

## CHAPTER 6

### **Sentiments of Disdain and Practices of Distinction**

#### *The Work Culture of the Hindi Film Industry*

During the question and answer session with the cast and director of the film *The Loins of Punjab Presents*—a quirky comedy set among the Indian American community in New Jersey—which had been screened at the South Asian International Film Festival held in New York, in October 2007, one of the actors, Darshan Jariwalla, discussed how working in this particular film was such a pleasant departure from the standard “Bollywood” fare. He drew loud laughter from the full auditorium when he contrasted the director’s working style with the norms of the Hindi film industry.<sup>1</sup> Stating that the whole process was very professional, because the film had a “bound script” (a completed script), which everyone read together, Jariwalla said, “There are none [scripts] in Hindi cinema. Whoever has the nicest handwriting writes the script; whoever comes on the set first directs the scene that day.”

Jariwalla’s sarcasm is not at all unusual, for the Hindi film industry has been a frequent object of mockery, ridicule, and parody—both by those unfamiliar with the industry as well as industry insiders—for its working style.<sup>2</sup> The dominant image of the film industry has been that of a chaotic, eccentric world populated with uneducated, uncouth, and at times, unsavory people. Even Hindi filmmakers are quite critical and disparaging of the industry’s overall work ethic, representing the film industry as

unprofessional and disorganized. For example, producer Firoz Nadiadwala declared at one point in our interview, "There's nothing that is organized in this place—right from the artist's dates, to the money that is paid, or to any of the technicians, nothing is organized. Everything is organized in a disorganized manner. We are organized to be disorganized" (Nadiadwala, interview, October 2000).

Throughout my fieldwork I heard similar statements from other filmmakers, who lamented the lack of discipline and professionalism among their peers and presented themselves in the forefront of trying to organize and professionalize the industry. I never met a single filmmaker who represented himself as the norm; nearly everyone in the industry represented himself or herself as harder working, more professional, and more quality-conscious than the "typical" Hindi filmmaker. Rather than being an empirical entity, the figure of the "typical" Hindi filmmaker, akin to that of the "proposal-maker," serves as a foil against which actual filmmakers define their own principles and practices of filmmaking; therefore, the sentiment of disdain expressed about the working style of the industry is another instance of boundary-work indulged in by Hindi filmmakers, as are their practices of distinction—by which I mean filmmakers' efforts to assert their difference from a generic norm, such as Jariwalla's mention of the "bound script."

In order to understand these sentiments of disdain and practices of distinction, however, it is necessary to know the working style of the industry. While the previous two chapters described the everyday life of Hindi film production and discussed some of the core features of the structure and organization of the industry, this chapter examines the work culture of the industry—an object of great criticism and disparagement by filmmakers, journalists, and sundry observers for decades. The inordinate amount of criticism and contempt about the working style of the industry expressed by filmmakers during my fieldwork was often articulated in conjunction with an equal amount of praise and admiration for Hollywood's perceived efficiency and organization. Although Hindi filmmakers are quite self-critical in their comparisons with Hollywood, they nonetheless manage to assert a form of cultural autonomy and exceptionalism: that despite the various constraints under which they operate, Hindi filmmakers are still able to produce films that have the potential to be wildly popular across the world. An acknowledgment of this popularity is the fact that Hollywood studios, since 2006, have become keen on partnering with Bombay producers to produce Hindi films in India.

Drawing and expanding upon the ethnographic material presented in chapter four, I first discuss the informality of the industry in terms of the blurred boundaries between work and home, as well as the absence of a clear-cut division of labor between the various occupational roles on a film set. Following that, I describe the tremendously oral nature of scripting, shooting, and negotiating. Then, I examine the reasons for Hindi filmmakers' highly flexible and improvisational style of working. After that, I detail filmmakers' relatively low-impact style of working and their prudent use of resources. Paradoxically, these very same attributes—informality, orality, flexibility, and minimal use of technology—are often the object of criticism and disdain by Hindi filmmakers in their representations and discourses about the film industry. Finally, I demonstrate how Hollywood—more specifically an imagined Hollywood—is invoked in filmmakers' discussions about professionalism, work discipline, and creativity.

#### INFORMALITY AND FLUID BOUNDARIES

Whether it is Malhotra negotiating a distribution deal, Debojit Das dropping by to pitch a story idea for a film, or the film journalist carrying out an interview with Vijay Khanna, in the chapter four sketch there is as much action off camera as there is in front of it. Even in a gated environment like a studio, a Hindi film set is a quasi-public space, where all sorts of activities occur in addition to the scene or scenes being shot: distribution rights are negotiated; other films are pitched, planned, or scripted; struggling hopefuls seek an audience with either a producer or a director; interviews are conducted by the media; and even fans turn up to obtain autographs or to be photographed with stars. In fact, while a film is under production, the set operates more as an office than filmmakers' actual offices. Since lighting a set takes a considerable amount of time, actors and directors have chunks of free time while on a shoot, during which they receive and interact with a steady stream of visitors. Additionally, a complex politics of status and respect exists between producers and stars, and the location of their meeting is an indication of relative status and power. Producers frequently meet stars on set when they are shooting a film, since sets—more than homes, offices, or makeup rooms—are regarded as neutral terrain. In the chapter four sketch, Lakhani chooses to wait for Khanna in the studio compound rather than meet him in his makeup room to discuss a potential film offer; this is an exemplary situation of these politics of space.

When I began research, I was unprepared for the informal working style of the film industry, with its lack of clear-cut spatial and temporal boundaries regarding different forms of work and leisure. When I approached members of the industry with a request for an interview, I was taken aback by their immediate willingness, especially if we were on a film set. I did not anticipate that actors or directors would speak with me while they were working, imagining rather that I would have to set up an appointment for a specific time and place—separate from the spaces of production—to conduct my formal interviews. I learned very quickly that I always needed to carry my tape recorder and lists of questions with me, because I never knew when a chance meeting could result in an interview.<sup>3</sup> I found myself conducting interviews—whether ad hoc or scheduled—in a variety of locations: film sets, makeup rooms, photographers' studios, recording studios, editing suites, homes, coffee shops, hotel bars, and even people's cars.<sup>4</sup>

This sort of immediacy of access and informality was not always viewed favorably by members of the industry, especially popular actors, who were the most likely to be visited during a film shoot. While discussing a star's relationship to his fans, during our interview that took place on the rooftop terrace of an apartment complex in suburban Bombay (where he was shooting for the film *Ishq* [Love]), Aamir Khan mentioned the challenges of working in an environment with minimal gate keeping: "There are times when you're trying to concentrate on your work . . . Unfortunately our office space is everybody else's public space, you know. Like we're shooting in this building now: this is my office. If twenty kids come and ask me for my autograph, what they are in fact doing is entering my office, opening my door, and while I am working coming in and saying, 'Sign those papers later, give that shot later; first, we want our autograph,' so that's a little unfair I guess sometimes, you know, it's disturbing sometimes" (Aamir Khan, interview, March 1996). Given Khan's popularity, there was a continuous stream of children and adults who lived in the complex visiting the roof to see him, ask for autographs, and pose for pictures (Figure 11).

A clear-cut distinction between work and home spaces, which exists in other modern urban professions in India, does not exist to the same extent in the film industry. The only formal offices I went to were those of exhibitors, some distributors, and a few producers. On the content-creation side of the film industry—in contrast to the business side—the people with offices, administrative staff, and other trappings of modern urban work-life are producers. Many of these offices are quite minimalist



**FIGURE 11** Aamir Khan signing autographs during the shoot of *Ishq* in Tarapur Gardens Apartment Complex, Oshiwada (northwestern suburb of Bombay), 1996. Photo by the author.

in terms of staff and the amount of work taking place. Much of the pre-production of a film, such as scripting sessions, music composition, and discussions about production design, usually takes place in filmmakers' homes rather than their offices, a social fact alluded to by Malhotra telling his nephew and the screenwriter Debojit Das to meet at his home to discuss Das's idea for a film. Pamela Chopra, who is involved with her husband's and son's films, either formally as a writer or a co-producer, or informally in other capacities, described how the lack of defined work space enabled her to become involved in filmmaking as well.

Our family is a completely *filmi* family, so we're all involved in various aspects of filmmaking. I am, you could say, involved with the writing, but I'm not actually writing. It's happened really because my husband likes to work at home. A lot of the work connected with making a film . . . doesn't require office space or a certain set of people: nothing like that. You can—you could—very comfortably sit in your drawing room and discuss the subject, or the script, or the scene, or even the music of a film, which happens a lot in our house, so he used to work a lot at home, and after my children were born and they were slowly growing up, I found that I was getting involved in the process that was going on. (Pamela Chopra, interview, 28 February 1996)

The reminiscences of second- or third-generation members of the film industry, about witnessing scripting or music composition sessions as children, emphasized that filmmakers' homes were important spaces of production. This early exposure to processes of film production is one of the advantages of growing up within the industry.

When a film is under production, producers' offices tend to have a very quiet and deserted quality about them. In fact, it seems that the office is a place to go to when there is no other work to be done. A couple of my key informants, an actress, Radhika, and a director, Tarun—both in their twenties, and having grown up and worked together frequently—would go to the offices of Radhika's family's production company whenever they were not shooting or otherwise occupied with some aspect of film production.<sup>5</sup> They spent their time watching television, talking on their cell phones, or playing games on the computer. Sometimes Radhika's father, a very busy director, or her uncle, an equally busy producer, even used one of the office rooms to take a nap.

Along with the absence of discrete workspaces, the film industry lacks a strict division of labor among those responsible for the narrative component of films.<sup>6</sup> Given the close-knit nature of many production teams—referred to as “units” in Bombay—where people work repeatedly with friends or family members, strict boundaries between individuals and their assigned tasks are not maintained. For example, during the shooting of a song sequence for the film *Duplicate*, at Mehboob Studios in Bandra in 1996, I observed the producer's son, Karan Johar—as of 2010 one of the most successful and influential producer/directors in the industry—choreographing some of the movements for the background dancers; at the time Johar's only qualification was being a long-established producer's son.<sup>7</sup> Even after Johar established himself as a successful director, he would work on his friends' productions in other capacities—most notably as costume designer for superstar Shah Rukh Khan.

The lack of well-defined roles and duties among principal players can be disconcerting to those who are not accustomed to it. I recall my friend Sandeep's experiences as an executive producer.<sup>8</sup> While Sandeep's extended family had been involved in Hindi filmmaking for two generations, Sandeep grew up in Britain and went to college in the United States. He had moved to Bombay in 1996 with a desire to make films, quickly becoming a part of a new production company started by one of his grandfather's colleagues. Sandeep was utterly dismayed on the first day of a shoot when workers in the setting (set design) department asked

him to place photographs in frames, since they were unable to do so. He kept protesting. “I can't believe I'm doing this! I'm the bloody executive producer!” The following day when one of the assistant directors told him that they needed a cushion for the living room, Sandeep exploded. “I'm the bloody executive producer! Why are you telling me? That's the setting department's job!” Clearly he did not recognize that specific titles, such as “executive producer,” have not carried much import within the industry, and the operative occupational categories with creative decision-making power are that of star, director, producer, writer, dance director (choreographer), music director (composer), action director, lyricist, art director, editor, and cinematographer.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, since most people play multiple roles, the industry is filled with people who are both producers and directors, writers and directors, editors and directors, actors and producers, or even a combination of actor/director/producer.<sup>10</sup>

The fluidity of occupational roles translates even to the various workers on a film set, especially when a Hindi film is being shot on locations in the United States or Europe where crew sizes tend to be attenuated for the reasons of budget or international work regulations. For example, in the case of *Awara, Paagal, Deewana* (Wayward, Insane, Crazy) a film that I closely observed being shot in the United States in July 2001, the production's spot boys were denied visas to enter the United States; therefore, the lighting assistants carried out the work that spot boys normally did on a film set. Much like Sandeep, who was unsettled by workers not honoring his title of executive producer, Sri Rao described how he and his crew working on *New York* were thrown off by the Indian crew's indifference to maintaining a clear-cut division of labor among the various categories of film workers. “With us, it's very delineated. Every position has their specific roles, and the unions are very specific and you can't cross lines at all,” he explained. “With them, it's sort of like a free-for-all. And if you're a grip, you're also a gaffer and if you happen to be standing around and happen to be near something, a stand or a mike or a prop or something, or someone needs help being changed or something, then you can be wardrobe all of a sudden. And that was really tough for us” (MIAAC 2009a). Positing the difference between the American and Indian crew, in terms of the values of professionalism and work quality versus efficiency and expediency, Rao asserted that the two crews were able to reach a “happy medium.” He concluded his recollection by saying, “Ultimately we sort of drew lines, because we—the Americans—needed to draw the lines, but we drew the lines more broadly than we would have normally drawn them” (MIAAC 2009a).