The bus to Jahangirnagar trundles through the narrow road connecting Bangladesh’s capital Dhaka with the town of Savar. Metal gates are set into either side of the walled boundaries along the road, bearing the names of garment factories. Behind these, fields betray that Savar was until recently a village. It isn’t only garments workers who walk this road every day. Buses and cars full of students pass along this road on their way to Jahangirnagar University, the high modernist campus from the 1960s set into Savar’s verdant landscape. Pasted to the urine-stained walls are bright posters promising ‘permanent solutions to sexual problems’ alongside instant cures for acne and skin brighteners, direct from Kolkata Herbal (Figure 1). The only images on the posters are

**Figure 1.** Posters for herbal remedies along the road to Savar, Bangladesh, 2019.

**Source:** Photograph by the author.
of instantly recognisable faces: Shah Rukh Khan, Deepika Padukone, Salman Khan–
Bollywood stars.

How Indian film stars came to adorn this dusty thoroughfare at the urban periphery in Bangladesh has everything to do with the historical transformation of Hindi cinema since the early 1990s. Scholars have pinpointed this time as the moment that Bollywood as we know it today came into being. In a foundational text, Rajadhyaksha (2003) distinguished the popular Hindi cinema made in Bombay since the early twentieth century from Bollywood and locates the latter’s emergence in the large-scale social, political and economic transitions ushered in by structural adjustments accompanying an IMF loan to the Indian government in the early 1990s. Rajadhyaksha suggests that while the term may be used to describe ‘a reasonably specific narrative and a mode of presentation’ (2003, p. 30), Bollywood should be seen less as a cinematic form and more as a cultural industry with a larger corporate and financial footprint than its films alone (Rajadhyaksha, 2003, p. 30). Contemporaneously, Prasad (2003) noted how the word grew from ‘a symptom of the affectionate lampooning that the Anglophone middle class subjected the Hindi cinema to’ into ‘an empty signifier [that] can be applied to any set of signifieds within the realm of Indian cinema.’ Memorably if flippantly paraphrased: ‘if Bollywood is not the Indian cinema per se, it might be adequately described as the “export lager” of the Indian cinema’ (Athique, 2008, p. 301).

Subsequent elaborations of the concept of Bollywood have straddled this tension between an understanding of Bollywood as foremostly a cinematic phenomenon or as corporate entity and commodity form. The ‘new Bollywood’ emerged ‘as a distinctive product in the post-liberalisation era’ (Gopal, 2011a, p. 3), during which the ‘high-profile, globalised mainstream cinema’ (Dwyer, 2014a, p. 8) becomes ‘the dominant media institution within India’ (Ganti, 2012, p. 2), tied to a geographic proxy that was roughly simultaneously renamed Mumbai. It is now ‘a transnational cultural and industrial formation’ (Punathambekar, 2013, p. 177) in which, for some scholars, ‘there can be no privileging of cinema as original apparatus or industry’ (Rai, 2009, p. 5; see also Basu, 2010; Dudrah, 2008). Instead, it is a highly dispersed media assemblage which synaesthetically incorporates viewer-consumers (ibid., p. 9) through the cinema and other media and that reaches out far beyond the confines of the theatre onto a myriad screens and in a thousand separate pieces, from advertising to ring tones (R. Mukherjee, 2019), from reality TV spin off (e.g. Fabulous Lives of Bollywood Wives) to holiday destination (Figure 2) and far beyond India right across South Asia, the diaspora and beyond (Dudrah, 2012). The evolving corporate context ensures that ‘the cinema emerging from this new configuration of the business is varied in its genre structures, much more so than ever before, and this is intimately related to corporatization and its bid to create differentiated product’ (Vasudevan, 2010, p. 346; see also Sen, 2017). Narrative forms and performance cultures with layered historical and industrial roots (Prasad, 1998; Thomas, 1989), including longstanding transnational linkages (Larkin, 2003; Thomas, 2015), recognisable genre aspects like the song-and-dance sequence (Iyer, 2020) and the intermission (Gopalan, 2002), shared by film industries across the South Asia region, have been incorporated and reorganised by this hegemonic industrial formation with its distinct and highly self-referential production form (Kabir, 2001; Ganti, 2012). Bollywood, then, is a star-driven Hindi cinema made from Mumbai since
Hoek

the early 1990s that is decisively shaped by an evolving corporate-industrial context that has refracted and reassembled the cinema and tied it into newly distributed forms.

Alongside scholars who have directly addressed Bollywood to parse it as an industrial, narrative, aural, experiential cinematic category, others have used these film industrial and stylistic insights to address the interface between cinema and society. In Bollywood research that stretches across the humanities and social sciences, scholars have posited Bollywood as India’s dominant or ‘national’ cinematic form since the 1990s and tried to understand Bollywood’s significance in and for society since that time. Its narratives have been used to map transitions in normative representations of

Figure 2. VisitScotland brochure celebrating 20 years of Kuch Kuch Hota Hai and containing a travel itinerary along all Scottish shooting locations used in the film.

Source: VisitScotland.
love and desire in India (Dwyer, 2000a) and to find the ‘fissures of rigidly heterosexual structures that can be transformed into queer imaginings’ (Gopinath, 2005, p. 103). Scholars have understood the political significance in Bollywood’s abetting of majoritarian politics (Banaji, 2006) and casteism (Yengde, 2018). Its changing genres and exhibition practices have indexed changing class relations (Kumar, 2013). At its most expansive, the high-end Hindi cinema has been seen as ‘the most reliable guide to understanding the nation’s dreams, hopes, fears and anxieties’ (Dwyer, 2014a, p. 7; see also Virdi, 2003) and a diplomatic asset for India’s presence abroad (Roy, 2012). Bollywood does it all!

The bulk of Bollywood scholarship has been focused on ‘India’, operating as a shorthand for Hindi speaking or urban. But the significance of Bollywood as an aesthetic-industrial formation goes beyond urban India. Scholars working within its global (formal and informal) distribution territories (Dudrah, 2006; Gopal & Moorti, 2008; Kaur & Sinha, 2005; Larkin, 2003; Manuel, 1997; Morcom, 2009) have reflected on the ways in which Bollywood film, culture and corporate presence intersect with social, political, cultural and economic transformations globally. Other regional production practices are sometimes read as explicitly shaped by the dominance of Bollywood, such as popular Bhojpuri (Kumar, A., 2016), Manbhum (M. Mukherjee, 2019) or Bangladesh (Rahman, 2020) film. Within South Asia, positing Bollywood as a new phenomenon erupting from a contemporary Mumbai outward along new platforms and carriers masks the longstanding imbrication of the regions’ film industries and the reliance on talent, production facilities, viewers and markets stretching far beyond Bombay into other parts of India, as well as beyond the boundaries of the contemporary nation-state into other parts of South Asia and into pre-partition India (Siddique, 2015).

Kanak Mani Dixit contends that Bollywood ‘could now definitively be called a Southasian phenomenon’ (2013b, p. 21) and speculates optimistically about Bollywood as an integrative force in the entire region (Figure 3). From Afghanistan (Khan 2013; Osman, 2011) to Nepal (Dixit, 2013b), the Maldives (Robinson, 2013) to Bangladesh (Hoek, 2015; Raju, 2012; Towfique-E-Elahi, 2013), Bollywood is a familiar everyday companion across the region, even in places where it has not been available in cinema halls, distributed today through ever transforming, diffracting and mobile technologies (Deo & Duggal 2017; Tanvir, 2018). Moving rhizomatically across otherwise firm and violent boundaries, Bollywood and its Hindi film antecedents are an aesthetic-sensory category of everyday immersion experienced and expressed bodily (Mohaiemen, 2003; Nakassis, 2016; Singh, 2003; Jhingan this volume). In that experiential form it is quietly lived, hummed meaningfully or loudly announced, when its songs blast from a rural homestead in Bangladesh announcing an imminent wedding, to which women will turn out in fashions adapted from Bollywood’s latest hits. Bollywood is part of South Asia’s ‘public culture’ (Appadurai & Breckenridge, 1989; Dwyer & Pinney, 2001), its visions and sensibilities moving across the region through fashion, music, advertising et cetera and exerting its social influence widely. Detached from particular films or studios, Bollywood’s presence in the region accounts for the place of its stars on posters advertising herbal fixes for your sex life in peri-urban Bangladesh.

The empirical phenomenon of Bollywood in South Asia is not unlike the analytical category ‘Bollywood’ in South Asian Film and Media Studies. Since the 1990s, research
in this academic field has flourished and has seen the expansion of effective and affective scholarly networks and infrastructures. Much of this leavening can be understood as the academic equivalent of ‘bollywoodization’, where Indian film scholarship has been transformed and exceeded through new forms of public interest and publishers knowing how to sell a book with the word ‘Bollywood’ in the title. It has also produced analytical chagrin about ‘the symptomatic naming both of present and past film cultures as Bollywood … [and] a marked absence … [of] any substantial reference to film form, storytelling practices, actorly and star economies, and even on-screen performance cultures’ (Vasudevan, 2010, pp. 359–360). Dedicated researchers have parsed
the historical roots of the contemporary articulations of Bombay cinema from evanescent archives (Bhaumik, 2011a; D. Mukherjee, 2020) and reject the film historical teleology implied by positing a narrowly conceived vision of Bollywood as a logical end point by noting how it forgets and occludes a more complex historical formation at its roots (Thomas, 2015), or by foreclosing a more expansive formal vision in favour of ‘highly dubious and usually intuitively generated truisms’ about Bollywood’s ‘epic structures, puranic themes, and Sanskrit dramaturgy’ (Prasad, 2003; also this volume). Concerns about the at times historically and formally thin scholarly accounts of Bollywood cinema sit adjacent to the challenge for scholars in other parts of South Asia to participate in and contribute to the debates in South Asian screen cultures focused around the dominant Indian industrial and scholarly sites of production. Read more positively, the sheer volume of scholarship on Hindi cinema, including its Bollywood forms, allows it to function as an exchange value by which comparisons can be made and by which questions can be meaningfully posed across many fields of scholarship within the entire South Asia region.

Bollywood as a conceptual category and empirical reality has contributed to a scholarly field in which a series of classic films from, and academic texts about, the Hindi cinema have become the standard references for a field that now expands into many subfields. At its worst, Bollywood is an uncritical category for all things South Asian media; at its best it is one, powerful, concept among many others that now ground the field of South Asian film and media studies (cf. Bordwell et al., 1985).

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