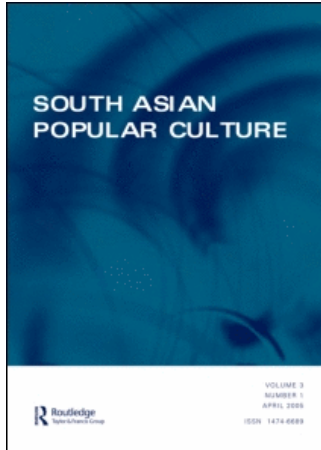


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### ETHNOGRAPHIES OF THE POPULAR AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE IN INDIA

Vinay Lal; Gita Rajan

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**Vinay Lal**  
**Gita Rajan**

## ETHNOGRAPHIES OF THE POPULAR AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE IN INDIA

It has sometimes been supposed that, between Bollywood and cricket, nearly the entire terrain of Indian popular culture is adequately captured. No one doubts that these are the twin passions on which contemporary India rides. When the quintessential Bollywood film *Lagaan*, which deployed the metaphor of cricket to frame the epic narrative of anti-colonial resistance, was released a few years ago, its immense critical and popular success was construed by many as a natural outcome of the director's savvy understanding of the passions that animate Indian life.<sup>1</sup> As the country celebrates 60 years of independence, it is all too evident that 'the freedom struggle' remains a reservoir of cultural capital, to be drawn upon (in the most optimistic of such accounts) to inspire Indians to emulate the visionaries who strove to free India and to pledge themselves to a renewal of the Nehruvian dream; but, as *Lagaan* appeared to make it all the more clear, a nationalism dedicated to vindicating the nation-state, conjoined to an anti-colonial nationalism, makes for a more heady brew. *Lagaan* kicked up something of a storm among critics and commentators. Some among them pushed for the view that *Lagaan* obfuscated with deliberate intent the riotous divisions, which define (and mar) the Indian polity, while others, veering to the other end of the spectrum, embraced the view that *Lagaan* points to the way in which the nation's fragments can all be welded together to form a more or less harmonious whole. Such seemingly opposite interpretations share the same epistemological space, and display little awareness of the possibility that the resounding success of *Lagaan* owes as much to the cavernous spaces of the mythos of Indian civilization as it does to anti-colonial resistance and 'cricket nationalism'. Self-consciously cast in the epic mould, setting itself up as a modern-day Mahabharata, *Lagaan*'s fundamental plot emanates from the idea of the improbable wager. From such uncertain beginnings have great outcomes emerged.

Interesting as are the debates woven around *Lagaan*, which intersects with the idea of the popular in numerous registers, in this, the second special issue co-edited by the two of us, we propose to elaborate upon ethnographies that mark, limit, and enlarge the domain of the popular. We move well beyond the obvious conceptions of the popular to evoke a far more ecumenical and expansive idea of the operation of the popular as it engages with the workings of the public sphere in India and, more broadly, South Asia. Indeed, as the papers in this issue amply suggest, there are a myriad number of expressions of the popular—and some of these impinge upon mainstream conceptions of the popular in ways not commonly imagined, as a more

textured history of Bollywood would surely reveal. In recent years, Bollywood, so to speak, has landed on the desk of critics and scholars. A little more than a decade ago, only very few scholars of cinema theorized about Hindi films and books that were written on Indian cinema were all resolutely focused on Satyajit Ray, Mrinal Sen, Adoor Gopalakrishnan, and other fixtures of the film festival circuit. One might safely aver that, following the determination to transform India from a 'license Raj' into a free market zone for marauding capitalists in the early 1990s, Bollywood too embarked on a journey to globalise itself. It had, to be sure, never lacked markets, and every Indian of our generation, and of two generations previous, has encountered more than one person from Russia, Poland, Hungary, Turkey, Algeria, Morocco, Somalia, Ethiopia, not to mention those places where the Indian diasporic presence is palpable if not magisterially present, who recalls with nostalgia, bordering almost on a reverence for the celluloid memories of childhood, the Raj Kapoor films. It is in keeping with the tenor of the song, 'Mera Joota Hai Japani, Yeh Pataloon Englishtani, Sir Pe Lal Topi Roosi, Phir Bhi Dil Hai Hindustani', that, notwithstanding the patriotic sentiments it evokes, its following should have extended from the Ganga to the Volga and beyond.<sup>2</sup> Bollywood's presence often extended to places where Hollywood did not always reach, and whatever competitiveness India may today have in global markets is prefigured in the largely unremembered and certainly unwritten history of the Hindi film's capacity to attract diverse audiences. Since Bollywood's early global presence was confined, if one may put it in these ironic terms, to the 'majority world', to those nations which had not enjoyed the advantages of colonizing powers, the developed world carried on as if popular Hindi cinema did not even exist.

To globalise itself, Hindi cinema perforce also had to be transformed into 'Bollywood'. Very brief news items in editions of Indians newspapers in late July this year have conveyed the two-fold news that the veteran actors, Naseeruddin Shah and Om Puri, have expressed umbrage at this term, and that Bollywood has now been accepted by *Merriam-Webster's Dictionary*, following the example of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, as a word in the English language. Once the West has conferred recognition on a social or cultural phenomenon, it then gives it a name: what is peripheral or transient becomes *pucca*. The misgivings, which we share, that these actors have expressed with the word Bollywood are more than understandable. The dictionaries inform us that the word Bollywood is derived from Bombay and Hollywood, though, if there were room for a lengthy exegesis of popular Hindi cinema, it would be our endeavour to demonstrate that Bombay-Hollywood might be a better approximation of certainly the bulk of popular Hindi cinema.<sup>3</sup> There is the supposition, which admittedly too has a substantial following, that Bollywood is derivative of Hollywood, and remarks are frequently encountered to the effect that such and such Hindi film is a copy of a certain Hollywood film. Notwithstanding all the supposedly nuanced and complex debates over the last few decades about simulacra, the impossibility of deciphering notions of what is authentic and what is a copy (even the hideousness of the idea of the original), apparently the trust in ambiguity can be suspended effortlessly when it comes to popular Hindi films.

Supposing that one could be certain about the 'original' and the copy or copies derived from it, very few have yet dared suggest that the copies are often more engaging, from the intellectual and entertainment standpoints alike, than the originals as this would violate the tacit understanding that the West furnishes the template for

much of modern culture around the world.<sup>4</sup> These too, are aspects of popular culture, not under any scholar's gaze at present. V. S. Naipaul, who is supremely gifted both as a writer and in his capacity to ape the white man, echoed this sentiment with the wretchedly cruel observation that those in the non-West only know how to use the telephone but such an instrument could not have been developed anywhere outside the West. However, in a very pragmatic sense, the clichéd opposition between the West and non-West is breached by the globalization of Bollywood as an entertainment phenomenon. Nevertheless, in this move, Bollywood directors and producers have been attentive to audience expectations, i.e. expressed most vividly in the idea of the *masala* film. Granted, this formula for success in globalising Bollywood has required engineering of the popular Hindi film at various levels—in the tenor, pitch, quality and timbre to appeal to diversely located audiences. Thus, the popular in South Asia can no more escape the globalising thrust of Western knowledge systems than can the economist with a neo-liberal agenda, the social scientist whose field work may be in Orissa or Chattisgarh (or in the numerous diasporic locations all over the globe) but whose stock of theories is derived from Marx, Gramsci, Weber, Levi Strauss, Marcel Mauss, and Jack Goody. So, too, the businessman or corporate executive whose idea of being properly credentialed is to have a MBA from an American-style business school, or indeed any other practitioner of knowledge. Whatever else may have been globalised—MTV, Harry Potter, Coca-Cola and McDonalds, and the iconic figures of Michael Jordan, Michael Jackson, and Paris Hilton (or, may we suggest, Aishwarya Rai?), not to mention such socio-economic and cultural phenomena, now greatly accelerated thanks to the notion of a borderless world, as the trafficking of sex slaves, the trade in body parts, and the export of migrant labour—it is the globalisation of certain forms of knowledge that is likely to have the most enduring consequences in the years to come.<sup>5</sup>

Having said that, we are also quite certain that it is possible to evoke a more ecumenical, less travelled, and far less predictable and marketable conception of the popular in South Asia, and the papers in this issue, following the essays in the previous special issue, are the first if tentative steps in that direction. This issue takes up the themes adumbrated in our issue on 'Beyond and Beneath the Habitual', but where earlier we had framed popular culture through visual modalities and experiences of everyday life, here we put on offer ethnographies of the popular. Bradley Shope's paper, the subject of which is music-making among African Americans in late colonial India, traverses territory that no one has previously plumbed; that novelty aside, his ethnography points to rich possibilities for those committed to an emancipatory politics of knowledge. In the 1930s and 1940s, India became home to a number of African American jazz musicians. The saxophonist Roy Butler described the time, over a decade long, he spent in India as 'simply a millionaire's vacation with pay and passage,' but Shope does not delve here into the conditions under which these musicians decided to make their passage to India. Butler commenced his Indian journey with a six-month stint in Calcutta, moving to the hill station of Mussoorie in the summer of 1934, and then relocating to Bombay where he became a regular feature at the Taj Mahal Hotel. 'Roy Butler's Indian Orchestra', comprised of Anglo-Indians and Goans, came into existence in 1941, and Butler only returned to the United States in 1944 when it appeared that India might come under Japanese attack. To take another figure, his compatriot, the jazz pianist Teddy Weatherford, who had a

glittering start in Chicago, moved to India in the 1930s and played at hotels and clubs across the country and even in Southeast Asia. Weatherford worked with female crooners, married an Anglo-Indian vocalist, and employed Anglo-Indian, Goan and Burmese musicians in his orchestra.

The recuperation of the history of African American musicians in late colonial India is far more than another exercise in minority history, adding to our stock of knowledge about little known social groups or phenomena—not that such knowledge is trivial. The African American interest in Gandhi, which commenced long before Martin Luther King, is doubtless the most well known episode in the encounter of two subjugated peoples, but Shope's paper amply demonstrates that their contacts were much wider and took more than the commonly expected forms. There was very little knowledge of Western classical music in India at that time, and one suspects that such music, with its rigid protocols of performance and spectatorship and its adherence to written notes, had little appeal to Indians. Be that as it may, Weatherford, Roy Butler, and other African American musicians introduced to India a new strand of Western music that, considering its stress on improvisation, its grounding in the culture of the oppressed, and its sense of *joie de vivre*, opened up India to another version of the West. Hitherto India had only really encountered the West in the culture of the coloniser—this was the West with its strains of harsh Puritanism, evangelicalism, utilitarianism, platonic guardianship, Burkenan trusteeship, and scarcely disguised sense of moral superiority that had lorded over Indians. Many Indians could not imagine a West within the West that itself stood at the margins of the dominant culture, a West that represented its own repressed histories and moral paths that had to be disowned in the interest of creating an instrumental rationality in the service of Empire. It is this other West that, so to speak, found another point of entry into India through African American musicians. However, if one wishes to settle for a less ambitious reading of the space occupied by African American musicians in the period just before Indian independence, Shope's argument about the role of Anglo-Indian and Goan musicians, who created something of a niche for themselves in African American-led bands and orchestras, in shaping Indian film music points to some of the unexpected ways in which the encounter of African Americans with Indians proved fruitful.

Ratnakar Tripathy's sociological analysis of Bhojpuri cinema points to a different and yet equally unexplored point of intersection with popular Hindi cinema. Few people are likely to associate the heartland of Bhojpuri cinema, eastern Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, with anything other than stagnation, social anomie, lawlessness, and thuggery; and outward migration from Bihar, Tripathy argues, 'has reached gigantic proportions comparable to the Indian Partition of 1947.' It is a land prolific with tales of migrants, of train journeys and passages down to the Indian peninsula, of peregrinations of unskilled labour; equally pervasive are stories of the deindustrialization of Bihar, the encrustation of caste divisions, and the flowering of a 'kidnapping industry'. This is none the less the same area that has witnessed the explosive growth of Bhojpuri cinema, which has taken up themes that, though perhaps once central to popular Hindi films, have now largely been abandoned by Bombay cinema. Though Tripathy does not quite put it this way, we can perhaps hazard a view of Bhojpuri cinema as, besides furnishing entertainment and giving expression to the most intimate dreams that can only be expressed in the vernaculars, standing sentinel. The

other remarkable aspect of Bhojpuri cinema's story is its extraordinarily expansive reach, with audiences beyond the Hindi heartland in Indian metropolises and much further in the far-flung Indian diaspora in Fiji, Trinidad, Guyana, Mauritius, and elsewhere. Tripathy's interpretive gaze does not take him as far as these diasporic sites, but he would not be altogether surprised, we think, to find out that Fiji, portions of which are just as much *Ramacaritmanas* country as Benares or the Gangetic heartland of north India, has also given birth to the first novel in Bhojpuri.<sup>6</sup> Tripathy helps us to juxtapose the alleged provincialism, rusticity, and backwardness of Bhojpuri cinema with its globalising thrust and even, if one could countenance an alternative conception of cosmopolitanism, its world of constant flux—the histories of which are etched in varying phenomena, from the historic importance since antiquity of the Gangetic plains in the development of an Indian civilization to the great migrations of Bhojpuri-speaking people in the 19th and 20th centuries.

It is migrant labourers such as the ones from the Bhojpuri-speaking belt who are the subject of Shankar Ramaswami's analysis of social relations among Hindu and Muslims male metal workers in a steel handicrafts polishing factory in the Okhla region of Delhi. Few subjects have received as much attention as Hindu-Muslim relations at the macro level, though on even a cursory reading it becomes apparent that the question of 'Hindu-Muslim' relations, as a matter of habit and intellectual practice, generally has been reduced to communalism. Even scholars, and there are obviously many, who are relentless and rigorous critics of the communalist thesis have not always dwelled on the social relations between Hindus and Muslims, and arguments about the Hindu-Muslim synthesis, or the compositeness of Indian culture, have only infrequently gone beyond the palest of generalisations. However, in Ramaswami's paper we have a thick description of how Hindu workers view their fellow Muslim workers. In particular, he addresses the question of how languages of ridicule, irony and satire, the intent of which in part appears to be to cast aspersions on the Muslim male's virility and sexual competence, can persist alongside what are evidently forms of conviviality and social intercourse between the adherents of the two religions. Ramaswami witnessed various forms of 'othering' on the factory floor, and describes coming face-to-face with numerous prejudices and taboos, such as the hesitation among Hindus to share food with Muslims; yet he is also struck by the *talmel* among Muslims and Hindus, by the numerous instantiations of 'border crossings' that take place 'across the partitions of consciousness and self-understanding'. In seeking to explain the development of 'intimate possibilities for deeper togetherness amongst Hindu and Muslim workers', Ramaswami suggests that, for all their religious differences, the workers are still tethered to something of a civilizational discourse, deeply united in their view that the modern world induces a form of decivilizing that has deepened divisions between people and obscured the fact that the soul is fundamentally without identity. While not all readers will be persuaded by Ramaswami's declared propensity for the philosophical teachings associated with *advaita* (non-dualism), his paper steers scholars interested in Hindu-Muslim relations at the popular level in significantly new directions.

The simultaneity of 'togetherness' and 'otherness' in the social relations between Hindus and Muslims is, Ramaswami suggests, best explained through Ashis Nandy's idea of the 'double ledgers' of the psyche. Another, albeit related, expression of this idea is encountered in Nandy's own paper in this journal issue on the resurgent



struggles in the public domain over the meanings of Gandhi. No one has done more than Nandy over the course of the last three decades to free Gandhi from the crushing pieties and hopeless clichés in which he has been entrapped by three generations of Gandhians, state functionaries, and an entire array of critics and admirers who alike have sought to fit Gandhi into a framework of normal politics and dissent,<sup>7</sup> and the present paper shows just why Nandy remains the most interesting modern-day interpreter of Gandhi and of the culture of Indian politics. Nandy argues that the hostility to Gandhi among the middle classes and elites, for whom his assassin Nathuram Godse served a role akin to that of a spokesman, is often contrasted to the supposed support that Gandhi commands in India's popular culture. Suggesting that the common divide between the classical and the popular is more accurately understood in India as a tripartite division of the classical, popular and folk, Nandy argues that there is an undercurrent of acute discomfort with Gandhi in popular culture but that the folk, wherein there is a greater compatibility within Gandhian values, can inform the popular to produce more sympathetic representations of Gandhi. Moving from the politics of the assassination of Gandhi, a subject on which Nandy's previous work remains decisive, to the controversy surrounding a Marathi play critical of Gandhi, Nandy goes on to consider briefly the re-emergence of Gandhi in popular Hindi cinema. Ironically, in the twists and turns which are expressive of popular culture, the hero of *Lage Raho Munnabhai*, a comedy where a small-time (and almost always loveable) Bombay hoodlum is moved by Gandhi's apparition to reform himself and society, has just been sentenced to a six-year term to be served out in Poona's Yeravda Jail, where Gandhi was confined from 1922 to 1925 on a six-year sentence for sedition.<sup>8</sup> Nandy goes so far as to suggest that this revival of Gandhi in mainstream cinema may perhaps mark 'a new moment in India's popular culture.' If we were permitted a similar indulgence, is it too much to suggest that Nandy has been the Munnabhai to the academic and intellectual culture of India?

The impress of Nandy's work on Indian popular culture has been felt far and wide, and Osamu Note's paper on the vast billboards that sometimes appear to hog the skyline in Chennai, is interested in probing whether Nandy's formulation of 'the slum's eye view' of Indian politics can yield some insights that might help us better situate billboards in the contemporary cityscape of Chennai. What relationship, for instance, might there be between the manner in which traditional (religious) images were viewed and the impress of billboards on viewers? Note takes us through some of the previous phases of the visual culture of South India, and though he does not document changes in the visual field at any great length, he finds significant the shift from gigantic hand-painted effigies (cut-outs) to billboards made of computer-printed vinyl fabric. He argues that such shifts reflect not merely changing aesthetic preferences, or even different orders of visibility, but rather that the transition to digitalized images signals a decisive shift from 'the order of things formed under Nehruvian socialist policy.' In the latter half of his paper, Note moves towards an adumbration of the wider socio-legal context within which billboards are displayed. Note seeks to understand Chennai's competitiveness as a market for billboard advertisements; but he also considers state laws, public interest litigation, and court orders in an endeavour to understand what space billboards occupy in public discourses, and suggests that they have 'normalised a temporal flow not common until recently.' Though the images rendered in billboards are not necessarily different from

those found in other media, the question is whether billboards embody a different trope to decipher popular culture through a collective public knowledge. Note may be somewhat reticent in speaking to that question directly, but nonetheless he views such public advertisements as panoptic, in so far as they dictate the 'potential transformation' of the viewer 'in advance'. We should not be altogether surprised at this reading, considering that the temporal regime of consumption is always a few paces ahead of the present.

From billboards, which straddle the public-popular topography of cityscapes through spectacle, Shailja Sharma's paper proceeds to analyze another kind of media—the roles played by 'ethnic' newspapers in deciphering the popular imaginary in diasporic, *desi* communities in the United States. In doing so, this paper expands our discussion of ethnographies of popular culture to explore the shifting generational attitudes of *desis* as minorities (in this case, the nebulously aggregated peoples of Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, and Sri Lankan origins) with regard to 'identity politics, consumer power, cultural and religious nationalism, and inter community affiliations.' While newspapers in the 1950s and 1960s fed the hunger and nostalgia for homelands, Sharma notes, today's print-media like the *Chicago Tribune*, *The Indian Reporter and World News*, the *India Tribune*, *India Abroad* and *Desi Talk* simultaneously respond to needs and desires of South Asian Americans and create 'reciprocal effects' in political, social, cultural, and experiential realities of their readerly communities. For example, Sharma suggests that this two-way relationship is palpable, on the one hand, in the shifting trends in the form and content of the various media themselves so as to appeal to multiple and diverse diasporas from South and South East Asia, Europe, Africa, and the Americas across political affiliations as well as generational, class, and religious lines. On the other hand, her argument builds upon the definitions of diaspora and migration put forward by Stephen Castles and Alastair Davidson to demonstrate how contemporary *avatars* of these newspapers circumscribe parts of the public sphere through 'place-making' to highlight 'ethnic enclaves.' So as to not homogenise the significance of the phrase, 'ethnic minorities,' Sharma gives brief examples of local language/culture media like *Ajit*, a Punjabi, Gurmukhi publication; *Urdu Times*, which caters to a Pakistani-American audience; and *Rediff.com*, a popular website for young Indians, which now puts out '*India Abroad*, a slick, colour magazine originating in the US.' Exploring the role of South Asian/ethnic newsprint in the United States is important in understanding how the media shapes and is shaped by instruments of popular culture, and adds to the growing scholarship on the effects of different kinds of media on north-south global migratory populations (as is the case with Canada, Europe, and Australia, for example); and south-south migrations (as, for example, from Africa, Bangladesh or Sri Lanka to India) whose diasporic populations are now jostling for serious attention.

What new insight then does an ethnographic thesis of popular culture yield? Ethnography, in a traditionally anthropological fashion, was designed to study other cultures. This takes us back to one of the opening remarks in our introduction wherein we critiqued the West's alleged centrality in the naming and production of knowledge. Bollywood, as noted above, is a good example of this phenomenon that partakes of such a naming while also resisting it. From a theoretical perspective, some anthropologists like Henrietta Moore, James Clifford and Akhil Gupta share our scepticism, and for over a decade now have posited new paradigms that re-define and



re-draw boundaries around cultures as centre/majority and periphery/minority. They concur that some of this shift has occurred because Western scholars now turn to their own cultures as objects of study while so-called *others* are leaning on subaltern modes to decipher theirs. Furthermore, ethnography now works through hybridity, transience, and partiality instead of seeking the pure, original, or *pukka*—yet another point made above in putting forth the very usefulness of studying South Asian popular culture through this particular lens at this moment in time. We find that we can gather-up different strands and various forms of the popular ranging from music to billboards, newsprint, regional cinema, even political ideologies and labour habits by using ethnography as a loosely posited approach in understanding our fluid, contemporary realities. Moore's comment is apropos here, especially as we take various global processes into consideration: 'communities "at home" ... are increasingly culturally diverse; "other cultures" are no longer confined to "other parts" of the world.... If some of the cultures and communities ... are transnational and translocation, then so too are the anthropologists'.<sup>9</sup> This gestures toward the richness of ethnographic inquiries that we feel we have captured in reading popular culture in South Asian contexts.

## Notes

- 1 See Rajan's essay for a nuanced reading of *Lagaan* (Rajan 1099–1124).
- 2 'My shoes are Japanese, the trousers from India; the red cap astride my head is Russian, but my heart is nevertheless Indian.' The song is from *Shree*.
- 3 This argument is implicitly taken up by Lal 228–259.
- 4 In a different context, others such as Dipesh Chakrabarty, Dilip Gaonkar, and Arjun Appadurai have theorised the presence of alternative modernities in non-Western locations. However, for the purposes of our argument here, we draw attention to the commonplace assumption that the West is still considered to be the guarantor of the modern.
- 5 For further elaboration, see Lal *Empire of Knowledge*.
- 6 The reference here is to Subramani, *Dauka Purana*.
- 7 Some of Nandy's landmark readings of Gandhi are enumerated in the list of references.
- 8 Munnabhai is played by Sanjay Dutt, sentenced on 31 July by a special court set up under anti-terrorist legislation to six years of rigorous imprisonment for unlawful possession of arms.
- 9 For an excellent analysis of the major shifts in coding and decoding cultures through ethnography, see Moore 8.

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