

Mehta, R. B. (2020). Unruly cinema: History, politics, and Bollywood.

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A Book Review by

Nadira Khatun

McMaster University, Canada

Rini Mehta's *Unruly cinema: History, politics, and Bollywood* is perhaps the most comprehensive account to date of Indian Hindi cinema's origin and expansion in relation to colonial, postcolonial, and the Emergency periods, and to neoliberal states based on secondary data. Trapped between an ambivalent and adversarial government and an undefined audience, the book describes how Indian commercial film historically has flourished by refusing control or homogenization. This book is divided into four chapters, each of which examines different moments in Indian cinema's history. The book demonstrates how Bollywood's current popularity is unlikely to be the consequence of 'unruliness' through a methodical presentation of four historical periods.

In the first chapter, Mehta (2020) provides a detailed account of the "captive consumer model" (23) of early Western cinema; she discusses the early invention of the magic lantern, "a contraption that projected still images onto a wall or screen" (25), as part of the development of cinematic technology and later highlights the ingenious business model of the Lumière brothers (27). In the next segment of the chapter, 'Trade, Art, and Origins' (30), Mehta has borrowed Someswar Bhowmik's idea of how the growth of early Indian cinema was facilitated by capitalists of the lower strata. Mehta, following Bhowmik, critiques the idea of Indian 'Swadeshi cinema' (Indian images for and by Indians) and argues that the Swadeshi idea was a marketing and advertising tool used by the manufacturers. Members of the film industry, including Phalke and others, started utilizing the Swadeshi idea to market their films. Most importantly, Mehta articulates the intersectionality of caste and class in the early age of the film industry, provides an account of the changes that took place after the introduction of talkies and even examines the debate over language (55). The last segment of the chapter, 'From Studios to Stars' (37), offers a wealth of information on the changes in film production in the colonial period.

The second chapter, 'Shadow Nationalism: Cinema and the Nehruvian State of Culture,' maps the crisis the Hindi film industry experienced due to the postcolonial government's intervention in the industry in spite of Indian popular cinema's role in accentuating the task of creating a national imaginary. Nationalism perpetuated most effectively through melodramatic form and, therefore, Hindi cinema of the 1950s was co-opted as an ideological state apparatus. The Indian government reasserted the state's power over certification and taxation by replacing the British-Indian Cinematograph Act of 1918 with its own version in 1952 and by establishing the National Film Awards and National Film Festivals that began in 1954. At around the same time, European films became the source of the reformist–realist social genre. Within this framework,

cinema as a cultural–artistic medium was destined to be part of the nation-building project (Mehta, 2020: 72). Raj Kapoor’s ‘Awaara cycle’ of films helped create the dominant language for cinematic nationalism (63) and the phenomenon led to the rise of a star system and melodramatic films. Benedict Anderson’s definition of a nation as an imagined community is utilized by Mehta to discuss the act of film viewing by the audience at that time.

The third chapter illustrates the post-Nehruvian period under Indira Gandhi’s leadership, which saw the government’s media policy of encouraging and nurturing the production of ‘art’ films. Also during this period, popular or mainstream cinema underwent an upheaval. In the 1960s and 1970s, the nationalist social genre gave way to facilitate the rise of the ‘action genre’, most prominently based on Amitabh Bachchan being cast as an ‘angry young man’ (130). This was the genre that would resurrect popular Bollywood cinema and provide an anarchic counter-discourse against both the state’s hegemonic efforts and New Cinema’s artistic supremacy. Mehta looks at this change through the lens of entertainment and art cinema and terms it as the ‘unruly turn,’ which tried to manipulate the hitherto ‘cinema versus state’ dynamic. While the Indian art cinema movement of the 1960s and 1970s re-energized the film medium, the Hindi mainstream movie industry in Bombay re-oriented the national imaginary to focus on physical violence and cathartic retribution, using the urban poor public as a stepping-stone to national success. In the chapter, Mehta has used the discourse that equates ‘modern’ with development (107, 123) though the concept of ‘modern’ seems undertheorized here.

The fourth chapter elaborates on India’s participation in globalization in 1990–91, noting that India was forced to deregulate its markets in order to meet the terms of a major World Bank loan. It was a time of pro-capitalist economic rhetoric, and the country witnessed the rise of political Hindu nationalism and a caste-based electoral polity. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, a new generation of actors, such as Shah Rukh Khan and Aamir Khan, portrayed a generation of youth that could neither live with the compromises of the nationalist social genre nor exact the vengeance dream of the action genre (152). At this time, Bollywood started getting international recognition and Hollywood studios started investing in Bollywood (145). Unfortunately, the reader does not get to see how this change reflected on the content of Bollywood cinema except for the influence on characters’ clothing (165), which was visible in the films where women are represented within the Indian context of pro-capitalist liberal modernity (153). At the same time, Bollywood witnessed the rise of the Nationalist Trifecta: Nation, Diaspora, and Enemies (158). The last chapter, the epilogue of the book, gives an overall perspective of the current and future development of Bollywood cinema, showcasing changes in film content due to international exposure and international collaboration (180), and discussing the adoption of new technologies, including online digital film-viewing platforms (184).

Mehta’s book has a plethora of information, though the extensive detail could be knitted together more strongly within an overarching argument. Despite the detailed historiography of Indian Hindi cinema and subsequent Bollywood cinema, it is not clear how the book departs significantly from the foundational work of Madhav Prasad (1998), Sumita S. Chakravarty (1993), Ashish Rajadhyaksha (1982), and T. M. Ramachandran (1983), among many others, who have already documented this critical history. Mehta notes that the title of the book is inspired by Carol Vernallis’s 2013 book *Unruly media* (15) but unlike Vernallis’s book, which is concerned with cinematic technical intervention, Mehta chooses to study the history of Indian cinema through the lens of the socio-political contexts of the films. In sum, for the reader seeking an overarching view

of key landmark eras of Indian history and their impact on the industry, Mehta's exhaustive historical account will be a great source of information.

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About the Reviewer

Nadira Khatun, is a Visiting Assistant Professor at McMaster University and Assistant Professor at XIM University, India.

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