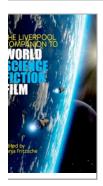
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Indian Science Fiction Cinema: An Overview

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Abstract and Keywords

Big budget Indian productions such as *Koi... mil Gaya* (*I...Found Someone*, dir. Rakesh Roshan 2003), its sequel *Krissh* (dir. Rakesh Roshan 2006), *Love Story 2050* (dir. Harry Baweja 2008) and *Krissh 3* (dir. Rakesh Roshan, 2013), all demonstrate that science fiction has become a major box-office draw in India and its diaspora. This chapter traces the literary origins and history of Indian science fiction film. Whilst doing so it also examines the influences, both international and local, which have gone into these productions. The chapter suggests that whilst borrowing heavily from Hollywood and the western science fiction tradition, Indian science fiction cinema is not entirely imitative. As a genre we suggest that it displays a cinematic tradition quite distinct, such as the inclusion of musical numbers, alongside certain significant Indian thematic elements, such as strong religious and Hindu nationalist references. Thus Indian science fiction cinema provides the possibility for not only generating significant revenue for the industry as a whole, but also remonstrating against 'the homogenising impulses of Hollywood' (Vasudevan 2000) whilst at the same time imitating its forms and styles.

Keywords: Indian cinema, Koi... mil Gaya, Krissh, Bollywood, religion, music, science fiction film

The past decade has been a rich one for Indian science fiction, both economically and in terms of production. Big budget Indian productions, such as *Koi ... mil Gaya* (I ... Found Someone, dir. Rakesh Roshan, 2003), its sequel *Krissh* (dir. Rakesh Roshan, 2006). *Love Story* 2050 (dir. Harry Baweia,

2008), and *Krissh 3* (dir. Rakesh Roshan, 2013), demonstrate that science fiction has become a major box-office draw in India and its diaspora as it has been among international audiences elsewhere. Both domestic and overseas gross box office takings from these films have subsequently been in the tens of millions of US dollars.

However, science fiction, let alone science fiction cinema, is not new in India. The earliest science fiction story to have been published in the subcontinent appears to have been the Bengali author Hemlal Dutta's 1882 tale of an automated house entitled *Rahashya* (The Mystery). The history of Indian science fiction cinema itself goes as far back as 1952, with the release of the Tamil-American coproduction *Kaadu* (The Jungle, dir. William Berke), in which researchers find that woolly mammoths are not in fact extinct. Although Swalaripi Nandi claims that *Koi* ... *Mil Gaya* 'introduce[d] images of spaceship and alien for the first time on a Bollywood screen' (81), the first Indian film to involve an alien's visit to Earth was in fact *Kalai Arasi* (Queen of Arts, dir. A. Kasilingam, 1960), a comedy in which aliens arrive in search of inspiration for their performing arts, which they find in the form of Vani, a village girl with a talent for classical Indian-cinematic song and dance. The aliens in *Kalai Arasi* view several different culturally specific examples of singing and dancing, rejecting them all before they finally settle on the Indian tradition. This prefigures an interesting development in Indian science fiction whereby nationalist and religious sentiment dominates much of the filmic discourse.

(p.57) The first Tamil film of any genre to cost more than Rs. 1 crore (10 million rupees) was the technothriller/Indiana Jonesesque *Vikram* (dir. Rajasekhar, 1986). It is interesting to note that Tamil cinema —known as 'Kollywood,' as distinct from the Hindi-language 'Bollywood' cinema—was also an early pioneer of science fiction, and continues to be a major power in Indian science fiction film. Indeed, other Indian linguistic traditions figure more prominently in the early history of Indian science fiction cinema than does Hindi film. The first Malayalam science fiction film, *Karutha Rathrikal* (dir. Mahesh), an adaptation of Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, was released in 1967, while the sadly cancelled Satyajit Ray-helmed *The Alien*, which is widely considered to have been the inspiration for Spielberg's *E.T.* (1982), was Bengali.

Since 2003, however, there has been a steady acceleration in production of Indian science fiction cinema, including the breakout hit *Koi* ... *Mil Gaya*, its aforementioned sequels *Krrish* and *Krrish* 3, as well as *Rudkrash* (dir. Mani Shankar, 2004), the generally panned *Love Story* 2050 (dir. Harry Baweja, 2008), *Endhiran* (dir. S. Shankar, 2010), and *Ra.One* (dir. Anubhav Sinha, 2011). In fact, nearly thirty major Indian science fiction films have been released in the past ten years (since 2003), a number that overshadows the entire Indian science fiction film production during the previous fifty. Indian science fiction is thus becoming a major powerhouse—and financial best bet—for Indian film studios, as well as a significant draw for both Indian and international audiences.

Many of these films are heavily influenced by Hollywood science fiction film, mostly by Spielberg classics

from the 1970s and 1980s, like *E.T. The Extraterrestrial* (1982) and *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977).¹ Neelam Sidhar Wright has gone so far as to suggest that *Koi* ... *Mil Gaya* is an 'unofficial Bollywood remake' of *E.T.* (202)—which, as we mention above and as director Satyajit Ray claims, was itself plagiarized from his unfinished film *The Alien* (Wright 2009, 194–210). *Koi* ... *Mil Gaya* also draws heavily on *Contact* (dir. Robert Zemeckis, 1997), *Back to the Future* (dir. Robert Zemeckis, 1985), *Flubber* (dir. Les Mayfield, 1997), and, with its mothership visualization, *Independence Day* (dir. Roland Emmerich, 1994). However, Indian science fiction cinema is not entirely imitative; as a genre, it also displays a cinematic tradition quite distinct from Hollywood. Indeed, many of its more recent films have become more co-productions than adaptations.

Koi ... Mil Gaya is a case in point. Despite the aforementioned parallels with earlier Hollywood productions, there are also a number of distinctly Indian elements. These include stylistic conventions such as the inclusion of musical numbers along with thematic elements like strong religious (p.58) and Hindu nationalist references: for instance, the film's theme of self-sacrifice and the parallels between the alien Jadoo and Lord Krishna. Thus Koi ... Mil Gaya reveals the possibility for Bollywood to remonstrate against 'the homogenizing impulses of Hollywood' (Vasudevan 2000), whilst at the same time imitating its forms and styles.

Another example is *Krissh* and *Krissh* 3, the sequels to *Koi... mil Gaya*, which were inspired by the Hollywood superhero-reboot films of the mid-2000s. The *Krrish* franchise was a major entry by Indian science-fiction cinema into the international cinematic marketplace. The films received a limited but relatively widespread cinematic release in the US and the UK, and were reviewed positively by Laura Kern of the *New York Times*. It too earned blockbuster acclaim and grossed \$15 million USD in its opening week at the Indian box office alone, and was the highest earning film of 2006 in India. Four years later, in 2010, *Endhiran* smashed box office records again, taking in \$44 million USD (including overseas revenue of \$12 million USD) and accounting for 30% of total yearly revenue for its producer/distributor, Sun TV Network (Malviya and Maulik 2011, par. 1).

Not all of these modern science fiction productions were necessarily successful at the box office. One of India's biggest science fiction failures of the decade was the time travel film *Love Story 2050*. Set mostly in a future Mumbai comprised of flying cars, soaring towers and robots that seemed to be copied directly out of *The Fifth Element* (dir. Luc Besson, 1997) or *I Robot* (dir. Alex Proyas, 2004), including a version of Asimov's 'Three Laws of Robotics,' this first Indian science fiction film to be set in the future over-relied on obvious Hollywood precedents. The most glaring illustration of this was a climactic laser sword fight between the film's protagonist and a Darth Vader-like opponent. Nevertheless, like *Koi* ... *Mil Gaya*, there were some intriguing Indian stylistic and thematic aspects to the film that set it apart from its Hollywood-inspired predecessors. In addition to the stylistically Indian music, for example, there is once again a strong religious theme with a story centered on reincarnation and the tag line: 'When love is

eternal, even God bends the rules.'

Alien Song and Dance

Despite Indian science fiction's growing popularity both in India and overseas, however, (or, perhaps, as a result of this simultaneous growth) there is a continuing tension between Indian cinematic tradition and expectations of international, particularly North American and other Western, audiences of science fiction cinema. The conclusion of Kern's (p.59) review of *Krissh* pinpoints this in the overseas reception of Indian science fiction cinema:\par

'Krrish' is overlong, schmaltzy, wholly derivative and sprinkled with underwhelming song-and-dance numbers. Coming from anywhere else, these elements might be considered glaring flaws. In Bollywood they are not only expected, but often, as in this film, they also appear as virtues. (2006, par. 3)

Notwithstanding the fact that schmaltziness is a relative, not absolute, value, Kern seems here to be reacting to the interpolation itself of song-and-dance into a science fiction film—a form that, in Hollywood, has generally been the domain of the socially serious (i.e. *Star Trek: The Motion Picture*, dir. Robert Wise, 1979), jingoistic (*Independence Day; Star Wars*, dir. George Lucas, 1977 and its sequels) or horrific (*Alien*, dir. Ridley Scott, 1979 and its sequels), not silly or schmaltzy. Song and dance, which Gopal and Moorti argue is so central to Bollywood film that it 'occupies the constitutive limit' of the form (2008, 1) and is also central to other Indian film traditions like the Tamil-language 'Kollywood' big-budget cinema, simply does not normally feature in Western science fiction cinema. The closest thing we have stylistically in Western science fiction tradition to a Bollywood/Kollywood film, in fact, may actually be the cult-classic *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (dir. Jim Sharman, 1975), which continues to fill theaters to this day with costumed sing-alongs—though no mainstream Indian film would ever be so sexually explicit, of course. The truly awful Paris Hilton vehicle *Repo: The Genetic Opera* (dir. Darren Lynn Bousman, 2008) is perhaps the only other mainstream example.

There is a yawning cultural gulf here in terms of the meaning of the musical number. The musical genre in the West, from the classic MGM musicals to The *Rocky Horror Picture Show*, is associated with camp—whether in its queer-theory iteration, as Steven Cohan argues (2005), or as a more generalized 'ironic self-reflective' quality (1). In contrast, in Indian cinema, song-and-dance numbers are neither semiotically genre-bound nor ironic in the least. They are present in the vast majority of films, be they gritty dramas, lighthearted comedies, or science fiction films.

In more recent films like *Ra.One* and *Endhiran*, the highly technol-ogized, effects-heavy song-and-dance sequences become central to the film's generic identity. Guest spots by popular Western musicians, like that of American hip-hop artist Akon on *Ra.One*'s soundtrack, function further as an internationalization of Indian cinematic form. **(p.60)** This adaptation goes both ways. Not only does Indian science fiction become internationalized, but the Western musical artists, visual effects artists, and other creative

professionals who work on Indian science fiction films are also engaging here with an indigenous Indian cinematic form, changing their own *oeuvres* as a result

One Recent Example: Endhiran (2011)

Endhiran—thus far the highest-grossing Indian film of all time, in any genre—is important to the newly crowded field of Indian science fiction cinema for a number of reasons. First, it is not a Bollywood film at all, but rather Kollywood. The international success of Endhiran among both Indian and non-Indian overseas audiences was driven in part by viral clips of some of the film's most outlandish action sequences, posted on YouTube. As we discuss later on in this chapter, the spread of Endhiran's content via social media provided a non-Hindi indigenous language of India with effective global representation in a novel way. Tamil Nadu is itself a particularly urbanized, and economically globalized, region. Fittingly, the representations of international commerce, scientific congress, and technological progress in Endhiran are both idealistic and cautionary. Even its casting choices demonstrate the film's simultaneous Indianness and internationality. It stars Rajinikanth, the biggest and most bankable star in India, opposite Aishwarya Rai, an international crossover star who is a household name in the West, has starred in both Indian and Hollywood films and is married to megastar Abhishek Bachchan, son of Bollywood great Amitabh Bachchan.

Genevieve Koski of *The A.V. Club* describes the film's plot as '*Frankenstein* via Asimov's Three Laws Of Robotics' (2011, par. 7). Although the film is of course more complex than this, it does owe a great, explicit debt to Asimov. Robotics expert and not-particularly-mad scientist Dr. Vaseegaran builds a robot, Chitti, using himself as a design prototype. Unlike Asimov's idealized androids, however, Chitti is physically superior to humans but is entirely subordinate to human commands, without the safety mechanism of Asimov's Three Laws of Robotics.² As in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), Dr. Vaseegaran's creation becomes self-aware and escapes from his control; a rogue scientist reprograms Chitti into a killing machine. The big questions are the classic ones of robotics and artificial intelligence: what happens when our creations become stronger and smarter than us? To what extent can we allow technology to rule us? And to what extent does embracing technology mean turning our back on humanity? These questions are **(p.61)** particularly incisive in modern India, with technology—and a reliance on technology—growing at an incredible pace.

Stylistically, *Endhiran* is a mashup. The non-action sequences are fairly standard, well-shot realism, but the action is in large part the descendant of Hollywood science fiction action films like *Robocop* (dir. Paul Verhoeven, 1987) and *The Matrix* trilogy. The latter, particularly the clone army of Smiths of *The Matrix Revolutions* (dir. Andrew and Lana Wachowski, 2003), is one of the most significant influences in the action sequences in *Endhiran*'s second half, though *Endhiran* is not alone in borrowing the image of a suited-up mass of Ray Ban-eyed soldiers. Stephen Chow's *Kung Fu Hustle* (2004) did it in its climactic battle, too.

As we discussed earlier in this chapter, nearly all mass-market Indian films, including science fiction films, include song-and-dance numbers. Earlier films tended to hew close to tradition in this context. *Koi* ... *Mil Gaya* and *Krrish*, for example, feature quite conventional Bollywood style music and dancing even as, in *Koi* ... *Mil Gaya*, a blue alien joins the dance. In *Endhiran*, 'Kadal Anukkal,' is a sweet guitar-y love song with visuals of smooth desert dunes and a gorgeous blue oasis.

The later musical sequences that feature Chitti, however, are revolutionary. The music, by composer A.R. Rahman (of Slumdog Millionaire [dir. Danny Boyle and Loveleen Tandan, 2008] fame) is wonderfully radical, and entirely unique in Indian cinema. The primary influence, both visual and musical, seems to be the electro/synth/house futuristic aesthetic of Daft Punk with a liberal splash of Lady Gaga and Deadmau5. These sequences absolutely must be seen: they are incredible to watch and a boatload of fun. English is used often in these sequences and peppered throughout the film. This is a fairly common trend in recent Indian cinema, including the science fiction examples already mentioned. It may in part be driven by commercial motivation and the intention to make crossover hits of such productions. Yet the effect in Endhiran is also quite specific. In the opening sequence to 'Irumbile Oru Idhayam,' for instance, we are treated to a journey through the inside of a CG engine, where metallic flowers suddenly blossom and become a feast for butterflies, and a high, singsong robotic voice breathes 'Arigatou qozaimasu' ('Thank you' in Japanese) and then, apropos of nothing, 'DNA.'3 What follows is a visual and musical feast that is in the aesthetic tradition of the late noughties, science fiction-inspired MTV music video: sleek silver-and-gold costumes, clipped Thriller-style movements, pop-n-lock. Sana, via playback singers Lady Kash and Krissy, raps lines like, 'You wanna come and get it, boy/Or are you just a robo-toy?' and 'I can melt your heart down/maybe if you got one/we doing that for ages/since the time of sages.' This last (p.62) is likely a reference to the Tamil saying that nothing can melt the heart that is not melted by the Tiruvachakam, a Hindu sacred text; a curious and apt double meaning, both technological and spiritual, and with an ironic context in the midst of a rap about a robot. Such a reference reminds us again of the strong religious influences to be found in Indian science fiction film. There are, however, other subtle elements—dance moves, musical characteristics, the fact that Sana dances provocatively apart from Chitti but is more subdued with him, and the two barely touch—that remind the viewer that this still is an Indian film.

One of the most striking scenes in *Endhiran* is Chitti's rescue of a teenage girl from a burning building, which refers to and ultimately subverts the figure of the Western action superhero in the face of Indian social custom. A crowd is gathered outside a burning apartment complex; a young girl is still trapped inside. Using his infrared vision, Chitti flies in and finds the girl, Selvi; as it turns out, she is bathing. This is where the film diverges from anything one would find in Hollywood superhero cinema. Selvi fights back against Chitti's rescue, because she is afraid that if she is exposed naked to the world, she will be shamed, and she would rather die in a burning room than be dishonored. Chitti ignores her, scoops her up, and deposits her, nude, before the crowd and the cameras. Rather than jubilation at her salvation, the crowd,

and Selvi's mother, react with dismay. Selvi herself pushes her way through the throng to throw herself in front of a truck. The moral here is not that Chitti is a hero for saving a life, but rather that Chitti is defective because he did not cover the girl, because he does not understand honor. At this point Dr. Vaseegaran decides to implant Chitti with an emotion chip. This dynamic is especially fascinating because of the way in which it assumes that this specific conception of honor and Indian custom, one in which a woman would rather die than be dishonored, is a fundamental part of Indian national identity. After Chitti is fitted with his emotion chip he falls in love with Sana, who kindly but firmly rebuffs his advances. His overtures anger Dr. Vaseegaran so much, however, that he dismantles the robot and tosses it in a landfill in pieces, in a scene that brings faintly to mind C-3PO's disassembly in Cloud City in The Empire Strikes Back (dir. Irvin Kershner, 1980). However, the rival scientist Dr. Bohra finds Chitti, repairs him, and programs him for destruction; to be the ultimate soldier. In practical terms, this leads Chitti to become a fluff-haired, sunglassed, GQ-styled supervillain. He kidnaps Sana from her wedding to Dr. Vaseegaran and attempts to romance her himself. He then turns on his new 'creator,' killing Dr. Bohra, and begins to (p.63) replicate himself. Herein lies the film's greatest debt to the *Matrix* trilogy: like those films' Mr. Smith, Chitti spreads like a virus, creating an army of himself that threatens to devour the city.

Readers of this chapter who are at all familiar with *Endhiran* have likely seen the viral clip that made it famous: the 9:49 minutes of increasingly absurd, over-the-top action at the very end of the film.⁴ It is not enough that Chitti stops bullets; he has to pick up a Mercedes and use it as a shield. He does not just shoot at the police who are trying to stop him; using his powers of magnetism he attracts all of their machine guns to him and then arrays them in a semicircle in front of him like an exceedingly dangerous anemone, spraying the crowd with bullets. He takes his own clone army and makes gigantic shapes out of it: a ball of Chittis that rolls around and crushes soldiers, a snake made of Chittis that eats soldiers, and finally, a giant Chitti made of smaller Chittis. The effect is both awesome and comic. And yet there is an uncomfortable sense of superiority in evidence in some discussion of the film, in which its unashamed excess is compared unfavorably with the sleek postmodern self-referentiality and sardonicism of modern Hollywood science fiction action cinema. There is a certain exuberance to *Endhiran*, a how-big-can-we-make-it sense of excitement and of play that is both characteristic of Indian cinema in general and very different from Hollywood.

International Reception and Online Community Engagement

It is not an exaggeration to suggest that the Internet is one of the most significant, if not *the* most significant, drivers of international interest in Indian science fiction cinema. Without online access to everything from promotional material to reviews to the blurry pirated clips that often, paradoxically, drive ticket and DVD sales, Indian science fiction cinema would not nearly be so well known outside of India.⁵ It is in part because of these new international audiences for Indian science fiction film that these films do so well at both Indian and international box offices, and why they are increasingly popular and well

funded by studios.

Take for instance the science fiction blog *iog.com*, one of the Gawker Media network of blogs. It is quite possibly the largest and most prominent science fiction publication online, with over a million and a half unique viewers per month, the majority of which are English-speaking Westerners. In 2008, *iog* blogger Charlie Jane Anders published a post entitled 'Five Bollywood Science Fiction Movies You Should Know.' Over the five years since, the blog has published more than a **(p.64)** dozen articles on various Indian science fiction films, including several articles on *Endhiran* both pre-and post-release.

One of the interesting things about these posts is that they include video elements: clips, previews, interviews with directors and actors, and other video content. They also include comment sections in which users can, and do, share their excitement about these films. Unlike a print review, this dynamic content is both highly engaging and highly shareable. Of course, the use of blogs, online review sites, and online video to promote a film is not unique to the Indian science fiction film industry. These channels and associated marketing strategies are now used by anyone who wishes to promote a film, including other non-Western filmmakers and film industries that seek greater international exposure and distribution. However, the ever-increasing prevalence of digital media, coupled with increasing connectivity and shareability of content—from 'share' buttons on blogs to the just-released Facebook Graph Search, which enables Facebook's billion-plus users to find relevant content more easily—makes it increasingly easy to expose international audiences to Indian science fiction cinema.

In the case of *Endhiran*, as we mention above, the most significant driver of international interest around the film is a clip of the film's final fight scene, which functions in part as a demonstration of the VFX team's sheer prowess. The most popular version of the clip, called 'Best Action Scenes Ever!!! (Indian Robot Endhiran),'7 has, as of October 2013, garnered over seven *million* views on YouTube. Similarly, a clip of the song 'Criminal' from *Ra.One*, which features a deliberately international crowd drinking together in a nightclub, has racked up over nine million views since being uploaded in November 2011. Other *Ra.One* songs have been viewed on YouTube over five million times.

There are risks here, of course. As the music industry has learned, exposure does not always equal increased sales. Video piracy is a problem, and there is likely to be a huge differential in the number of people who have seen the newest Indian science fiction film and the number of people who have actually paid to see it. But again, these risks are no different from those facing any other segment of the film industry. In fact, unlike in the case of Hollywood films that are relatively easy for Western audiences to access, the *limited* nature of access to this kind of content—that is, the ability to see a sequence or a song, but not necessarily the whole film unless one is willing or able to seek it out on torrent sites—may actually drive demand for legitimate releases of these films.

(p.65) Conclusion

Although the Indian science fiction film industry is not young, its prominence and popularity, particularly

internationally, are very new and are increasingly driven by digital media and online sharing. Koski touches on this phenomenon in her review of *Endhiran*, referencing the aforementioned video clip that became famous on YouTube:\par

Endhiran is more than just an accidental viral hit: That paunchy guy is Rajinikanth, the biggest Indian movie star (he's actually billed as 'SUPERSTAR Rajni' in his movies) and the second highest-paid actor in Asia after Jackie Chan. His co-star in Endhiran is a former Miss World, and probably the only Indian film star recognizable to American audiences, Aishwarya Rai. Endhiran is the most expensive (around \$38 million US) and highest-grossing (roughly \$82 million US) film in Indian history. Those special effects were done by Stan Winston Studios (of Jurassic Park, Aliens, Terminator, and more) and Industrial Light and Magic. And the music was composed by Academy Award-winning composer A.R. Rahman. This isn't just some random Indian movie that happened to stumble into the American consciousness; it's the Indian blockbuster, essentially the Avatar of Tamil cinema (often referred to as 'Kollywood,' the South Indian cousin of Bollywood). And yet most Western audiences are only familiar with it through a 10-minute YouTube clip they guffawed at with coworkers over lunch one day. (2011, par. 3)

Here, Koski effectively sums up the Gordian knot of Indian science fiction film's tensions around indigeneity, coproduction, and international reception. *Endhiran* is not the only Indian science fiction production that is technologically state-of-the-art. *Love Story 2050*'s special effects were done at Weta Workshop, New Zealand, the team behind *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit* trilogies. Similarly, *Koi ... Mil Gaya*'s special effects were the work of Marc Kolbe, who had been hired to produce science fiction Hollywood blockbusters such as *Independence Day* and *Godzilla* (dir. Roland Emmerich, 1998). *Endhiran*'s stars, like those of the other major Indian science fiction films, are some of the highest paid in the world; its visual effects are a team effort between Indian studios and George Lucas's legendary Hollywood VFX house Industrial Light and Magic. And yet its climactic action sequence, which marries Hollywood-quality visual effects with a particularly Indian over-the-top, not-quite-serious cinematic style that is coupled with a strong dose of religious and moralistic sentiment, is not taken seriously in American (p.66) office cubicles. It is a big-budget science fiction film that owes much to Hollywood and is popular in the West—and yet, at its heart, it is ultimately Indian.

The rate of production of Indian science fiction films is increasing nearly exponentially. The past four years have seen over a dozen major releases in the genre, with several more, including the forthcoming comic-adaptation superhero film *Doga* (dir. Anurag Kashyap), due out in 2014. It is too early at this point, and the modern state of the genre is too new, to predict trends. But one thing seems certain: the popularity of Indian science fiction film, both at home and abroad, seems poised only to increase. The emphasis upon science fiction may be one element, therefore, of an Indian commercial strategy to challenge the hegemony of Hollywood both commercially and thematically.

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