

INDIA POLITICAL ECONOMY PROGRAM ESSAY

“MAANGTA HAI KYA?”
HOW HINDI FILMS SAW
LIBERALIZATION

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SUMMARY

This essay delves into how Hindi cinema evolved in response to India’s economic reforms in the 1990s. Many post-liberalization films illustrated the immediate societal impacts of economic reforms, while the overall industry saw a shift in narrative themes and production values. The adoption of new technology and a transition towards more lavish and global storytelling coincided with the rise of Bollywood, mirroring India’s economic liberalization.

Keywords: Bollywood; trade liberalization; Hindi cinema; 1991 economic reforms; cultural change; India political economy

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On the cover: Pillar of Ashoka (detail) at Sanchi, Madhya Pradesh, India. The pillars of the emperor Ashoka the Great (268–232 B.C.), renowned for their polished sandstone and intricate carvings, were dispersed throughout the Indian subcontinent and carried imperial edicts promoting moral and ethical conduct. The Lion Capital of Ashoka, which tops the pillar at Sarnath, Uttar Pradesh, has been adopted as India’s national emblem. Twenty of the pillars of Ashoka still survive.

Even dedicated Hindi film fans don't spend much time thinking about Parmeet Sethi's *Badmaash Company*. An amiable caper film set in the 1990s, it starred Shahid Kapoor and Anushka Sharma and was a middling hit in 2010. Yet, because of a story line that dovetails with the reforms process, it's a surprisingly vivid illustration of the tectonic effects of liberalization in India. It follows four young schemers (*badmaash* is Hindi for "rogue") who band together to import and sell Reebok shoes in the local market. They come up with a plan to bypass the customs duty, which in the 1990s was more than 100 percent on items of clothing. Their savings on the duty—which would normally be passed on to the consumer—allows them to sell the otherwise prohibitively expensive shoes at a discount.

For a while their enterprise is successful. Then, one day, two of them show up to work worried—they've heard rumors about a new import policy. They turn on the TV. Finance Minister Manmohan Singh announces in his budget proposal a reduction in the duty on clothing imports: from 120 percent to 20 percent. Just like that, the company's novelty stock is commonplace. *Badmaash Company* may be the only commercial Hindi film whose pivotal scene involves the national budget.

Indian governments in the 1980s had started chipping away at the protectionism that had defined the nation's economy for more than four decades. In the early 1990s, faced with spiraling inflation and dwindling foreign exchange reserves, Prime Minister P. V. Narasimha Rao and Manmohan Singh took a series of steps to liberalize the economy. Changes in economic policy usually take time to percolate through to the everyday workings of society. But, as we see in *Badmaash Company*, the 1991 reforms and the ones that followed in their wake were dramatic enough to bring about visible and fairly rapid changes in people's lives.

"Bollywood" today is used interchangeably with Hindi cinema. Yet the term did not exist until the mid-1990s. Before that, it might not have occurred to people in the industry to think of themselves as a professional ecosystem like Hollywood. The Bombay movie industry was a place where actors shot one film

in the morning and another in the evening, where gangsters bankrolled features, where the only constant across five decades was a pair of Maharashtrian sibling singers. In 1998, the government fulfilled a long-sought demand and declared Hindi film an industry. This “industry status” allowed banks to advance loans for films, paving the way for corporate financing and professional studios and signaling the decline of private bankrollers with their attendant problems of black money and underworld pressure. Reduced tariffs lowered the costs of importing film stock, cameras, and tools for recording, editing, and mixing. Technological upgrades came in quick succession: Dolby sound, digital editing on Avid, sync sound, CGI. The industry turned a corner in 2001 with the release of Ashutosh Gowariker’s expansive *Lagaan* and Farhan Akhtar’s tasteful *Dil Chahta Hai*. Films looked and sounded different after that—and they weren’t watched the same way, either. The first multiplex, PVR, opened in 1997 in Saket, Delhi. Two and a half decades later, multiplexes have all but replaced single-screen theaters in metropolitan cities.

While these structural changes were taking place, cinema itself was changing. Much of this was tied to the visible and invisible effects of the liberalization process. Previously, conspicuous on-screen wealth had been a smoke screen for villainy or, at the very least, a corrupting influence. But from the 1990s onward, Hindi film protagonists were, increasingly, second- or third-generation rich kids. With *Hum Aapke Hain Koun . . . !* (1994), *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (1995), *Dil To Pagal Hai* (1997), *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* (1998), *Mohabbatein* (2000), and *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham . . .* (2001), there was a marked tonal shift toward youth, romance, and enough money to take money out of the equation. Producers discovered a lucrative overseas market that wanted to be told pretty, reassuring tales of home. If “Hindi film” was about the working-class hero and the mass audience, “Bollywood” stood for wealth and family values. “The Hindi film industry’s metamorphosis into Bollywood,” writes Tejaswini Ganti, “would not have been possible without the rise of neoliberal economic ideals in India.”¹ Šarūnas Paunksnis is more emphatic: “Liberalization caused the emergence of Bollywood itself—an industry *selling dreams . . .*” (emphasis original).²

If Sooraj Barjatya, Aditya and Yash Chopra, and Karan Johar were happy to show viewers the impossible dream, a few filmmakers explored how ordinary Indians were dealing with the changes around them. Ram Gopal Varma’s

1. Tejaswini Ganti, *Producing Bollywood: Inside the Contemporary Hindi Film Industry* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 3.

2. Šarūnas Paunksnis, *Dark Fear, Eerie Cities: New Hindi Cinema in Neoliberal India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2019), xvii.

Rangeela (1995) is a particularly potent encapsulation of the post-liberalization moment. The playful argument of the musical number “Yaaro Sun Lo Zara,” in which Aamir Khan’s *tapori* Munna and Urmila Matondkar’s aspiring actor Mili trade verses, is the new India of 1995 arguing with itself. “*Gaadi bangla nahin na sahi na sahi / bank balance nahin na sahi na sahi*” (If you don’t have a house and a car, that’s fine; / if you don’t have a bank balance, that’s fine), Munna sings. Mili responds with “*Gaadi bangla agar ho toh kya baat hai / bank balance se rangeen din raat hai*” (It’s amazing if you have a car and a house; / if you have a bank balance your life is made). Munna, a ticket tout, declares himself above material things, a gesture at once dismissive and defensive, preempting the possibility of losing face if things don’t work out. But Mili knows that it’s no longer forbidden to want a lot, to dream outsize (but not impossible) dreams.

In another musical number that includes a magic carpet ride from Mumbai to New York, Mili, in Shweta Shetty’s booming voice, challenges Munna: “*Maangta hai kya? Woh bolo!*” (What do you desire? Say it!). Here was the world at your fingertips—all you had to do was speak up. Munna almost pays the price for not heeding this advice, coming within a hair’s breadth of losing Mili to film star Raj Kamal (Jackie Shroff) because he won’t tell her he loves her.

The word *maang*—to ask, desire, or demand, depending on the passion with which it’s said—featured in another 1990s landmark. In 1998, Pepsi debuted an ad featuring Shah Rukh Khan, Rani Mukerji, a young Shahid Kapoor, and Kajol, with the tagline “*yeh dil maange more*” (this heart wants more). Like so many other “Hinglish” phrases in those early days of cable, it became a rage, supplying the title of a film (2004’s *Dil Maange More!!!*, starring Kapoor) and the code word used by Captain Vikram Batra in the Kargil War of 1999. The 2021 biopic *Shershaah* brought it full circle by having Batra, played by Sidharth Malhotra, watch the Pepsi ad.

No actor personified the drive toward upward mobility better than Shah Rukh Khan. In Aziz Mirza’s sweet but incisive *Raju Ban Gaya Gentleman* (1992), Amrita Singh’s rich girl sings to Khan’s middle-class striver: “*Tujhe pukarta hai tera aane wala kal*” (Your future calls out to you). Five years later, in Mirza’s *Yes Boss*, Khan’s advertising man is hustling his way to success. “*Jo bhi chahoon, woh main paon . . . bas itna sa khwaab hai*” (Whatever I desire, I attain it . . . that’s my little dream). At one point in the song, Khan is seen rolling in a sea of cash, an image of such frank materialist desire that it would have signaled moral decay had it appeared in any film made before the 1990s. (Satyajit Ray’s 1966 Bengali classic, *Nayak*, has a dream sequence with Uttar Kumar running through a field of cash; it quickly turns into a nightmare.)

Consider the shocking moment in *Baazigar* (1993)—a pulpy thriller whose hostile takeovers and backroom maneuverings seem to anticipate free-market anxieties—when Khan pushes Shilpa Shetty off the roof of a building. It’s like a perverse echo of creative spirits unleashed; his last words to her are “*main tumhe azaad kar raha hoon*” (I’m setting you free). There’s something of Joseph Schumpeter’s “creative destruction,” the new incessantly replacing the old, in Khan’s credo: “*Kabhi kabhi kuch jeetne ke liye kuch haarna padta hai. Aur haar kar jeetne wale ko baazigar kehte hain*” (Sometimes you have to lose in order to win. The one who understands this is the supreme gambler).

Liberalization changed Bollywood’s attitude toward money—and its villain profile. The move away from protectionism meant that dealers in contraband weren’t needed as they had been before. This led to the fading away of the smuggler, a staple villain (and sometimes antihero) from the 1940s to the early 1990s, as well as the black marketeer (though these figures still resurface, as in the influential *Gangs of Wasseypur* [2012], where the mafia controls the coal trade in Dhanbad town in the 1970s). The corrupt politician survived and adapted, as did the Hindi film gangster. The power-hungry industrialist and the manipulative *seth* turned increasingly benign; the hero or heroine’s father in 1990s rom-coms was often a businessman of some kind. Wealth was no longer a red flag. This laid the groundwork for the cartel-disrupting entrepreneurs of the following decade: Abhishek Bachchan playing a version of Dhirubhai Ambani, founder of Reliance, in *Guru* (2007), and the young upstarts of *Rocket Singh: Salesman of the Year* (2009) and *Band Baaja Baaraat* (2010).

THE LUXURY OF CHOICE

No film recalls the drudgery of pre-liberalization compromise as readily as *Mr. India* (1987). In the 1980s, packets of rice and lentils bought at the ration store often had little stones in them; winnowing these was an accepted part of cooking. Among the many criminal activities of Mogambo (Amrish Puri), the psychotic villain of Shekhar Kapur’s film, is selling adulterated grain. When everyman Arun (Anil Kapoor) finds a watch that renders him invisible, one of his acts of justice is to make Mogambo’s henchman eat the same tiny pebbles they’ve been using to dilute the grain. And though the orphans’ refrain of “Calendar, *khana do*” (Calendar, give us food) is lighthearted, it’s still a reflection of the scarcity mindset of that age. You can sense the same desperation in films as different as the gangster drama *Hathiyar* (1989), where Sanjay Dutt ends up killing a man after watching him eat, and the black comedy *Jaane Bhi Do Yaaro* (1983),

whose “*thoda khao, thoda phenko*” (eat some, toss some) scene is funny precisely because throwing away good cake was unheard of back then.

As the 1990s rolled on, Indians grew used to multiple brands within a single category vying for their patronage. The move from the broadness of product to the specificity of brand is best illustrated by two songs from films released a year apart. In the 1994 smash *Hum Aapke Hain Koun . . . !*, Madhuri Dixit sings about “chocolate, lime juice . . . my friends.” The following year, in the thundering title track that kicks off *Rangeela*, young Aditya Narayan names as candidates for consumption Cadbury and Amul (confectionary brands), Horlicks and Complan (chocolate milk brands). Choice was a luxury, but it was also a new kind of headache. “There’s tension in eating chocolate,” Narayan complain-sings. “There’s tension in drinking milk.” It’s no wonder *Hum Aapke Hain Koun . . . !* spoke in generalities. Sooraj Barjatya’s film was saccharine and safe, dated almost from the moment it released. Mentioning brands would have been too racy for its vague universe. Whereas *Rangeela*, a film bursting with post-liberalization energy, knew in what terms to couch consumerism.

The entry of cable TV in India was as big a jolt as anything liberalization wrought in those early years. Though small cable channels had started proliferating in the 1980s, most TV viewing was still limited to state broadcaster Doordarshan. Then, as part of the 1991 reforms, the government allowed private and foreign broadcasters to start operations. Star TV was one of the first to enter, bringing with it Hollywood movies and English-language soaps and sitcoms and music. It was a whole new world.

Music channels shook up Hindi film song and dance. The flash zooms, rapid cutting, and glossy production of videos on MTV and Channel V were adopted by younger directors, technicians, and choreographers such as Farah Khan, Ahmed Khan, and Shiamak Davar. Sophisticated recording equipment became available, allowing composers to improve on the muddy sounds of the 1980s. A. R. Rahman brought energy and eclecticism to film soundtracks: *Roja* (1992), *Thiruda Thiruda* (1993), and *Bombay* (1995) in Hindi dubs and, *Rangeela* onward, original Hindi soundtracks. A pop music industry sprang up and flourished for a decade or so before being swallowed by Hindi film.

This was the first generation of Indians who could watch foreign TV shows at home. Young people learned English from reruns of *Friends* and *The Wonder Years*. Indian TV channels sprang up—some in English, but most in local languages—and society reconfigured itself accordingly. (In the seminal 1998 gangster film *Satya*, Bheeku Mhatre makes fun of his wife when she claims to watch MTV and *The Bold and the Beautiful*, joking that she actually watches the

news in Marathi every evening.) This was also the first generation of Hindi filmmakers who had to deal with audiences fed on a steady diet of foreign movies. It wasn't as easy to steal from Spielberg and De Palma when their films were playing on TV all day. Viewers had more opportunities to compare local and international films, and to ask why they should settle for drastically lower production values. Luckily, Bollywood was in a position to do something about it. Import restrictions had eased and the necessary equipment could be brought in. Almost overnight, Hindi films became slick.

It was a time of relative innocence—MTV's *The Grind* and *FashionTV* was as risqué as it got. Yet many parents in those days did a lot of hand-wringing about the “Western values” their children were imbibing. When Asha Bhosle, who had been singing in films since the 1950s, won the Channel V award for best playback artist for *Rangeela*, she jokingly mentioned her reservations about attending the ceremony: “*Wahan chhote bachche honghe, chhote kapde honghe. Main kya karungi?*” (There will be young people, skimpy clothes. What will I do there?).

Bollywood gleefully incorporated the new values as well as the conservative correction. The scene that comes to mind most readily is Shah Rukh Khan, in *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge*, somewhat cruelly leading a distraught Kajol to think that they were intimate the night before, then turning serious and saying he knows how important any Indian girl's honor is to her. Later in the film, Khan keeps a daylong fast on Karva Chauth along with Kajol: a spoonful of allyship to help the patriarchal tradition go down.

In Yash Chopra's *Dil To Pagal Hai*, Madhuri Dixit goes on a shopping spree in a gift store decked up for Valentine's Day. She's buying presents “to make myself happy”—retail therapy articulated simply and without guilt. She tells her friend it's a rare February 14 that's also Purnamashi (a full moon night). Shrayana Bhattacharya writes about this scene in her book *Desperately Seeking Shah Rukh*: “The awkward mingling of the Hindu lunar calendar with a Western holiday inspired more by Hallmark cards than any particular tradition was, post-liberalization, typically Indian.”³

This idea of a mixture—Indian and Western, traditional and new—was central to the early years of liberalization. After an initial run with foreign veejays speaking aspirational but difficult-to-understand accented English, Channel V and MTV started to air shows and promos in slangy Hinglish. Advertisers slipped a bit of English into their taglines: “Yehi hai right choice, baby” (Pepsi), “Piyo

3. Shrayana Bhattacharya, *Desperately Seeking Shah Rukh: India's Lonely Young Women and the Search for Intimacy and Independence* (Noida, India: HarperCollins India, 2021), 266.

glassful” (Amul), “Bole mere lips, I love Uncle Chipps.” Fusion music became a big deal. Colonial Cousins, a successful pop duo of the time, switched awkwardly between English and Hindi in its songs. A particularly ill-advised cross-culture stew was the version of “Raghupati Raghav Raja Ram” in *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai*—half-bhajan, half-dance pop, all cringe.

SELLING THE DREAM

Post-liberalization, a “cinema of things” emerged: cars, clothes, accessories, TVs, gadgets, computers, décor, homes. Above all, there were phones ringing louder and louder across a decade in Hindi cinema. Early 1990s films found excuses to place characters in telephone booths—ubiquitous across India thanks to a government push—that had both dramatic potential and, with their cheerful yellow color, visual appeal. (Two of my favorites: Aamir Khan in *Dil Hai Ke Manta Nahin* [1991] showing off for the other reporters who don’t know he’s being scolded by his editor, and Shah Rukh Khan in *Dil Se . . .* [1997] watching a charming village scene turn tragic as soldiers shoot an unarmed man.) Then, around 1996–1997, mobile phones started turning up in films. In Ram Gopal Varma’s *Satya*, an ambush is coordinated—and, at the last minute, called off—via cell phones. In *Company* (2002), Varma’s next gangster film, phones are wielded like guns. The comedy *Haseena Maan Jayegi* (1999) has Govinda singing to Karisma Kapoor: “What is mobile number, / what is your smile number.” A year later, the climax of *Har Dil Jo Pyaar Karega* is set in motion by a mix-up of Preity Zinta and Rani Mukerji’s cell phones.

Bollywood was eager to participate in the new consumer economy—perhaps a bit too eager. Very quickly, the capitalist drive of the market and the promotional instincts of the film industry synced up. Brand placement for everything from cars to soaps started to appear in films. In *Taal* (1999), Subhash Ghai constructed a love scene around a Coke bottle. Shah Rukh Khan, brand ambassador for Hyundai, drove a Sonata in *Don 2* (2011). Nothing was beneath a plug, no matter how prosaic the product. The chocolate drink Bournvita was hawked quite shamelessly by Hrithik Roshan in the superhero film *Koi . . . Mil Gaya* (2003) and its sequel, *Krrish* (2006). Amitabh Bachchan’s character in *Baghban* (2003) works for ICICI Bank; the real Bachchan urged people to buy their products in ads. The blatancy of all this in-film branding seemed to justify the reasoning that Bollywood wasn’t just another name for Hindi cinema but something altogether more business-like: films as products in a booming market.

As brands signed actors to be the face of their campaigns, advertising and film dovetailed until it was difficult to tell the difference. Ten minutes into *Baazi*

(1995), Aamir Khan’s cop takes out a gang of criminals in a gun battle. He then walks up to a roadside shop and asks for a soda. He shakes the Lehar soda bottle vigorously and sprays it on his face, the Lehar Pepsi branding on a crate taking up a quarter of the screen. It’s a nice bit of *heropanti*—and audiences would have immediately connected Khan the actor to Khan the Pepsi brand ambassador. In 1993, he starred in the company’s first ad campaign in India, a sensational obstacle-course commercial with Mahima Chaudhry and Aishwarya Rai Bachchan, which sparked a craze for the name Sanjana.⁴

“The links between cinema and consumerism,” writes Tejasvini Ganti, “are most apparent in the lobbies and concession areas of multiplexes, which feature advertising for cell phones, cell phone services, credit cards, banks, financial services, jewelry brands, clothing brands, air conditioners, and even airlines.”⁵ It wasn’t just in the theaters, either. Multiplexes were often located in malls, so when you exited a film, the same movie stars you’d just seen on screen were now around you in the stores endorsing perfumes and sofas. An electronics shop might have a TV playing a song from the film you just saw; you could pick up the same jacket Shah Rukh Khan had worn.

THIRTY YEARS ON

I’ve mostly limited myself till now to films that released in the decade after the 1991 reforms. Though it’s harder to draw a line from policy decision to eventual effect the further one gets from the original moment of liberalization, I’ll end by trying to map some of the long-standing changes the reforms engendered in Hindi films. The scaremongering about globalization changing the DNA of Hindi cinema is belatedly coming true in the streaming age. As taste flattens across the world, Bollywood is moving toward the global mean, with its eye on the success of Turkish dizi and Korean dramas. This means slowly tamping down the musical traditions that have defined it for over 80 years. Most films still have songs but with less dancing and lip-syncing, and there are not many directors left with a conception of Hindi film as a musical form. Even the lush romantic musical—the core of Bollywood—has seen a marked dip in the past decade.

Dil Chahta Hai provided a template for how Hindi cinema shows new money. It was a triumph, but also, in a way, a beautiful smoke screen. Before

4. Sanjana Ramachandran, “The Namesakes: The Story of Roughly Fifty Sanjanas, How Their Parents Decided to Call Them That, and the Secret History of Why Indians Give Their Babies the Names They Do,” *Fifty Two*, October 7, 2021, <https://fiftytwo.in/story/the-namesakes/>.

5. Ganti, *Producing Bollywood*, 332.

this, Bollywood wasn't adept at concealing wealth. But the subtler aesthetic of Akhtar's film made it easier to ignore that the characters were impossibly wealthy. Films about idle sons and daughters of rich parents became increasingly popular (*Lakshya* [2003]; *Wake Up Sid* [2009]). The occupational profile of Bollywood characters underwent a dramatic change. They were no longer doctors and lawyers and mid-level managers but rebellious entrepreneurs, photographers, architects, stand-up comics, video-game designers, and, in the recent *Gehraiyaan* (2022), cheese farmers. The working class receded from Hindi films altogether. It's only in the non-Hindi cinemas that you'll consistently find rural characters and the urban working class.

There has, however, been a return of the middle class. This new Middle Cinema began in the first decade of the millennium with the Delhi-set stories of Dibakar Banerjee and came to prominence over the next 10 years with the deceptively modest films of actors such as Ayushmann Khurrana, Rajkummar Rao, Pankaj Tripathi, and Bhumi Pednekar. These are life-size films, less exciting than the fantasies of the 1990s but more perceptive about the economic, familial, romantic, and interior lives of ordinary Indians. As the effects of liberalization spread outward from the urban areas, small-town settings for Hindi films have become increasingly common (though villages remain a rarity).

Hindi cinema of late has been mining the 1990s for good songs to ruin and ideas to reboot, and, occasionally, to use as a setting. Much of this is geared toward capitalizing on the childhood memories of thirty- and forty-somethings who have disposable income and kids of their own. But now and then something incisive comes along, like the limited series *Scam 1992* (2020), about the rise and fall of stockbroker Harshad Mehta. If our directors can wrest themselves away from 1990s nostalgia, there's a great film waiting to be made about the first heady years of liberalization. And, of course, there's a wealth of existing films if you're looking to understand, or just relive, those seismic times.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Uday Bhatia is a film critic with *Mint Lounge* and author of *Bullets Over Bombay: Satya and the Hindi Film Gangster* (HarperCollins India, 2021). He has previously worked with *Time Out Delhi* and *The Sunday Guardian*. His writing has appeared in *The Caravan*, *GQ*, *The Indian Quarterly*, *The Indian Express* and *The Hindu Business Line*. He is the winner of the 2019 Ramnath Goenka Award in the Arts, Culture and Entertainment category.