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Working Paper 21-077



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Funding for this research was provided in part by Harvard Business School.

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Abstract

This working paper examines the social impact of the film industry in India during the first four decades after Indian Independence in 1947. It shows that Bollywood, the mainstream cinema in India and the counterpart in scale to Hollywood in the United States, shared Hollywood's privileging of paler skin over darker skin, and preference for presenting women in stereotypical ways lacking agency. Bollywood reflected views on skin color and gender long prevalent in Indian society, but this working paper shows that serendipitous developments helped shape what happened on screen. The dominance of Punjabi directors and actors, organized as multi-generational families, facilitated lighter skin tones becoming a prominent characteristic of stars. By constraining access to legal finance, pursuing selective censorship, and by denying Bollywood cinema the kind of financial and infrastructural support seen in other developing countries, the Indian government also incentivized directors and producers to adopt simplified story lines that appealed to predominately rural audiences, rather than contesting widely accepted views. Employing new evidence from oral histories of producers and actors, the paper suggests that cinema not only reflected, but emboldened societal attitudes regarding gender and skin color. The impact of such content was especially high as rural and often illiterate audiences lacked alternative sources of entertainment and information. It was left to parallel, and to some extent regional, cinemas in India to contest skin color and gender stereotypes entrenched in mainstream media. The cases of parallel cinema and Tamil cinema are examined, but their audiences were either constrained or – as in the case of Tamil cinema – subject to the isomorphic influence of Bollywood, which grew after policy liberalization in 1991.

Keywords: film industry; Bollywood; Tamil cinema; India; gender; male gaze; race; social impact; stereotypes; oral history; business history

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This working paper examines the impact of movie content on gender and skin color stereotypes in India between Independence in 1947 and the start of policy liberalization in 1991. India developed a huge film industry during this period. In 1990, one estimate was that it was the ninth largest industry in the country, and employed 2.25 million people in production, distribution and exhibition.² During the 1970s and 1980s, the release of some 800 features annually made India larger than any other country, including the United States, in movie production. However, it was also a diverse industry: Hindi language films, which included the Bollywood industry based in Mumbai (formerly Bombay), only accounted for one fifth of the total production, with the remainder of the movies being in regional languages, especially those spoken in the south of the country.³

This working paper does not offer a general history of the Indian cinema industry as such, nor does it offer critical commentary on particular films. There is already a rich literature by film, cultural and other scholars, on which this working paper gratefully draws.⁴ Rather, the focus is on the impact of the content of films on gender and skin color stereotypes. In particular, there are three main research questions. First, did the film industry in India embolden or contest stereotypes on skin color and gender during the post-Independence decades? Second, to what extent did the business organization of the industry influence the content of films in this period? Third, why and how were there variations on these issues between different components of Indian cinema? A film

industry has many other impacts on a society and economy beyond influencing societal values – such as the generation of employment and serving as a source of revenue from exports to foreign markets – but these are not the concern of this working paper.

This study focusses on the formative decades of Independent India between 1947 and 1991. It does not seek to contribute to our understanding of Indian cinema in the colonial period. Nor does it address the more contemporary period, which is the primary concern of much of the existing literature on Indian cinema. The policy liberalization that began in 1991 resulted in major, and on-going changes, to every aspect of the industry, especially access to capital and new viewers across the globe. There was also a major technological shift, described by the leading Indian film and cultural critic Ashish Rajadhyaksa, as digital recording and editing replaced celluloid in the production process.⁵

The working paper proceeds in four sections. The first section positions this study within the broad literature which has sought to examine the historical impact of industries or clusters of firms on societal values and choices before turning specifically to film. It shows that the impact of Hollywood on both perceptions of gender and ethnicity has been particularly well-documented, although primarily by cultural and social historians. This establishes concepts and approaches which will be used to look at Indian cinema. The second section turns to the business organization of Bollywood, and explores how this might have shaped content. The third section reviews historical attitudes to gender and skin color in the India before exploring how Bollywood portrayed these topics on screen between 1947 and 1991. Given the absence of archives in the industry, given its lack of formal status as an industry and the high degree of informality in its organization, the working paper offers a methodological innovation by drawing on the voices of prominent actors and producers that are preserved in two oral history databases. The fourth section identifies

different approaches to gender and skin color found in the parallel cinema and in regional cinema, with a focus on Tamil language cinema. A final section concludes.

II

Business historians have validated a longitudinal approach to understanding the societal and cultural impact of business by showing how tastes, preferences and values have been shaped over time by corporate strategies. From the late nineteenth century, for example, business enterprises transformed national diets by introducing foods never previously consumed in countries. Well-known examples include the globalization of banana and other tropical fruit consumption by firms such as the United Fruit Company and the Dole Fruit Company. The globalization of standardized, packaged food products altered what was eaten, and how it was eaten. When Kellogg entered the British market in the interwar years, for example, it resulted in a major shift in breakfast habits from consuming hot meals to ready-to-eat cold cereals. In post-World War II Turkey, Unilever introduced an entirely new food product, margarine, to consumers who had previously used ghee as a spread on bread.⁶

The scale of the impact of globalization on national diets intensified from the 1960s. This was the era when American fast food restaurants globalized rapidly, resulting – according to critics – in a “McDonaldization” of food tastes and wider values.⁷ However, scholars have also shown that the impact of such firms was tempered by adjusting products and services to local preferences and tastes.⁸ This highlights the broader methodological challenge of assessing the impact of businesses on society, which is that corporate strategies are executed within social, cultural, and historical contexts that condition the nature of that impact. The point is well-made in Hisano’s recent study of how business helped shape the visual appearance of food, which

emphasizes that the process was an iterative one which also involved scientists, regulators, consumers and others.⁹

The multiplicity of actors shaping impact is also evident in the history of the beauty industry. In his study of the globalization of the beauty industry from the nineteenth century, Jones lays heavy stress on the role of business in the homogenization of global beauty standards over time, especially towards Caucasian beauty ideals. However, he also demonstrates the continued wide variation between countries and geographies in their preferences for different beauty products, even when the same set of multinational enterprises were predominant in the various markets. Despite numerous corporate attempts to change consumption patterns, for example, East Asians remained resistant to perfume and focused on skin care, while American consumers retained a much higher preference for color cosmetics. Marketing and branding strategies can certainly influence consumer preferences in this industry, but only to a point.¹⁰

The business history literature on the film industry has had much less to say concerning the long-term impact of cinema. This is understandable because the media industry as a whole represents especially formidable challenges to establishing causality in any rigorous fashion, given that media, culture and everyday life are intimately interconnected.¹¹ Yet this does not mean that the impact of the content of cinema – and other media - concerning social issues should not be examined. The subject is too important to permit a discrete silence. Cinema is a different kind of commodity than food and cosmetics, as it is one that can be copied, distributed, played, and replayed. It is constantly consumed rather than being a one-off. Its impact might be assumed to be as, or even more, substantial as a result. Even before the recent outpouring of literature on the impact of social networking media on consumers and voters, there were plentiful empirical studies anchored in different academic disciplines showing how electronic media appeared to shape, rather

than just reflect, people's values and outlook. One large econometric study demonstrated that when the conservative Fox News channel was introduced in the cable programming of U.S. towns between 1996 and 2000, for example, the vote share of the Republican Party in Presidential elections increased in the towns that broadcast Fox News.¹² Meanwhile, a long tradition of experimental research has shown that violent television programs increased aggression, and that cinema content has impacted views on matters ranging from attitudes to rape to the value of individuals and particular professions.¹³

A further reason why the business history literature on the impact of cinema has been limited is the way that the huge literature on cinema has evolved. This literature pays unusually limited attention to cinema as a business. In one recent survey, Miskell noted the small number of studies looking at business organizations in cinema compared to the large literature on "particular directors, producers, actors, or the development of specific genres or national cinemas."¹⁴ Insofar as cinema has been treated as a business, the main focus of business historians until recently has been the growth of Hollywood, and its dominance of many international markets.¹⁵ More recently, the growth of other national cinemas, mostly in Europe, has also attracted attention. However only one of the mere ten articles on cinema which have been published over the last decade in the three top U.S. and European journals in the discipline – *Business History Review*, *Enterprise & Society*, and *Business History* – has discussed the issue of impact.¹⁶

The single article in that group which does discuss impact is Hansen and Magnussen's nuanced study of Hollywood films between 1928 and 2016. They employ a narratives and sense-making approach to show how Hollywood films used narrative plots "that legitimize certain practices and worldviews while marginalizing others."¹⁷ In particular, they show how Hollywood

films became important vehicles for audiences' understanding of business in periods of uncertainty, crisis, and instability. This working paper builds on their pioneering contribution.

The specific portrayal of gender and race in Hollywood has been the preserve of cultural, feminist and social historians rather than examined through the lens of business. The patriarchal nature of the industry after the silent film era – when female directors and screenwriters were common, and women actors played multiple and complex roles – has been documented and analyzed.¹⁸ In 1975, the British film critic Laura Mulvey coined the term “male gaze” to describe the lingering cinematic angle of a heterosexual male on a female character. She argued that the woman was represented as the “other”, or an object rather than a subject, in Hollywood movies. The narrative structures of Hollywood movies during the postwar decades, in her analysis, saw male actors as the active role with the power that advanced the story, and with whom the observer can identify, while the female role was presented as a passive spectacle. In Mulvey's view, the women on screen became part of a commodity culture and created a dichotomy of “the woman as consumed versus the woman consumer.”¹⁹

Hollywood's distinctive stance on skin color has also been subject to much analysis. Basically, Blacks were largely kept off screen before at least the 1960s. If they were on-screen, they had designated roles. Black masculinity in Hollywood inherited the stereotypes of the “shaman” or the “scoundrel” found in nineteenth century minstrel shows.²⁰ From the 1930s, the phenomenon of Blackface, where makeup was used by non-Black actors to play the role of a Black character, and yellowface, where makeup was used by non-East Asian actors to play the role of an East Asian character for instance, began to be used. Within the context of Hollywood's construction of race, however, a variety of white skin tones were shown from the 1930s. This reflected the strictly commercial ethos of Hollywood rather than any interest in diversity. As

Hollywood used its financial resources to build European and other markets, it recruited actresses from Europe and Latin America with diverse skin tones and hair colors to greater appeal to local markets.²¹

Hollywood's portrayal of gender and skin color reflected patriarchal and racist views found in the United States long before film industry was invented. It was noteworthy, however, that there was an institutionalization of certain views on skin color and gender. The Motion Picture Production Code (better known as the Hays Code), launched in 1927 and enforced through a ratings system from 1934, banned all manner of things from being on screen, from nudity and drug trafficking to childbirth scenes and white slavery.²² It strongly discouraged showing unmarried men and women in bed, and criticism of marriage as an institution. The portrayal of same sex relationships was prohibited. However, it was the ban on showing miscegenation, or in the worlds of the Code, "sex relationships between the white and black races," which represented the visual inscription of race-as-color.²³ Censor boards based in Southern cities, such as Atlanta, exercised additional pressure on Hollywood, censoring out – for example – any discussion of white racism.²⁴ The Code remained in place until 1966.²⁵

Even in the much-studied case of Hollywood, it is harder to convincingly prove that the impact of film content changed the views of audiences than to demonstrate the impact of companies on, say, the consumption of bananas. What can be determined is that the narrative told by Hollywood over decades was a racist and patriarchal one. It reflected widely held views in the United States in that period, and made minimal attempt to contest them. Mulvey among others thought that Hollywood movies emboldened rather than simply reflected such societal views. This working paper now turns to the film industry in India. It begins with a brief description of the organization of Bollywood, as this provides important insights on the generation of content.

II

Although the history of cinema in India has a rich literature, it has not featured strongly in the mainstream business history of that country. Despite its size, the cinema industry is not discussed in recent authoritative business and economic histories of India.²⁶ Whilst this is reflective of the general lack of interest in the industry in the discipline as a whole, there are particular problems facing researchers in the case of India. The fragmented and informal nature of the Indian industry has made rigorous archival research on the cinema as a business a lot more challenging than, for example, research on large business groups such as Tata and Godrej that retain historical archives. Global consultancies like KPMG, EY, and Deloitte have produced reports on the media industry in India, often in consultation with the preeminent association of business organizations in India called Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce & Industry. However, these publications focus explicitly on the post-2000 period, and even then, offer only summary statistics, such as number of cinema halls across India and the production numbers of biggest grossing films.²⁷ Much can be gleaned about the business history of the industry, and more particularly its impact, from more general histories of the industry. However, caste and region are usually the focus of attention rather than skin color, and while female characters are widely discussed, gender more broadly has been left to more specialist literatures.²⁸

The broad patterns of the evolution of the industry is broadly known. By 1925, Mumbai had established itself as the nation's cinematic capital, but there was and remained extensive filmmaking in other regional centers using languages other than Hindi. Rajadhyaksa has stressed the diversity of Indian cinema in the colonial period. The silent film, *Raja Harischandra* (King Harischandra), released in 1913 and based on the famous Indian epic *Mahabharata*, has

often been described as the start of the industry, although Rajadhyaska has shown it is better seen as an explicit attempt at nation-building, which co-existed with many other types of film.²⁹

The immediate postwar and Independence period saw both growth and major discontinuities. The number of Hindi language movies jumped from 73 in 1945 to 183 in 1947.³⁰ For Indian cinema as a whole, the official Film Inquiry Committee in 1951 reported both the growth, and the turbulent turnover of production houses. In 1946, the Committee found 151 producers, of whom 94 were no longer in business the following year. In 1947, there were 156 newcomers out of 214 producers. Only 54 producers among the 214 for that year survived by 1948.³¹ Overall, throughout the 1940s including after Independence in 1947, film production was growing steadily with new producers entering the business.³²

As the industry transformed, there were four major changes in Bollywood – the primary focus of the next two sections - which re-shaped the industry. First, the trauma leading to Independence greatly impacted the producers and actors. The violent partition of the country into India and Pakistan led to millions of people being displaced.³³ The actors and directors in the industry before the early 1940s were often Westernized elites long residing in urban areas. This shifted after 1947 with the industry coming to be dominated by migrant Punjabis who achieved elite status through the film industry.³⁴ When Punjab was divided with Partition, many film directors, writers, and crew members fled to Mumbai which became a cosmopolitan hub for displaced creative classes.³⁵ The pre-eminence of Punjabis was ostensibly surprising as their language was not spoken in Mumbai, nor was it the language of Bollywood movies. However, the Punjabi dialect was close to Hindi, making acting in Hindi-language films easy. Moreover, the displaced Punjabis were able to draw upon on capabilities developed in their home region during colonial times. In 1901, the Gandharva Mahavidyalaya was established as a music school in

Lahore where classical music training was made available beyond hereditary families who previously guarded musical knowledge. The school generated famous musicians, singers and composers.³⁶ Meanwhile, a Land Act in Punjab during the same year reduced urban investment in agriculture, shifting resources towards large-scale investment in entertainment. This included theatre-building, first for the stage and then for film.³⁷

Cultural factors may have facilitated the Punjabi presence in Bollywood. As India's primary agrarian belt, Punjabis embraced colorful outfits, songs, and dance to commemorate productive harvests, and such exuberance became a stereotype for Punjabis. Punjabis have also been described as embracing traditional gender roles, especially males as rustic and sexual, and females as shy and domestic. The stereotype of the boisterous Punjabi male translated well into the emerging Bollywood culture, and was further reinforced through the cinematic medium.³⁸

A second major change was the transformation of the political context from colonialism to a newly independent country. Film assumed an important, although unsupported, role in nation-building in the newly independent country. The challenges of poverty and inequality faced by the new nation became a topic for filmmakers. One of the most successful films of the post-Independence decade was *Andaaz* (Style) (1949), a film depicting an upper-class love triangle, which examined the common person's struggle between modernity and traditional social values.³⁹

The Indian government was interested in the film industry, but only to the extent it contributed to its vision of a post-Independence India. The Films Division of India (FDI) was established in 1948 as the main film-medium organization of the government. The FDI had a prodigious output, mostly documentaries and other films about rural upliftment, ideal marriage, education, and sanitation. However, FDI material attracted low viewership given poor distribution schemes, its failure to inspire audiences, and often poor technical quality.⁴⁰

Meanwhile the government, which progressively introduced a planned economy with extensive state controls, refused to recognize commercial film, including Bollywood, as an official industry. This left film producers with no access to legitimate external finance. The industry was also heavily taxed. In many regions, local governments did provide some support to cinema, but Mumbai was located in a Marathi-speaking region, and the local government only supported films made in that language, rather than Hindi-language Bollywood movies.⁴¹ Bollywood never achieved the status of a “national cinema,” and received neither subsidies nor market protection from international films.⁴² In this respect, it was like Hollywood, and very different from the cinema of many emerging markets after World War II. There were unforeseen consequences of the lack of formal status. Bollywood became one of the main arenas in the Indian economy for investing and circulating unreported and untaxed income. It was infiltrated by criminal elements, which were even more focused on securing revenues than Hollywood financiers. Bollywood became a high-risk enterprise, and producers were reported to borrow money at monthly interest rates of 3-4 per cent.⁴³

These financial challenges translated into a third major change in the Bollywood industry, which was the decline of the Hollywood-style studio system which had emerged during the interwar years. The studio system, including Ranjit Studios founded in 1929 and Bombay Talkies founded in 1934, was adversely affected by rising production costs during World War II. Subsequently, with the increasing status of individual film stars, the power of such large studio houses dwindled as criminal elements were able to offer large fees through money laundering. The industry saw the rise of freelancing, in which stars were not contractually obligated to work exclusively with any studio or director. Actors including Raj Kapoor and Dilip Kumar became box-office legends of Bollywood.⁴⁴

Bollywood became dominated by independent producers without access to the level of funding seen in Hollywood. The whole system worked on an informal ad hoc basis. The prominent actress Shabana Azmi later recalled that when she entered the industry in the 1970s there was a “trickle-down way of financing.” She added that film makers “would get finance in little bits and pieces.”⁴⁵ There was limited opportunity to generate cash through box office tickets. Prices were kept very low because the majority of viewers were the rural poor. Although it could match Hollywood in the number of films made, Bollywood could never match Hollywood’s total revenue figures, even after liberalization began in 1991.⁴⁶

A fourth major change for Bollywood after 1947 was increased censorship. While Hollywood content was highly self-regulated, India had formal government censorship. This had existed in the colonial era, but its scope was widened after 1947. The autonomy of regional censors was curtailed, and in 1951 the Central Board of Film Certification was established.⁴⁷ The Censor Board blocked mention of politically sensitive topics, including Partition and also, as noted in the following section, restricted explicit sexual content.⁴⁸ However, and in contrast to the Hays Code, the Cinematograph Act of 1952 made no mention of gender or ethnicity, and focused primarily on threats to the integrity of Indian sovereignty.⁴⁹ In 1960, the government issued new directives censoring films that “lower the moral standards of those that see it,” but there remained no mention of gender or ethnicity.⁵⁰

Censorship, financing challenges and informality set the parameters under which Bollywood operated, and more importantly for this working paper, may have influenced content. They provided the institutional incentives to deliver movies based on the lowest common denominator so that audiences could be enlarged. A highly standardized format emerged of romantic melodramas focused on issues related to marriage and class. Movies featured songs that

were pop versions of Indian folk music combined with musical styles emanating from Broadway, scripted into Hindi. Songs provided filmmakers with a way to convey eroticism in an environment where government censors prevented explicit romance. The songs were a key component of a movie, and assumed a life of their own outside the movie. The sale of the film's music became a key factor in the success of the film.⁵¹

The actor-director Raj Kapoor was a formative influence on this post-1947 Bollywood world. Born in 1924, he and fellow star actor Dilip Kumar were born and grew up in Peshawar's oldest and most famous road, Qissa Khwani, or Street of Storytellers. His father Prithviraj became a star in the emergent industry. Like many other Punjabis, the family settled in Mumbai after Partition. Kapoor acted as a child, and in 1948 started his own production house, R.K. Studios, which Rajadhyasha judged to be "perhaps the most important of the new-era production houses."⁵² He financed his first film, *Aag* (Fire), by borrowing from friends and family, as well as his own servant, and mortgaging his car. Most of the actors were also friends and family.⁵³ His next two films established his reputation. *Barsaat* (Rain), released in 1949, was shot in the (then) exotic location of Kashmir, which set a precedent for later films which often featured colorful exotic locations. In *Awaara* (Vagabond), released in 1951, Kapoor created an Indianized Charlie Chaplin Tramp with a bowler hat, a blazer, black pants, and a rucksack on a stick.⁵⁴

These films established a basic formula for Kapoor's films over the next three decades. The central story was typically built around one man and his relationship with his heroine and his family. There was little critique of accepted social norms, although there was an underlying critique of excessive wealth, in line with the rhetoric of a nascent post-colonial nationalism. The films typically emphasized the common person's struggle between traditional social values and the promises of modernity, including love stories between upper-class and lower-class individuals.

The female lead was portrayed as a passive and demure figure, conservatively dressed, and coy until swept off her feet by the male lead. It was a format which worked well in many Middle Eastern markets and in the Soviet Union, where Hollywood movies were banned and Kapoor's "poor man" focus was politically correct.⁵⁵

Kapoor was hugely influential shaping content in Bollywood as a whole, but from an industry perspective the most significant factor is that he was the nucleus of an extended family network which had no real parallel in contemporary Hollywood beyond a handful of acting families like the Fonda's. Kapoor's brothers Shammi and Shashi were star actors between the 1950s and the 1980s. Shammi Kapoor married actress Geeta Bali. Raj Kapoor's son Rishi also joined the industry debuting with his father's 1973 film *Bobby*. Kapoor's other sons Randhir and Rajiv also became leading Bollywood actors. In the recent past, Randhir's daughters Karishma and Kareena have become leading actresses, along with Rishi's son Ranbir. Reflecting on the family business, Randhir observed that "we were born into films. We had not known anything else. From our grandfather, grand uncles, uncles...we had only seen an involvement with the film industry."⁵⁶

Bollywood, then, assumed a distinctive shape after 1947. Movies were built around extended love stories in which music and song-and-dance numbers were key features. Although there was always some experimentation, and films became more technically sophisticated over time, the industry settled into a broad pattern of norms. This situation was reinforced by censorship which ruled out political or explicit sexual content. The fact that so much financing was informal, and indeed criminal, encouraged replication of proven formats. Meanwhile large barriers to entry arose was the entrenched position of Punjabi family dynasties, of which the Kapoor's were the leading example. The other Punjabi family dynasties included the Chopra's, beginning in the early

1950s, the Roshan's later in the decade, and the Johar's in the mid-1970s.⁵⁷ Marriage and casting family members became, and remained, key strategies for maintaining power in the industry. This closed insider club provided the setting for stereotyped views to be endlessly recycled.⁵⁸

Despite India's long history in cinema, then, Bollywood was largely re-invented during the postwar decades. It represented the considerable paradox of a successful industry deeply distrusted by its own government. In 1971, India overtook Japan to become the world's largest manufacturer of feature films, with a total of 431 feature film titles across all languages. By 1979, the figure rose to 700, and by 1989 to 839.⁵⁹ A UNESCO survey on national cinematography showed that India was the only non-Western country to have a larger audience for locally-made films than for imported films.⁶⁰ While international films remained relatively marginal in India, Indian films also secured large market shares elsewhere in Asia, and in Africa and the Middle East during the postwar decades.⁶¹ Yet the government denied the industry official status, and thus access to legal funding, and censored content.

The next section turns to the impact of the content of Bollywood movies. Raj Kapoor often reflected on the central role of film in Indian society. He met with Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of India, to discuss how "screen celebrities could attract millions . . . it would result in immense good to the country." Kapoor would have endorsed Hansen and Magnussen's view that cinema was a major vehicle for sense making. He told Nehru that he believed that "the screen and the stage were . . . an intimate part of India's life and culture."⁶² The statement left unanswered what elements of Indian life and culture would be reflected in the cinema, and whether the mission of cinema was to embolden the views of its audience, or contest them.

III

As in the case of Hollywood, Bollywood developed in a society in which certain beliefs about both skin color and gender were embedded through history.⁶³ In the case of India, light skin preferences can be discerned in works written in classical Sanskrit and regional vernacular languages. The powerful image of lighter skinned peoples called Aryans invading India and setting fire to the settlements of dark-hued people, and the presenting of fair-skinned women as gifts to black seers, is documented in the ancient Hindu text *Rigveda* composed in Sanskrit around 1500 BCE.⁶⁴ Around 1000 CE, as Islamic armies from Central Asia took over the northern parts of the subcontinent, a preference for lighter skin was also discernable, although historical evidence is unclear how far these political elites subjugated populations solely based on race.⁶⁵

A stronger emphasis on skin color emerged during the sixteenth century as Europeans arrived in India for trade. Skin color was the most obvious marker of distinction between white Europeans and Indians. Early modern missionaries, traders, and travelers were the first to document such race-based prejudice. When the English East India Company (EIC) established their first outpost at Fort Saint George in Madras in 1644, they bifurcated the settlement, distinguishing between a “White Town” for colonial families and a “Black Town” for native Indians. By the nineteenth century, various colonial cities like Kolkata, Mumbai, and Ahmedabad were organized along racial grounds.⁶⁶ Whiteness came to be deeply associated with power, status, affluence, and beauty. Indigenous ideas both fed into and drew from this racialized colonial world.⁶⁷

As colonial power became entrenched through military campaigns, race-based privilege became institutionalized as army rank and martial prowess was seen to reside in particular

racial groups. After the end of EIC rule when India became a Crown colony in 1858, the British Indian Army also set standards for the perfect human body. The ideal soldier was light-skinned mirroring that of his colonial superiors. The politics of rank and file in the army cast the idealized male as tall, strong, fair-skinned, and possessing an aquiline nosed and a defined jawline. Such features were generally characteristic of populations residing in the northwest mountainous terrains of the subcontinent.⁶⁸ For colonial officials, these groups confirmed contemporary martial race theories which gave men from these mountainous regions of India privileged access to army positions. This included Pathan tribesmen from modern day Afghanistan, and men from the various ethnic and religious backgrounds of the Punjab region including Sikhs, Muslims, Rajputs, and Dogras.⁶⁹

The evidence on the evolution of gender norms in India appears less robust than for skin color, but broadly supports a view that patriarchy was the norm. From the ancient Sanskrit textual tradition dating 500 BC to 500 CE, evidence points to men viewing women as property to be traded for alliance building between different warring clans.⁷⁰ These legacies continued into the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries during the Mughal period as women occupied the domestic sphere or *harem* as wives, mothers, and concubines. In this setting, royal women of the king's household were held in high regard and sometimes possessed their own resources, property, and aspirations.⁷¹ Unfortunately, we possess relatively little evidence of ordinary women, a point emphasized by feminist scholars including Ruby Lal, Susie Tharu, and Ke Lalita.⁷²

A number of scholars have argued that patriarchy was enhanced by colonialism. In trying to prevent certain indigenous practices like widow burning, colonial law actually contributed to the isolation of females to the domestic sphere. Women became the site and repository of tradition, culture, and religion in need of protection by Indian men who felt

destabilized by colonial rule.⁷³ As a result, women were relegated to the domestic sphere and became the foci of discursive attention by Indian nationalist men, colonial authorities, and social reformers. This process has been articulated most clearly by Partha Chatterjee and Patricia Uberoi.⁷⁴ Indian patriarchy was furthered by the colonial state's establishing of a two-tier system of law where secular matters fell under British legal norms while family disputes were relegated to personal law courts, assessed according to Hindu or Muslim personal law. This further limited property rights of women, an aspect that has continued under postcolonial and modern law.⁷⁵

It is apparent, then, that as the cinema industry developed in India, exclusionary regimes around skin color and gender were quite entrenched. From the start, there was a tendency to reinforce, more than to contest, such norms in parts of Indian cinema. During the interwar years there was considerable influence by both European cinema and Hollywood. For example, in the 1920s, the prominent director Himanshu Rai pioneered several early films like in which he used foreign Eurasian actresses playing female leads. They were given Indian names and were projected as ideal Hindu women on screen. These were black and white films, but the light skin contrast was apparent. For example, the Anglo-Indian actress Renee Smith was the female lead in a Rai trilogy from 1925-29, and changed her name to Sita Devi.⁷⁶ Other examples included Mary Evans "Nadia", Beryl Claessen 'Madhuri', and Iris Gasper 'Yasmin'.⁷⁷

After 1947, an unintended consequence of Punjabi pre-eminence as actors and directors impacted skin color preferences. Punjabi's were often fairer skinned than many other Indians. Raj Kapoor, and some other members of his family, had blue rather than brown eyes which were more typical across India. The archetype male hero in Kapoor's films, and Bollywood in general, became a lighter skinned tall male, and the heroine was a delicate lighter-skinned beauty. Moreover, female protagonists had to carry an additional burden of being the site of chastity and

morally acceptable romance. To achieve this, films usually carried a contrasting character of the female vamp, a Westernized lurching woman accepting the sinister glances of men in unsavory settings like nightclubs, and succumbing to male desires, aggression, and power.⁷⁸ The vamp in Kapoor's and other films has been described as "the sexy, glamorous, dangerous woman whose body was the focus of desire for the male spectator, made guilt-free by her ultimate defeat by the heroine's pure chasteness."⁷⁹

The star system which replaced studios rewarded celebrity around male personalities, and to a lesser extent around female leads, who were paid less.⁸⁰ The Censor Board also propagated unwritten rules around male-female interaction, censoring films with explicit sexual content, including kissing. This had consequences for establishing new gender norms. Producers had to compensate with exaggerated body language, such as romantic leads bumping shoulders. This led to growing vulgarity, racy song and dance sequences, pelvic thrusts, bathtub fantasies, and dream sequences as a stand-in for expressing sexual desire.⁸¹ Gesture, silence, tongue and cheek dialogue, and other forms of suggestive behavior became the hallmark of the Bollywood cinematic genre.

India had excellent professional training for actors at institutions such as the Film and Television Institute of India (FTII) in Pune and the National School of Drama (NSD) in Delhi. However, their graduates were not typically hired in Bollywood. Instead, actors were cast either for belonging to a powerful film family like that of Kapoor, or for fitting standards of beauty that could be commercialized without great difficulty.⁸² Stars became key elements of Bollywood's simplistic messaging, and their physical appearance and skin color were important components of that messaging.

The informal nature of the industry and the consequent absence of conventional archives makes it hard to explore casual mechanisms using conventional business history

literature. In response, this working paper has drawn heavily on two recent and publicly available oral history databases consisting of interviews with leading actors and producers in India. The first database is based on the Guftagoo talk show series produced between 2011 and 2020 for Rajya Sabha Television, the official channel of India's Upper House of Parliament. Hosted by journalist S. M. Irfan, the interview-based show takes the format of an intimate conversation in Hindi that explores the life journey and industry experience of creative personalities associated with Indian cinema. With researchers at the University of Pennsylvania, a public database was created with interview links, keywords, and other metadata to aid scholars.⁸³ The second database is the Creating Emerging Markets (hereafter CEM) project established at the Harvard Business School. This project involves lengthy interviews by Harvard faculty with highly impactful leaders or former leaders of for-profit businesses based in emerging markets. The interviewees are required to have had at least three decades of experience. A total of 150 interviews were available as of January 1, 2021. These include 38 interviews with individuals based in India.⁸⁴ A sub-set of the interviews with prominent media figures is used in this study.

These interviews provide personal testimony on how Bollywood worked. There is, for example, plentiful evidence confirming the role of stars. "Bollywood stars know that they are commodities that they themselves are being sold," the veteran actor Naseeruddin Shah observed. He added, "they are not a medium for reaching a message to the audience, they are themselves the product."⁸⁵

Skin color is demonstrated as being an important part of this commodification of the actor, and therefore casting. The noted Bollywood actress Nandita Das, active in the industry from 1989, recalled her own experiences as a darker-hued actress. "My parents never made me feel bad about my skin color, and now I see around the country young girls lose their confidence due to

this. I myself faced this, with uncles and those in the extended family, and later in the film industry, saying you could certainly play a slum dweller or a village girl, but if playing an urban upper-middle class or educated girl, the director or makeup artist would come and say ‘I know you don’t like wearing makeup, but could you lighten your skin a little with makeup, since this role is that of an educated person’.”⁸⁶ There were plentiful other personal testimonies from other darker-skinned Bollywood actresses being denied the opportunity to play heroines, and facing personal abuse, because of their skin color.⁸⁷

The interviews with actors and actresses provide personal testimony about the gendered portrayal of women, and more importantly explain in a more nuanced fashion how this became embedded in Bollywood. As with Hollywood, the issue was not a lack of female roles, but rather it was how they were fitted into stereotyped roles without significant agency. In the words of Shabani Azmi,

A lot of [films] were being made with women protagonists... but these were in stereotypical [roles]. So, you have the sacrificing mother, you have the forgiving wife, you have the understanding sister. All of it was within the concept of what traditional society actually wanted. And I think women were the worst sufferers in that because if I tell you the name of a film in the 1960s, for instance, which was very popular, which was *Main Chup Rahoongi*, translated [it] is “I will remain silent”—remaining silent being considered a virtue for women.⁸⁸

However, there were worse things than stereotyping. Physical violence against women was often portrayed casually. There is a considerable literature that has documented how Bollywood glamorized violence, degraded and humiliated women through images.⁸⁹ Azmi recalled:

“Violence against women was portrayed in a way which was absolutely shameful..., and within the mainstream cinema where just the act for instance of a rape was so prolonged that it would become almost vicarious. The business of cinema is the business of images and how the

camera lingers over the female body decides whether it is commodifying or whether it is sensitizing. So, rape scenes—for instance, there was this villain who would just go on for about five minutes and it was totally disgusting and blood curdling.”⁹⁰

Another noted Bollywood actress Jaya Bachchan, active in the industry from 1963, recalled in her interview how she was expected to be stripped naked and raped in a film called *Ek Nazar* (1972). After she protested, the producer threatened to scrap the film entirely and report her for misconduct to the artists association. She then came under further pressure: “My co-star Amitabh also coaxed me by saying that you have accepted the role and have agreed to work, and you have to do the scene seeing that you’ve signed up for the movie. I said I will not allow anyone to show me with my clothes being ripped off. Finally, it was decided by Mr. Babu *we will shoot the scene, you react naturally, and we will make some edits afterwards*. The poor villain in the scene, the person doing the raping, I actually hit him so many times that even he said *I don’t want to rape her*.”⁹¹ Despite Bachchan’s protests, then, the rape scene was shot, and included in the film.⁹²

Although female actresses evidently objected to what they were expected to do how they behaved on screen, there were many obstacles to changing how gender was portrayed in Bollywood. Like Hollywood, the industry structure was male dominated and practically guaranteed to replicate the male gaze issue. “[India] is largely a patriarchal society, and the industry is completely male-dominated,” Nandita Das noted in her Guftagoo interview. “There are jobs like editing, music composing, music direction, and there are thousands of other jobs that women can do apart from acting. But, we never hear of those because there are hardly women in the industry.”⁹³ As often in Hollywood, powerful directors and actors engaged in affairs with

actresses. Raj Kapoor, for example, earned a reputation as a serial adulterer, and this was confirmed by his own son much later.⁹⁴

There could also be violence if gender norms were challenged by actors. Azmi recalled how her playing the role as a lesbian in the film *Fire* (1996), some years after the era of liberalization had begun, provoked violent outbursts.

I felt it was very important that I acted in that film, because it is a film about a lesbian relationship between two sisters-in-law and before that nothing of that kind had been attempted in Hindi cinema at all, in Indian cinema. Now when the film gets released there is one section [of the public] that really loves the film and says this is a really bold film to do. On the other hand, there is a group of people that says that these are antinational people, they are anti-Hindu people, and they are doing this to desecrate Indian culture. A political party, [the]right-wing Shiv Sena, decides that they [will] make hay while the sun shines. [They] pulled the film out of the theaters, start[ed] breaking furniture.⁹⁵

By the time of *Fire*, the level of violence against women in Bollywood was in decline, but gender stereotyping was not. The cabaret dancing sequences of former years had evolved into the phenomenon of the “item song”. The item woman was tall, beautiful, toned, and highly sexualized. She gyrated on screen and had little to do with the main plot of the film.⁹⁶ Reflecting on the phenomenon of the item song, Azmi noted, “what is actually happening is that the way the camera moves on the women’s body in fragmented images of a heaving bosom, a shaking navel, a swiveling hip, the woman is robbed of all autonomy and becomes an object of the male gaze..... You have these horrible lyrics where a woman is actually commodifying herself by saying that, you know, ‘I am a tandoori chicken and why don’t you just swallow me along with a glass of alcohol’.”⁹⁷

It is easier to assert that Bollywood portrayed women as “tandoori chicken” and light skin people as elite, than to prove that it substantially emboldened pre-existing gender and skin color norms. Indeed, even within the industry opinions differ widely on the matter. In his *Guftagoo*

conversation, the noted Bollywood lyricist and scriptwriter Javed Akhtar, active in the industry after 1971, took a diametrically opposed view from Azmi, who also happens to be his wife.

“Who is a protagonist, and how is that image made? It reflects a society’s ambition, dreams, and moral values. When your ambitions and moral values change, so does the protagonist of a film. It is not that you derive your values from the film, it is the other way around. When society changes, films and accompanying images of the also change. If you have any complaints against films, you cannot fix them by fixing films. You have to fix society which is reflected in those films.”⁹⁸

The debate whether to “fix” society or “fix” cinema, which was also a recurrent topic in debates about content in Hollywood, has evident legitimacy. However, the following section will discuss the opinions of actors and directors outside mainstream Bollywood who saw the cinema as part of the problem rather than part of a solution. In support of their critical views, it is significant that cinema occupied a uniquely important position in the media during the post-Independence decades. The first television broadcast in India was only in 1959. As late as 1975, only seven cities had television service, which was limited to a single state-owned channel, Doordarshan. Doordarshan introduced a second channel in 1984. By 1985, India ranked at the bottom of the world’s television markets with only 10 million TV receivers compared to 190 million in the United States.⁹⁹ Private television channels were only permitted in the early 1990s. Cinema, then, was the major form of visual media throughout this period. It was the primary media in rural India, where low literacy rates ruled out access to printed media. In rural areas too, social interaction between genders was highly regulated and constrained. As a result, it seems highly plausible to argue that Bollywood exercised a significant influence on the nature of gender

relations, including male perceptions of female bodies and idealized love, and reinforce light skin as ideal.¹⁰⁰

It is possible to build a more specific case on the negative impact of Bollywood during these decades. Again, context is important. The widespread violence against women portrayed in Bollywood cinema took place in a society in which sexual violence and the legal response to it was a longstanding problem. Colonial laws placed a heavy burden on women seeking judicial remedy in courts. These laws were carried over into Independent India, and continued to make rape convictions difficult. The issue was highlighted in the Mathura case in March 1972, when a sixteen-year-old tribal girl was repeatedly raped and molested by police in their station in Maharashtra. When the case came to trial two years later, the judge described Mathura as a “loose woman” who must have consented in the first place. When the case ultimately came before India’s Supreme Court, it ruled that the girl’s failure to sound an alarm during the alleged rape, along with the absence of injuries, constituted evidence of consent. The case caused an outpouring of protests and some changes in the law, although much of the problem persisted over the following decades.¹⁰¹ The repeated depiction of rape in cinema, then, was hardly conducive to combating the country’s problem with sexual violence against women, the underreporting of rape, and the oft disqualification of victim testimonies in court.¹⁰²

In addition to espousing violence against women, Bollywood also became involved from the 1990s in the business of skin lightening creams. The two are closely related, as they reify the Indian woman as the site of sexual fantasy. The iconic *Fair and Lovely* skin cream was launched by Unilever’s Indian affiliate in 1978.¹⁰³ It was advertised explicitly on the platform that fair skin provided women with greatly enhanced opportunities for romantic relationships and successful careers.¹⁰⁴ Bollywood actresses and actors became important celebrity figures used in advertising

these creams, although the really close connection between actors and skin lightening creams only scaled after liberalization began.¹⁰⁵ This was the start of a new era in Bollywood in which cinema became deeply integrated with the sale of ancillaries, especially fashion.¹⁰⁶

Post-Independence Bollywood, then, inherited a society in which gender norms and attitudes to skin color had been conditioned by past history. However, as an industry that avoided complexity, and even the recruitment of professional actors, it collectively chose to accept conventional norms rather than to contest them. In contrast to the impact of the Hays Code on Hollywood, this was not so much imposed on the industry, but it was rather the product of a desire to sell a lot of tickets to people with very low discretionary incomes. Meanwhile, the dominance of Punjabi business families as leading producers, directors, and actors perpetuated preferences for lighter skins. Women in Bollywood movies in this period were almost a parody of the male gaze problem, and there was a more sinister aspect also. The frequent use of violence against women occurred in a society in which there was widespread sexual violence against women, as evidenced by the underreporting of rape and the law's laxity towards offenders.¹⁰⁷ The repeated use of the same format drove home the "sense making" about gender and skin color, as did the dominance of the industry by a small group of family dynasties, which meant that values were transmitted across generations, rather than being contested by newcomers. At best, Bollywood chose to embolden pre-existing prejudices and behavior, especially in rural areas. At worst, Bollywood is likely to have contributed significantly to the problem of violence against women.

IV

The Bollywood paradigm has been so prominent for understanding Indian cinema that it has often overshadowed both the heterogeneity of parallel Hindi cinema, and regional cinema produced elsewhere than Mumbai.¹⁰⁸ There were parallel and regional cinemas that addressed

different audience segments which sometimes, but not always, overlapped with mainstream Bollywood movie goers. In other words, the categories of “parallel” and “regional” are not absolute, but they do provide an analytic differentiation of the Indian cinema industry as a patchwork quilt composed of different film spheres. This section examines in particular how Indian cinemas other than Bollywood treated gender and skin color.

The first category considered here is parallel cinema. Films in this category were usually in Hindi, although major blockbusters in other languages sometimes fell under this category. Parallel cinema was driven by a number of visionary film makers and actors who sought to contest restrictive societal norms, including concerning gender and ethnicity, rather than play to them.

The origins of parallel cinema have often been traced back to the iconic postwar film producer Satyajit Ray, although he can also be regarded as an example of regional cinema given that his films were distinctly Bengali in language, style, form, and location.¹⁰⁹ Ray and others made films that shifted attention from romance and middle-class anxiety towards films straddling the rural-urban divide with coming of age films, movies about religious superstition, and later detective films and historical dramas. An example was *Mahanagar* or *The Big City* (1963) in which the filmmaker narrated the domestic conflict a young woman faced with her in-laws, children, and husband after joining the workforce selling sewing machines door to door to support her unemployed husband and the family. Ray stands out as a male director for his strong female characters, and exploring their complexities, and for the absence of patriarchic assumptions in his films.¹¹⁰

Ray’s contemporaries in parallel cinema included Mrinal Sen, who directed films primarily in Bengali and Hindi. Sen was an ardent Marxist, who in an interview on his deathbed

conveyed “I’ve tried to connect cinema to my life. I’m a social agent, I’m a social being. I’ve been trying to say something about the society to which I belong. This is possible only when I have done something about it.”¹¹¹

An official “art cinema” developed in India, where films were funded partly through state subsidies and promotion at international film festivals. The director and screenwriter Shyam Benegal became an important force for using film as a medium for shaping social views. Benegal himself made an unconventional entry into the cinema industry, working as a writer and film maker in the advertising industry in Mumbai before moving to a major advertising distribution company called Blaze, whose founders independently financed his first films, including *Ankur*, released in 1974.¹¹²

Benegal explicitly sought to confront stereotypes, especially concerning gender. He observed:

“We have always felt, traditionally speaking, that the woman’s place is in her home. Her role in the society is either as a daughter, wife, or mother. Her kingdom is the home. Her job is to be a dutiful daughter, a faithful wife, a giving mother. This is her job, and if she fulfills that role, she is as good as goddess. This is the traditional view. Now, in a situation like this, how do you achieve equality? One of the things I did in my films was to challenge that notion from the very beginning....The traditional view has to go, because otherwise there will be no equality.”¹¹³

Benegal’s films addressed issues such as gang-rape, corrupt politicians, rural empowerment, women’s exploitation, children’s themes, interracial love, prostitution, and the unique plight of Muslim women in India.¹¹⁴ *Ankur*, for example, had a heroine who was married to a deaf mute, and had an affair and got pregnant with the landlord’s son. He recruited the young Shabana Azmi, who later recalled in her CEM interview, that people thought that it was a bad

career choice because the heroine would have been portrayed in traditional cinema “as a villain and somebody who broke the moral ethical code.”¹¹⁵

Azmi was not the only actor promoted by Benegal. Over the years, he introduced actors like Naseeruddin Shah, Om Puri, Kulbhushan Kharbanda and Amrish Puri, many of which were trained at FTII or the NSD. Not surprisingly, Benegal did not indulge fair skin preferences. He discovered the darkish Smita Patil, a prominent feminist who became acclaimed as a wonderful actress during her tragically brief career, and other darker-hued women like Deepti Naval, Zarina Wahab, and Pallavi Joshi were active in parallel cinema from the 1970s. These and other actors built their careers acting in roles which challenged conventional Bollywood norms rather than conforming to them. Certainly, Azmi continued to play controversial roles. “Art should be used as an instrument for social change,” she noted, “and I think film is a very important medium through which we can bring about changes, particularly in the characterization of women.”¹¹⁶

Although their budgets and outputs were more modest than mainstream Bollywood, “art films” received disproportionate interest because they appealed to film critics, educated classes, and discerning international audiences. This created a chasm between the two industries, where actors and directors who were involved in “art films” were often typecast and their opportunities in mainstream Bollywood were limited. It seems highly unlikely that parallel cinema in this period could have exercised any influence beyond urban elites in India. There was a further challenge when television service began to spread in the 1980s. “Then television came,” Benegal noted wistfully in his interview. “And the moment television came, it all collapsed, because people didn’t have to go out to see films. They sat at home, they could get themselves entertained with anything that came on television.”¹¹⁷

Regional cinema was a second category of films beyond Bollywood. While these might run alongside Bollywood films in their absolute number of viewers, they were specifically geared to audiences at the state level, especially because these films are in languages that were not mutually intelligible across the subcontinent. In 2001 only 40% of the India's population identified Hindi as their mother tongue.¹¹⁸ Even in the areas where the language was spoken widely, such as across much of northern India, dialects varied to such a degree that mutual comprehension and conversation was difficult. In southern India, encompassing the states of Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and Telangana, regional languages had no affinity to northern Indian vernaculars.¹¹⁹

The first Tamil and Bengali talkie films were already released in 1931, and films in other languages soon followed. As these regional industries developed, small budgets and the need to cater along specific linguistic lines prompted filmmakers to develop aesthetics for highly segmented markets. In some ways, film producers also had more latitude compared to the fledgling Bollywood industry, as directors could shape regional preferences by adapting existing popular genres such as mythologies, regional folk stories, and even stage theater to suit limited audiences.¹²⁰

Some contemporary observers believed that the constraints of regional cinema gave them a “greater sense of reality and cultural integrity.”¹²¹ The themes explored in early regional cinemas often included the evils of caste, anxieties around premarital love, widow remarriage, self-desire versus collective good, religion and secularism, and after 1947, ideas of democracy oriented towards nation building.¹²² Moreover, while mainstream Bollywood cinema cultivated characters with recognizable generic characteristics such as being broadly urban or rural, rich or poor, upper or lower caste, regional cinema could present characters with much more precise trappings of

identity and locality, and therefore complexity. A closer look at how the Tamil film industry, which was based in Chennai (formerly Madras) developed shows some of this complexity, and demonstrates how regional cinema took its own path on issues of gender and skin color.

During the postwar decades, Tamil cinema was a prolific producer of films. Between 1984 and 1988 a total of 843 Hindi language and 811 Tamil language feature films were produced, and in two of those years more Tamil films were produced than Hindi films.¹²³ However while Bollywood lacked strong political connections, and indeed the ruling Congress Party was skeptical of it, Tamil cinema became entwined with the non-Brahmin movement and Dravidian nationalism. Brahmin refer to the upper caste Hindu elites, while Dravidian refers to proponents of anti-Hindi and Tamil-language chauvinism. Both movements dated back to the early twentieth century, when resentment grew in the south of India at the dominance of Brahmins in colonial government jobs. The Tamil non-Brahmins began building a narrative which equated the powerful Brahmins with the Aryan civilization of North India, which became associated with caste and inequality, while the non-Brahman Dravidian past was portrayed as egalitarian and democratic. The same era saw a surge of interest in ancient Tamil texts which apparently supported this interpretation of past history.¹²⁴

Politics became intertwined with the regional cinema soon after Independence with the founding of the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) party in 1949. The DMK was a Dravidian party that advocated principles of social justice, anti-caste discrimination, and Tamil linguistic nationalism.¹²⁵ While Tamil films were initially largely mythology-based, the DMK began using cinema to launch film stars, progressive story lines, and regional nationalism.¹²⁶ Tamil cinema from the 1950s, one study suggested, “actively contested what they viewed as an exclusionary north Indian construction of nationhood.”¹²⁷

An early film, *Parasakthi* (1952), was scripted by M. Karunanidhi, a leader of the DMK, and a future chief minister of Tamil Nadu, one of five major states in southern India, whose capital city was Chennai. The film focused on the trials and tribulations of a middle-class Tamil family's journey to poverty, especially the female lead Kalyani who was orphaned, widowed and impoverished. Reduced to selling rice cakes on the streets, the film critiques the alleged sorry state of the Congress Party's policies with a strong female protagonist who worked equally to her male colleagues.¹²⁸

Despite such progressive themes in early films, Tamil cinema did not really contest gender stereotypes. In *Parasakthi* the protagonist struggled to maintain her chastity throughout the film in the film, and she was only safe once her brothers returned to town and protected her from the public. According to one scholar of Tamil culture, the film's critique of society operated largely within the realm of government and economy, not society.¹²⁹ Tamil movies were more political than their Bollywood counterparts, and were more socially progressive, but they were not far ahead in breaking gender norms.

From the perspective of this study, one of the longer-term consequences of DMK-inspired films was that gradually the party identified strong male characters as the archetypal audience, and catered to them. There was, as a result, a progressive degradation of women in Tamil cinema. At the outset, one study suggested that DMK films treated women as a "subset within the larger category of the downtrodden."¹³⁰ By the 1960s, however, the DMK had identified Bollywood-style escapism as the primary way to gain viewership. The chief strategy was through portraying the typical male hero as saviors and guardians of women.¹³¹ Typically, these male heroes were cast with actresses who were much younger than them. In films like *Rickshakaran* (1971), *Urmaikkural* (1974) and *Dr. Siva* (1975), these young actresses were primarily employed as

vehicles to depict the virility of the lead actors, and those in the audience. Sometimes, as in Bollywood, sex was more explicitly conveyed through the cabaret dancer cast opposite to the female heroine.¹³² As convergence with norms seen in Bollywood continued, Tamil cinema started to feature rape scenes. The ideal Tamil woman transitioned, in the words of one film historian, from a “traditional, sari-clad, docile protagonist” to a “modern, scantily clad, mischievous woman, indicative of a pleasure object.”¹³³

As striking was the sudden appearance of light-skinned actresses in the Tamil industry, which had formerly reflected the reality of the largely darker-skinned region. From the 1990s, light skinned actors from Mumbai were imported into the industry, their voices dubbed into Tamil, while the industry moved to prefer lighter-skinned female Tamil actresses.¹³⁴ International beauty pageant winners, who were invariably lighter-skinned, like Aishwarya Rai also entered the Tamil industry.¹³⁵ It would seem that regional cinemas as a whole underwent convergence with Bollywood norms after liberalization began in 1991. Bengali regional cinema, for example, before the 1990s was broadly not characterized by cheap thrills, scenes degrading women, and the propagation of gender and ethnic stereotypes, but thereafter convergence with Bollywood norms became evident.¹³⁶

Bollywood’s stereotypical treatment of women and preference for light skin color was not, then, fully representative of Indian cinema between 1947 and 1991. The directors and actors in parallel cinema directly contested restrictive norms and emphasized their negative social impact. They had no doubt that mainstream cinema was emboldening what they considered to be negative norms in Indian society. Meanwhile regional cinemas had their own narratives which were not straightforwardly aligned with Bollywood. Yet Bollywood’s setting of norms and success left parallel cinema with more international prizes than Indian audiences. The importance of language

meant that regional cinemas were to some extent better placed to hold their audiences and offer alternative views, yet the success of Bollywood helped erode their willingness to do so. The appearance and eventual dominance of Tamil cinema of fair-skilled actresses was indicative of the forces of convergence let lose in the era of economic liberalization.

V

During the second half of the twentieth century Bollywood and its American twin Hollywood were the world's largest producers of movies. It is a sad commentary, therefore, on the societal responsibility of the mass entertainment industry that both mainstream cinemas privileged paler skin over darker skin, and both cinemas viewed women through the "male gaze." In both cases, directors and many others behind the camera were also paler skinned men. Although the screen was recognized as having the capacity to shape societal perceptions, the entertainment business in both Bollywood and Hollywood largely focused on confirming, and probably emboldening, inequitable prejudices. This working paper has confirmed through interviews with past actors and producers in Bollywood the existence and persistence of such patriarchal narratives and preferences for light skin color during the post-Independence decades.

Bollywood reflected views on skin color and gender long prevalent in Indian society, but this working paper has argued that serendipitous developments in the organization of the industry, as well as its regulation, helped shaped what happened on screen. The entry and dominance of Punjabi directors and actors, such as Raj Kapoor and his family, facilitated lighter skin tones becoming a prominent characteristic of stars. By constraining access to legal finance to cinema and through censorship, the Indian government incentivized Bollywood directors to adapt

simplified story lines that appealed to their predominately rural audiences, rather than contesting widely accepted views. There were no financial incentives for Bollywood producers to contest gender stereotypes, colorism, or innovate beyond filming in ever more exotic locations that perpetuated sexual fantasy and the objectification of women. Like Hollywood, but unlike most cinemas in the emerging world and regional cinemas within India, there was neither state subsidy nor protection which might have encouraged norm-breaking experimentation.

This working paper has argued that what was shown on screens in India during the post-Independence decades emboldened societal attitudes on gender and skin color as well as reflecting them. It has made extensive use of interviews with producers and actors captured in two novel oral history databases to demonstrate the extent of biases in Bollywood, and to uncover the many critical contemporary voices within the industry. It remains much harder to prove this kind of impact than to show, for example, that Turks started eating margarine from the 1950s, but the balance of probability supports such an argument. In India, like many other emerging countries in this era, cinema seems likely to have exercised a huge influence on sense-making, more especially in rural areas where literacy levels were still low, alternative sources of information and entertainment non-existent, and social interaction between genders and non-local communities highly constrained. Bollywood used that influence to perpetuate beliefs about pale skin, portray women in passive roles, and show rape scenes. It repeated the same format again and again. Although Bollywood was not even recognized as an industry by the Indian government, paradoxically it is likely to have exercised a powerful influence on societal attitudes to gender and skin color in the new nation.

It was left to parallel, and to some extent regional, cinemas in India to contest such stereotypes. Producers and actors in parallel cinema such as Shabani Azmi and Shyam Benegal

articulated both a strong belief that Bollywood cinema was replicating restrictive social norms, and that cinema had a responsibility to contest stereotypes. However, their audience was highly constrained. Regional cinemas, which often had some state support, had different agendas than Bollywood. The study has examined the case of Tamil cinema, which became entwined with Dravidian nationalism. However, over time the roles of women became more restrictive, while by the end of the period covered here light-skinned actresses had begun to populate Tamil screens. Over time, Bollywood exercised an isomorphic influence on other cinemas in the country, and this appears to have intensified after policy liberalization began in 1991.

This study ends in 1991, and much has changed since then as policy liberalization took hold. The Indian film industry opened to more global influences, and new media technologies facilitated rapid diffusion of Bollywood movies to the Indian diaspora and beyond. In 2000, the Indian government finally reclassified cinema as a legitimate industry, enabling Bollywood to begin to raise funds externally. Post-2000s, as regulations further relaxed and economic growth intensified, Bollywood films started diversifying storylines and themes through the gradual entry of new directors and producers. This shift was accelerated by new online streaming services such as Hotstar, Amazon, and Netflix which gained traction as both platforms for wide distribution and as new sources of finance for production. Yet, despite these incremental changes, Bollywood remains the preserve of film scions and nepotistic family networks, criticism of which has mounted recently.¹³⁷ Gender stereotyping continues as a noteworthy feature of films, while bias towards light skin has only intensified as the silver screen has converged with the multi-billion-dollar skin lightening industry.¹³⁸

¹ The authors would like to thank the Division of Research and Faculty Development at the Harvard Business School for funding part of the research on which this article is based. The Lauder Institute and the Price Lab for Digital Humanities at the University of Pennsylvania provided additional research support. A revised version of this working paper will be published as “Emboldening and Contesting Gender and Skin Color Stereotypes in the Film Industry in India, 1947-1991” in the journal *Business History Review*.

² Manjunath Pendakur, “India,” in J.A. Lent (ed.) *The Asian Film Industry* (Austin, 1990), 229.

³ Pendakur, “India,” 231; Unesco, *Statistics on Film and Cinema 1955-1977* (Paris, 1981), 10.

⁴ In recent years, a number of excellent surveys have been published that include extensive guides to the literature. See Ashish Rajadhyaksha, *Indian Cinema. A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, 2016), as well as his exhaustive study, *Indian Cinema in the Time of Celluloid: From Bollywood to the Emergency* (Bloomington, 2009).

⁵ This is the major element of his analytical framework in Rajadhyaksha, *Indian Cinema in the Time of Celluloid*.

⁶ Peter Chapman, *Bananas: How the United Fruit Company Shaped the World* (New York, 2007); Richard A. Hawkins, *A Pacific Industry: The History of Pineapple Canning in Hawaii* (New York, 2011); E.J. T. Collins, “Brands and Breakfast Cereals in Britain,” in Geoffrey Jones and Nicholas J. Morgan (eds.) *Adding Value: Brands and Marketing on Food and Drink* (New York, 1994), 237-258; Geoffrey Jones, *Renewing Unilever* (Oxford, 2005), 167.

⁷ George Ritzer, *The McDonaldization of Society* (Thousand Oaks, 1993).

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