Paradoxes of Postcolonial Vernacular Cosmopolitanism in South Asia and the Diaspora

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Introduction

It is now more than 20 years since the fatwa calling for the death of Salman Rushdie, transmitted globally from Tehran, was pronounced by the Ayatollah Khomeini. The Satanic Verses, the book that evoked the wrath of the Ayatollah, was written by an Indian-born Pakistani postcolonial novelist; a Cambridge graduate living in London and writing in English. The book was an open and explicit attack on all ‘fundamentalist’ pretences to purity, whether Islamic, Hindu or neoliberal, and it responded to the threat posed by the Iranian Islamic revolution, President Zia’s Islamizing military dictatorship in Pakistan, the rise of the Hindu nationalist Right in India and the emergence of Thatcherite Britain with its doctrinaire neoliberal philosophy. Against all those ‘pure’ fundamentalisms, the book extolled an ‘impure’ culture and religion imbued with popular and global aesthetics: of poetry, music, cinema, art. It portrayed an alternative society – a multicultural Britain, a tolerant peaceful India, an open, universal Sufi Islam. Its very language was hybrid – English mixed with Urdu words and expressions – and one of its anti-heroes, Gabriel, was a famous Indian cinema actor in religious ‘mythologicals’. In the novel, the Prophet Muhammad was depicted as a poet in spite of himself. But, as many scholars recognize (e.g. Fischer and Abedi 1990, see Werbner 2002), to understand the book’s message a reader would have to be familiar with the central paradigmatic myths and intellectual writings of a wide range of intellectual traditions: the Koran, the Hindu Mahabharata, Gramsci, Fanon, Blake, Shakespeare, Persian satirical poetry. Whatever the novelist’s intentions, this very diversity of mythological and epic sources makes it inaccessible to Muslims and non-Muslims alike. The world-embracing fusion of Indian, Islamic and English literary epic traditions allegorized in The Satanic Verses is lost, in other words, on most readers. Diaspora South Asian Muslims – and indeed Muslims worldwide – could not be blamed thus for thinking that The Satanic Verses was a deliberate, iconoclastic,
offensive, even blasphemous vilification of the Prophet of Islam, the ‘Perfect Man’ of Sufi tradition.

Rushdie’s project of fusing different traditions and representing the enormous diversity of India’s vernacular cultures had begun even earlier, in *Midnight’s Children*, the novel that told the story of India’s birth as a nation. As he explained in a preface to the 2006 paperback edition, his aim in the novel was to create ‘a literary idiolect that allowed the rhythms and thought patterns of Indian languages to blend with the idiosyncrasies of “Hinglish” and “Bambaiyya”, the polyglot street slang of Bombay’ (2006: xiv). The central plot of this novel relates to the hero’s telepathic capacity to hear and comprehend the ‘inner monologues of all the so-called teeming millions, of masses and classes alike’ that ‘babbled in everything from Malayalam to Naga dialects, from the purity of Lucknow Urdu to the Southern slurrings of Tamil’ (*ibid.*: 232).

Like *Midnight’s Children*, the present chapter considers the Indian subcontinent and its global diaspora(s) as a vernacular cosmopolis, divided by religion, nation and language, and yet nevertheless united by mutually comprehensible popular aesthetics. The task posed here is, in the first instance, to disentangle the ambiguities inherent in the very notion of vernacular cosmopolitanism before going on to analyse, first, Sufi pilgrimage cults in South Asia and the diaspora and second, Indian film, popularly known as ‘Bollywood’ and now having a global reach, as vernacular cosmopolis. Within South Asia, I will argue, Bollywood transcends the spaces of the region’s cultural and religious diversity, despite its deep divisions. This encompassing capacity is one rooted in Indian popular cinema’s sensual aesthetics, which has arguably created a Bollywood ‘sensorium’. Unlike Rushdie’s intentional and sometimes deliberately provocative literary and vernacular hybridities, Bollywood’s sensorium, much like its American counterpart, Hollywood, appears to have grown organically out of the contributions and appropriations of a multitude of artists, writers and performers, drawing on diverse traditions, many of whom originate from India’s diverse minorities, alongside the majority Hindu and Hindi-speaking population.

Before pursuing this argument further, the need is first to disentangle what we mean by vernacular cosmopolitanism.

### Vernacular Cosmopolitanism

The notion of vernacular cosmopolitanism has been used to refer to alternative, particularly non-Western, forms of cosmopolitanism, the latter defined broadly as an openness to difference, whether of other ethnic groups, cultures, religions or nations. As a concept that joins contradictory notions of local specificity and universal enlightenment, vernacular cosmopolitanism can be located at the crux of difference.

1. I owe this insight to Marie Gillespie.
2. For a range of examples, see the contributions to Werbner (2008).
of current debates on cosmopolitanism. These pose the question whether the local,
parochial, rooted, culturally specific and demotic may coexist with the translocal,
transnational, transcendent, elitist, enlightened, universalist and modernist –
whether boundary-crossing demotic cultures and migrations may be compared
to the sophisticated cultures of globetrotting travellers or the moral worldview of
deracinated intellectuals. Indeed, the question is often reversed to ask whether there
can even be an enlightened normative cosmopolitanism which is not rooted, in the
final analysis, in patriotic and culturally committed loyalties and understandings.

Kwame Anthony Appiah (1998), for example, evokes the notion of cosmopolitan
‘patriotism’, a ‘rooted’ cosmopolitanism, and proposes that cosmopolitans begin
from membership in morally and emotionally significant communities (families,
ethnic groups) while espousing notions of toleration and openness to the world,
the transcendence of ethnic difference and the moral responsibility for and
incorporation of the other. As he recognizes, postcolonial migrants elites may and
do feel sentimentally attached to several homes in several different countries.

Seen theoretically, then, vernacular cosmopolitanism belongs to a family of
concepts all of which combine in similar fashion apparently contradictory opposites:
cosmopolitan patriotism, rooted cosmopolitanism, cosmopolitan ethnicity, working
class cosmopolitanism, discrepant cosmopolitanism. Such conjunctions attempt
to come to terms with the conjunctural elements of postcolonial and precolonial
intercultural and political encounters, while probing the conceptual boundaries of
cosmopolitanism and its usefulness as an analytic concept.

The parameters of vernacular cosmopolitanism remain, however, ambiguous:
are we talking about demotic forms of travel and trade across borders in the
postcolonial world, as in the case of the Senegalese Mourides described by Diouf
(2000), or of the tolerant worldviews of Sufi labour migrants working in the Gulf,
whom I describe elsewhere as ‘working class cosmopolitans’ (Werbner 1999)?
Or are we talking of non-European but nevertheless high cultures produced and
consumed by non-Western elites, such as those of the Sanskritic, Urdu, Persian,
Arabic or Ottoman worlds? The Sanskritic cosmopolis in precolonial Asia,
Pollock tells us (2000), spanned an area extending from Afghanistan to Java and
from Sri Lanka to Nepal in the first millennium, a non-Western but nevertheless
cosmopolitan literary world that he contrasts with the vernacular traditions that
succeeded it. Are we to define, by analogy, contemporary Hindi/Urdu, Cantonese or
Southeast Asian mass-consumer and mediatized cultural worlds as cosmopolitan,
or as vernacular, or both?

In disentangling these conceptual ambiguities we are confronted with a paradox:
since all vernacular languages or cultures are naturally, organically, hybrid and
hybridizing, in the way argued by Bakhtin (1981), while at the same time they
retain their distinctive local, even parochial identity, then the conjunction of the
vernacular with the cosmopolitan appears to be an international contradiction, an
international contradiction...
oxymoron. But this view implies a closing of space, an extremely restricted local
localness. Hence Briggs argues that

[O]ne of the cornerstones of projects of modernity has been to construct a
moral opposition between vernacularism and cosmopolitanism that denigrates
the former and valorises the latter … [in order to maintain] elite control over
vernacular subjects. (Briggs 2005: 77)\textsuperscript{5}

My argument here is that, by contrast, the South Asian vernacular cosmopolis,
represented and embodied most saliently in Indian popular cinema, is a hybrid
mixture of a wide range of traditions and languages within the space of South
Asia. Its eclectic origins and heteroglossic, carneval-esque assemblages have
led commentators to note the transcendent, extra-national self-contained
cultural ‘autonomy’ (Gopal and Moorti 2008: 15), articulating an ‘alternative
cosmopolitanism’ and offering a counterpoint to ‘neotraditionalist discourses’ of
nation (ibid.: 32). This enables it to reach out across the whole region, to Muslims,
Hindus and Sikhs, to Pakistanis and Indians. Since the 1980s, this distinctively
South Asian cosmopolis has sometimes been threatened by a Hindi takeover, but
in a more recent countermovement, the undermining of the polyglot, heteroglossic,
carneval-esque assemblage that Bollywood represents appears to have failed as the
genre increasingly moves into a new phase – that of diasporizing and opening
up globally. Indeed, the continuous dialectic in Indian film between local and
cosmopolitan vernaculars, between the pure and the impure, the fundamentalist
and syncretic, represents, perhaps, the wider story of South Asia and its diasporas,
a proposition that I hope will become clearer in the course of this chapter.

Popular versus Elite Forms of Vernacular Cosmopolitanism

Can the novels of colonial and postcolonial intellectuals written in the language of
the imperial colonist, be regarded as exemplars of vernacular cosmopolitanism?
Against this claim, Timothy Brennan has argued that third world novels in English
by diasporic writers such as Salman Rushdie, while admittedly promoting genuine
aesthetic novelty or ‘hybridity’ within the English novel, are celebrated because
they fit a Western liberal aesthetics and novelty-dominated consumer market. By
contrast, politically committed third world novelists like the Egyptian Naguib
Mahfouz, who write from within richly layered indigenous aesthetic traditions and
address Arab audiences beyond the English-speaking metropolis, are marginalized
(Brennan 1997: 37–43). In similar vein Aijaz Ahmad, reflecting on the new Urdu
writers’ realist literary movement in South Asia in the 1930s, critiques Frederic

\textsuperscript{5} Briggs’ argument, against that view, that both Boas and Du Bois advocated a kind of
vernacular cosmopolitanism. The weakness in his argument is that he often tends to
equate cosmopolitanism with globalization.
Jameson’s essentialist proposition that all ‘Third’ world literature is ultimately to be read as ‘nationalist allegory’ – a response to the ‘experience of colonialism and imperialism’. The lumping together of all ‘Third World’ novels as the Other of the West, Ahmad proposes, effaces the autonomous bases of non-Western literatures and effectively constitutes them as an ‘absence’, a negative mirroring (Ahmad 1992: 100 and passim). Yet not only, he says, is most literature outside the West not even written in English; even more crucially, far from being exclusively preoccupied with the confrontation of their nations with imperialism and colonialism, the agendas of the Urdu realist writers were often highly complex and internally focused, demanding that

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a \text{critique of others (anti-colonialism) be conducted in the perspective of an even more comprehensive, multifaceted critique of ourselves: our class structures, our familial ideologies, our management of bodies and sexualities, our idealisms, our silences. (Ahmad 1992: 118)}
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In other words, there can be no separation of the agonism of internal moral debates from broader ethical questions surrounding ethnic or national differences. The dichotomy identified by Brennan or Ahmad appears to set a limit to high-cultural vernacular cosmopolitanism: they are novels inspired by a cosmopolitan world consciousness but written in the vernacular and thus accessible only in translation to Western readers. Against that, it may be argued that colonial and postcolonial novels that incorporate the vernacular into an imperial world language, much as Rushdie does, occupy a unique border zone defining the limits of vernacular cosmopolitanism. A fascinating example from the Philippines is that of José Rizal’s anti-colonial masterpiece, *Noli me Tangere*, published in Berlin in 1887 and written in Spanish, the language of the colonial master, understood at the time by only 5 per cent of the Philippines’ population. The novel, a satirical critique of race, class and cruel clerical mendacity, is cosmopolitan in its intellectual allusions to world literature and languages\(^6\) while being embedded in the vernacular: in words, places, persons and scenes intimately familiar to Filipinos. As Benedict Anderson comments poetically,

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\text{Rizal’s Spanish text is bejewelled with Tagalog words and expressions. Sometimes they are deployed for sheer comic effect, sometimes to deepen the reader’s sense of the conflicts between peninsular Spaniards, creoles, mestizos and Indios. But most often they simply reflect, as did the Anglo-Indian that developed in Victorian times, the casual penetration of the imperial vernacular by local languages. (1998: 241)}
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\(^6\) Hence Benedict Anderson makes the point that almost a fifth of the 64 chapters of *Noli* begin with epigraphs ‘taken from poets, dramatists, philosophers, the Bible … and come in Spanish, Italian, Latin, and even Hebrew’ (2005: 51). We find references in the novel to a ‘Filipino Rothschild’ (p. 255), to Aristotle’s categories (p. 464), all in the spirit of a new world in which ‘the old gods are gone’ (p. 465).
So too, Noli is replete with references to, and descriptions of, streets, churches, neighbourhoods, cafés, esplanades, theatres, and so forth. … The density of these places and placenames are among the elements that give the reader the most vivid sense of being drawn deep inside the novel. (1998: 243)

This localizing and vernacularizing movement in the novel, along with its emancipatory cosmopolitan message, enable its readers to ‘imagine’ a nation on the edge of being born out of its multifarious ethnic groups and dialects (Anderson 1983: 26–7, 30).

As in the Philippines, so too in postcolonial Nigeria, the dilemma posed by the highly restrictive domestic readership for original novels for Anglophone Nigerian writers is how to develop ‘expressive forms which acknowledge the history of local symbolic and cultural practices and which strive for a direct didactic or political impact’ (Smith 2005: 280); they resist the view that one ‘can become a member of the cosmopolitan literary ecumene only by taking the bend in the road which leads away from home’ (ibid.: 281, italics in the original), but the reliance on an international readership compels novelists to adopt a ‘cosmopolitan tenor’ (ibid.: 10) while not abandoning the specifically Nigerian vernacular ‘cadences, resonances and nuances of the language’ (ibid.: 285).

If hybridized Anglophone or Latino colonial and postcolonial novels occupy the border zone between third world vernacular writings and Western aesthetic works, much of the scholarly interest in vernacular cosmopolitanism has focused on indigenous, demotic or popular forms of intercultural life worlds. In particular, the notion that there are many, different, cosmopolitan practices with their own historicities and distinctive worldviews, all coexisting in late modernity, has led to an exploration of marginal cosmopolitanisms. Homi Bhabha, who possibly coined the term vernacular cosmopolitanism, is uneasy with Martha Nussbaum's image of the self as at the centre of a series of concentric circles, with universal liberal values privileged above family, ethnic group or nation (Nussbaum 1994). The notion of a borderless cosmopolitan community seems inadequate, he says, in relation to the millions of refugees and migrants fleeing violence and poverty. Drawing on Appiah’s vision, Bhabha proposes a ‘cosmopolitan community envisaged in marginality’, a border zone which he terms vernacular cosmopolitanism (1996: 195–6).

The challenge to the idea that cosmopolitans are necessarily members of the elite was first posed by James Clifford who reflects on the status of companion servants, guides and migrant labourers, and the grounds of equivalence between privileged and unprivileged travellers (1992: 106–7). Critiquing Hannerz’s (1992) original depiction of cosmopolitan subjectivity as elitist, Clifford (1992: 107) proposes that ‘the project of comparing and translating different travelling cultures need not be class- or ethno-centric’. The differential, often violent, displacements that impel locals to travel create, he says, ‘discrepant’ cosmopolitanisms (Clifford 1992: 108).
Despite the fact that Hannerz (2004: 77) has revised his position, acknowledging that more people beyond the elite may now be identified as cosmopolitan, he nevertheless notes that ‘bottom-up’ cosmopolitans are unlikely to be recognized as such in their own environment. This raises the critical question of cosmopolitan consciousness: in what sense does cosmopolitanism need to be grounded in an open, experimental, inclusive, normative consciousness of the cultural other? Such a consciousness would need to include elements of self-doubt and reflexive self-distantiation, an awareness of the existence and equal validity of other cultures, other values, and other mores. Is travel without such an inclusive consciousness cosmopolitan? Does travel inevitably lead to such openness and reflexivity? Despite their global commercial acumen, Senegalese Mouride traders are said to engage in ‘rites of social exclusiveness’ so that ‘Mouride diasporic culture is homogenised in a way that excludes foreign values’ (Diouf 2000: 694, 695). Similarly, members of the jet-setting wealthy Chinese overseas trading diaspora studied by Aihwa Ong, with their multiple passports and multiple homes in different countries, appear to lack the kind of cultural openness and sensitivity normally associated with cosmopolitanism. Diasporas, by definition, are heterogeneous, and not all their members are equally cosmopolitan. Sometimes it is factory workers rather than wealthy merchants who display more openness to their non-diasporic compatriots (Werbner 1999). Diasporic intellectuals may be alienated from working class compatriots despite their celebration of cultural hybridity as Friedman (1997) has suggested. But not all diasporic elites are so alienated. Similarly, not all Senegalese in Italy are inward looking, even if Mourides regard Italy as a ‘polluting’ environment. Riccio reports that Senegalese in Italy are a multi-ethnic and multi-religious community who seek, as one migrant told him, not ‘only to look for jobs. To emigrate is to know new things, to broaden one’s horizons in such a way that one can bring back home what one discovered and learned’.

It has been argued that cosmopolitanism is always ‘situated’ (Robbins 1998, Werbner 2008) and this is all the more so in the case of vernacular cosmopolitanism. Indeed, much depends on context. Some environments are more cosmopolitan than others. Zubaida (1999) invokes the ‘legendary cosmopolitan enclaves of Cairo, but especially Alexandria, the paradigm case of Middle Eastern cosmopolitanism’ – a hub of ideas, religions, goods and people from East and West, protected by an imperial context. Thessalonica was, according to Kenneth Brown (2006), ‘a great Balkan cosmopolitan city for centuries, a veritable Babel of languages, religions, cultures and local traditions’. Ashis Nandy describes the cosmopolitanism of contemporary Cochin on the Malabar coast – ‘the ultimate symbol of cultural diversity and religious and ethnic tolerance’ (Nandy 2002: 158 passim). If we take vernacular cosmopolitanism to refer to a multi-centred world, beyond the West, in the sense proposed by Arjun Appadurai (1990), it is perhaps among the elites of such cosmopolitan cities in South Asia and elsewhere that distinctive vernacular cosmopolitanisms are created.
Complex Diasporas

Given this potential for an inclusive vernacular cosmopolitanism in South Asia, what happens when economic migrants from the whole subcontinent, divided by nationality, religion and language but united by a shared popular culture, cuisine, music and custom, settle permanently in a Western country like Britain or the United States? What kind of diasporas does such a heterogeneous and yet in many ways homogeneous group form?

One result is the emergence of two alternative visible diasporic public spheres in Britain created by South Asian settlers, the one, ‘pure’ nationalist or religious, the other resistant and yet complicit, produced through the entertainment industry – commercial film, novels and other media – that tells a story of cultural hybridity and cosmopolitanism, of inter-generational conflict, inter-ethnic or inter-racial marriage, family politics and excesses of consumption; a cultural arena produced by British South Asians intellectuals, that makes its distinctive contribution to British and South Asian popular culture by satirizing the parochialism and conservatism of the South Asian immigrant generation.

The fact that, as in South Asia, similar vernacular cultural tastes, cuisines, music, sport, poetry, fashion and film are widely enjoyed across vast geographical regions points to a key feature of late modern diasporas (and indeed of some earlier ones) which has remained so far untheorized in the scholarly literature. The Jewish model of diaspora, often taken as archetypal, is in a critical sense misleading, because Jewish religion, culture and national political orientation (to Zion, to the memory of the Holocaust) coincide, despite geographical dispersion and despite internal religious or political disagreements. This is true also of the Armenian and Greek diasporas, each of which shares a place of origin, unique history and specific Christian liturgical tradition. But where vast cultural regions of consumption do not simply coincide with either religion or national homelands, as is true for South Asians, Middle Eastern Arabs, Latin Americans, Afro-Caribbeans and possibly even Chinese, we may talk of ‘complex’ or ‘segmented’ diasporas; segmented, because members of such diasporas may unite together in some contexts and oppose each other in other contexts. Their members’ identities, in other words, are not fixed but situationally determined. In such complex, segmented diasporas the fact that people from a particular region share a rich material culture of consumption, both high cultural and popular, and sometimes a dominant religion (e.g. Islam, Catholicism) across a large number of nation-states, creates public arenas and economic channels for cooperation and communal enjoyment, which cut across the national origins or religious beliefs of performers and participants.

The South Asian regional diaspora of vernacular cultural consumption in no way determines either political loyalties and commitments or more focused exilic yearnings for a lost homeland. It is quite possible for people from a single cultural region to be locked in bitter national or religious conflicts. In the diaspora, however,

This section is extracted from Werbner (2004).

On different cultural arenas in the diasporic public sphere see Werbner (2002).
the sharing of a regional culture can create cross-cutting ties and the potential for transcendent coalitions and alliances which mitigate such conflicts.

Regional and inter-regional cultural sharing, a vernacular cosmopolitanism, is rooted in many respects in shared traditions of ritual and celebration. Among these I want to single out here one in particular: Sufi pilgrimage regional cults.

Pilgrimage and Sufi Regional Cults

Pilgrimage centres whether Mecca, Rome, or the basilica of Our Lady in Guadalupe in Mexico, attract millions of devotees annually. They come from many different countries, and many have travelled long distances. Such shrines seem to epitomize the utopian vision of the Prophet Isaiah when he prophesized that at the end of the days ‘all nations will flow’ to the mountain of God in peace. Victor Turner labelled the harmony at great pilgrimage centres as ‘communitas’, the erasure of structure and hierarchy. Against that, much anthropological research has shown that shrines can be sites of conflicts and misunderstanding, often between co-religionists regarding the significance of the sacred centre, and different visions of Christianity or Islam. In contemporary South Asia, however, where communal violence between Hindus and Muslims has made religion intensely politicized, pilgrimage shrines to Sufi saints are widely held to be havens of amity between Muslims and Hindus; of a genuinely vernacular cosmopolitanism.

This utopian vision of Sufism and Sufi pilgrimage has, however, had its critics. They argue against the view among Indian postcolonial scholars (e.g. Nandy 1990) who extol syncretic folk religions such as that practised at saints’ shrines as the answer to India’s religious ‘fundamentalisms’ and their associated communal conflicts. Peter van der Veer, for example, argues that although Muslim shrines attract both Muslim and Hindu worshippers, they do so for different reasons: whereas for Muslim followers, a spiritual relationship to the saint, or pir, is of central importance, Hindus see the dargah mainly as a healing domain specializing in the cure demonic illnesses. Consequently, Muslims and Hindus are clearly divided by different degrees of participation and non-participation in rituals defined as Islamic, such as prayers in the mosque (1994a: 207, 1994b). Sufi shrines, in other words, do not provide the context for intercultural communication. Other scholars, however, such as Helena Basu (1998) or Saheb (1998) have shown that there are indeed Muslim shrines that create islands of Hindu and Muslim communal harmony.

Those on the negative side of the debate like van der Veer maintain that the mere presence of Hindus at Muslim shrines cannot be taken as a sign of a commonly shared, syncretic folk-religion. Rather, the different meanings and values associated with pilgrimages and visitations to Muslim shrines must be carefully delineated. Against that, on the positive side others argue that while the interpretation of the meaning of pilgrimage rituals or of the saint may vary, Hindus and Muslims worship in amity (see also Werbner 2010). This inclusive aspect of local Islam is
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stressed by Saheb (1998), for example, as being the ‘universalist’ dimension of the cult of Nagor-e-Sharif in Tamil Nadu. At that shrine, established since the sixteenth century, various communities of Hindus and Muslims come from as far away as Sri Lanka and Singapore, and participate as equals in the processions to the shrine centre, but Hindus construct the saint as a deity, whereas for the Muslims he was/is an extraordinary man. Clearly, the charismatic power embodied by a Sufi shrine is dependent on the cosmological ideas actors bring to bear on his image.

Despite this divergence of interpretation, Muslims do not perceive of the presence of Hindus at shrines as indicative of non-Islamic practices. On the contrary, the symbolic repertoires of regional saints’ cults in South Asia reinforce beliefs in the universalism of Islam. The Sufi fable of saintly world renunciation and closeness to God is widely shared throughout the region. Even though each specific cult is deeply embedded in and shapes a local environment, all address similar ontological themes related to death, place and embodiment through which sanctity and sainthood are constructed (see Werbner 2003). To argue that these practices are marginal to the ‘true’ Islam represented by the mosque and the ulama is to misrecognize the centrality of eschatological ideas about redemption and salvation to Islam more generally.

In the perception of followers and devotees, saints’ shrines create a haven of blessed tranquillity and peace, sukun, within an alternative universe of ethical meanings. Rather than being merely a magical source of healing, for devotees saintly charisma embodies an emotional and moral space and is at the hub of a sacred topography. In different ethnographic contexts, in South Asia, the sacred aura of a saint, his baraka, karamat or faiz, is revealed as an embodied quality of exemplary persons. These outstanding individuals create for followers and supplicants spaces of potential freedom which extend geographically across administrative and even national boundaries. They bring into dialectical conjunction a series of apparent opposites – between universalism and particularism, inclusiveness and exclusiveness, hierarchy and equality. They deny the importance of difference. All followers are united in their devotion and love of the saint, alive or dead. The vitality of Sufism thus derives not only from the ritual devotional practices around saints’ shrines, but from the way ritual is embedded in Sufi mystical philosophy, emotional proximity and a utopian imaginary of an alternative social order.

The intercultural atmosphere of tolerance evident at Sufi annual festivals in South Asia can be found elsewhere in the Muslim world too. Schielke (2008) describes the carnivalesque atmosphere at annual mulid festivals in Egypt, marked by an ethos of joyful inclusiveness. Differences between Islamic religious tendencies, gender or class are erased so that a ‘famous actress can eat next to a beggar, and there is no difference between them’. Attempts by Islamic reformists in the Egyptian administration to control what they regard as the disorderly dimensions of these festivals, with their crowds, music, transgressive alcohol drinking, gambling and spontaneous mingling between the sexes in intercultural amity, seem to be, in the long run, doomed to failure, however.

The annual celebration at a saint’s lodge or shrine in South Asia gathers together individual supplicants and pilgrims alongside organized groups of devotees and
disciples who visit the festival annually and cultivate a special relation to the saint and the Sufi tariqa or order he founded. These groups often travel great distances to attend the annual ritual. They frequently come from different linguistic, ethnic and even religious groups. Although the celebration marks the high point of the year, it cannot be understood apart from the more enduring links that constitute the organization of the order.

Inclusivity, a form of vernacular cosmopolitanism, is thus a key feature of South Asian Sufi cults. Saiyed echoes other scholars when he contends that it is through Sufi shrines that ‘the subcontinent saw the best part of Hindu-Muslim integration’, and that it was ‘the personal and spiritual influence of various saints that ... allowed for the peaceful coexistence of the two communities for several centuries on the Indian subcontinent’ (Saiyed 1989: 242). The experience of communitas at pilgrimage centres, the true sense of love and camaraderie, comes from membership in a specific but deterritorialized organization. Jurgen Frembgen describes the pilgrimage to the shrine of Lal Shabaz Qalandar in Sehwan in Sind, a thirteenth-century shrine of a saint who preached peace between Hindus and Muslims, which nevertheless has sustained a regional cult organization (Frembgen 2011). Its disciples are qalandar dervishes who often grow their hair wild and are mendicants or faqirs. At the shrine during the ‘urs they dance a devotional dance known as ‘dhammal’, a frenzied and ecstatic swirl of the head and body performed to the rhythmic beat of the dhole (a big barrel-shaped drum). Bells, gongs, cymbals and horns make a thunderous din, while the dervishes, clad in long robes, beads, bracelets and coloured head-bands, whirl faster and faster in a hypnotic trance, until with a final deafening scream they run wildly through the doors of the shrine to the courtyard beyond. The devotees come from all over Pakistan. They make their way to the shrine in organized groups known as jamaats to arrive in time for the annual festival. They meet regularly with one another at the places where they usually live.

Sufi orders create global pathways along which labour migrants travel. In a case study told to me by a migrant at the lodge centre in Pakistan, he recounted how he overcame his trials and tribulations with the aid of his Sufi shaykh (for details see Werbner 1999). For Hajji Suleiman, during his transnational peregrinations ‘home’ was condensed in the image of his Sufi saint whom he mustered before his inner eye whenever he needed courage to confront superiors and foreigners. That image was always with him. His experience of overseas travel was thus not one of alienation but of triumphant mastery, rooted in his localized faith in his shaykh – which was, simultaneously, very much also a faith in Islam as a world religion. Hence, one of the most exhilarating aspects of his migration experience for him was the sense of Islam as a boundary-crossing global faith. His voluntary labour at the tomb of Abdul Qadr Gilani in pious service to God while working on a building site confirmed his identity in his own eyes as a cosmopolitan who is at home everywhere just as God is everywhere. So too, the pilgrimage to Mecca, which he performed several times during his stay in the Middle East, provided him with an experience of membership in a global community. He was determined to have that experience, even at the risk of losing a valuable job.
Although a simple man from a poor background and with little formal education, Hajji Suleiman clearly felt that the experience of labour migration has transformed him. He was competent now in the traditions of others. He understood the Japanese, his employers, intimately, having observed their minutest customs. By the same token, he had also observed the customs, habits and idiosyncrasies of Hindus, Bangladeshis, Arabs and Iraqis. He appeared to have had close cross-cultural friendships. His confidence was such that learning another language was regarded by him as a small matter. But when he considered moving to Europe, it was nevertheless from the vantage point of his most valued identity as a Sufi. If he moved to Holland, it would be with the mission to found a branch of his order there. He would utilize the Arabic picked up in the Gulf to create a cross-national Sufi community of Pakistanis, Turks and Arabs. He was certain he could do that, since he had lived with Muslims from other countries already. The world was mapped by him in terms of his Sufi order. Holland is an empty place, a void, since there is no branch of the order there. His perspective as a Sufi member of his shaykh’s transnational regional cult shapes his cosmopolitanism and provides it with a sense of order.

The Dialectics of Vernacular Cosmopolitanism: Bollywood

The relations between Sufi followers, venerators of saints’ shrines, with their more inclusive and tolerant worldviews, and the iconoclastic, puritanical Islamists, have been antagonistic and highly politicized for hundreds of years in South Asia, and the battles have carried over into Britain, though in a attenuated form. The same puritans have also condemned Pakistani wedding ritual celebrations, with their overt sensuality, fun, dance, song and music. These too contain many themes that are widely prevalent across the whole of South Asia and its diasporas, from the use of turmeric and henna to ritual clowning and bawdy singing (see Werbner 2002/1990). Music and songs travel across the boundaries of religious communities. Not surprisingly, then, romance, love and weddings figure prominently in the shared vernacular cosmopolis of Bollywood.

Not only Muslims but the Hindu Right have objected to Bollywood as a site of ‘vice’ and loose morals. For Muslim hardliners, Bollywood is the epitome of all that is Hindu and beyond the pale. But the emergence of Bollywood, like the emergence of Hollywood, tells quite a different story. Foreigners, minorities and Muslims were there from the start. As Tabish Khair, an Indian scholar based at Aarhus University in Denmark, explains, ‘Bollywood’ was only briefly, if ever, ‘Hindi’ cinema. To the extent that the term stands for ‘mainstream Bombay cinema’, until the 1980s Bollywood was dominated by Urdu, with its historical Muslim, high-cultural associations. All the major writers of Bombay cinema in the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s wrote in Urdu. Some were famous Urdu writers. A conscious use of

In a collaborative research project proposal I am currently preparing alongside others.
Hindi began creeping into Bollywood only in the 1980s. Although both Hindi and Urdu developed from a common trunk, nevertheless there are differences between the two languages today, and the two have been written and spoken (and heard) as different languages, at the very least by the middle classes, from early in the twentieth century onwards, if not earlier. Until the 1970s, no Bollywood actor could ‘get away’ with a ‘Hindi’ accent (s instead of sh, k instead of q in some words, etc.); they had to have an Urdu accent. The language was also Urdu, or Hindustani (Hindi + Urdu = the common trunk) leaning heavily towards Urdu. Parsis and especially Anglo-Indians, who were significant in the early silent films, largely disappeared in the talkies because they mostly did not have a chaste Urdu diction. Bombay cinema only became equated with Hindi post-1970s, when it came to be caught up in quasi-nationalist discourse.

This has obscured many aspects of Bombay cinema, and particularly the large-scale involvement of Muslims and other minorities in the industry. The most recent change in Bollywood as a linguistic and national film genre has been the adoption of a kind of semi-anglicized Hindustani accent by some of the younger stars today. This would have had audiences laughing themselves to death even two decades ago, but the new creolized linguistic turn once again has the capacity to reach out across the religious, national and ethnic divisions in the subcontinent – between Hindi and Urdu, India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, Hindus, Muslims, Bengalis and Sikhs.

Like Bollywood, the term ‘diaspora’ too cannot be used unproblematically when it comes to the Bombay cinema. One has to bear in mind two types of ‘diaspora’: South Asian communities outside India and different linguistic and cultural communities within colonial India and its emergent postcolonial nations. Right from the beginning, Bombay cinema attracted people from all over India. During Partition this meant that some people, like Raj Kapoor or Dilip Kumar, who were actually from Pakistan, ended up staying on in India, and some, like Saadat Hasan Manto, ended up leaving for Pakistan. There were also Parsis, Indian Jews and Anglo-Indians in the industry. Ashok Kumar, the first real star, was a Bengali. The appeal of Bombay cinema in the context of the global South Asian diaspora can only be understood if it is put in the context of its development and continuation as part of and inflected by its internal subcontinental ‘diasporas’. It has always been an aesthetic and cultural melting pot, and hence its appeal was broader – and felt not only in India but in the rest of Asia, Africa and Eastern Europe, even before it came to the attention of Western viewers.

Diasporic South Asian audiences in the West appropriate and perform Bollywood songs and dances, irrespective of origin: Jewish Indians in Israel, Muslim Indians in East and South Africa, Sikhs in Britain, all draw from the Bollywood sensorium selectively, to perform and celebrate their own cultural events during weddings, in nightclubs, even in Hindu temples. This includes minority sexual communities such as gay South Asians (Dudrah 2006). Diasporics figure in Bollywood movies, now shown in mainline cinemas in the UK, just as these movies now include songs, dances and travel beyond the borders of India. The imagination of the vernacular

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cosmopolis which is South Asia has expanded beyond the boundaries of the subcontinent, along with its diasporas. Bollywood clearly does not belong to a single, pure culture. It has created its own imaginary country, as Javed Akhtar playfully argues:

There is one more state in this country and this is Hindi cinema ... Hindi cinema’s culture is quite different from Indian culture, but it is not alien to us, we understand it. Hindi cinema is our closest neighbour. It has its own world, its own tradition, its own symbols, its own expressions, its own language and those who are familiar with it understand it. (Kabir 1999: 35, see also Gopal and Moorti 2008: 15)

It is this capacity to share popular culture across communal divisions which has allowed the different South Asian diasporas in the UK and elsewhere to coexist harmoniously, despite conflicts on the subcontinent. Bollywood is now playing a part of what has been called ‘celluloid diplomacy’ between India and Pakistan, allowing imports of Indian movies and other cultural products between the two countries. The threat to this fragile peace currently being negotiated, and with it a loss of a shared world of aesthetic pleasure, understandings and openness to hybridity, caricature, playfulness, fun, music and song, comes from the hardliner puritans, whether Muslims or Hindus.

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