

one

*B*ombay before Bollywood

Film City Fantasies

When I first arrived in autumn 1979 at the modest bungalow in the leafy outskirts of Pune that housed the National Film Archive of India (NFAI), eager to see their paperwork collections, I was directed to one dusty cupboard in the corner of the small library. Inside, higgledy-piggledy, was a random collection of posters and film stills from the ‘new’ or ‘art’ cinema, alongside some stills from Hindi and Marathi classics of the 1950s and earlier. Once I had explained—to the consternation and bemusement of the library staff—that I was interested in the contemporary popular or mainstream Hindi cinema, a script of Vijay Anand’s 1965 film *Guide* was reluctantly retrieved for me. As it had been nominated for an Academy Award, I was assured that it was a ‘good’ mainstream film—a film of a better kind. I spent a few weeks dutifully working my way through this script and usefully improving my Hindi. But little more was on offer, although it is now clear that their vaults must have held much other uncatalogued material, albeit little of the then recent popular.

I soon gave up and made my way down to Bombay where I started to build my own collection of fan postcards and calendars of stars, film song-books and dialogue cassettes from the ubiquitous pavement vendors and small street stalls. I found a film-crazy college student as my unofficial tutor, visited the cinema with her twice or thrice a week, watched Doordarshan’s Sunday night movie and its film song show *Chitrahaar* with determined regularity and gradually, pincer-movement, made my way into the industry, watching first-hand how films were made. After a confusing twenty months in which I met

almost all the Bombay cinema ‘greats’ alive in that era, I returned to London to attempt to make sense of it all, with no more than a handful of other scholarly works or databases to refer to. It was a daunting task. When I had first suggested this doctoral project to my social anthropology department, I was firmly discouraged on the grounds that ‘cinema isn’t culture’. When I presented a paper on Manmohan Desai’s films at a Pesaro conference in 1985, I was slow-clapped by the entire contingent of *Cahiers du Cinema* critics aligned along the front row. Today the situation for any researcher of Indian cinema has changed beyond all recognition, both at the National Film Archive in Pune and elsewhere. Part of the journey of this book is also the journey of this transformation.

THE CHALLENGE

Now that Indian cinema is at least a hundred years old—and possibly a decade older than that—it is time to take stock. Indian cinema studies has, largely over the past decade, become an established academic discipline with a fast-growing community of scholars based around the world. Much has been achieved since Barnouw and Krishnaswamy’s groundbreaking *Indian Film* of 1963, which had been my bible in the early 1980s.¹ We have two scholarly encyclopaedias, a burgeoning body of academic and journalistic books and articles, at least three peer-reviewed journals in the field, digitised archives at NFAI, any number of films and film clips online—many with subtitles—and a mushrooming of databases, including collections of visual ephemera and songs, as well as a pioneering online encyclopaedia wiki project.² It has never been easier to find material.

But, with this plenitude comes a danger: as academic and journalistic projects accumulate, certain versions of Indian cinema history are becoming fossilised and assumptions and assertions about the form are being uncritically recycled, as I will discuss. While there is an abundance of online and other information, the resources for critical evaluation of this material are more limited. Moreover, the archives of early Indian cinema, both films and documents, are notoriously scanty in comparison with film industries elsewhere in the world, a point to which I will return.

The current book is both an intervention and itself an archival repository of sorts. By way of intervention, I will be arguing that, now that the discipline has reached critical mass and is ready for take-off, it is urgent that we encourage more stories to be told about Indian cinema and that we reassess some of the myths and hazy generalisations that have grown up around its history. This includes building—and stressing—a more nuanced picture of India's earliest films and film-makers that, among other things, represents the true balance between mythologicals, stunts, fantasies and other genres within that early history, as well as the dominance of American and European films in that era.³ This process should also include a reassessment of the significance of the B- and C-circuits throughout Indian cinema history and recognition of the dangers of carving this history into monolithic eras.⁴ While some scholarly works—notably Ashish Rajadhyaksha and Paul Willemen's *Encyclopaedia of Indian Cinema*, together with groundbreaking studies of the silent era by Kaushik Bhaumik and Virchand Dharamsey (on Bombay) and Stephen Hughes (on Madras)—have long been clear about this, their findings do not always get through to the accounts that flourish in the mainstream.⁵ Although the more journalistic histories are rarely completely *wrong*, their emphases can be decidedly misleading. But now that scholarship is growing and Indian cinema history can afford to become more complex and less pat, it is time for orthodoxies to be challenged.

Alongside this polemical thrust, the impetus for the current book stems from the recognition that I have myself accumulated a body of writing and research material over the past thirty years and it is time to reassess my own collection and to see what patterns emerge. The chapters that follow track a broadly chronological path, from the silent era to 1994, with a brief coda bringing us up to 2013. However, this is in no conventional sense a history of Bombay cinema. Instead, the book draws eclectically on diverse cinematic tropes and film artefacts across two key eras, pre-independence and the early 1980s. From these 'clues and myths', for the most part serendipitously found and intuitively followed, a map emerges that opens up alternative historical narratives and debates to shed new light on the films, their industry and their circulation.⁶ Thus, for example, two chapters in part one

take ephemeral visual artefacts as their starting point (lobby cards, film stills, posters), while the chapters of part two are substantially based around ethnographic fieldwork. Although the book builds on discrete essays researched and written at different points in time and within varying conceptual frameworks, its overarching themes and arguments emerged as the chapters spoke to each other across three decades of Indian cinema scholarship.

BOMBAY BEFORE BOLLYWOOD

My title is a knowingly controversial one. At its simplest, *Bombay Before Bollywood* signals no more than that the book's content focuses on mainstream Hindi cinema in the years before 1995—before the Shiv Sena renamed Bombay as Mumbai and before the moniker 'Bollywood' gained international currency as changes began to take root within India's film industry in the wake of economic liberalisation. But the title also points up conundrums around two equally—if differently—contentious and slippery terms. The use or refusal of both has become significant in the modern world: while both 'Mumbai' and 'Bollywood' had been in use for many years before the mid-1990s, both terms are today crucially marked by who speaks them and from where.

For many Marathi and Gujarati speakers of Mumbai/Bombay, their home city has always been 'Mumbai' in their vernacular languages. Moreover, for many people outside India, both diasporic Asian and non-Asian, as well as for others within India, there is a compelling case for refusing the term Bombay, given its colonialist history and connotations. The city's official name has been Mumbai since November 1995. On the other hand, many of the city's inhabitants of all backgrounds, brought up within a proudly cosmopolitan metropolis, have always called their home Bombay and continue to assert their right to do so or to slip between Mumbai and Bombay, often within the same sentence.⁷ The term, for them, signals a celebration of the secular, multi-faith city with which they identify. In this book I have chosen to use the term Bombay to refer to the city and its film industry as I knew—and lived with—them before 1995 and the term Mumbai to refer to the city after that point.

The term 'Bollywood' is more subtly—and less politically—complicated. A well-rehearsed debate on what, exactly, Bollywood means, how it evolved and how it should—or should not—be used is still unresolved. As with all good histories there are contested myths of origin, with several people claiming to have invented the term.⁸ In fact, as Madhava Prasad points out, the term 'Tollywood' had existed since the 1930s to refer to films made in Tollygunge, Calcutta.⁹ The follow-on coinage of the term 'Bollywood' is likely to have arisen in a number of places independently. This matter is of little importance. For what it is worth, while I do remember the term's occasional usage within Bombay film circles in the early 1980s, it had little wider currency at the time and was a flippant, slightly derogatory term that expressed the ambivalence of educated English-speaking middle-class Indians towards their own popular cinema.

The debate about the term 'Bollywood' today revolves around three issues: what it means, who uses it, and where. Crucially, the term is not unanimously used within the Mumbai industry, although it is becoming increasingly common among the younger generation. But many film-makers are openly hostile to the term—although they will happily tolerate it in the context of the global success of their own films. 'Bollywood' is of course widely used outside India, by both diasporic South Asians and non-Asians, and Rajinder Dudrah has argued for its special importance within this context.¹⁰ While Dudrah uses the term carefully and consistently, many others do not.¹¹ To be fair, its meaning is extraordinarily elastic: most usually it refers to films made in Mumbai/Bombay within the populist conventions of spectacle and action, song and dance, music and stars. At times 'Bollywood' refers to those conventions themselves. Sometimes the term is used only of films made in Mumbai since the mid-1990s with a targeted appeal to the non-resident Indian (NRI) market; at other times, in popular parlance, Bollywood refers to all Indian films of all eras, or even to all films made by people of Indian origin anywhere in the world. The term may also refer, more broadly, to the contemporary Mumbai film industry, while more nuanced arguments building on a key intervention by Ashish Rajadhyaksha use it to refer to the agglomeration of cultural and entertainment industries that revolve around Hindi/Mumbai/Bombay/Indian cinema, in which

the films themselves play a comparatively minor role.¹² Whether the term refers to a set of conventions, a body of films or an industry, 'Bollywood' is a brand that sells everything from face cream to barbers' stalls; from fashion to food; from dance classes to academic books. Crucially, as Ravi Vasudevan notes, it is a brand that sells India to the world.¹³ But, as Prasad and others point out, the effect of the term 'Bollywood' is to promote, on the world stage, the notion of an unchanging essence of Indian cinema.¹⁴ This is not a sound basis for a serious study of India's multiple cinemas.

The battle to control the term's use—both by film industry folk and by India-based academics—appears to have been lost. 'Bollywood' is here to stay, even though, as Prasad argues, 'in the end it must be admitted that there is no hope of giving it a definite meaning' and its growing usage is perhaps best read as 'a cultural symptom'.¹⁵ I have chosen, perhaps hopelessly, to follow the practice of most Indian academics and some in the film industry itself and limit my use of the term to the mainstream output—in the broadest sense—of the Mumbai-based, commercial Hindi cinema industry since 1995. The 'before' of my title, therefore, gestures towards the 'once upon a time' of an equally hopeless celebration of a mythologised past.¹⁶

What the debate over nomenclature signalled by my title also points to is a broader question that has haunted me throughout my decades of study of this cinema. It is the perennial quandary of any work of cultural translation: from where am I speaking and to whom? With every audience I address, I must modify my exposition. As I pointed out in the 1980s, it was one thing for educated Indians to dismiss or celebrate their own cinema but quite a different matter for 'foreigners' to do the same. I was imbued, at that time, with liberal ideals—to understand Indian films and film-making in their own terms (or in their film-makers' own terms) and to escape the dismissive and patronising gaze of Western cultural imperialism. But today, to whom am I speaking and on what terms? I hope that by my title I signal, however obliquely, something of the complexity of this conundrum. Moreover, given that an ongoing theme of this book concerns the paradoxes of cultural flows and cultural translation, the two contested terms of my title highlight the slippery nature of this terrain.

My subtitle, *Film City Fantasies*, is more straightforward, although this, again, condenses a number of associations and ideas. The first half of the book, which builds on my research over recent years, explores the more popular genres of pre-independence cinema, including a body of films known within the industry as *Arabian Nights* fantasy films, together with their sister genres on the B- and C-circuits, notably stunt and action films. The book is a plea for these more fantastical and popular films, the genres that refused ‘realism’ outright and were—for much of the pre-1970s era—largely aimed at subaltern¹⁷ or lower-class audiences, to be reinstated and given proper attention within Indian cinema history and for their importance to the subsequent development of film form within India to be recognised.¹⁸

On the other hand, the second half of the book draws primarily on my period of ethnographic fieldwork in the early 1980s within the film industry of Bombay, film city par excellence. In that phase of my project, I was as much concerned with the beliefs and fantasies that film-makers had about their film-making as with the operations of the industry on the ground. I became particularly interested in the beliefs film-makers developed about their audiences. I was also, of course, interested in the fantastical tales that were the films themselves. All of these concerns find expression in the chapters in part two.

Finally, the term fantasies is also a synonym for popular misconceptions, in which case the subtitle refers back to the other overarching project of this book, which is to challenge and complicate a number of myths about Indian cinema and its history, as already described. In all these senses, this book addresses the ‘fantasies’ of Bombay cinema.

TOWARDS SOME ALTERNATIVE HISTORIES

One of the most widely circulating stories about Indian cinema is that its first film—and many of its silent films—were Hindu mythologicals. The celebration of Dhundiraj Govind Phalke’s first Indian feature film, released in 1913, tells a triumphal tale of Indian nationalism bending modern technology to an essentially Indian form, with an episode from the Hindu epics, King Harishchandra, providing a conveniently pure Indian subject matter. Since at least the mid-1930s Phalke has been feted internationally as the first Indian film-maker and, as his

films represent a significant proportion of the twenty or so silent films to have survived, Phalke has been championed in each successive era as the 'founding father of Indian cinema'.¹⁹

The story is not quite so simple. However remarkable Phalke's achievements undoubtedly were, it is well documented that in the early twentieth century a number of people in different parts of India were experimenting with the new technology of film. These include Dadasaheb Torne, whose *Shree Pundalik* was released in 1912, as well as others in Calcutta and Bombay.²⁰ Even as late as 1917, Phalke's unique contribution was not widely known: as Ranita Chatterjee points out, the Bombay-based *Times of India* film critic was still blissfully unaware of any Indian film-making in the Bombay area and excitedly informed his readers that he had news of a 'Mr Madon' (*sic*) who had just made an Indian film, *Harishchandra*, 'played by Indians', which had met with great success at the Elphinstone tent in Calcutta.²¹

In fact, quite another man may have claims to being Indian cinema's unsung pioneer. Hiralal Sen, a Calcutta-based photographer and founder of the Royal Bioscope Company, was making films around the turn of the century and, as others have pointed out, by 1913 had two dozen or so productions under his belt. As I describe in chapter 2, he had allegedly already made a number of dance shorts by 1903, when, according to anecdotal reports, he made *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves*, a two-hour version of an evergreen hit of the Calcutta stage. The play was based on K.P. Vidyavinode's version of this classic fantasy tale and referred to as an '*Arabian Nights* opera'. We know nothing more about Hiralal Sen's film apart from rumour and anecdote: his life's work went up in flames in 1917 and there are no records of any screenings, although considerable talk of the film circulated in old Calcutta.

The question of 'firsts' and 'founding fathers' is not, in itself, of any great significance and I am not proposing a simplistic, revisionist history. But let us speculate. What if Hiralal Sen's feature film did exist? What if *Ali Baba* and not *Raja Harishchandra* was Indian cinema's foundational text? What if India's first celluloid hero was not a noble royal from the Hindu epics but a feckless young woodcutter from a quasi-Arabian/European orientalist tale? The implications are intriguing. Rather than beginning with a forty-minute Hindu myth,

Indian cinema history would kick off with a two-hour, confusingly culturally-hybrid tale from the *Arabian Nights*, set within an Islamic fantasy world and keying into global orientalist obsessions at the high point of cosmopolitan modernity. Crucially, such a history would stress Indian cinema's interconnectedness with world cinema and culture, not its exotic difference—a point to which I will return throughout this book.

If we continue our speculation and we tell Indian cinema history through the fantasy film, different emphases and different films and film-makers hove into view. Let us, for now, briefly assume that the *Arabian Nights* fantasy, *Ali Baba*, was India's first feature film. If we follow this trail, other landmark films then become more visible. The first all-India super hit, a storm across the country in 1924, was *Gul-e-Bakavali* (The Bakavali Flower, Kanjibhai Rathod), a fantasy film that was made and released a year before Douglas Fairbanks's Hollywood film *Thief of Bagdad* (Raoul Walsh, 1924) arrived to captivate India's audiences.²² Two years later India's first woman film-maker Fatma Begum, a star of *Gul-e-Bakavali*, wrote and directed her first film, the fantasy *Bulbul-e-Paristan* (Nightingale in Fairyland, 1926), starring her daughters Zubeida and Shazadi. The following year, three of the top ten box-office favourites cited in the 1927 evidence to the Indian Cinematograph Committee (ICC) were fantasy films, including an *Aladdin Ane Jadui Fanas* (Aladdin and the Wonderful Lamp, B.P. Mishra, 1927) that kick-started the success of Ardeshir Irani's Imperial Studios. Imperial quickly followed this with an equally successful *Alibaba Chalis Chor* (Alibaba and Forty Thieves, B.P. Mishra, 1927) that was a milestone in Sulochana's career as a super-star. Four years later, Irani's studio made history by producing India's first talkie, *Alam Ara* (Beauty of the World, Ardeshir Irani, 1931), also an *Arabian Nights* fantasy film.

While mythologicals and devotionals did indeed dominate Bombay production in the years between 1913 and 1921, by the early 1920s these were fading out of view. From the mid-1920s onwards, production was dominated by stunt and action, costume and fantasy films, alongside, of course, a growing trend for 'socials'.²³ However, the latter were appreciated primarily by film-makers and audiences with pretensions to respectability.²⁴ As I describe in chapter 2, in the later silent era between 1925 and 1934, fantasy and costume genres

represented around 40 per cent of production, alongside a significant percentage of stunt films per se. Precise quantification is difficult as, from what we can judge in the absence of the films themselves, there was considerable overlap between genres: for example, stunts, 'thrills' and special effects were aspects of both mythologicals and fantasies. There was, however, a clear perception of a mass or 'C-grade' class of audience for all such films.²⁵

With the coming of sound, *Arabian Nights* fantasies that drew on Urdu-Parsi theatre productions and their personnel flooded the early talkies, given the opportunities they offered for extravagant spectacle, music and dance. In chapter 3, I examine one of these, *Lal-e-Yaman*, in some detail. While the social films came into their own on the respectable A-grade circuits from the mid-1930s onwards, stunt and action films continued to dominate what I refer to as the subaltern circuits, and therefore the box office, as chapter 4 describes.²⁶ Even when the 1930s stunt era was dying, fantasy films could still make money. In 1940, Mehboob Khan's *Ali Baba*, shot in Hindi and Punjabi, was the super hit that allowed him to leave Sagar Studios and set up on his own.²⁷ It was also a film about which Mehboob felt particularly sentimental: his first break in the film industry had been a cameo role as one of the forty thieves in Imperial Studio's 1927 hit, the Sulochana-starrer *Alibaba*, although he used to grumble that he spent most of his onscreen time inside a jar.

If the significance of fantasy and action films during the pre-independence era has been underplayed to date, the received histories of the post-independence era are even more partial. These have tended to privilege the socials as the monolithic form of the 1950s and 1960s, along with occasional references to mythologicals and historicals.²⁸ In this they have taken their cue from the official film industry discourse of the day. Thus, according to an anonymous author writing an overview of 'Indian films' for a 1956 publication *India Talkie: Silver Jubilee* to celebrate the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Indian sound film:

After Independence and the new censorship policy of the Government of Bombay, which did not look favourably on magic and fighting scenes, production of 'stunts' of the type popular in the silent days and

the early days of the Talkie, virtually ceased. Social, mythological and historical stories continued to be the main subjects for picturisation.²⁹

This is misleading. For 1956, the year that this article was published—and also the year when, for example, *Mother India* was shooting on the studio floors—the editors of the industry trade paper, *Trade Guide*, named three box-office super hits.³⁰ Two of these were indeed socials—B.R. Chopra’s *Ek Hi Rasta* (Just One Road) and Raj Khosla’s *CID*, a crime thriller starring Dev Anand.³¹ The third was Basant Pictures’ *Hatimtai*, directed by Homi Wadia, an unadulterated *Arabian Nights* fantasy film based on a favourite Indian story of the Parsi stage, handed down through the oral traditions of *qissa-dastan*.³² The film of *Hatimtai*, ‘the most generous man of the Arab world’ according to its song-book publicity, was set in a spectacular never-



Figure 1.1 *Hatimtai* (1956) lobby card

Source: © Basant Pictures. From the Priya Paul collection. Courtesy Roy Wadia and Wadia Movietone.

never land of fairies, monsters and giants. It boasted stunts and action, glorious music and special effects magic, including an ornate underwater palace and a tree from which the heads of beautiful water nymphs hung like fruit (Figure 1.1). It was Homi Wadia's first full-colour film and his own personal favourite among all his movies.

Nor was the success of *Hatimtai* a flash in the pan: just two years earlier, Homi Wadia's *Alibaba and the Forty Thieves* was firmly in 1954's top four super hits (Figure 1.2). The film was shot in black and white but its novelties included choice scenes in so-called *bhoji* colour, for which prints were painstakingly hand-coloured by specially trained Gujarati craftsmen. *Alibaba* is premised on memorable songs and buffoonish comedy, together with stunts and action, with Alibaba, played by Mahipal, as a Douglas Fairbanks-style fighting hero. Although its special effects fantasy was less marked than *Hatimtai*, it was directly based on an *Arabian Nights* tale: it was hardly a social.

Even more significantly, two years before that, Homi Wadia's *Aladdin and the Wonderful Lamp* (1952), starring a young, beautiful Meena Kumari, together with a flying *jinni*/ genie and exquisite special

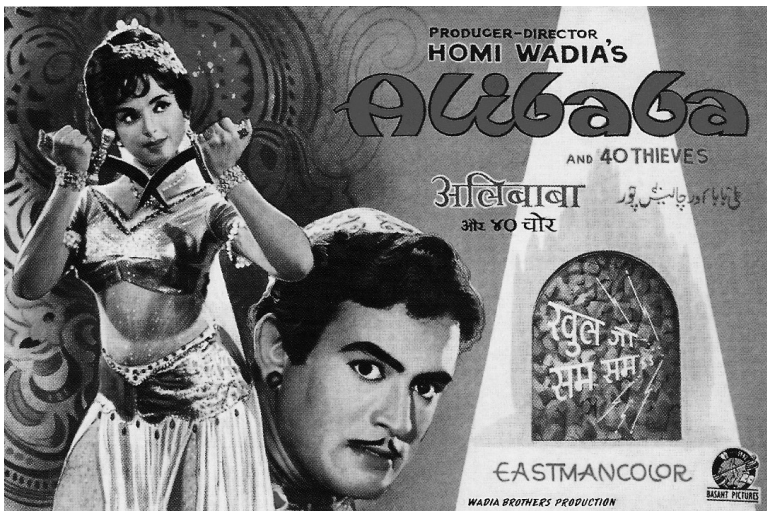


Figure 1.2 Basant's *Alibaba* (1954) postcard

Source: © Basant Pictures. Courtesy Roy Wadia and Wadia Movietone.

effects magical happenings, was also among India's top ten box-office successes of the year. As in the silent era, there was overlap between the fantasy and mythological films: studios such as Basant Pictures made both, drawing on the same pool of actors, stuntmen and special effects technicians. *Aladdin's pahalwan* (wrestler) jinni, flying through the skies, bearing the magic carpet that transports Aladdin and his princess to safety (see Figure 6.3 in chapter 6), had visual echoes of familiar mythological scenes of Hanuman flying to Lanka.³³ Moreover, Mahipal, who here played Aladdin, was nicknamed 'Ram' by his co-workers at Basant, as he strutted around the sets, because he so often played that role. Indeed, there are grounds for arguing that, especially in the 1950s, it was the fantasy films that drove the market for the mythologicals, at least among certain audiences. Vijay Mishra, a schoolboy in Fiji in the 1950s, still remembers the Basant fantasy films almost frame by frame and tells me that these were the films most eagerly anticipated within his community: mythologicals, when they came, were a poor substitute.³⁴

It is true that stunt films 'of the type popular in the silent days' dwindled away in the 1950s—before taking off again with a vengeance in the early 1960s. It is also true that some populist elements of 'magic and fighting' were incorporated within some (but not all) socials. But the B- and C-circuits, which had been part of the exhibition landscape since the silent era, did not disappear. On the contrary, Basant and other studios knew only too well the commercial viability of the subaltern audience. The stunt queen of the 1930s, Fearless Nadia, continued to be a box-office success throughout the 1940s and 1950s on these circuits. Once social films had replaced stunt thrillers among the more 'respectable' audiences, who increasingly dominated the film industry's aspirations, Homi Wadia started to produce cheap genre versions of Nadia's earlier hits, beginning with *Hunterwali ki Beti* (Daughter of the Woman with the Whip, Nanabhai Bhatt, 1943), as I describe in chapter 4. Indeed, in 1956 Nadia starred in an *Arabian Nights*' spoof, *Baghdad ka Jadu* (Magic of Baghdad, John Cawas). Moreover, Homi Wadia's action films—drawing on other globally popular stories such as Tarzan and James Bond—continued to make money right through the 1960s, as described in chapter 5.

A more complete account of the 1950s would show that for most of that decade the makers of C-circuit stunt and mythological films turned to other forms within which to incorporate the attractions of 'magic and fighting'. The costume and fantasy genres provided these forms. Moreover, these genres were especially popular with children, including middle-class children, many of whom still fondly remember the fantasy films of their youth. In 1955 and 1956, costume and fantasy films made up around 30 per cent of all productions, only dropping to less than 20 per cent in the late 1950s, when stunt films took off again.³⁵ Rather astutely and somewhat tongue-in-cheek, the more cynical of the Bombay industry started to refer to such films as 'semi-socials' in order to keep the more snobbish of their critics at bay.³⁶

Crucially, Indian cinema in the 1950s and 1960s was not homogeneous. Accounts that privilege the socials within a so-called 'classic era' of Bombay cinema tell only half the story. It is true that, in a spirit of Nehruvian optimism, many 1950s socials engaged with the project of Indian nationalist modernity, whether through the essentialist values of Mother India's chastity and the 'timeless' Indian village or through the exciting new cityscapes of Bombay in the Navketan films. But the fantasy films of Bombay's subaltern circuits were equally, if differently, engaging with that modernity: they related to more global forms of cosmopolitan modernity in which an exotic Orient, full of magical delights, provided the Other to the nation's self-image of rationalist modernity and socialist utopia. The fantasy films of the 1950s can be seen as the flip side of *Mother India* and *CID*. Moreover, we should remember that the *Arabian Nights* themselves were essentially *city* stories and until recently dismissed as trash by Arabist literary intellectuals. As Robert Irwin puts it, they were 'the collective dreaming of commercial folk in the great cities of the medieval Arab world' whose stories 'pander to the tradesman's fascination with commodities'.³⁷ As such the *Nights* were far from irrelevant to the new India. Furthermore, while always 'Indianising' their material, these fantasy films invariably made direct visual references to Hollywood versions of such tales, as later chapters will describe.³⁸ On the other hand, the stunt films of the late 1950s onwards also openly bought into the transnational popular culture—as they had in the 1920s and 1930s—drawing on global icons such as Tarzan,

James Bond and King Kong. Indian stars such as Dara Singh, Fearless Nadia and John Cawas brought 'Indianised' versions of this global culture to lower-class audiences, and these stars thereby became counter-heroes and counter-heroines to the mainstream heroes of Bombay's socials, as discussed in chapter 5.

Turning to the 1970s and 1980s, the focus of the second half of this book, our project of looking at Indian cinema history afresh through the lens of the fantasy film uncovers a rather different picture. In this period, now often referred to as the *masala* era,³⁹ on account of the 'spicy' form of the attractions of the dominant mainstream blockbusters, fantasy films per se were fewer, even on the lower-class circuits. Nevertheless, there were some straight *Arabian Nights* productions, including a big-budget, Indo-Soviet co-production of *Alibaba aur 40 Chor* (Latif Faiziyev and Umesh Mehra, 1980) starring Hema Malini, Zeenat Aman and Dharmendra, and, even as late as 1990, a *Hatimtai* from Babubhai Mistry that starred Jeetendra.⁴⁰ However, B- and C-circuit stunt films persisted throughout the 1970s and 1980s and even mythologicals and devotionals had a half-life in this era: in April 1980, I visited the sets of the last film to shoot at Basant studios and watched Homi Wadia direct the mythological *Mahabali Hanuman* (1981).⁴¹ But by then change was well under way in the film industry. On the other hand, the fantasy and mythological genres found a new life on television in the 1980s and early 1990s. Ramanand Sagar followed his phenomenally successful 1980s television serial of the *Ramayana* with the equally popular *Alif Laila*, two series of stories from the *Arabian Nights*, broadcast on Doordarshan and SAB TV between 1993 and 1996.

The importance of a history of Bombay cinema told 'from below'—through the frame of the magic and fighting films—is that it brings to our attention the crucial role played by these lower-brow forms in the rise of the big-budget masala film in the 1970s. The spectacle, action and special effects magic of the B-movies⁴² were all greedily incorporated within the conventions of the mega-masala films that ruled the box office of that decade—a cinema of attractions that predated Hollywood's own turn to big-budget, visceral spectacle in the 1980s. A different sensibility about verisimilitude emerged through this: social 'realism' was no longer of much relevance to the

masala blockbuster. Rather, the suspension of disbelief of the B-grade fantasy, stunt and mythological films moved into the mainstream. *Naseeb* (Manmohan Desai, 1981), for example, not only references popular Hollywood and Hong Kong action films but also plays out across three different registers of verisimilitude, as described in chapter 8.

Most significantly, some of the biggest names in the Bombay industry of the 1970s and early 1980s—directors, producers and stars—learnt their trade directly from the older B-studios. Manmohan Desai, the masala king of the 1970s, used to refer to ‘trick wizard’ Babubhai Mistry, the special effects genius of Basant studios, as his guru: Desai was apprenticed to Mistry in 1957 and told me he learnt all he knew about populist, spectacle-based film-making from this legendary figure.⁴³ Moreover, Manmohan Desai’s own father was Kikubhai Desai, a fantasy and stunt film-maker, who founded Paramount Studio and was a close friend of J.B.H. Wadia. Even Mahesh Bhatt’s father was one of Basant’s top directors, Nanabhai (aka Batuk) Bhatt, who directed more than a hundred fantasy, stunt and mythological films over the course of his lifetime. One of Bhatt’s earliest memories is of visiting his father directing *Sinbad the Sailor* (Nanabhai Bhatt, 1952) on the studio sets of a grand ship and of ‘an enchanting land which mesmerised me’.⁴⁴ The masala films were, almost literally, born in the B-studios.

If we reduce the so-called ‘classical’ era of the 1950s and 1960s to a monolithic form of social film, as some accounts of Indian cinema have implied, these other threads and influences become less visible. It makes no sense to talk about the ‘Bollywoodisation’ of the masala era (whatever that means) as Sangita Gopal does, without recognising that this spirit of cosmopolitan, visceral, lowbrow, popular culture was kept alive within the B-circuit throughout the 1950s and 1960s.⁴⁵ The B-films implicitly challenged the dominant paradigm of the Indian nation: if, as has been said of Hollywood, B-films are the space within which the ‘return of the repressed’ of the A-film erupts, the Bombay B-films of the 1950s and 1960s were arguably the place where the idealised Nehruvian ‘nation’ became messy and porous and could not be neatly severed from global popular culture. As I suggest in the first part of this book, the Wadia brothers’ films—from the 1930s

to the 1960s—embodied a somewhat different vision of nationalism and a modernising India from that of the mainstream elite. This brought together transnational popular culture with traditional Indian subaltern performance forms in an inclusive, hybrid, ludic space. A crucial aspect of the Wadias' cosmopolitan worldview was that their thrillers and fantasies engaged audiences at a visceral level, through thrilling action, spectacle and songs, which linked in to the culturally hybrid traditions of lower-class entertainment, including circus and variety entertainment, magic shows, cabaret and wrestling, as well as to Hollywood's so-called 'lower genres'.⁴⁶ The *Arabian Nights* and fantasy tropes figured within many of these traditions, as we shall see in subsequent chapters.

To recap, the beauty of an account of Indian cinema that begins with *Ali Baba* rather than *Raja Harishchandra* is that, for a change, cultural syncretism is placed at its heart: as we will see, the *Arabian Nights* are a transcultural body of stories that have developed over the centuries through an accretion of cultural borrowings. They are as Indian, Persian or European as they are Arabian. Indian films have always been simultaneously 'Indian' and in touch with the global. An undue emphasis on the mythological in some earlier scholarship has encouraged essentialist celebration of Indian cinema's exotic difference and an ultimately distracting focus on features such as the 'darshanic gaze'.⁴⁷ Meanwhile, such emphases have sidelined the contribution of the much-maligned stunt and fantasy films to the development of mainstream Bombay cinema's conventions, including the introduction of global cinema codes of both form and subject matter, as Ashish Rajadhyaksha and others have pointed out.⁴⁸ It is time to redress the balance.

LOOKING BACK: THE LONGER VIEW

There are a number of lessons here, not least the perils of generalisation. In practice, there are both similarities and differences between Bombay cinema and other forms of world cinema, between one period and another, and across a body of films within any one period. Film-makers themselves work within an economy of both repetition and difference. For example, it is in many ways true that

one form—the social—dominated from the early 1950s to the 1990s, a period between two more cosmopolitan eras of global flows. Uncovering the ground rules of this was the focus of much of my own work in the 1980s. Madhava Prasad took this further and outlined the ascendance over this period of the dominant super-genre of the ‘feudal family romance’.⁴⁹ But, as argued above and *pace* Prasad, we must not over-generalise. To take one example, Sangita Gopal asserts of the very long period between independence and the early 1990s: ‘The films themselves were . . . cut-and-paste—dialogue, songs, dance numbers and fight sequences were manufactured piecemeal and then assembled to create the final product.’⁵⁰ This was undoubtedly true of a number of film-makers at different points within that period. However, now that a more nuanced picture of production is emerging through new ethnographic and historical research by younger scholars, such generalisations become problematic. For my own fieldwork of the 1980s, I visited the productions of mainstream directors/producers as contrasting as Kamal Amrohi, Manmohan Desai, Subhash Ghai, Raj Kapoor, Raj Khosla, Hrishikesh Mukherjee, the Ramsay brothers, Mohan Segal and Homi Wadia. I saw as many differences as similarities in how individual film-makers worked. Production norms differed not only between production companies but also at different points over those four decades. In the 1950s and 1960s, ‘cut-and-paste’ was not the norm with the established film-makers and it never was with the Raj Kapoors, Guru Dutts and Mehboob Khans of the film industry. Moreover, there was always, even in the silent era, a complex network of circuits targeting different audiences with appetites for different kinds of cinema.⁵¹

If the anthropologist is one who ‘stays long enough’, as Trinh T. Minh-ha’s memorably ironic voiceover put it in her essay film, *Re-assemblage* (1979), I still have to wonder whether I qualify, even after more than thirty years of research on Bombay cinema—albeit not continuously. Indeed I have amassed my own archive: a series of notebooks, interviews, tapes and trunks of ephemera that I can—and should—plunder and put into the public domain before they turn to dust.⁵² While the Indian cinema archive is notorious for its gaps and irrevocable acts of destruction and neglect, it is nevertheless growing exponentially today, as the very concept of what an archive might

be and contain is transformed and as the digital opens new doors.⁵³ Different forms of collections are emerging across a plethora of sites, both within public institutions and among private collectors: material ignored by the NFAI in Pune in the 1970s now has commercial as well as academic value.

There is still a wealth of resources out there to be tapped. Some, like the websites of the film song fanatics of Kanpur, are already in the public domain; others—from *Movie Mahal's* priceless collection of film industry interviews of the 1980s to Osians' enviable collection of cinematic artefacts and ephemera, or to the million-plus negatives of classic Bombay film stills held by Kamat Foto Flash—await a viable commercial vehicle before being put into the public domain.⁵⁴ As a consequence of all this, the nature of academic labour itself has to be re-evaluated: where is value to be located in the collection, analysis and contextualisation of archival materials? What is to be rewarded and how? Who can own what? Whether or not such questions can be resolved, this 'living archive' must be tracked down vigorously before it is too late, for, as Stephen Hughes points out, 'film history dwells alongside us as a part of the living present; it is an ongoing, unfinished and open-ended project.'⁵⁵

An additional advantage of being around 'long enough' is the privilege of the longer perspective. One can better see the continuities across the years, not just the changes. While a perennial theme within the film industry has been that major changes are afoot—and even that crisis is imminent—in the longer term these changes seem less significant than the continuities. For example, when I briefly returned to the film industry in the context of a television documentary I was making in 1994, after a gap of almost a decade, I was astonished to watch the top hits of the day—*Khalnayak* (The Villain, Subhash Ghai, 1993) and *Sadak* (The Street, Mahesh Bhatt, 1991). As I discuss in the final chapter of this book, they were both in some ways quite different from the films of the 1970s and 1980s but in others very much the same.

Currently (in 2013), it is true that almost every aspect of film production has been transformed—as has India—and the Mumbai film industry is now full of sophisticated, elite, young people, many internationally educated, whose range of cinematic references spans

world cinema in a way that was almost unheard of thirty years ago.⁵⁶ Nevertheless, *Agneepath* (Path of Fire, Karan Malhotra, 2012), which I discuss in the coda to this book, not only reflects world cinema but is also a remake of a 1990 Bombay film which itself draws on motifs and an underlying structure and grammar that looks back to *Mother India* and, arguably, earlier. The challenge is on to analyse cultural flows in a complex new world. But it was ever more or less thus. *Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*.⁵⁷

NOTES

1. Erik Barnouw and S. Krishnaswamy, *Indian Film*, second edition, New York: Oxford University Press, 1980 [1963].

2. See Ashish Rajadhyaksha and Paul Willemen (eds), *Encyclopaedia of Indian Cinema*, new revised edition, London: British Film Institute and Oxford University Press, 1999, and Encyclopaedia Britannica, *Encyclopaedia of Hindi Cinema*, New Delhi: Encyclopaedia Britannica (India) Pvt. Ltd, 2003. Journals include Sage's *BioScope: South Asian Screen Studies*; Routledge's *South Asian Popular Culture*; and Intellect's *Studies in South Asian Film and Media*. For the online wiki project set up by Lawrence Liang and Ashish Rajadhyaksha and hosted by pad.ma, see: www.cinemaofindia.org.

3. Genres in the Indian context (as elsewhere) are notoriously difficult to define. Broadly, mythologicals are films about the Hindu gods drawn from the epics and puranas; devotionals are stories of their devotees, including the medieval saint-poets; fantasies are set in magical worlds and mostly draw on Persian-Arabian storytelling traditions; stunt films are action films set in a contemporary world. For a brief gloss of these and other terms see Rosie Thomas, 'India: Mythologies and Modern India', in *World Cinema since 1945*, ed. William Luhr, New York: Ungar, 1987, pp. 304–5. As I will later discuss, there is considerable overlap between these genres.

4. According to industry parlance from the 1930s onwards, the 'A-circuit' comprised prestigious metropolitan cinemas; the 'B-circuit' referred to middle-ranking and 'second-run' cinemas in cities and larger towns; the 'C-circuit' comprised cinemas in rural districts, smaller towns and the poorest urban areas, where the lower-class and unlettered audiences lived, and included travelling cinemas.

5. A growing body of academic research is excavating this. However, these interventions have made little impact to date in the non-specialist public domain. See, for example, Kaushik Bhaumik, 'The Emergence of the Bombay Film Industry, 1913–36', unpublished DPhil thesis, University of Oxford, 2001; and 'Cinematograph to Cinema: Bombay 1896–1928', *BioScope*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2011, pp. 41–67; Suresh Chabria and Paolo Cherchi Usai (eds), *Light of Asia: Indian Silent Cinema, 1912–1935*, New Delhi: Wiley Eastern, 1994; Virchand Dharamsey's work ('Filmography', pp. 69–235) in Chabria (above) and elsewhere, including 'The Advent of Sound in Indian Cinema: Theatre, Orientalism, Action, Magic', *Journal of the Moving Image*,

vol. 9, 2010; Rachel Dwyer, *Filming the Gods: Religion and Indian Cinema*, London: Routledge, 2006; Stephen Putnam Hughes, 'Is There Anyone Out There? Exhibition and the Formation of Silent Film Audiences in South India', unpublished PhD thesis, University of Chicago, 1996; and 'When Film Came to Madras', *BioScope*, vol. 1, no. 2, 2010, pp. 147–68; Rosie Thomas 'Miss Frontier Mail: The Film That Mistook Its Star for a Train', in *Sarai Reader 07: Frontiers*, eds Monica Narula, Shuddhabrata Sengupta, Jeebesh Bagshi and Ravi Sundaram, Delhi: Centre for Study of Developing Societies, 2007, pp. 294–308; and Valentina Vitali, *Hindi Action Cinema*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2008.

6. This methodology acknowledges the inspiration of Carlo Ginzburg, *Clues, Myths and the Historical Method*, trans. from the Italian by John and Anne C. Tedeschi, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989 [1986].

7. Moreover, there are official anomalies, such as the continued use of the term Bombay High Court.

8. *Cine Blitz* journalist Bevinda Collaco and producer Amit Khanna, among others.

9. For an excellent, succinct overview of the debate and nuances of the phenomenon see M. Madhava Prasad's 'Surviving Bollywood' in *Global Bollywood*, eds Anandam P. Kavoori and Aswin Punathambekar, New York: New York University Press, 2008, pp. 41–51.

10. Rajinder Dudrah, *Bollywood Travels: Culture, Diaspora and Border Crossings in Popular Hindi Cinema*, London: Routledge, 2012, pp. 4–7.

11. For example, Sangita Gopal, *Conjugations*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2011. Although this is an otherwise useful and insightful American academic book on what it calls 'the New Bollywood', Gopal flounders in her attempts to define its terms, admitting that 'when I do use [Bollywood] at all, I mean it to signify Hindi film in general', while referring to a mysterious process of 'Bollywoodisation' that she argues was in process from the 1970s.

12. Ashish Rajadhyaksha, 'The "Bollywoodization" of the Indian Cinema: Cultural Nationalism in a Global Arena', in *Global Bollywood*, eds Anandam P. Kavoori and Aswin Punathambekar, New York: New York University Press, pp. 17–40.

13. Ravi Vasudevan, *The Melodramatic Public: Film Form and Spectatorship in Indian Cinema*, New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2010, p. 339.

14. Prasad, 'Surviving Bollywood', p. 49.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 44.

16. N.B. the 'new Bollywood' trend of nostalgic celebration of the 1970s and early 1980s, for example, *Once Upon a Time in Mumbaai* (Milan Luthria, 2010).

17. I use the term subaltern to refer to the disempowered, mostly unlettered, urban and rural poor, broadly in line with the use of the term within the academic discourse of subaltern studies. This word would not be used among film industry workers, for whom terms such as the 'masses', 'C-grade' or 'C-class' were most commonly used.

18. Valentina Vitali's research on action cinema is important in this context. Vitali, *Hindi Action Cinema*.

19. This is not to deny that Dadasaheb Phalke was the first Indian feature film-maker with a conscious project to build a national film industry, as Ashish Rajadhyaksha argued cogently in 'The Phalke Era: Conflict of Traditional Form and Modern Technology', in *Interrogating Modernity: Culture and Colonialism in India*, eds Tejaswini Niranjana, P. Sudhir and Vivek Dhaireswar, Calcutta: Seagull Books, 1993, pp. 47–82.

20. Rajadhyaksha and Willemsen, *Encyclopaedia of Indian Cinema*.

21. Ranita Chatterjee, 'Journeys In and Beyond the City: Cinema in Calcutta 1897–1939', unpublished PhD thesis, University of Westminster, 2011. The reference will be to *Satyawadi Raja Harishchandra*, produced by Elphinstone Bioscope Company and released in March 1917 in Calcutta.

22. *Gul-e-Bakavali* was released in India in March 1924, two months before *Thief of Bagdad* was released in the United States of America (USA) and a year before its Indian release.

23. In Bombay film industry parlance, the social has been broadly understood as any film in a contemporary setting not otherwise classified.

24. Kaushik Bhaumik describes how the desire for 'respectability' underpinned the Bombay silent film industry's move towards the social film. See Bhaumik, 'The Emergence of the Bombay Film Industry'; see also Kaushik Bhaumik, 'Sulochana: Clothes, Stardom and Gender in Early Indian Cinema', in *Fashioning Film Stars: Dress, Culture, Identity*, ed. Rachel Moseley, London: British Film Institute, 2005, pp. 87–97.

25. J.B.H. Wadia uses this term in his memoirs. For more on elite perceptions of the Indian mass audience, see also Manishita Dass, 'The Crowd Outside the Lettered City: Imagining the Mass Audience in 1920s India', *Cinema Journal*, vol. 48, no. 4, 2009, pp. 77–98.

26. My use of the term 'subaltern circuits' refers primarily to the distribution circuits where 'C-grade' audiences lived, that is, underclass and unlettered audiences.

27. Bunny Reuben, *Mehboob: India's De Mille*, New Delhi: Indus, 1999, p. 63.

28. To take three examples from across the decades: Barnouw and Krishnaswamy, *Indian Film*; M. Madhava Prasad, *Ideology of the Hindi Film: A Historical Construction*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998; Gopal, *Conjugations*. My own early work was also somewhat guilty of this.

29. Anonymous in *Indian Talkie, 1931–56, Silver Jubilee Souvenir*, Bombay: Film Federation of India, 1956, p. 81.

30. I base these rankings on discussions and correspondence with Uday Row Kavi, Associate Editor of *Trade Guide*, in the early 1980s. His lists replicate those published by his employer, B.K. Adarsh, *Film Industry of India, 1913–1963*, Bombay: Trade Guide, 1963, p. 59, which were drawn on by Vinayak Purohit, *Some Aspects of Sociology of Indian Films and Profile of the Hindi Hit Movie, 1951–1989*, Bombay: Indian Institute of Social Research, 1990. However, Row Kavi's lists also include the trade distinctions between A+ (super hit), A (hit), and B (successful) films. He also adds four more 1952 'hits' to Purohit's two, one of which is Homi Wadia's *Aladdin and the Wonderful Lamp*.