, Aman, is almost identical to Raj in *DDLJ*, albeit more mature and with a fatal heart condition.

Running parallel to the transforming hero are the roles of, and attitudes towards, women in these films. Gangoli (2005) argues that the Indian woman of the 1990s is a balanced conglomeration of the ‘50s and ‘60s dichotomy of the independent “Anglicized vamp” – albeit in a subtle form – and the demure and obedient traditional Hindu woman. This stance is refuted by Gokulsing and Dissanayake (1998) who state that there has been no significant change in the portrayal of women in the films; the ideal female character must still comply with patriarchal views. This notion is further supported by Steve Derné’s ethnography of men’s film-going in India, which states:

> [M]en cope with their ambivalences about modernity by identifying Indianness with an oppressive gender hierarchy. While films facilitate men’s movement towards companionate love, they also preserve male dominance by constructing women’s adherence to oppressive gender norms as fundamental to Indian identity. In doing so, films contribute to the invention of a new ideology of male dominance that portrays men as rational and modern and women as emotional and traditional.  
> (Derné 2000: 114, as quoted in Banaji 2006: 26-27)

Desai (2004) continues with a similar thought, suggesting that diasporic filmmakers such as Mira Nair and Gurinder Chadha offer more empowering feminist women fighting heteropatriarchy in their films in contrast to Bollywood norms. This
observation is clearly evident in numerous films, including the recent NRI-focused narratives. Subhash Ghai’s *Yaadein* (*Memories*, 2001) about a contested romance between the son of a wealthy business family and the daughter of a middle-class family both living in London, is an ideal example of Derné’s point. In the film, while the female lead and her two sisters are forced to adhere to Indian tradition, the male characters of the film are free to challenge the very same traditions and conformity. Another example is the love story between Akash and Shalini that takes place in Sydney, Australia in the film *Dil Chahta Hai* (*The Heart Yearns*, dir. Farhan Akhtar, 2001). Shalini, despite being in love with Akash, is sacrificing her own desires to pay off a familial debt by marrying childhood friend Rohit. Only at the very last minute before she is officially married off to Rohit that Akash appears to “win” his love, thereby forcibly freeing Shalini from her obligation.

The portrayal of sexuality and gender roles in film narratives are far from being an open topic of discussion. However, with Bollywood’s role within Indian society as perhaps the most progressive and liberal medium through which to negotiate with such issues, this portrayal is gradually changing. Furthermore, although direct and unprejudiced representations of homosexuality, as well as more equitable roles for men and women in mainstream cinema won’t evolve for a while, films such as *KHNH* are taking bold steps towards raising the issue within the audience’s consciousness.
PART 3

NON-BOLLYWOOD DIASPORIC FILMS
CHAPTER SEVEN
NRI Filmmakers telling NRI Stories

I think it is very important the way in which some people now...begin to reach for a new conception of ethnicity as a kind of counter to the old discourses of nationalism and national identity...It insists on difference – on the fact that every identity is placed, positioned, in a culture, a language, a history...But it is not necessarily armor plated against other identities. It is not tied to fixed, permanent, unalterable oppositions. It is not wholly defined by exclusion.

- Stuart Hall (1987: 46)

Hall’s statement about the “new conception of ethnicity” can be applied to film to further explore representations of the South Asian identity, specifically in films made by NRI filmmakers primarily in the U.K. and U.S.A. Since the NRI filmmakers have been producing films about the diaspora long before India’s mainstream cinema shifted its focus to the group, their negotiations of various issues regarding the community have thus become more evolved and intrinsic to the NRI hybrid identities.

Due to the large population of people of South Asian origin in both the U.K. and the U.S.A., NRI filmmakers in these two countries have taken the lead in diasporic film expression, and have set a precedent for Bollywood’s narrative revolution recently. One British South Asian director, who has come to the forefront with her films dealing with the dramatically changing notions of British South Asian identity, is Gurinder Chadha. After a series of critically acclaimed short films and documentaries, Chadha’s first feature film was Bhaji on the Beach (1993). In a very comedic and often satiric manner, the film follows a group of Indian women from the industrial city of Birmingham that embarks on an “Asian ladies day out” to the seaside town of Blackpool. The group ranges in age and manner, from the feminist tour guide, to the traditional sari-clad elders, to teenagers looking for holiday romance. As David Ansen states, “Director Gurinder
Chadha and [writer] Meera Syal have a gift for drawing complex characters in quick, seriocomic strokes. By the end of this delightful outing, a fresh corner of contemporary England has been vibrantly revealed” (Ansen, in *Newsweek* 1994: 58). A point to note is the resemblance of the film’s title to that of Chadha’s contemporary in the United States, Mira Nair’s *Mississippi Masala* (1991). Both films – about Indian Diaspora trying to find new identities in the West – have titles that allude to Indian cuisine. While *masala* is the Hindi word for a mix of hot spices, the word *bhaji* refers to “a South Asian snack that is a curious hybrid of a traditional East Indian dish with British snack food. It represents the curious position of South Asians in Britain, a blend of the different worlds of the East and West” (Rajgopal 2003: 57). The mainstream release of Chadha’s first feature film paved the way for other Diasporic filmmakers to attempt films on similar topics, and eventually her second film almost a decade later.

**Britishness versus the American Dream**

In 2002, Chadha returned with her release *Bend It like Beckham*, which tells the story of Jesminder Bhamra (nicknamed Jess). The eighteen-year-old daughter of Indian Punjabi parents living in London, she is trapped between her family’s expectations and her own passion. While her parents insist on her becoming a doctor or a lawyer, and being able to cook full Indian dinners while wearing traditional Indian dress, Jess secretly plays soccer and gets accepted into a women’s club. With a light-hearted tagline asking “Who wants to cook *chapattis* when you can bend a ball like Beckham?” Chadha’s film tackles issues of shifting ethnic identities in multicultural Britain (Raschke 2004). According to Shoba Rajgopal,
Chadha is the first Asian woman to have made inroads into the mainstream public sphere of the West with her films. Her films give priority to class, race, and gender issues and focus on...the working classes of the western metropolis, much of which is made up by people of colour from Britain’s former colonies in Asia and Africa (Rajgopal 2003: 49).

In her portrayal of the Bhamra family and Jess’s attempt to juggle two cultures, Chadha essentially steers ahead into further discussions on ethnic traditions, modern notions of cultural hybridity, and the vehement struggle over what exactly the so-called British identity is in the wake of dramatically changing demographics in the United Kingdom.

The discourse that Chadha’s film then examines is one that cultural theorists have been pointing at repeatedly. Gone are the eras where ethnicity meant homogenous nationalism, of staying within one’s boundaries and maintaining an unchanging notion of a cultural group. Europe’s colonial adventures and their subsequent collapse after World War II signaled a growing determination for the colonies to reframe their cultural identities in an attempt to fight off any threats of a “cultural genocide” that many claim is imminent due to rampant globalization led by the capitalist West (Rajgopal 2003). Therefore, Chadha’s Jess can be seen to represent this determined ethnic group that has become as much a part of the British identity as any other. In the film we see the Indian Punjabi Diaspora involved in a generational struggle as well as a cultural one. While the older generation, i.e. the parents, are ingrained in British economic life – the father works at London’s Heathrow Airport – they have a stronger affiliation with the ethnic identity they have brought to the U.K. On the contrary, their children who have been born and brought up in the British environment are a much stronger example of the hybridization of ethnicities that Stuart Hall described. They have now come to represent the “trans-
ethnic” identity of Britain. However, there are also fears of what sort of representation this new wave of British-South Asian cultural production will produce. As Werbner (2004) notes, this erasure of national belongings, and in some cases religious affiliation, can then bring into question exactly how representative these cultural products are of the people they portray.

In *Bend It like Beckham*, Chadha lays to rest the fears Werbner raises about appropriate representation. While the story of the film can essentially be applied to any minority group in a dominantly white European state, there is no doubt from the onset that the Bhamra family is of Indian Punjabi origin, and is Sikh by religious following as well. Furthermore, a brief analysis of the film’s mise-en-scène unfolds the unique “British” identity of the Bhamra family. For example, the house the family inhabits is a very typical London home, which is adorned on the inside with a blend of traditional Indian décor as well as European furnishing styles. The large framed photograph of Guru Nanak, the holy figure of Sikhism, is obvious to the viewer, as is the traditional *salwar-kameez* dress style of Jess’s mother. The two daughters, Pinky and Jess, are then displayed as more “Western,” and yet are still shown to be faithful to their religious beliefs.

Another pertinent example of a film text that parallels Chadha’s is the story of Indian migrants in the United States, as told by another diasporic filmmaker Mira Nair. Nair’s films have dealt with a common theme: the definition of home and “the complexity of issues related to exile, expatriatism and the question of belonging and of experiencing life from the margins of society” (Redding and Brownworth 1997: 158). Nair has been fascinated by the human transgressive experience of living in a society
composed of various communities that may not necessarily blend so well. Through her
feature films *Mississippi Masala*, *Monsoon Wedding*, and *The Namesake*, Nair
characterizes the idea of home as that which is defined by experiences and surrounding
people, and not necessarily a geographic location. In these films, Nair delves into the
Indian Diaspora experience (diverging in *Mississippi*..., while converging in *Monsoon*..., and a mix of both in *The Namesake*) and states that intercultural misunderstandings and conflict can arise in any situation due to the highly globalized world we live in. Even if the people interacting are seemingly from the same culture, in today’s interwoven diversities the varying backgrounds of the people can be cause for conflict.

Nair was born in 1957 in Bhubaneshwar, India, into a Punjabi family. She was studying at Delhi University until age nineteen when she was awarded a full scholarship to Harvard University. This is when she relocated to the United States, and embarked on a career that would make her one of the most prominent female filmmakers of her time. After a series of acting stints and making documentaries (most notably the *Jama Masjid Street Journal* in 1979 and *India Cabaret* in 1986), Nair made her first feature film under her own production banner, Mirabai Films. Her directorial debut, *Salaam Bombay!* (1998) instantly made her a noteworthy filmmaker. She took this homage to the street children of inner Mumbai to Cannes Film Festival, and was awarded the Camera d’Or for best feature film and the Prix du Publique for most popular film. In the same year, she also received an Academy Award nomination for best foreign language film.

When asked why she decided to move from India to the U.S., and pursue a career as a filmmaker, Nair replied:

I was an actress in India, working on an amateur level in the theater there…[At Harvard] I planned to do my B.A. and pursue a career
in the theater, but I wasn’t very inspired because we were studying American musicals in the tradition of *Oklahoma*, and they didn’t really have anything to do with me. So I stumbled into the next best thing, and at that college it was documentary filmmaking. Right away I thought that it seemed to be a marriage of all my interests – of working visually, working with people, and capturing life. So for seven years I made documentary films, working very much in the cinema verité tradition. (Cole and Dale 1993: 146)

The influence of Nair’s personal life on her work is inescapable. When she moved to the United States to study at Harvard, Nair began her journey into the rapidly growing Indian Diaspora. Since the majority of her work concerns people living on the margins of society or between two societies, Nair accepts that these themes reflect her personal life: “These concerns are…inextricably linked with my personal history as well, since I have spent most of my adult life living between two worlds” (Redding and Brownworth 1997: 159). She thus claims that despite having strong connections to India as her “home,” she has gained much greater appreciation of the concept of home due to living in various places throughout her life.

In her films, Nair exhibits the same personal concerns and influences to tell their stories. In 1990 Nair released a film that brought onto celluloid the story of one of the largest and most underplayed forced migrations of a population in recent times. In her feature film *Mississippi Masala* starring Denzel Washington and Sarita Choudhary, Nair told the story of an Indian family that is expelled from Uganda in 1972 under the rule of Idi Amin. They migrate to small-town Mississippi and start life anew managing a motel. The family struggles to settle comfortably in their new environment, a home away from home, which is in turn away from their original homeland. The situation complicates further when the daughter of the family (played by Choudhary) falls in love with an
African-American (Washington), and the two worlds are set on a collision course as memories of the family’s expulsion are revived.

*Mississippi Masala*, according to Andrea Stuart, is “a film that anticipates the social conditions of the next century…to debates and conflicts between ‘minority’ communities,” and not just black-white relations (Stuart 1993: 210). The film also serves as commentary on the divergent Indian diaspora, that, already a part of the expatriate group by living in parts of Africa, migrates even further away from home to newer lands. The film further illustrates that, due to the influence of “newer” ideas (e.g. the daughter of an Indian family falling in love with an African-American man), the diaspora is witnessing a further rift, thereby essentially expanding it. At the end of *Mississippi…*, the parents do not fully approve of the interracial relationship, and so the daughter leaves home and moves elsewhere with her lover. The notion of hybridization thus begins to come into effect here.

Both Chadha and Nair depict migrated Indian families in their films, and how they are adjusting to the new locations. While the Bhamras in Chadha’s story seem to be well settled in the U.K, the family in Nair’s story is uncomfortable and struggles to create a home. However, it is again the younger generation – Meena, in the case of *Mississippi Masala* – that takes strides in bridging the cultural gaps. She maintains her ethnic and cultural heritage, but is also eager to make new friends and quickly create a sense of belonging. Just like Jess Bhamra and the lead characters of *DDLJ*, Meena doesn’t attempt to completely assimilate into the host culture, but finds a comfortable middle ground. Her desire, which essentially creates the conflict in the plot, is her love for an African-American man she meets.
After analysis of Chadha’s film, as well as the other two used as comparative examples, one can begin to see a pattern and correlation between the portrayals of older generation versus youth, and changing ideas of ethnicity to which Hall points. The older generation, represented by the parents in all three of the film texts, clings to traditional notions of ethnicity, that of exclusivity, nationalism, and the “fixed, unalterable oppositions” that Hall mentions. The younger generation, portrayed as the lead characters in all the films, embodies the new conception of ethnicity, that of the hybridized, trans-national identities that do not cling to any sense of exclusive nationalism. Representation of transformed ethnicities in such films as *Bend It Like Beckham* thus produce “technologies of truth and identification that serve to transform concrete individuals into cultural citizens whose lines of loyalty and affiliation now exceed the territory and social geography of the nation-state” (McCarthy, in Giardina 2003: 78).

This idea is then further solidified if we are to use Hall’s argument that fundamentally, all of the nation states of the West have historically been “ethnically hybrid.” He reasons,

[The western nation-states] are the product of conquests, of inter-relationships between nations, and absorptions of one people by another. It has been the main function of these so-called modernizing national cultures to represent the ethnic and cultural hotchpotch of modern nationality as the primordial unity of one people and one culture…What is more, this hybridity of the modern nation state is being compounded, in the present phase of globalization, by one of the largest forced and unforced mass migrations of modern history. One after another, western nation states already ‘diasporized’ beyond repair are becoming inextricable mixed up ethnically, religiously, linguistically, culturally and in every other significant way. (Hall 1993: 356)

Therefore, if by the course of history the nations of the West have already been “ethnically hybridized,” cinema has only recently started to pick up on this notion by
bringing to the forefront the result of the “mass migrations of modern history.” With filmmakers such as Chadha and her product of cultural hybridization *Bend It like Beckham*, cinema in the West has begun to finally arrive at a juncture where the new ideas of ethnicity are being brought into the mainstream. As Sarita Malik notes, it is this meeting of various identities and contrasting forms of cinema that “generates the pleasures of hybridization in the cinematic form. Furthermore, Chadha does not treat her own ‘hybrid’ identity as a hurdle and does not see it as limiting the range of issues or characters she can explore” (Malik 1996: 212). While there is no concrete or colossal shift in the representation of hybridized identities in cinema, films such as *Bend It like Beckham*, be it from British or Indian cinematic traditions, are pointing the way towards such a future. There is currently no impetus for filmmakers on either end of the cultural spectrum to completely shift focus onto such representations, and many probably will continue to present the traditional ideas of ethnic identities. However, just as with the actual hybridization of western nations, the cultural representation on celluloid of this new conception of ethnicity will also take time.

**The Circumstances of Diasporic Films**

With a topic such as an interracial romance set in the “Deep South,” Nair had great difficulty in raising funds for the production of *Mississippi Masala*. Due to well-established prejudices, and Hollywood’s hesitation to address the issue so openly, Nair struggled to make potential producers understand the necessity of the project, and her dedication to telling a story of this kind. Soon Nair discovered the main problem that Hollywood producers had with *Mississippi Masala*: its lack of a white perspective.
According to Nair, “people were disconcerted that we had no white characters (among the 79 speaking parts) in the film. One [executive] asked if I couldn’t make room for a white protagonist.” At this Nair responded, “I said, sure, all the waiters in the film could be white” (Gritten 1992: mirabaifilms.com).

Eventually, Nair raised almost $7 million for her film and completed her project in Greenwood (Mississippi) and Kampala (Uganda). The portrayal of an Indian family expelled from Uganda as Idi Amin attempted to “purify” the African nation, and then trying to adjust in a primarily African-American community in the U.S., is perhaps one of the subtly boldest statements on diaspora and home made in recent film. The comparison Nair makes between the African-American and Indian communities in Mississippi form the undercurrent of the film, and comments fervently on the nature of intercultural relations. In an interview about the film, she stated that “there is a great deal of commonality between the black and brown communities in Mississippi.” She added, “It’s interesting that here are these people who regard themselves as Indian, though many have never been to India. And compare that with the American blacks who think of Africa as a homeland but have never been there either” (ibid.)

Essentially, in *Mississippi Masala*, Nair works with intercultural relations on two levels: firstly, the idea of a displaced diaspora trying to redefine home; and secondly, the relations between the diaspora and the rest of the community that they call their new home. Nair used these two ideas to write the script for the film. When asked about her inspiration for making the film, Nair responded:

The inspiration came from something that I had felt right from the time of being a student in America, of being a brown person in between black and white. I could move between these two worlds very comfortably because I was neither. So there’s a sense of being accessible to both, but in
a way belonging to neither. I perceived it as the hierarchy of color – of white, brown, and black. (Cole and Dale 1993: 149)

The films made by NRI filmmakers inevitably foster a rivalry with the increasingly swift advance of popular Indian cinema into mainstream Western movie markets. Hindi cinema’s narrative and visual transformation to NRI characters and locations both salutes and rivals the NRI filmmakers. It is therefore this sort of cinematic influence that many British South Asian filmmakers have begun to incorporate into their products, thus adding more to the hybrid mixture. As Jenny Sharpe argued, Bollywood itself has been a hybrid form from the beginning, developing a style of its own based on a mix of melodrama and musical from classic Hollywood, and Hindu mythology, “Orientalist exoticism, and the visual and aural overload of Indian culture.” Sharpe further adds that although “once derided for its melodrama and derivative plots, Bollywood has more recently begun to infiltrate a Euro-American consciousness through what can be identified as a new transnational cultural legacy…while its cinematic style has been mainstreamed into British and American theatre, film and television” (Sharpe 2005: 59).

In her exploration of the changing dynamics of India and Indian diasporic film, Sharpe highlights the 1995 Bollywood release *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (DDLJ). The story, as highlighted in an earlier section of this project, follows two UK-based NRIs on a romantic tale that takes them from their new ethnic identities in Europe back to their traditional roots in India, with disapproving families, arranged marriages, and stereotyped notions of the West as obstacles in their path. Essentially the “first Bollywood film to fuse elements of Eastern and Western cultures into…believable fantasies,” *DDLJ* perfected the cinematic style of “western gloss-desi soul” that became endlessly repeated
in subsequent films hoping to reproduce its success (Chopra 2002: 54-58). It is this same idea of traditional parents stuck firmly to their roots even while living in a different country, as the new generation is successfully creating a hybridized form of their ethnic identity, which Chadha infuses into *Bend It Like Beckham*. The objects of desire, however, happen to be different; in *DDLJ* it is a “love match” whereas in *Bend It Like Beckham*, it is the game of soccer. The younger generation, as depicted by both Chadha and Chopra in their respective films, embodies the characteristics of British youth, while being Indian at the core. They have British friends, they socialize where everyone else does, and at the same time they go home to the traditional Indian culture their parents are trying to educate them on. In both cases they speak their “ethnic” languages, occasionally wear their traditional clothes, but can also fit effortlessly into a more Western identity.
CONCLUSION

In 1971, legend of Indian cinema Satyajit Ray described Hindi films as follows:

The ingredients of the average Hindi film are well known; colour (Eastman preferred); songs (six or seven?); in voices one knows and trusts; dance – solo and ensemble – the more frenzied the better; bad girl, good girl, bad guy, good guy, romance (but no kisses); tears, guffaws, fights, chases, melodrama; characters who exist in a social vacuum; dwellings which do not exist outside the studio floor; locations in Kullu, Manali, Ooty, Kashmir, London, Paris, Hong Kong, Tokyo….who needs to be told? (Ray, in Willemen 1982: 25)

Popular Hindi cinema – Bollywood – has for decades been labeled in the ways described by Ray, and while the description (albeit simplistic) has been more or less accurate, it is important not to neglect the reasons why the cinema has settled with this reputation. Bollywood is a global popular cinema constantly positioning itself against the domination of Hollywood. While the American film industry is far ahead financially and in recognition, Hindi Cinema has maintained consistent growth and witnessed a recent transformation that has begun to demand more attention. Beyond the escapist narratives and extravagance, there lies an ability Bollywood has possessed for decades: the films are “frequently at the forefront of recognizing social change and are often ahead of sociologists and anthropologists in their anticipation of and commentary on significant issues in Indian society” (Srinivas 2005: 321).

Being the most readily accessible form of entertainment to the Indian masses, Bollywood films have for decades fostered a relationship with their audience, one that has provided a way for people to negotiate with and adjust to social changes around them. The 1970s, for example, saw the infamous “angry young man” era which involved heroes fighting against the corruption and injustices of the State, a reflection of the tumultuous politics of the time. Similarly, right when India established a much more open
relationship with globalization and the widespread diaspora, Bollywood films took the lead in addressing this global social shift. Kal Ho Naa Ho (KHNH) serves as a useful example through which to explore how Bollywood is addressing fast-altering images of the NRI within cinema. Through its overindulgent style, the film establishes a key message: the NRIs are simply Indians who are content in their location and working towards (or have embodied already) an identity that balances ethnic heritage with a different location, i.e. the hybridized identity. Thus the film also comments on the dramatically changing demographics within India, where the urban-rural and traditional-modern binaries are in more intense negotiation than they have ever been.

Essentially, the “new” Bollywood is fast trying to construct a much-needed bridge between Indians living in the homeland and those who are not. Through flagrant consumerism, characters living in India wear the same Western designer clothes as the NRIs, and even visit locations known for large numbers of diaspora. At the same time, NRI characters still speak their mother tongue, occasionally wear Indian clothes, and are very much part of the fold of the great Indian family. The term for this, according to Karan Johar himself, is “glamorous realism,” an era of films that depict “real people in an unreal world” (Johar interview 2006: bafta.org). So while there is an aura of extravagance and luxuriance in the new Bollywood representations of the NRI, hidden beneath it is a very clear attempt to understand globalization from a perspective that is not overshadowed by western dominance. As Gokulsing and Dissanayake stated, “cinema not only reflects culture, it also shapes culture. When we consider Indian films, we see how they have promoted modernization, westernization, urbanization, new ways of life, a sense of pan-Indianism, secularization…” (Gokulsing and Dissanayake 2004: 11).
Perhaps then it would be safe to assume that the NRI population has thus become one of the foundational influences on popular Bollywood films of the new millennium.

**Bollywood as a Genre, or Transnational Cinema?**

While it is evident that the new representations of the NRI in films and the growing influence of the diaspora in the homeland are mutually dependent, it is necessary to look at how these changes are affecting the industry as a whole. The films of the ‘90s did trigger the shift towards NRI-centric narratives, but those same films also struggled to settle comfortably on the potential for the NRI character. The more recent post-millennium films have established a much more comfortable relationship with the NRI, one that is noticeably satisfying both the urban middle-class in India as well as the diaspora. This development also starts a new debate, one that is increasingly crucial for the future of Hindi cinema. While *KHNH* and other similar films have been the focus here, it is equally important at this juncture to point at the institutional shifts the films are bringing to the industry, as well as those films that weren’t mentioned.

With a section of the Mumbai filmdom churning out mass-budgeted magnum opuses that are given widespread releases internationally, it is becoming increasingly evident that these films are forming their own genre of sorts. As Punathambekar states,

…We need to recognize right away that [Mumbai]-based Hindi cinema’s output in its entirety does not reach and/or succeed in markets abroad… In a recent article, Rajadhyaksha locates shifts within Hindi cinema in relation to a larger conjuncture of economic, political and sociocultural transitions in India since the early 1990s. This cinema, he argues, ‘refers to a reasonably specific narrative and a mode of presentation… couched in the post-information technology claims that Indian economy has been making in the past few years of global competitiveness’…It is this cinema, that ‘exists for, and prominently caters to, a diasporic audience of Indians’, that can be usefully termed ‘Bollywood.’ (Punathambekar 2005: 153)
Therefore, according to this argument, the idea of ‘Bollywood’ is itself founded upon the globalization of a chunk of the Hindi film industry. The term gained widespread global notoriety in the ‘90s, just when India arrived on the world map with a grand entry; Indian films were getting noticed at the Oscars, in Cannes, and on national television around the world, so it was only natural that this “new” phenomenon were given a catchy name as well. Subsequently, if all the films being produced by the Mumbai industry were given grand international releases, Punathambekar and Rajadhyaksha’s arguments would fall flat right there. However, there is still a significant chunk of the film output that audiences outside of India do not get to see. Included in this list are films from prominent production houses such as Vishesh Films (run by the Bhatt family), and RGV Productions (helmed by the Johar-Chopra antithesis Ram Gopal Varma). Producers such as these provide films with modest budgets, a compromised star power, and an increasingly diverse array of topics that relate more intimately to the movie going masses. The relative success of these films has encouraged such filmmakers to continue on their mission to entertain the domestic Indian audiences only, and so very few of their films have seen theatrical releases elsewhere.

Interestingly, these filmmakers spurn the ‘Bollywood’ title. The prevalence of this term has abruptly reduced the “multiple cinematic traditions within India and the diverse range of themes addressed…to one all-encompassing stereotype of the ‘masala musical’” (Punathambekar 2005: 153). Thus it is safe to assume at this point that KHNH and its kin do in fact stand as examples of this ‘Bollywoodization’ effect. The NRI is now very much an indispensable part of the Hindi film narrative, much so that the industry has branched off to create its own hybrid form. However, there are also films without the
necessary NRI characters that fall into the Bollywood categorization. Films such as *Lagaan*, *Devdas*, and *Asoka* were all historical epics, and were made with the same technical precision, gloss, and gargantuan personas that the NRI-centric films paraded. Therefore, they too fit comfortably into the growing club of films being aimed at the diasporic and non-Indian audiences alike.

**A Happy Ending**

The goal of this project was to explore the new path that contemporary Bollywood cinema is charting for itself. Hindi Cinema, as the largest and most influential cultural product of twentieth century India, has maintained a steady relationship of artistic expression with the country’s growing struggle with modernity and globalization over the past century. In the impassioned drive to enter the world stage of cinema and cultural arts, Hindi Cinema has taken strides in reevaluating its narrative traditions and being more inclusive of the burgeoning audiences, especially outside India. Indian emigrants have dispersed across the globe in large numbers for numerous reasons, and have established processes of hybridizing their traditional Indian heritage with the culture of their host nations. India’s transition to a free market economy in the 1990s brought a flood of investment by the diasporic community, thereby inverting the portrayal of the expatriate from morally corrupt and culturally void individuals to glorified representatives of the Indian homeland.

Post-2000 Bollywood releases have revamped the standard narrative structure into fast-paced, more identifiable (and at the same time experimental) plots, presented in increasingly glossy and big-budget packages. Recent big-budget productions such as *Kal*
Ho Naa Ho that tackle a wide range of issues among the diaspora are evidence of India's portrayal of its expatriates as a socially liberal, affluent, culturally liminal, and hybridized ethnic population within their host societies. Through these films, more progressive and direct negotiations of sexuality, gender, religion, and regional politics are established, and in turn permeated to the audiences in the homeland to have a consequent social impact.
GLOSSARY

*Bhaji* – an Indian snack, often made of vegetable fritters.

*Chapattis* – medium-sized, thin, bread which is a key staple of Indian cuisine. It is also referred to as a *roti*.

*Desi* – a label for native Indians or South Asians, used increasingly by members of the diaspora when referring to activities or people linked to the homeland.

*Guru Nanak* – 1469-1539; founder of the Sikh religion and first of the eleven Sikh gurus. He greatly influenced the history of the Punjabi people, and is revered widely by Sikhs, Hindus, and even Sufis.

*Mahabharata* – Hindu epic, which tells the story of the largest battle on earth and is the basis of most Hindu mythologies. The Hindu holy book, the *Bhagavad Gita*, in fact arises from a segment of the *Mahabharata*.

*Masala* – Hindi word for a mix of spices, most commonly used in reference to cooking.

*Parsi/Parsee* – Indian word for Persian Zoroastrians who were persecuted by Muslims in Persia and migrated to India to become an affluent and politically neutral minority.

*Picturization* – a term frequently used in Indian English in reference to the way something is presented visually. It is used most often in film writing, where critics and academics analyze the way songs from a soundtrack are filmed within the context of the film’s narrative.

*Qawwali* – a form of Sufi devotional music that originated in Persia and is now extremely popular on the Indian subcontinent.

*Ramayana* – An epic fundamental to Hinduism; tells the story of Lord Rama who is sent into a 14-year exile, and his adventures during that time.

*Salwar-Kameez* – a traditional dress worn by both men and women across South Asia. *Salwars* are loose pajama-like trousers, and the *kameez* is a long shirt.

*Sanskrit* – Root of most Indo-European languages, and official language of ancient Hindu texts.

*Swadeshi* – referring to something made and belonging to India as the homeland. The term was brought into popular use by Mahatma Gandhi during his movement to encourage Indians to only use products made in India in opposition to imported goods from England.
APPENDIX
Political Map of India showing major regional film industries

The Hindi Belt: Approximate area of India where Hindi is widely understood.

Chennai: The center for the four southern film industries.

Southern India: The four southern states comprise the largest and most successful regional film industries after Bollywood:
- Andhra Pradesh - Telegu language
- Karnataka - Kannada language
- Tamil Nadu - Tamil language
- Kerala - Malayalam language

1 Map from www.mapsofindia.com
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**Key Films**


