



APPRECIATING MELODRAMA

Theory and Practice
in Indian Cinema and Television



PIYUSH ROY

BLOOMSBURY

Appreciating Melodrama

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Piyush Roy

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For
Thakuba (Aditya Prasanna Madhual), Aai (Malatilata Rout),
Julki apa and Pramila Panda aunty

॥ संप्रेषण का कोई भी माध्यम कला है और संप्रेषण का संदेश ज्ञान है। जब संदेश का उद्देश्य उत्तेजना उत्पन्न करता हो तब कला के उस रूप को हीन कहते हैं। जब संदेश निश्चार्थ प्रेम, सत्य और महान चरित्र की रचना करता हो, तब वह कला पवित्र मानी जाती है ॥

निर्देशक चंद्रप्रकाश द्विवेदी, उपनिषद् गंगा, एप. 8, उपवेद (2012)

Any means of self-expression is an art and the message of self-expression is knowledge. When the purpose of the message creates agitation, that form of art is considered inferior. Bad arts are used only to satiate the hunger of the body and the thirst of the eyes. When the message creates selfless love, truth and great character that art is considered to be sacred.

Director Chandraprakash Dwivedi, *Upanishad Ganga*, Ep. 8,
Upaveda (2012)

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Foreword

Appreciating Melodrama by Piyush Roy is a timely intervention, as it challenges the Western critique of Indian films as ‘melodrama’ and subverts the Western ‘standard’ in an against-the-grain appraisal of Indian cinema and television. It establishes continuity in Indian dramatic modes through the application of the theoretical framework provided by the 2,000-year-old aesthetics of the Indian *Natyashastra* attributed to the sage Bharata. In providing a chronological study of landmark films from Bombay (now Mumbai) and regional cinema, this study epitomises the development and continuing success and appeal of Indian films in the subcontinent and amongst a global audience. By utilising the ‘*Rasa*’ theory, which embodies *navarasas* (nine universal human emotions) and *bhavas/anubhavas* (feeling/mood/sentiment/expression), this book gives primacy to character depiction in popular films, which have impacted Indian and international audiences through time, in a balanced argument without demonising or valorising Indian cinema.

The book’s historical and mythological overview of Indian aesthetics/poetics establishes the continuity of Sanskrit forms in classical literature, oral tradition and folk culture in India through time. The book challenges the premise of Hollywood-led assertions of the ‘norm’ that has informed the canonisation process of academic film studies syllabi. In tracing the journey from drama to cinema, the significance of traditional regional theatre and popular culture in a national television epic series, it establishes the links between diverse performance art forms and thus consolidates the position of silver and small screen productions as integral to Indian aesthetic perception and response. While highlighting the overlap between parallel films and the popular masala film industry, it makes a distinction between cognitive realism and affective realism, as it affirms the efficacy of the Indian melodrama in its continuing appeal with its audiences from pre- to post-Independence times. The foundational *rasa/bhava* theory highlights the honesty and integrity of culture-specific creativity and

practice that problematises established ideas of Western binarism and a place and space for the validity and appeal for Indian cinema.

This book opens up a fresh area of scholarship with its refreshing revisionist approach. It moves away from European–American recommended ‘standards’, questioning notions of the ‘norm’ as it dismantles the prevalent canon. It comes in the wake of the Black Lives Matter movement and the decolonisation of the curriculum project that have rocked the establishment and renowned institutions worldwide in a postcolonial affirmation of Indian techniques and performance traditions that utilise the song and dance, emotion, action and dialogue kaleidoscope of the masala film. This nuanced appreciation of the stereotypical and stylised clinches the ‘universal’ and timeless nature of the guidelines offered by the *Navarasa* theory of the *Natyashastra*. It augments and enriches the Hollywood-led film canon, widening current critical debates, and opens new doors to further research, and new perspectives in a reader/audience-response theoretical approach can give primacy to emotionalised performance and its undeniable appeal. This perceptive and in-depth study allocates a pride of place to effective melodrama and its makers, allowing the reader/critic to see Indian films in a new light and encouraging a global reassessment of film studies.

Dr. Bashabi Fraser, CBE

Professor Emerita of English and Creative Writing
Director, Scottish Centre of Tagore Studies, Edinburgh Napier University
Honorary Fellow, Centre for South Asian Studies, University of Edinburgh

Preface

Indian cinema is fast becoming the most-watched and arguably a very influential national cinema of the 21st century. Against this backdrop, *Appreciating Melodrama* is a highly original contribution to the field of Indian film studies and beyond, offering a comprehensive insight into the history and development of the defining features of Indian cinema. Its originality lays in the diversity of its subject matter and sources. For the first time (in a single English publication), an interdisciplinary academic work engages with the key films of all four major regions of cinema in India (West/Marathi, North/Hindi, South/Telugu, East/Odia), covering a period of a hundred years and multiple genres. Within this broad sweep, it pays specific attention to the conscious and subconscious processes that underpin the development of *rasa* traditions in Indian filmmaking by, in part, interrogating the creative and technical voices behind them.

The extensive use of interviews is a major strength of the study. The breadth of the project allows it to embrace a diverse collection of interviewees from across the industry, both geographically and professionally. Notable subjects include the Indian auteurs K. Vishwanath and Shyam Benegal, prominent actors like Sarat Pujari and Om Puri and iconic screenwriters such as Salim Khan and Kamlesh Pandey. Eminent Indian cinema directors based in different regions are vital sources for Roy, including individuals such as S.S. Rajamouli (the director of *Bahubali*), Nirad Mohapatra and Prashanta Nanda (Odia cinema), Paresh Mokashi (Marathi), Anjali Menon (Malayalam), Srijit Mukherji (Bengali) and Chandraprakash Dwivedi (Hindi). By mining the experiences of such instrumental figures, Roy creates an engaging portrait of Indian cinema. This methodology also adds a sense of the personal to the study; some of these directors, technicians and 'movie legends' are taking part in academic research for the first time, making their contributions original and individual. Complex insights emerge without excluding a non-academic audience.

For those interested in the more technical aspects of Indian film, the analysis is thorough and compelling. The author's detailed critical reviews of the devices and acting choices deployed in contemporary drama are enhanced by the observations of key players in the productions. Crucially, *Appreciating Melodrama* combats the often-patronising attitude towards the masala style of narrative and its melodramatic performances. It casts these creative choices in a new light by introducing a *rasa*-based theoretical model through which to view expressive performances, particularly within musical sequences. This provokes thoughts on how audiences can identify the layers of explicit and implicit emotions (*rasa*) in song-, dance- and dialogue-oriented scenes, showing that *rasa*-based analyses of Indian cinema should be a vital cornerstone of contemporary film criticism.

Having begun his career as a journalist and then editor of *Stardust* magazine, Roy's intimate knowledge and enthusiasm for Indian film shines through this book. He remained a prolific author and prize-winning journalist even while completing his PhD at Edinburgh University, where I had the privilege to serve as his supervisor. Given the immense breadth of his knowledge, which he shared every week in the popular Indian Film Club screenings and discussions which he organised for the University's Centre for South Asian Studies, it was clear from the start that Piyush's research would become a milestone in Indian film criticism. It will hopefully lead to Indian film being taken more seriously as an art form, at the same time helping us to move away from the Eurocentric bias in the interpretation of the visual arts. Roy's ambitious project will be a valuable resource for anyone involved in the study of drama and film and its practice. Its careful analysis provides a vital and original contribution to the academic field of film studies. It will also be a provocative and engrossing read for those in related fields in academia and the millions of Indian film enthusiasts around the globe.

Dr. Crispin Bates

Professor of Modern and Contemporary South Asian History

University of Edinburgh, UK

Director of the Centre for South Asian and Indian Ocean Studies

Sunway University, Malaysia

Acknowledgements

A profound moment in my journey from writing on cinema (as a critic) to writing about cinema (as a film historian) was the dawn of an opportunity to also start making cinema, encouraged by friends and fellow cinephiles during my doctoral pursuit at the University of Edinburgh. Thanks are due to those friends and mentors. The journey helped inculcate empathy into my critical outlook towards reviewing movies. Subsequently, making films in the Indian context with local technical talent and exploring vernacular idioms of expression, performance articulation and conditionings towards one's expectations from cinema and movie-watching made me further appreciate and better engage with the narrative purpose and achievements of the unique aspects—song, dance and emotion and signature aesthetics, *bhavas* and *rasas*—in India's varied onscreen storytelling traditions across mediums. I also realised that there has been a serious lack in acknowledgement and acceptance of the same in popular review and writings, because of a critically dismissive attitude towards Indian cinema's most distinct, high engagement attributes, as unrealistic distraction and melodramatic escape, for their not confirming to the established Euro–American canons about 'the recommended best' in film lists, study, criticism and making.

This book, conceived as a researched argument highlighting the role of civilisational aesthetic traditions in the shaping of artistic expression, brings into critical consideration voices and perspectives of those who make movies in the Indian context. The aim is to introduce discussions on alternate and empathetic parameters of review. Hence, it was essential to go beyond cross-textual academic endorsements to actually engage with the real makers of celluloid masterpieces in the Indian context, along with their fans and interpreters. This would not have been possible without liberal time commitment for qualitative, open-ended discussions with each of my interviewees, most of whom are valuable contributors in their respective fields to the art, craft and review of films.

I would like to thank pioneer auteur of Indian parallel cinema movement of the 1970s, Shyam Benegal, veteran Hindi filmmaker and television director Lekh Tandon, who began his prolific direction career in the 'Golden Age of Hindustani Cinema' (1950s) and made some popular television serials in the 1980s and 1990s. The director and lead actor of the still-watched, much-quoted historical TV series *Chanakya* and producer-director of *Upanishad Ganga*, Chandraprakash Dwivedi, and multinational-award-winning veteran Telegu and Tamil cinema director of musical classics, K. Vishwanath, for their exhaustive insights into the *Natyashastra* traditions of Indian cinema. They have also made some memorable shows in the 'Golden Age of Indian Television/Doordarshan' (1980s/1990s).

Thanks are due to S.S. Rajamouli, producer-director of epic Telegu cinema blockbusters, including the Bahubali film series, and Nirad Mohapatra, maker of one of the most critically acclaimed Odia films of all time, *Maya Miriga*, for sharing insights on the influence and achievement of *rasas* in their works. Popular maker of *masala* movie potboilers in the 1980s–1990s, Deepak Shivdasani, and multinational-award-winning 21st-century Bengali cinema auteur, Srijit Mukherji, and writer-director of popular new-age Malayalam language dramas, Anjali Menon, for their insightful conversations on *rasa*-evoking practices in their respective regional language movie industries and own filmmaking styles. Experimental Indian filmmaker Kamal Swarup, filmmaker and chairman of the Kerala State Chalachitra Academy, Kamal and director of *Harishchandrachi Factory*, Paresh Mokashi, for their insights on the influences and the influence of Dadasaheb Phalke around the birthing of Indian feature films at the beginning of the 20th century. The life and times of the 'father of Indian cinema', Phalke, have been the focus of some of their most acclaimed film works, along with offering valuable insights on region-specific sociocultural influences on the 'Silent Era of Indian Cinema' (1898–1930).

Together, each of the above acclaimed filmmakers, representing and working in some of India's largest and most prolific cinema industries like Hindustani (Hindi/Urdu), Telegu, Tamil, Odia, Malayalam, Marathi and Bengali, have enriched the arguments in this book with

pan-Indian cinema perspectives on moviemaking in the space of a single book compendium.

Thanks are due to the legends of Indian movie acting like Amitabh Bachchan, Hema Malini, Om Puri, Tom Alter, Vikram Gokhale and Bollywood's new millennium 'superstar actor-with-a-difference', Vidya Balan, each of whom, in my interactions for interviews published in the *Stardust* magazine, have offered personal insights on elements shaping their own and Indian movie acting styles. This has lent some valuable practice-based attestation to the book's recommendations on how to observe and appreciate the layers in 'emotive acting'. I am grateful to pioneer Odia filmmaker-actor Gopal Ghosh, Odia cinema's first superstar Sarat Pujari and its most successful producer-director and lead actor of multi-starrer post-1970s *masala* blockbusters, Prashanta Nanda, for sharing their personal journeys and insightful anecdotes from the birth to the evolution of Odia cinema as a significant regional film industry in East India.

My long conversations with Indian cinema's first female superstar playback singer from the 1940s, Shamshad Begum, veteran choreographer Saroj Khan, popular Hindi cinema script writers Salim Khan and Kamlesh Pandey, and actors and acting gurus Kishore Namit Kapoor and Anupam Kher have enriched the book's highlighting of *bhava* and *rasa* elements in every sphere of the film craft, from story conceptualisation to performed interpretation and choreography, apart from being the essence of all song and music endeavours.

I express my gratitude to senior critics, writers and lovers of Indian cinema, such as Ali Peter John, Mark Cousins, Surya Deo, Rajiv Vijayakar, and Professor Rachel Dwyer (School of Oriental and African Studies, London), for their analytical discussions on the many queries emerging from my initial research. Thanks especially to Surya Deo for sharing archival newspaper records of the first reviews of the first Odia film, *Sita Bibaha* (1936).

My heartfelt gratitude to former director of the National Film Archives of India (NFAI), Pune, P.K. Nair, for many valuable resource leads, and its present director Prakash Makdum for research access to film magazine archives and the viewing of all existing silent Indian films in the NFAI collection for study and review. Most posters and

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Special thanks to the founder and creative director of Swastik Productions Pvt. Ltd., Siddharth Tewary, maker of the first major 21st-century adaptation of the Mahabharata epic as a mega television series telecast on Star Plus India Pvt. Ltd. (2013–2014), for hosting me on the show's sets at Umargam in Gujarat and allowing extensive access to all its cast and crew. Thanks also to episode director Mukesh Singh, production manager Kuntal Shukla and actors Sourabh Raaj Jain and Saurav Gurjar.

The book is the published outcome of my doctoral thesis submitted to The University of Edinburgh, titled 'The Aesthetics of Emotional Acting: A *Rasa*-Based Review of Indian Cinema and Television' (2017). It would not have been possible without the guidance and critical suggestions of and many discussions with my supervisors Prof. Crispin Bates and Dr. Paul Dundas. Prof. Bates has constantly encouraged me to convert the findings of my over three years of field work in India and many interviews of archival value conducted as a film journalist and Editor of *Stardust* into a book; he also conducted the manuscript's first edit. Prof. Dundas, every one of your questions on my every submission has further refined the researcher in me. Thanks are also due to my doctoral thesis examiners, Prof. Bashabi Fraser (poet, post-colonial writer–academic and director of The Scottish Centre for Tagore Studies) and Dr David Sorfa (Programme Director of Film Studies, The University of Edinburgh), whose critical inputs and incisive reviews have enriched the book's final arguments.

The actual realisation of the thesis to book, however, would not have been possible without Shambhu Sahu, who represented the work to publishers. His enthusiasm for the work, clubbed with a researcher's interest in the study of cinema, patience and diligent guidance through the publishing process will be forever cherished, as will the beginning of a new association with my publishers, Bloomsbury India. Thank you, Chandra Sekhar (Publisher, Academic Books, Bloomsbury India) and Shreya Chakraborti (Editorial Manager) for your faith in the book's academic promise and necessity, and Ankita Deshpande (Editor), for a truly meticulous edit and some valuable questions and perspectives

to ponder and review. The processes of learning are, indeed, never over or enough.

Thanks are also due to Prof. Saugata Bhaduri and Prof. Indrani Mukherjee from Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi, and Sara Martínez from Book Permissions Springer Nature, Germany, for facilitating the reproduction of excerpts from the chapter ‘Gendered *Bhavas*: Perpetuating Notions of “Ideal” Male and Female Behaviour Through Specific Emotions Highlighted in Acting in *Mayabazar*’, authored by me in their co-edited book publication, *Transcultural Negotiations of Gender Studies in (Be)longing* (2015). Thanks to John Cerullo, Senior Executive Editor, Rowman & Littlefield/Globe Pequot, Applause Books/Backbeat Books, for facilitating permissions towards reproducing excerpts from my authored book, *Bollywood FAQ: All That’s Left to Know About the Greatest Film Story Never Told* (2019).

I am thankful for the participant and moderator feedback on some of the book’s chapters presented as work-in-progress seminar talks at various international conferences in the UK (‘MOVING ON: South Asian Screen Cultures in a Broader Frame’ conference, University of Westminster, London [2014]; BASAS [British Association of South Asian Studies] annual conferences at Royal Holloway, University of London [2014] and University of Cambridge [2016]; ‘The Rest and The West: RipOff or Resourceful Creativity?’ Innovation over Imitation in Popular Cinema Beyond the West, conference, University of St. Andrews [2016]; and the Centre for South Asian Studies seminars at The University of Edinburgh [2015]).

I am forever grateful for my foundational and lifelong sources of inspiration, the four people to whom this book is dedicated—my paternal grandfather Aditya Prasanna Madhual, maternal grandmother Malatilata Rout, aunt Manjula Madhual (Julki apa) and Prof. Pramila Panda from REC Rourkela, who, since my childhood, through their long and short stories sourced from the diversity of human existence, local literature, Indian mythology and history, did perhaps subconsciously inculcate within me a shared love for the art of storytelling, local lore and storytellers irrespective of the medium of communication, be it novels, classical dance, theatre or film.

A good story is of fundamental essence to the 'art' of a film. How it is told constitutes the craft of filmmaking. Why a particular story is selected for cinematic telling from a plenitude of options and experiences that make human life, and how it is told, is courtesy the context, culture and movie-watching memories and their influences on a filmmaker. This book is a humble effort at appreciating the above by engaging with voices that represent, shape and create content across a diversity of Indian language cinemas that make up the world's largest and most prolific national film industry. I hope the book also fosters the development of an empathetic understanding of some fundamental, common, stated and unstated civilisational notions about 'creating art and its criticism' that have held the unity in Indian cinema's vibrant and plural creative masala mix.

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Introduction: Bharata to Bollywood

The conception of art as an activity and an independent spiritual experience, freed of practical interest, which the intuition of Kant perceived for the West, was already in 10th century India, an object of study and controversy¹.

Raniero Gnoli, Indologist

The *rasa* philosophy or wisdom goes back for many thousands of years and somewhere in the collective subconscious it has become ingrained in Indian filmmakers, myself included. Yet, in the various contradictory philosophies of film criticism, an orthodoxy has crept in, leaving the *rasa* theory unkindly looked upon in some critical and academic circles. This could be considered intellectually fascist².

Srijit Mukherji, filmmaker

Indian cinema, popularly known as ‘Bollywood’³, is arguably, along with yoga, spices, the Taj Mahal and Gandhian thought, one of the most universally recognised Indian contribution and introduction in global culture today. Despite ‘its predominant narrative styles not conforming to the first world European and/or American cinema narrative structure’ (Thomas 2010: 22–24), its diverse regions of filmmaking and the many contradictions surrounding the appreciation of its indigenous aesthetics, Indian cinema is acknowledged as an influential national cinema. It functions as an important socio-cultural tool of entertainment, engagement and influence for its audience. Simultaneously, it has also emerged as an industry of immense global reach and financial worth. It is mainly led by five of India’s largest language cinemas—Hindi, Tamil, Telegu, Malayalam and Bengali—but films in the remaining 18 official Indian languages (listed in the eighth schedule of the Indian Constitution) and those outside of it, such as Bhojpuri and English, together account for the Indian film industry’s annual output of nearly 2,000 films a year. Today, Indian movies are screened in theatres and cinemas in over 100 nations from the

United States to Australia and United Kingdom to South Africa. They have also been enjoying an increasing distribution presence in the dubbed film circuits of Africa, the Middle East and South America; the subtitled showcasing of movies through online and OTT platforms like YouTube, Hotstar, Netflix and Amazon Prime has further increased viewership for regional language movies across and beyond India. International ticket sales of some post-2010 Hindi, Telegu and Tamil films, such as *Dangal* (The Wrestle, 2016), *Bahubali 2: The Conclusion* (2017) and *2.0* (2018), have generated an income share at times rivalling their earnings from distribution within India.

India has been the largest moviemaking nation in the world for over three decades. It is, more-over, increasingly viewed as the world's second-most important film industry after Hollywood and arguably more important than the European film industry (Epstein 2011). Since Sony Pictures' 2007 Diwali festival debut with the film *Saawariya* (The Lover, 2007), Hollywood studio majors like Disney, Fox Star, Sony Pictures and Viacom 18, with a decade plus presence in the Indian film market, have been making or distributing films in Hindi and regional Indian languages. Fox Star and Viacom 18 have made films in other Indian language cinemas like Tamil, Telegu and Bengali, while Indian film production companies like Reliance Big Pictures are co-producing Hollywood films. By 2003, within five years of being granted an industry status by the Indian Government, 30 film production companies were listed on the National Stock Exchange. Half of the Best Hindi Film nominees at the 2011 Filmfare Awards had at least one foreign national heading one of its technical teams. The International Indian Film Academy (IIFA) awards, which began at London's millennium dome in 2000, have emerged as one of the biggest global event exports of any national film industry, having been hosted by cities in Africa, Asia, Europe and North America in the two decades since their inception. Numbers have always been Indian cinema's biggest advantage. Post 2000, it has been acknowledged as the most viewed cinema worldwide, peaking to 2.6 billion cinema admissions in 2012, in contrast to Hollywood's 1.36 billion (McCarthy 2014).

Another record of sorts was achieved in 2011, when just the making of a video of a yet to be shot Tamil film song '*Why this Kolaveridi?*'

went viral on YouTube. It garnered over five million hits in a week and crossed the one-crore mark in 10 days, highlighting one of India's larger regional language cinema's potential global appeal.

The distances between industries may be shrinking, collaborations between technicians increasing and appeal of Indian cinema widening, but the genre continues to confuse viewers outside of India. Much of Indian cinema, especially its popular 'all India form' often erroneously identified with Bollywood, remains initially amusing and perplexing to non-Indian audiences and critics in its 'epico-mythico-tragico-comico-super-sexy-high-masala-art form in which the unifying principle is a techni-colour-storyline' (Rushdie 1996: 148–149; Stadtler 2005: 517). Its aesthetics are Indian cinema's strongest identifier, differentiator and attraction for traditional fans. However, in the absence of fair appreciation models of its defining attributes, both within India and in the West, it continues to suffer a crisis of recognition (Dudrah 2006; Ray 1976; Thomas 2008).

India has one of the lowest percentages of admissions for Hollywood films, which is still less than 10 per cent (KPMG India 2016)⁴. This implies that India's film-going audience (despite having access) watches fewer American movies than many other audiences in the world. A majority of the Indian audience appear to return to familiar films or to those they have grown up watching after occasional partaking of other world cinema aesthetic experiences. According to Rachel Dwyer, leading professor of Bollywood Studies in the UK, 'It is the only cinema apart from Hollywood, which is more popular than Hollywood in the country it is made. And that is something unique about Indian cinema' (2015). What is that unique attraction in its telling? What is that missing appeal in other national cinemas that is present only in Indian cinema for its fans and consumers? This necessitates a researched engagement. There is a need, given the 'inadequacy of existing Euro-American film theory models' (Booth 1995/2000; Hogan 2009; Lutgendorf 2007; Thomas 2008), for contributions towards an empathetic criticism of Indian cinema, to strengthen emerging arguments for appreciating Indian cinema on terms of reference that engage with its diversity rather than dismissing it with an essentialisation as is often encountered in practice.

Indian Cinema: Definitions and Divisions

Describing all Indian language cinemas with the term Bollywood, which originated as a reference to films made in Bombay or Mumbai's Hindi film industry, is a minor indicator of the above-mentioned tendency towards essentialisation. Bollywood has now mutated into a brand and genre in itself, both in media reference and academic discourse. Hindi cinema or Bollywood has, however, been equally passionately and convincingly claimed as the dominant narrative form and storytelling convention in all Indian cinema (Rajadhyaksha 2003; Yadav 2001: 42). This has been evidenced in films from India's regional cinemas, which share the Bollywood format of a blend of numerous emotion-evoking modes such as action, comedy and 'melodrama'⁵. They use larger-than-life characters, spectacle, songs, dialogue and dance to weave together an integrated whole that prioritises the establishment of an affective or emotional connect over an appeal to the intellect of its audience. Using the phrase 'Bollywoodisation of Indian cinema' to describe this influence of cinematic storytelling, Rajadhyaksha (2010) identifies it as the most homogenising influence and recognisable factor amongst all Indian mainstream language cinemas. It is termed as commercial cinema too, because of its profit-based motivations. This body of cinema will henceforth be referenced as 'popular cinema' in the book.

The other major category within Indian films, based on aesthetic criteria and a notional privilege of being driven purely on artistic motivations by critics and/or 'anglophone Indians' (Kesavan 2012: 13), is the off-beat or art-house cinema. Its corpus is primarily comprised of the emotionally understated, realistic, appealing-to-the-intellect (intellectual/thought-provoking) films that were made from the late 1960s onwards, subsequent to auteur Satyajit Ray's successful international debut with the Apu films (1955–59) trilogy⁶. These films were often made using state funding. The greatest differential of this category of cinema was its subscription to the canons of Euro-American film theories with a perceived (and often stated) total rejection of popular cinema's filming codes. Predominantly located within Bengali and Malayalam cinema, the number and influence of

these films increased after the emergence of director Shyam Benegal's pioneering New Wave cinema in Hindi (*Ankur*, The Seedling, 1974), coupled with intermittent bursts in Odia, Assamese, Kannada and, most recently, English (Hood 2000; Rajadhyaksha and Willeheim 1994). For categorisation purposes, these films will be called 'parallel cinema' in the book, and not art-house as they are often referred to, in agreement with actor-scriptwriter Salim Khan's argument that since filmmaking is an artistic exercise, all cinema is art, with the sole distinction being whether it represents good or bad art⁷.

These artistic and commercial categorisations did not always exist in Indian cinema discourses or film criticism. For instance, many acclaimed films from the Golden Era of Hindi Cinema (1950s–1960s) can be considered as forbearers of both subsequent popular and parallel cinema making styles. The classics of that era, such as *Mother India* (1957) and *Mughal-e-Azam* (The Great Mughal, 1960), which Salim Khan refers to as art films, were commercial blockbusters featuring most of the popular cinema attributes listed above. Also, many New Wave cinema directors of the 1970s and 1980s, after making their mark through films in the parallel cinema category, having received critical acclaim and with access to larger funds, shifted to the popular style of filmmaking in the 1990s in order to take their films to a bigger audience. Finally, the post-2000 entry of blockbuster Indian films like *Lagaan* (Taxation, 2001), *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham* (Sometimes Happiness, Sometimes Sadness, 2001) and *Devdas* (2002) in non-South-Asian diaspora spaces in Europe, and *Muthu* (1995) in Japan, has been in their art-house, mini-theatre and/or camp circuits. Films regarded as popular in India, when selected for screening in first-world international film festivals like Cannes, Toronto and the like, were received as art-house cinema (Brunow 2010; Srinivas 2010). The borrowed categories of aesthetic divisions inspired by Euro-American distribution are thus incomplete and non-absolute. The accompanying appreciation parameters that have come to define filmmaking styles within Indian cinema have been consistently rejected by most of its films. Some of the finest actors have frequently acted in both these forms to equal acclaim and great filmmakers and stars have worked alongside them, kindling Indian cinema's current global spread. Actor turned acting guru Anupam Kher

states, 'Just because realistic acting looks fascinating, it does not mean that the acting done by mainstream actors in India is easy to do. It is easy to simplify and do realistic acting. It is very difficult to do dramatised acting' (2015). If Raj Kapoor's socialist melodramas made Indian cinema popular in the erstwhile USSR, China and Eastern Europe in the 1950s, Amitabh Bachchan's angry young man *masala* films widened its appeal in the Middle East and Africa in the 1970s. Shah Rukh Khan's post 1990s' aspirational candyfloss romances have inspired cultural engagements like Bollywood-style dance classes in Europe beyond its South Asian diaspora (Dudrah, Mader and Fuchs 2015). For 'holding the largest audience from diverse places and cultural backgrounds in the contemporary world of cinema' (Mader 2010), Khan was the subject of a multidisciplinary international conference organised by the University of Vienna in 2010 focussing on the contribution of his stardom to the increasing popularity of Hindi cinema post-2000 among mainstream Euro-American audiences. His 2015 bestowal of an honorary doctorate by the University of Edinburgh, a first for an Indian cinema star, is a big step forward in the acknowledgement of the discipline of film studies and the place of Indian cinema within it.

Traditionally, Indian cinema had been accessed through unofficial channels of distribution across the globe. Since 2000, it has increasingly been distributed in Europe and the United States with Western audiences getting an opportunity to seriously engage with it in art-house and mainstream cinema spaces with subtitles. The reception has not always been one of uncontested enthusiasm, but the playing field at least is more even than before. Indian film and music critic Rajiv Vijayakar states:

If you are giving somebody a burger everyday, he is going to eat only the burger, until you feed him something else like a *biryani*. Even then, he would not be able to make a choice between whether his burger was better or the *biryani*. He may not even like the *biryani* instantly. He has to keep eating the *biryani*, until he develops a taste for it and only then will he be able to decide whether they are both equally good or which one is better (2012).

Around the beginning of the first millennium C.E., Bharata *muni* in the ancient Indian dramatic textbook of the *Natyashastra* had also used a

similar taste and reception analogy to frame one of the most seminal ideas of Indian aesthetic appreciation—the *rasa* theory of aesthetic taste and appreciation. This theory will provide the focus in this book as the latter investigates the former's use and viability for the analysis and appreciation of Indian cinema.

The *Natyashastra*: Essence and Origin

The origin of the *rasa* idea, after two millennia of scholarly deliberations by critics and Sanskritists in India and the West, can be traced back to the 2000-year-old textbook of Sanskrit drama, the *Natyashastra*. It is considered to be the foundation of Sanskrit drama and the first most exhaustive, comprehensive and encyclopaedic practical manual of dance, acting, music and theatre in India. Deliberating at length on stagecraft and the performing arts, it describes and categorises the different kinds of drama, acting and direction, along with the varied aesthetic experiences of the audience. According to South India's prominent 20th century dramatist-scholar Adya Rangacharya, *Natyashastra*'s creator, Bharata *muni*, 'has not only defined for us characters on the stage, but even characters in the auditorium (i.e. the audience)' (1966: 73), based on the nature of their reactions to onstage acts. Schwartz sums up its scope and significance as 'part theatrical manual, part philosophy of aesthetics, part mythological history, part theology' (2004: 12) and part psychological in its 'analysis of the mental states of spectators watching a performance, and the nature and effects of the pleasures derived thereof by them' (Raghavan 1940: 73–81).

Though the *Natyashastra* is attributed to the mythical Bharata *muni*, art historian Kapila Vatsyayan acknowledges a counter view that the name could have been an acronym for the three syllables—Bha (*Bhava* or mood/state of mind), Ra (*Raga* or melody) and Ta (*Tala* or rhythmic timing)—essential for any artistic performance (2007: 6). This acronym of 'Bharata' then possibly went on to become a common name for sages, dramatists or actors working over a couple of centuries to formulate the foundational principles of Sanskrit dramaturgy that have come to define the *Natyashastra* in its present form. However, when the name

Bharata is used in this book, it is intended to refer to an individual and not as an abstract term.

The *Natyashastra* compendium of dramatic lore, in accordance with the traditional Indian practice of prescribing the authorship of any ancient work (e.g., the Vedas) to the gods or sages of yore, in its first chapter ascribes its authorship to Lord Brahma, the creator in Hinduism's Trinity of Gods that feature Lord Vishnu as the preserver and Lord Shiva as the destroyer. Its genesis was in response to a request by the gods to create something that would educate and inspire its readers about the nature and behaviour of the world by imitating its conduct through various stages and situations, to be rendered by physical and other forms of acting, by depictions communicating the emotions of the entire triple world⁸. Since the work was intended to be entertaining and enlightening at the same time, its presentation had to be pleasing to the eyes and the ears so that it was accessible to all, from the evolved immortals of the celestial world to the demons of the netherworld, along with the entire diversity of the human race in between. As a result, Brahma composed the fifth Veda, known as the *Natyaveda*⁹, incorporating elements from all the arts, sciences and ethics. He took 'the words from *Rig Veda*, music from *Sam Veda*, movements and make-up from *Yajur Veda* and emotional acting from *Atharva Veda*' (NS 1.17–18; Rangacharya 1966: 1) and gave it to Bharata¹⁰, and his sons or pupils to practice and perform the lessons of a good, civilised and moral life for the entertainment and enlightenment of all. Dance already existed when drama was created, with Shiva being the acknowledged god of dance. However, when Shiva saw the first performance of drama, though appreciative of Brahma's creation and the efforts of Bharata and his actors, he thought it was too plain. Brahma then asked Bharata to take inspiration from Shiva's *tandava* (cosmic dance) and created the *apsaras* (celestial nymphs) to perform them with grace (*lasya*), since he felt that no male other than Shiva could perform the graceful aspects of his *tandava* as elegantly. Experiencing the aesthetic appeal of Shiva's dance movements, Bharata incorporated dance to beautify drama and transformed it from a *suddha purvaranga* (simple drama display) to a *chitra purvaranga* (beautiful dramatic presentation), thus giving

birth to the concept and realisation of the first operatic Sanskrit dance drama (Raghavan 1940: 2–4).

Within the fable on the origin of drama is embedded a significant guiding principle that has become the *raison d'être* of all Indian performance forms including cinema: the integral role of music and dance in any dramatic performance. According to Srijit Mukherji:

Bharata's *Natyashastra* tells of a storytelling tradition through music and songs, which is why I am personally unapologetic about using music and songs to take my story forward. The West might have denounced and forsaken the musical genre in the 1940s and 1950s, but for me, music and songs is as much of a tool as a trolley shot, a jump cut or a particular sound design. We tend to stress unnecessarily on a song or music being a song or a music when it could very well be another cinematic tool for the storyteller, which it is for me, and which it has been for the Indian sub-continent. That is why the use of music has been one of the biggest unifying factors for Indian cinema (2015).

This should not be confused with an unequivocal recommendation of the musical format without any reservations. Bharata warns in his review of *Amrutamanthan* (The Churning of the Ocean), the first ever drama performed in the mythical land of the gods, that music and dance should not be overdone or else both the performers and the viewers will feel the strain (Raghavan 1940: 3). This divine claim to its origins endorses the influential and divine status of the *Natyashastra* in the Indian aesthetic scheme, but it does not exactly aid in ascertaining a credible upper limit to the date of its authorship. The broad consensus amongst modern (post-1900) commentaries is that it existed before the beginning of the Christian era. Bharatanatyam dancer and scholar Padma Subrahmanyam contends that the *Natyashastra* is pre-Ramayana, since there is no mention of its hero, Rama, in the drama treatise (2010: 21). Its lower limit is a more assured, pre-Kalidasa, pre-450 CE period. This has been endorsed by the eminent Sanskrit dramatist himself in his reference to the Bharata legend and in his attribution to the sage of the idea of the eight *rasas* in his 5th century CE romantic drama *Vikramorvasi* (Urvashi Won by Valour, Kane 1994: 43).

The Theory of *Rasa*

One of the most intriguing aspects of Bharata's exhaustive treatise is its theory of aesthetics, developed by later commentators into the Sanskrit drama's influential *rasa* theory. Though *rasa* has many literal meanings such as taste, extract, juice, essence and ultimately bliss, in the *Natyashastra* it is used to signify the essence of an emotion as a sentiment or the final emotional state of 'relish/satisfaction/reaction/aesthetic experience'¹¹ achieved by a spectator while watching and experiencing a performing art. According to Kane, 'This also is the most seminal contributor principle, which when extensively deliberated removes all perceived notions of neglect of [any proper] aesthetic appreciation in Indian drama traditions given its [obvious] fondness for ethics and frequently enveloping frameworks of metaphysical speculation' (1994: 8).

According to Bharata, *rasa* is born in the union of the play with the performance of the actors and is to be realised by the audience. Its articulation by Bharata, however, suffers from the established predilection of ancient writers for concise definitions and summary explanations, followed by limited illustrative articulation. This ensures that later commentaries are valuable sources for analysis and interpretation. Since the *Natyashastra*'s prime focus is dramatic representation and not the *rasa*—which is first described in the context of drama as a means to appreciating dramatic art and not vice versa—Bharata dedicates only two (chapters six and seven) of its 36 chapters to a summary listing and description of the *rasas* and their constituting *bhavas* (Rangacharya 2010). Scholars like Subrahmanyam have opted to view this only summary introduction to *rasa* as an indicator of the fact that the concept was already in practice at the time of the writing of the *Natyashastra*, with its practitioners being aware of its significance in any performative form. By listing it at the beginning of his treatise, Bharata was only reinforcing its already acknowledged pre-eminence before deliberating at length on other lesser-known aspects and attributes of the dramatic art.

The *Natyashastra* in Review: Commentators and Commentaries

The *rasa* idea, however, has been consistently evolving and extensively engaged with to become Sanskrit drama's most debated subject, to be acknowledged, used and/or challenged by dramatists, writers and critics for over two millennia for various interpretations¹². Evolving insights within subsequently emerging Indian philosophical systems have further shaped and influenced the application and understanding of the *rasa* concept in aesthetic appreciation (Vatsayan 2007). This can be attributed to two reasons: first, Bharata's cursory enunciation of a *sutra* of immense psychological insight and significance that immediately demanded a clearer articulation by its every subsequent commentator; and the second, the unquestioned acknowledgement by all commentators of the *Natyashastra* on the status of the *rasa* concept as a cornerstone of aesthetic appreciation. They systematically worked towards converting it into a fundamental aesthetic conception for all Indian art forms, starting with drama and dance, followed by poetry, literature and now cinema. There are many treatises expounding the theory of *rasa*, but this book will situate its understanding and interpretation of the concept to its most authoritative source, the *Natyashastra* (as translated by Ghosh in 1961 and Rangacharya in 2010) and its most influential commentary by 11th century CE Kashmir philosopher and aesthetician Abhinavagupta, titled *Abhinavabharati* (as discussed by Gnoli in 1956). The *Abhinavabharati*, according to all its subsequent medieval commentators and modern Sanskrit scholars, marks the highest critical and intellectual achievement in the history of the evolution of the 'Rasa School of appreciation' (Sarma 1994: 6–8). It is the only source that reviews the lost original works and views of most pre-10th century commentators of the *Natyashastra* like Bhattalolata, Sankuka, Bhattanayaka and Bhattatauta (Vatsayan 2007: 138). Abhinavagupta, also wrote an influential commentary on Anandavardhana's pathbreaking 'dhvani theory'¹³ (*Dhvanyaloka* 9th century CE), which suggested that the dominant *rasa* of an aesthetic