

ECMSAS: Panel 18

Intersecting Contexts: Media Cultures, Politics and Identity in South Asia

Convenors:

Dr. Rashmi Sawhney

Dr. Shakuntala Banaji

Panel Schedule:

Session I: 9.00 – 12.30

‘Averts make me want to break the television’: Children’s responses to the audiovisual media environment in India

Shakuntala Banaji, Institute of Education and LSE, University of London, UK

The media environment which surrounds children in India has altered dramatically in the last two decades. Millions of children can watch *Peppa Pig* or *Hanna Montana* dubbed in Hindi or in English or programmes in a number of vernacular languages; they have access to Japanese children’s cartoons (again dubbed in a number of languages) on VCD or television; they can watch Manga or Hindi, Tamil, Malayalam, Bengali, Gujarati and Marathi films and serials, MTV-India and a host of other programmes from Fox and Disney to Nick Junior and local sponsors as well as Hollywood films. However, discourses about children and mainstream media have remained almost unchanged. These discourses tend to fall into one of two paradigms – a stridently protectionist one that sees most ‘western’ media products as dangerous and having negative effects on ‘Indian’ ethics and culture and hence on children; and one which views all developments as good because they construct children-as-consumers, thus making India feel more ‘modern’ and giving advertisers or ideologues a larger market. While other positions do exist amongst both parents and especially young people, these are rarely articulated publicly. In fact, the voices that do get most coverage in the media are usually related to calls for censorship and the media industry’s response. Built around a series of small-scale interview-based cases studies with children in different locations in India, this paper aims to problematise some of the rhetoric about ‘Indian’ children and media by examining the realities of children’s experiences and understandings.

'Anti-minority Violence Medialised: The Crisis of Representation in Indian Television

Britta Ohm, University of Bern, Switzerland

My paper will focus on the intertwined relation between the privatisation and commercialisation of news television in India, the medialisation of anti-minority violence in the context of the 2002 Gujarat pogrom and the implied shifts of legitimacy and in the definition of democracy in Gujarat and the larger Indian public. The state-sponsored anti-Muslim pogrom of Gujarat – governed since 2001 by the Hindu-nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) under Chief Minister Narendra Modi – represents

the best-documented and most extensively reported communal violence ever in India. The first communal violence that has been classified by the UN as an attempted genocide, it was also the first that was within India broadcast live by competing and largely unregulated TV stations, nationally and locally, and the first that was directly organised as well as documented by the extensive employment of private new media (digital cameras, mobile phones, Internet platforms etc.). At the same time, the pogrom provoked the least opposition in terms of resistance against the *violence*. Rather were journalists, and especially English-language television journalists, confronted with a massive opposition against their *reporting* and thus with a hitherto unprecedented sense of impotency and loss of authority. On the basis of ethnographic material gathered at the time amongst executives and journalists of leading national news channels, this paper attempts to contextualise this complexity in terms of a) the transition of news television from an institution of public information into a medium that is seen by its viewers as having to be answerable to their private opinions, feelings, and religious sentiments, and b) a discourse of ‘neutrality’ and interpretability of imagery, terminology and law that is enabled by the inclusion of basic ethical standards (or human rights) into electoral politics. The re-election of Narendra Modi in 2014 and the futile attempt of *Tehelka* magazine to reveal the culprits of Gujarat despite the BJP’s debacle in the general elections 2004 and 2009 are analysed in terms of the legitimate establishment of a new, post-democratic and potentially post-global understanding and practise of liberalised ‘good governance’ that re-defines law and order according to effective exclusion of minorities and that impacts mainstream media coverage – rather than the other way round – without directly censoring or subjugating it.

‘New Media and the Cultural Politics of Moderation in Pakistan’

Tahir Naqvi, Trinity University, San Antonio, USA

Domestic private satellite stations began to operate in Pakistan in the early part of this decade. Since 2001 thirty-five stations have commenced broadcasting from and /to/ Pakistan (since most stations uplink their signal to Dubai). Pakistan is now awash in 24 hour news cycles, on-the-spot reporting, and an array of talk shows covering politics, health, religious affairs, celebrity lifestyles and so on. I argue that Pakistan’s new channels are now at the forefront of mediating the shifting geo-political, democratic and cultural frontiers of the political. Alternating between overview and situated account, this paper considers the medium’s formative negotiation of what, in Pakistan, has come to be the increasingly militarized division of the body politic into moderate and extremist camps. That private stations are involved in producing and /re/-presenting such distinctions, reveals, on the one hand, their obvious dependence on multi-national advertising revenue. On the other hand, it reveals the secular liberal affinities of the new media elite, who conceive of the medium against real and possible threats of state censorship as an emergent discursive and subjective medium for the elaboration of a new vision of the national universal.

COFFEE BREAK

From Centrestage to the Margins: Hindustani Classical Music in Radio, Television and the Music Industry

Naresh Kumar, Kamla Nehru College, Delhi University, India

This paper attempts to understand the impact of nation-state, mass-media, technology nexus in redefining and relocating the listening experience vis-à-vis Hindustani music in postcolonial India. From the late 19th century onwards classical music has passed through rapid and drastic transformations. Changes in patronage, the development of new technologies, and the growth of radio and television resulted in differently configured audiences, performance contexts, and strategies. This has affected both the practice and practitioners of classical music. This paper presents critical points in the history of Indian Classical music and its interface with mass media: first in the context of state owned and run television and radio and thereafter in the changing commercial climate of the entertainment industry. I will discuss the progressive marginalization of this music from being the 'national music' to a more peripheral presence within the dominance of the 'pop' and film industry in India.

The paper will explore how the nationalists and subsequently the ruling elites invented a tradition, where one particular kind of music was projected as the national music and was patronized to the extent of excluding other dominantly emerging popular forms, especially the film music from official broadcasting. It will address the challenges, the state faced while implementing its cultural agenda on television raising questions such as: how was classical music treated on TV when the state-owned Doordarshan did not have any competition? What happens to this genre when television is controlled by global conglomerates? Through an examination of two or three major labels, the paper attempts to investigate where the traditional niche music lies in the commercial agenda of the recording industry and where it locates itself in terms of becoming a market product.

Although classical music is largely an audio phenomenon, one cannot ignore the visual dimension in talking about TV and popular videos. The images can be very carefully chosen signifiers for propagating certain values – sacrality, elevation, piety and spirituality attached to this music by the nationalist elites. Moreover, images accompanying 'national music' may also be a tool for strengthening nationalist aspirations of 'unity in diversity' and syncretism. Therefore, both inclusions and exclusions in this panorama at different historic periods can be problematized in terms of caste, class, gender and religion. The paper will explore if market intervention alters the visual dimension and to what extent visibility on TV translates into success.

Gender in Indian Film Media vis-à-vis Indo-Pak Politics

Musarrat Jabeen, University of Balchistan, Quetta, Pakistan

Identity politics is political action to advance or to denote the interests of a hegemonic state that oppresses the another state or nation as per set of political mindset by virtue of a shared history and future structure of bilateral relations.

Film has the ability to project powerful images of nation states in ways conventional academic medium cannot. This is particularly true in learning about India, which is home to the second largest film industry in the world. This discussion explores images of gender depicted in Indian films vis-à-vis Indo-Pak relations. Our attention will be focused on the ways in which Indo-Pak relations are portrayed intentionally to uphold the Indian hegemony; the presented reality and historical reality dilating the intention; and the powerful role of the Indian film industry in affecting socio-political orientations and values of the South Asian region and particularly of Pakistan. This paper addresses why the role of women is given to a Muslim or Pakistani female? It also explores why the moral of

stories of Indian films tell of the subjugation of Pakistan? Such questions can be best addressed by analyzing the effects of Indian film media on the socio-political structure of Pakistan.

Reading Hindi Cinema in Pakistan

Shahnaz Khan, Wilfrid Laurier University, Ontario, Canada

Noted social scientists (Mishra 2002, Dudrah 2006, Rai 2003) argue that Hindi Cinema (aka Bombay Cinema) produces and circulates ideas about an authentic and moralistic India as it participates in nation building projects. Cinematic narratives universalize an upper caste and upper class Hindu male while other groups are marginalized. Muslims in particular are shown as the exotic and increasingly as the violent other while women are presented as repositories and potential polluters of culture whose mobility and sexuality must be controlled, monitored and deployed to serve national needs. At the same time their bodies are sexualized to sell products. As the dominant popular cultural institution in the region, Hindi cinema circulates these ideas all over South Asia.

Pirated copies of Indian films have been widely available in Pakistan since the 1980s and the local Lahore based, Lollywood, suffered tremendously because of this. In recent years however the Pakistani film industry has seen a resurgence in that a few quality films have been produced by independent film makers. Also some Indian films have been given permission for screening on the big screen. These screenings are happening at a time when Pakistan is a front line state in the US-led “war on terror”. The frequent incidents of insurgent violence exacerbate the sense of vulnerability of people who are already suffering the disastrous effects of a roll back on subsidies for basic foodstuff and a rising cost of living.

In such a context of social and political flux, I draw upon interviews with Pakistani actors, directors, producers, and other stake holders in the film and television industries, including those involved in regulation and distribution and examine the ways in which Bombay cinematic narratives and their spectacles interrelate with local social, political, economic and cultural ideologies. In examining Hindi cinema’s influence on and interaction with media, the fashion industry as well as lifestyle and consumption choices in Lahore, Pakistan, my analysis pushes the boundaries of Bombay cinema studies to make visible creative engagements and ongoing resistance at local sites.

12.30 – 2.00 LUNCH BREAK

Session II: 2.00 – 5.30

Brand Bollywood, Bombay cinemas and local audiences: Relocating global routes through C-movie circuits.

Madhuja Mukherjee, Jadavpur University, Kolkata, India

In recent times, Bollywood’ has become popular as both a cinematic form as well as a topic for discussions. It is argued that, Bollywood signifies a certain kind of branding of Bombay-cinemas.

Rajadhyaksha (2002) writes that, Bollywood occupies a space analogous to the film industry, but might best be seen as a more diffuse cultural conglomeration. Thus as Bollywood generates new modes of consumption, the films also recreate narrative strategies and a general aesthetic of the Bombay city and urban cultures. Majumdar (2007) has divided the representations of Bombay into panoramic interiors and gangland Bombay. It has also been argued that, another type of films function from the edge. These relatively small-budget films seem to fare well through contemporary multiplex cinemas. Nevertheless, beyond this, certain B-movies operating within comic as well as grim *Noir* modes seem to succeed locally despite the fact that Bollywood is a global phenomenon, through which the Diaspora may refigure its self-identity.

This paper focuses on the B-movie scene and the C-movie circuits. Here, I study certain shoddy theatres located in Kolkata. For instance, cinemas like *Regal*, *Park Show House*, *Bhabani*, *Pradeep* and *Prachi* exist on the geo-political margins of the city as well as the cinematic institution. While some of these theatres have been setup in 1930s, their recent descents into pornographic show-houses make these interesting case studies. This paper uses the research material to problematize global-local dichotomies, questions of transnationalism-regionalism, and issues of dominant hegemonic culture vis-a -vis multifarious sub-cultures of the film industry.

Urdu for Image: Understanding Bangladeshi Cinema through its Theatres.

Lotte Hoek, University of Edinburgh, Scotland

In Bangladesh, the cinema hall provides more than a roof over a film screen. The film theatre is a powerful symbol of modernity, technology and urbanity. Understanding the changing place of the cinema hall in the urban landscape, its changing functions and fortunes, allows unique insights into the linked transformations in visual culture and public life. The Tosbir Mohol cinema hall in Jessore, Bangladesh, is more than a roof over a film screen. Its Urdu name, meaning ‘image’, harks back to the time when Bangladesh was part of Pakistan. The delicate wooden pillars holding the balcony date from the colonial era while the faded marble plaque inside the hall recounts its opening as a theatre in 1927 as Bisonath Sorkar Memorial Hall, in Colonial India, patronised by the wealthy Hindu landowners that ruled Jessore. This paper discusses the changing fates of five cinema halls of Jessore, a medium-size town in southwest Bangladesh. It shows, firstly, how the place of the cinema hall in the cityscape, its architecture and the uses to which it is put, sheds new light on the history of film in Bangladesh. Secondly, it discusses how the fate of the theatres echoes national political transformations, as well as the interlocking of local and global political change. This discussion of the cinematic culture in the halls of Jessore also allows a reflection on changing norms of publicness, gender relations, ideas about progress and cosmopolitanism, from colonial East Bengal through East Pakistan and Bangladesh. The foregoing discussion is contextualised by an initial sketching of the changes in the film industry in Bangladesh; the changing place of cinema in the public realm of the city; and the ways in which the national and global transformations have impacted the business of film exhibition in Bangladesh. This paper, therefore, provides a unique view of the history of the film industry not through an analysis of film texts from different eras but rather tells this history through the built environment of the cinema halls in Jessore. This not only sheds new light on the film industry from a perspective that is not Dhaka-centric but also allows an understanding of the film industry and its history through exhibition practices. Crucially, the paper shows how the industry’s current concerns about satellite competition, a slide into ‘obscenity’ as well as a prevalence of action cinema can be better understood from such a perspective.

Cinephilic Imagination in Contemporary Indian Art: Case of Pushpamala N.

Ajay J. Sinha, Mount Holyoke College, U.S.A

Pushpamala N. is among many contemporary artists in India and around the world that have engaged with film and media images. Since the mid-1990s, Pushpamala has worked on photographic projects in which she uses her body to impersonate a wide range of subjects from India's popular visual culture, including commercial film. In what the artist calls her "photo-performance," I will explore a zone of confluence and exchange between media images and body. In particular, I will situate her work against both, the post-colonial notion of impersonation and the post-structuralist strategy of citation, both usually suggesting an artist's critique of mass media, and difference between the artist's copy and the original image. Instead, I will identify in Pushpamala's photographs a mimetic logic I will call cinephilia. I will define in this term what film historian, Siegfried Kracauer, calls susceptibility of a cinema audience, making cinephilia extend beyond its Euro-American definition to include a mode of enchantment relating to global film and media history. I will show clips from Indian commercial cinema (and possibly world cinema) and demonstrate in the uncanny wonder of Pushpamala's photographs a compelling elaboration of cinephilic imagination, thus contributing to the debates on intersecting contexts the politics of complicity with, not difference from, media.

COFFEE BREAK

Beyond Reverse Ethnography and Self-Representation: Transforming Social Perceptions Through Cinema

Rashmi Sawhney, Dublin Institute of Technology, Ireland

Images of *adivasis* (Indian tribal communities) being displaced by the building of industries and dams have been regularly flashing across television screens for the last twenty years or so, yet, media scholars have shown very little interest in this constituency either as producers or as audiences. Contrary to the mass media's favourite stereotype of the forest-inhabiting 'native', India's tribal communities exist in a complex constellation of modernities, both urban and rural, and many of these communities, have at least a nominal contact with media cultures. One such group, the Chharas of Ahmedabad, popularly branded as a criminal tribe, has made extensive use of street theatre and film in its activism for social and political rights. Organised under the banner of 'Budhan Theatre', their film and theatre practice has focused on changing both public perception, as well as socio-economic circumstances. Based on the case of the Chharas, this paper explores issues around the politics of film production in India – how the means to production, subjectivity and speaking position, and agendas of advocacy influence the form and content of marginal cinemas. Further, this thread of inquiry is framed against the backdrop of Bombay cinema's dominance of the Indian 'social imaginary', raising questions, of the extent to which independent cinema can affect change, and the particular challenges this poses to historically disenfranchised groups in finding a cinematic language for representation.

Cinematic Narrations from the North-East

Mara Matta, University of Rome 'La Sapienza', Italy

The North-Eastern regions of India consist of the so-called Seven Sisters States of Assam, Nagaland, Mizoram, Meghalaya, Manipur, Tripura, and Arunachal Pradesh plus Sikkim and some parts of Northern Bengal. It is an area of variegated natural and human geography, which remains largely unknown and unstudied. During the last few years, the regions of the North-East have started to raise considerable interest among scholars of Asian languages and literatures, on one side, and among scholars/activists who study political and developmental issues concerning 'indigenous people and minorities', on the other side.

The issue of visual representation of the people and cultures of the North-East, however, remains largely overlooked. This paper aims to present and discuss some of the films and documentaries produced and directed in the North-Eastern regions of India by indigenous filmmakers or by directors who live in these areas and are directly involved in the daily lives of some of the tribal groups represented in these films. I would like to focus on the issues related to the politics of representation and to the way the films produced by, or that directly involve, indigenous people of the North-East can contribute to reframe the discourse of 'representation of adivasis' in a more complex and thought-provoking way.

Voices on the move: transition in oral performances from indigenous cultures in India

Budhaditya Chattopadhyay, University of Siegen, Germany

During fieldwork for a media project at the Bengal-Jharkhand border in India, I was drawn to observe how the indigenous cultural landscape of tribal communities are being affected by rapid and rampant development, particularly in relation to oral performances.

This paper addresses transformations in oral performances from indigenous cultures in India by means of media intervention in the form of television, radio, cinema and mobile media devices. The methodology employed in this study is that of a site-specific ethnography in the tribal dominated landscapes of the eastern part of the country. The paper, which is an outcome of a yearlong fieldwork and research in the concerned regions, will be presented with additional screening/playback of ethnographic audiovisual materials.

The argument presented is that contemporary 'ethnic' landscapes get severely reorganized through phenomena like globalization, urbanization and convergence, where the old and new constantly shift meanings and contexts. An active and intense interplay between tradition and time takes place bringing culture to the foreground in the metamorphoses of 'mediascapes'. Pervasive popular media like *Hindi* cinema, television, radio and mobile media players intervene into these indigenous performances of ritual songs and dances, initiating transitions within their form and content, making the mediascapes increasingly hybrid, syncretic and complex and thus challenging to study.