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The Singing Cowboys: *Sholay* and the Significance of (Indian) Curry Westerns within Post-Colonial Narratives
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During the 1970s, Hindi mainstream cinema experienced a spurt of what may be described as "Curry Westerns" or adaptations of Westerns within Indian contexts, which in reality pointed out specific undercurrents of political change. While, on one hand, these films were remarkably different from the erstwhile *dacoit* (bandit) films (for instance, the ground-breaking film *Gunga Jumna* (Nitin Bose, 1961)), they also tackled the iconicity of a barren landscape and narrated the inclusion of the outsider into the community. On the other hand, the so-called Curry Westerns did not carry the bleakness of Spaghetti Westerns, though they involved a sense of harshness, betrayal and the presence of a demonic villain, who often emerged as if from nowhere. The concern in these films was not the conquest of the wilderness and the subjugation of nature or issues of territorial rights. Here, the world was organized around codes of honour, kinship, and personal vendetta. These films were premised on questions of justice, which, as apparent from other Indian films produced between the 1950s and 1980s, was essentially denied by the newly instituted secular law of the country. This paper focuses on *Sholay* (aka *Flames*, Ramesh Sippy, 1975), one of the most enduring Indian films, in order to recognize the function of the popular within the political. Consequently, this paper addresses the historical impact of the film both within the field of popular practices, as well as within the chronicles of the political everyday. Furthermore, the paper analyzes the film's visual style, along with the soundtrack, in order to study its multiple influences, as well as to examine the implications of re-framing a dominant Hollywood genre within Indian settings.

As suggested by Kuan-Hsing Chen in the crucial work *Asia as Method*, the questions this paper will raise in regard to *Sholay* are about its status as an emanation of the Global South: "How does it [the Global South] operate? What are the discursive content, form, and direction of the argument put forward [within the film]? What ideological structures does it [the film] assume and connect with? As a cultural imaginary, what are its [historical] sources and its resources?" (26). Briefly, the attempt here is to use *Sholay* as a method and thus, by means of its analysis enquire about its cultural, political, and ideological links with the times. In addition, this paper maintains the distinction between Hindi language films produced in Bombay, and the umbrella notion of the "Bollywood" film industry. Of late, scholars of Indian cinemas have studied the Bollywood phenomenon as a specific shift within the film industry during post-liberalisation. Rajadhyaksha describes the "*Bollywoodization* of the Indian cinema" as the *corporatisation* of the film industry in its efforts to re-integrate finance, production, and distribution, along with the music industry (see Rajadhyaksha). Furthermore, Prasad in "Surviving Bollywood" suggests that "successful commodification of Indian cinema as Bollywood in the International market is based on the idea of an unchanging essence that distinguishes it from Hollywood" (49). Through an analysis of *Sholay*, however, we are looking at the industrial structure that precedes this moment, as well as an aesthetic system that is much more eclectic and importunate than that expressed in Bollywood cinema. [1]

Once upon a time in India

For those who watch *Sholay* for the first time, the film may well appear inexplicable. The colour palate now appears somewhat pinkish, the faces seem unusually dark, and the typical rhetorical dialogues of Hindi language cinema, excessive comic interjections, romantic scuffles, elaborate song and dance sequences, soaring emotional drama about homo-social bonding and a feudal world view, dominate the scene. But, *Sholay* clearly has survived it own caricatures, B and C movie spoofs, and numerous cross-references (mostly comic) in Hindi films produced from Bombay. [2] As well, it has successfully transcended its own B movie roots, and its associations with Sergio Leone's landmark Spaghetti-Western *Once Upon a Time in the West* (1968), in order to become a cult that speaks to a range of other issues.

Sholay is the story of the now incapacitated Thakur Baldev Singh (the

village head, played by Sanjeev Kumar), who was once an honest police officer who had arrested Gabbar the bandit (played by Amjad Khan). While Gabbar was initially captured and jailed, he eventually escaped and returned to avenge this dishonour by exterminating Thakur's entire family, and by capturing Thakur and chopping off his arms. Thakur, located outside legality and in a mythical landscape – "somewhere between Mexico and Uttar Pradesh" (Chopra 34) – plots revenge. He severs his lawful leanings, and recalls two petty crooks – Jai and Veeru (played by superstars Amitabh Bachchan and Dharmendra, respectively) – whom he had captured earlier. [3] At the time they were being transported to jail, Jai and Veeru had saved his life during a train robbery. [4] The film takes off with this spectacular train robbery sequence.

As Thakur appoints Jai and Veeru to find Gabbar, the film develops its own complications. Before Jai and Veeru can seize Gabbar, they fall in love – Jai with Radha, Thakur's widowed daughter-in-law (played by Jaya Bhaduri, now Jaya Bachchan), and Veeru with Basanti, the vivacious "tanga-wali" or horse-carriage driver (played by Hema Malini, now married to Dharmendra) – and take up Thakur's motivation as their own moral responsibility. Among other facets, two dialogues from the exploratory sequences have circulated continually. First, *loha lohe ko kaatta hai* ("an iron weapon cuts an iron object") and the second, *mujhe Gabbar chaahiye – zinda* ("I want Gabbar – alive"). While the second phrase describes the dramatic content of the film, both, but especially the first phrase, set the moral tone of the film; a pair of outlaws shall capture the bandit Gabbar.

Thakur's centrality to the film is decisive. He stands tall (supported by low angle shots) and is firmly grounded within a feudal worldview. Yet at the same time he is an ex-police officer whose arms were cut off by Gabbar. Interestingly, one of the most common phrases in Hindi cinema is *kanoon ke haat lambe hain* ("the law has far off reach," or literally, "the law's arms are long"). This expression is reworked in *Sholay*, where during Gabbar's arrest, Thakur warns him and exclaims, *yeh haath nahin phansi ka phanda hai* ("This is not my arm, instead it's the noose"). Another cult film, *Mother India* (Mehboob Khan, 1957) also deals with a male protagonist who loses his arms in an accident and is therefore left incapacitated. The problem of the absentee/weak father figure was a recurring subject in melodramas from 1950s to 1980s, as in the case of Amitabh Bachchan's milestone film *Deewar* (Yash Chopra, 1975). Furthermore, after *Sholay*, Gabbar's punitive dialogue, *yeh haath muhje de de Thakur* ("Give me your arms, Thakur") became pervasive in Indian popular culture, and was

referred to in disparate contexts, including art projects. The problem of the arms, as an (in)effective extension of the state, is clearly the premise of the film, which on one hand shows the social contract between the rural gentry and the state, and on the other hand demonstrates – with the hands being bluntly cut off – the vulnerability of the law in post-colonial India. This is further complicated by the heroism of the petty criminals who dwell on the thin line between law and justice.

Furthermore, the structure of doubling takes on a specific meaning within the film, since all characters and situations are bound by a symmetrical pattern of opposites. Highlighting such double significances, M. Madhava Prasad writes in *Ideology of Hindi Film*:

> in *Sholay*, the doubling takes on an added significance for two reasons: one, the figure who demands our sympathy at the first border is a landlord, by sharing his vengeance, we are also seduced into participating in a reaffirmation of the feudal order. Secondly, the political address to the audience ... is eliminated.... Protecting the village [from Gabbar's wrath] is the form taken by the action initiated to restore the Thakur's honour. (155)

Therefore, at the end, when Gabbar is captured by Veeru after a series of gunfights, horse racing, dance-sequences and Jai's fateful death, he is handed over to Thakur to fulfill his vengeance. Thakur takes charge of the situation and utilizes his specially made spiked shoes and proceeds to kill Gabbar. However, the police intervene, preventing Thakur from killing Gabbar, and the law takes its own course. It is only at this point that subjects of law and legality are evoked. Prasad describes this as the "triumph of the Law over the intransigent political order of the countryside" (158). This, however, was not the "original" ending. The first version, which has re-surfaced in recent times (initially through the circulation of VHS tapes and more recently through the internet), offers another reading. [5] In this version, as in the theatrically released version, Thakur pushes and hits a weak Gabbar with all his strength, leaps over him and crushes Gabbar's hands with his spiked shoes. In the course of this action, Gabbar, now toothless, suffers immensely, and finally he is struck by a spear and killed. In the end Thakur wails and cries over the consequences.

Clearly, this account was not devised to show the "triumph of Law"; instead, this ending highlights a deep sense of desolation and the subsequent victory of a pre-modern moral order and its notions of justice

over the modern, secular and unsympathetic judiciary. A series of films made during the 1950s and 1960s, including *Awaara* (Raj Kapoor, 1951), *Kala Pani* (Raj Khosla, 1958) and *Mamta* (Asit Sen, 1966), raise the question of authority and justice in post-Independence India. I have argued elsewhere that a certain kind of gloom and despair regarding the post-Independence moment had produced a series of dark and "noir-ish" films, which narrate the unease regarding transforming cities. [6] One of the most important films of this period, *Mother India*, illustrates the ruthless process of modernization, and the ways in which the ultimate development of the imaginary village is achieved through cycles of death and enormous suffering. The form of the film, particularly the uses of the songs, the Technicolour film stock as well as the film's images of a vast landscape (deep blue sky and bloody red soil), emerged out of a range of contemporary nationalist issues, including the first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru's dam-building projects, as well as through recollections of the revolutionary novel *Mother* by Maxim Gorky and the popular imagery of the *Bhārat Mātā* ("Mother India"). Effectively, this question of "form" was critically linked with the discursive content of the film. [7]

The timeframe of *Sholay*'s release – marking the rule of decree in India during June 1975 that suspended elections and civic rights – is thus significant in more ways than one. [8] When the film was submitted for its censor's certificate during the state of Emergency, the board vehemently opposed an ending in which an ex-police officer takes the law in his "own hands" and the police force becomes conspicuous by its absence. In due course, director Ramesh Sippy had to re-shoot the final scene, and the film was issued a "Universal" certificate after multiple cuts. [9] *Sholay* negotiates disparate temporalities and different phases of Indian modernity, as well as unexplored zones of anguish; it deals with the dynamic play between traditional value systems and the promise of a new nation. In manifold ways, such edgy eclectic structures become a device (like the magic cube) through which the wider narratives of post-colonial nations may be continuously sensed.

Currying the Western

Figures 1 and 2: DVD cover and Poster for *Mera Gaon Mera Desh* **and** *Khote Sikkay*

It may be argued that the wave of Curry Westerns in the 1970s indicate the historical churnings I have just discussed. For instance, *Mera Gaon Mera Desh* (Raj Khosla, 1971) stars Dharmendra as Ajit, the petty thief, who is re-employed by the policeman (Jaswant Singh, who had arrested Ajit earlier). In time, Ajit encounters Jabbar Singh (Vinod Khanna), a *dacoit*, and gradually prepares to protect the innocent villagers from him. Consequently, Jabbar abducts his lady-love Anju (Asha Parekh), and scuffles and eventual resolution follow. Similarly, *Khote Sikkay* (Narendra Bedi, 1973) was a B-movie (in terms of its production and circulation, as well as its modes of address) about five young men who earn their living through odd jobs and petty crimes conducted in the city. This situation is juxtaposed with the heinous crimes committed by the *dacoit* Junga in the village. Ramu (one of the five men) loses his family because of Junga, and thus the five men come together to resist such atrocities. They form a gang in an attempt to protect the villagers. Moreover, Dilbar (Feroze Khan) is possessed by the idea of avenging his father's death and thus tracks Junga. After Junga is defeated, the villagers and the headman plead with the authorities to give these petty crooks a chance to reform themselves. Finally they are integrated into the village life. According to Prasad:

> Feroze Khan's role in *Khotey Sikkay* [sic] was a blend of elements
> from Clint Eastwood, Zorro, and perhaps Lone Ranger comics.
> He was a man in search of a dacoit who had killed his parents.

> He roams the countryside, protects the weak, and punishes the wicked in the course of his search for his parents' killer ... at the end of which the dacoit is vanquished and order is restored to the rural landscape.... They give up their counterfeit lives for the authenticity of village life. (157)

While the "counterfeit coins" (*Khote Sikkay*) idea takes on a visual significance in *Sholay* as Jai tosses a coin every time they need to make a crucial decision, the film clearly recreates the cultural meaning of Spaghetti-Westerns, and borrows from a series of Indian sub-genres. *Sholay* may also be read as a self-conscious reworking of post-war Hollywood westerns in terms of its visual-scape, iconography, characterization and ideological implications. [10] Indeed, as Tag Gallagher would describe, it comprises "[p]icturesque scenery, archetypal characters, dialectical story construction, [remarkable] long-shots, [intimidating] close-ups, parallel editing, confrontational cross-cutting, montage chases [with horses]..." (265). Additionally, one may argue that it shares generic elements of the musical in terms of its "delight in movement, colour, and harmony" (Collins 160). Javed Akhtar and Salim Khan, the famous scriptwriter duo, have indicated that they were inspired by Sergio Leone's film *Once Upon a Time in the West*. [11] Moreover, besides the deployment of the harmonica and its haunting sound (as well as the image of the widow), which speak to Leone's film, one of the early murder sequences of *Once Upon a Time in the West* (in which McBain and his entire family are massacred) is reworked in *Sholay* with much intensity.

This scene is in fact the crux of the film, and of Thakur's story. After having jailed Gabbar, Thakur is on his way home for the annual festivity. He is carrying gifts for his sons, daughters-in-law, daughter and his little grandchild. The younger son, a petty bird hunter, appears to be shooting at the moment when Gabbar – who has meanwhile escaped from jail – strikes. The sound of the hunter's gun resonates with his own fall (shown in extreme long shots) to emphasize the fact that it is *he* and not a little bird which has been hit by the bullet. While the recognizable aural motif that is associated with Gabbar plays on the soundtrack, Gabbar's figure emerges on the horizon. Sippy (and his editor M. S. Shinde) display a unique sensitivity by freezing these moments (or the collapse of the characters, one after the one). Thus, every shot in which Thakur's kin is brutally hit by Gabbar is frozen. The moving images reappear again and sequentially later, to accentuate the dynamism of the scene. A shot by shot analysis emphasizes the rhythm of the film.

Figures 3, 4, 5, and 6: Thakur's family suffers the bolt from the blue

Figures 7, 8, 9, and 10: The freeze frames, and the subsequent falls

Figures 11 and 12: Gabbar emerges on the horizon

Figures 13 and 14: Thakur's grandson faces Gabbar, and Thakur discovers his body

Shot over twenty-three days, against a cloudy and gloomy sky, the characters appear to sink like dead birds in order to produce one of the most memorable scenes of Indian cinema. The little boy (as in *Once Upon a Time in the West*) shivers in fear when Gabbar points the gun at him. The juxtaposition of melancholic long shots and disturbing close-ups (as well as uses of blurs in action sequences) is the imperative aspect of *Sholay*. The boy's murder, however, is never shown in the film. His dead body is ultimately discovered after Thakur arrives, as a powerful wind tears open the coverings of the five dead bodies.

Investing unprecedentedly both in the image (70 mm prints, massive fight sequences, choreographed chase scenes with horses and gun fights created with the help of an international team), and in sound (stereophonic sound, creation of recognizable sounds for the major characters, sound design for the entire film as opposed to uses of stock-music, as well as pre-release contract with Polydor music company), the film distinctly demonstrated what Prasad has described as the

mobilization of the film industry in the context of the political shifts. [12] Prasad argues that, "[t]he recuperation of the commercial film industry from the crisis of the Indira Gandhi [Prime Minister] era required a reconstruction of its cultural base and a reform of its mode of address" (138). In fact, as narrated by Chopra, "G. P. Sippy [was] dreaming big.... He wanted to make a multi-starrer.... He was looking for scale and grandeur" (21). Above and beyond, the uncanny sound produced by the musician Vasudeo Chakravarty on his amplified cello, married to sounds emanating from a brass pot, became the recognizable tune that would be perpetually associated with Gabbar. [13] The six-track sound, technologically difficult at that time (and even later), transformed the soundtrack of Indian films, forever. The sound of *Sholay* became very popular, with audiences flocking to the theatres to listen to the "stereophonic" sound of the (counterfeit) coin being flipped and tossed. *Sholay* unmistakably was not another *dacoit* film, and even when it borrowed from the sub-genres, *Sholay* was the most extravagant film to be ever made in India (until 1975), as it successfully mixed sub-cultural forms with an influential Hollywood genre. Moreover, the setting up of an entire village in a desolate location in the south of India (for shooting purposes), signified the recreation of a new and imaginary nation. Chopra writes how permissions were sought from the farmers of Ramnagaram, a village near Bangalore (renamed as Ramgarh in the film) (45-46). In places the ground was razed, and in others, steps were carved out to create an entirely new and generic landscape. This setting up of a virtually real village highlights the ideological implications of the film.

Figures 15 and 16: A 70mm film demanded fitting title cards and wide posters, as well as the re-construction of an entire landscape

The Scope of Sholay

Lalitha Gopalan writes:

> [I]n my course on Postwar Westerns, I decided to show Ramesh Sippy's *Sholay*. My students [in the USA] were already prepared for international responses to the American Western and had only recently discussed Paul Smith's essay on Sergio Leone. But they seemed rudely shocked by Sippy's film.... Whereas some of them were genuinely interested in a different national cinema, others were not keen on going down this politically correct route, complaining that it did not merit the attention that they accorded even to kung fu films. Since we had not seen the singing cowboys Westerns, singing in a Western, especially two men singing to each other, was the last straw. (15-16)

In connection to similar responses, this paper argues that, besides being a reflection of the socio-political conditions in which the film was made and released, *Sholay* has the ability to tell us more about India's cultural and historical transformations. Indeed, it may be applied as *a tool and a method* through which one can read the burgeoning problems of a post-colonial state as well as its uneven growth and rambling conditions. Its multiple excesses in reality *produce a framework* by means of which we can consider the continuities and breaks, as well as the tussle over modernity, within post-colonial contexts. [14] Likewise, *Sholay* may be studied as a response to the dominant (global) structures, which are demolished and renewed in our scenarios. Moreover, its everlasting appreciation (till date) and the recycling of its themes, complicate the ways in which one may read social history and the dense fabric of the popular. [15] Thus, any attempt to analyse the film in a linear fashion, and examine the so-called influences of Hollywood genre may appear unwarranted. In effect, *Sholay* is an effective example of the manner in which Hollywood genres are rematerialized by Indian perspectives. Clearly, this is no straightforward appropriation of Spaghetti-Westerns, and thus, a reading of *Sholay* is not restricted to an exploration of the ideology of a genre. Contrarily, it generates a research framework, which permits us to understand the social history of the film industry, the economy of culture and political change.

After Gabbar is introduced through a rather dreadful scene (emphasised by close shots of his approaching feet accompanied with the ominous screeching sound associated with his character), in which he brutally kills his own trusted men (because they were defeated by Jai and Veeru), Gabbar enquires, "when is Holi [the festival of colours]?" His expected retaliation is then "interrupted" by an elaborate song and dance sequence

(which tangentially develops the romantic sub-plot), and it is after this that Gabbar attacks the village. The style of the shots in this sequence is clearly borrowed from Westerns. The merry-go-round drifting at the centre, children caught in cross-fire, women screaming, men running aimlessly, horses falling, long-shots, close-ups, blurs and eventually the frame that appears to be taken from *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (George Roy Hill, 1969), set off such interpretations. While the two-man team protects the village, through their grit and cleverness, this is followed by Thakur's elaborate explanation and narration of his suffering (discussed earlier).

The much awaited counter-attack scene (involving Jai and Veeru), however, is further delayed by another gypsy number, *Mehbooba, Mehbooba*. Madan Gopal Singh analyses this spectacular song as a new mode of address or an emergent relation between the screen and the spectator, whereas Lalitha Gopalan, after Steve Neale, demonstrates the dynamism between generic forms and industrial structures. Indeed, the inner "coherence" of classical Hollywood cinema is disturbed by a range of extra-diegetic elements within the framework of Indian cinemas. According to Gopalan such "interruptions" demonstrate the "film industry's interest in profits, and the global circulation of popular cinemas" (18). More important, it constructively produces a style that uniquely presents longer and intricate histories of widespread practices. [16] Thus, the sequence of foremost violence (the killing of Thakur's kin) is propped by two remarkable song sequences. [17]

Figures 17 – 24: The Holi sequence, and Gabbar attacks the village

Figures. 25 and 26: Following the gypsy number, Jai and Veeru attack Gabbar in his den

To borrow from Koushik Banerjea:

> Jai and Viru [Veeru], Gabbar and Thakur are characters whose mimetic appearance within these local registers is testament to their enduring appeal. It could be argued that their evocation at the level of memory or simply recognition operates within a transformative modality. (176)

Accordingly, one may argue that *Sholay* is not simply a film text that is waiting to be deliberated upon in terms of its genre or genre mixing. [18] It is more appropriately a composite or transmuted object that demands a careful mapping in order to understand its broader function within public cultures. Beginning its shooting in 1973, on one side, the film tackled the impending fear of an autocratic state; on the other, on its surface, it effectually captured the muted and hushed notes of unspeakable violence. Therefore, the murder scenes of both Thakur's grandchild's and Ahmed's (a Muslim minority), which were edited out, produce a harsh silent cry through their absence. The import of *Sholay* may be thoroughly recognized through a close-reading of the manner in which it brings together the dreads of continuous violence, along with the love for romance, comic scenes, a feudal melodrama and effectually connects Indian B-movies with American A-westerns and Italian Spaghetti Westerns, in order to become an epic tale of post-colonial transformation. Thus, according to Bishnupriya Ghosh, "*the film's romance with popular sovereignty over state power had tapped a vein:... Hence ...* Sholay *turned out be Phoolan Devi's* [Indian famous 'bandit queen'] *first film*" (22). [19] Therefore, through its countless adaptations *Sholay* conspicuously becomes a *method* of approaching the narratives of post-colonial histories and its widespread uncertainties.

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Endnotes

1. One may therefore consider the case of *Sholay* re-released in 3D format in January 2014.

2. Some of the widely held caricatures are *Duplicate Sholay* (Kanti Shah, 2002) and *Malegaon ki Sholay* (Naseer Shaikh, 1998), both marginal industrial products.

3. Two sequences become crucial within this context. First, the scene towards the beginning in which Thakur relocates the petty crooks, Jai and Veeru, through a police officer (who is also a friend); and second, the situation in which he refuses to cooperate with the police after Gabbar attacks his village. Instead, Thakur relies on his two-man army in his pursuit of personal vendetta.

4. *Ganga Jumuna* (Nitin Bose, 1961), shot years before *Sholay,* had an elaborate train robbery sequence. The action director (Azeem Bhai) of the film was appointed for *Sholay* along with an international crew.

5. See http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x6p-_OIDp_g

6. At the Seminar titled *Postcolonial India: Democracy, Development and Drama,* organized by and at the Department of History, West Bengal State University, February 2013, I presented the paper entitled "The streets and the parlours, and resonances of fear: Visual structures and sound design of our modernity." In this paper, I discuss how the so-called "noir-ish" *mise-en-scene* in the popular Indian films of the 1950s, or the uses of the low key lights and the long dark shadows,

silhouetted figures emerging from nowhere, and actors performing scenes totally in the dark, as well as unsettling close-ups of their faces, angular shots, and unclear reflections craft an environment of claustrophobia, disquiet, and despair (even in romantic situations). Moreover, this mood is generated through extensive night shots and night shoots as well, through images of undefined streets and mansions, which fabricate the noir sky and the murky urban landscape.

7. See Padmanabhan, " Recovering Budhni Mejhan from the silted landscape of modern India."

8. See Vishwajyoti Ghosh's graphic novel *Delhi Calm* as an intriguing comment on the suspension of democratic rights. Also refer to *Unsettling Memories*.

9. See Bhowmik (209).

10. Andre Bazin's study of the evolution of the Western, and Jim Kitses' landmark work are important references. Also see *The Invention of The Western Film*.

11. Banerjea (182) .

12. Chopra writes, "He [Sippy] wanted Gabbar's menace and Radha's tragic serenity to translate into sounds so distinctive that even when the character wasn't on screen, just the note would suggest his or her presence" (143).

13. See Gregory Booth (73)

14. See Chatterjee, *Our Modernity.*

15. Recent art house films like *Bandit Queen* (Shekhar Kapur, 1994) and *Paan Singh Tomar* (Tigmanshu Dhulia, 2010), a story about an athlete who becomes an outlaw, have certain similarities with *Sholay* in terms of its settings and themes.

16. Elsewhere I discuss the subject of long drawn and multiple influences through the soundtrack of Indian films: see Mukherjee, "The Architecture of Songs and Music: Soundmarks of Bollywood, a Popular Form and its Emergent Texts."

17. Also see Chapter 1 of Gopal, *Conjugations*.

18. See Prasad, "Genre Mixing as Creative Fabrication."

19. Italics in the original.

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