“If Globalization Is Happening, It Should Work Both Ways”: Race, Labor, and Resistance among Bollywood’s Stunt Workers

Pawanpreet Kaur¹

JAWAHARLAL NEHRU UNIVERSITY, NEW DELHI
Postforpawan [AT] gmail.com

Abstract

The study of labor relations in the Mumbai film industry is a curious blind spot in scholarship on Indian cinema. While scholars have attended to the history of Indian cinema, film texts, and questions on circulation and viewership, the study of the industrial relations that uphold the production of cinematic content remains largely ignored. Through this article, I hope to address this gap, by examining specifically the prickly relations resulting from the transnational flow of labor into the Mumbai film industry, especially among the segment of stunt workers. I hope to examine this knotty triangulate of race, labor, and resistance, as put up by local stunt workers, organizationally and individually. I will be doing so by attending to the subjective articulations of stunt workers and by examining the industrial structure that allows for these conflicts to arise in the first place.

Keywords: Race, Labor, Competition, Stunts, Bollywood

Introduction

The study of labor relations in the Mumbai film industry is a curious blind spot in scholarship on Indian cinema. While scholars have attended to the history of Indian cinema, film texts, and questions on circulation and viewership, the study of the industrial relations that uphold the production of cinematic content remains largely ignored.² Through this article, I hope to address this gap, by examining specifically the prickly relations resulting from the transnational flow of labor into the Mumbai film industry, especially among the segment of stunt workers.³

In the last decade, the entry of multinational media conglomerates, such as Fox Studios, Walt Disney, and Viacom, and the inflow of foreign capital in the Mumbai film industry have meant a change in its production culture. This has resulted not only in the proliferation of variegated content in films but also in leaner productions, a spike in overseas location shootings, and an increase in the hiring of non-Indian film workers, both in overseas and domestic location shootings. Increasingly, workers such as cine dancers, extras, cinematographers, and stunt performers are drawn from the ever-expanding pool of transnational workers, albeit mostly from Europe and North America. Insofar as stunt workers are concerned, the hiring of non-Indian stunt directors, their assistants, and stunt performers (specialists as well as utility performers) has registered a sharp increase, much to the chagrin of the local stunt fraternity. Very often, the foreign stunt teams who are invited to join film productions are from European or the US (in films such as *Agent Vinod* [Sriram Raghavan, 2012], *Ek Tha Tiger* [Kabir Khan, 2012], and *Force 2* [Abhinay Deo, 2016]) or, of late, from east Asian countries (*Fan* [Maneesh Sharma, 2016], *Rocky Handsome* [Nishikant Kamat, 2016], and *Baaghi* [Sabbir Khan]).⁴ Since the hiring of foreign stunt teams means competition and loss of job opportunities for local stunt workers, the latter view the former with a heightened degree of caution and suspicion. While the actual shoots may proceed smoothly, there is nevertheless an acute anxiety that undergirds the working relations between local and foreign stunt workers. These tensions, I will argue, assume racial connotations, especially because local stunt workers often lose out work opportunities to stunt teams comprising white men and women. Rather than offering a chance for transnational solidarities, we can see tensions in the international flow of labor as it occurs in the Mumbai film industry. However, local stunt workers have responded to this development by devising their own strategies to prevent the undermining of their own position in the local production culture. Through this article, I hope to examine this knotty triangulate of race, labor, and resistance, as put up by local stunt workers, organizationally and individually. I will be doing so by attending to the subjective articulations of stunt workers and by examining the industrial structure that allows for these conflicts to arise in the first place.

Responding to Conflicts: Organizational Resistance

At the outset, it would be helpful to understand the organization of stunt workers within the Mumbai film industry. Stunt artists in Mumbai are organized under the umbrella of a craft association called the Movie Stunt Artists Association (MSAA), which in turn is affiliated to the Federation of Western India Cine Employees (FWICE), a trade union with twenty-two film craft affiliates under it. While today MSAA is one of the strongest trade union body within the Mumbai film industry, its origins were fraught, given the antagonism it faced from film producers and studio heads, who were vehemently opposed to the formation of a trade union of stunt workers. Film scholar Madhava Prasad writes that as independent producers slowly gained traction in the erstwhile Bombay film industry through the 1930s and 1940s, their tactics (such as “luring away” film stars) caused the destabilization, and eventually the collapse, of the Bombay film studios. With film studio workers turning into a floating, free-lance labor force, working conditions became more and more precarious, with rampant

disregard for their rights pertaining to wages, safety, and labor time. Following calls for legislative interventions to streamline the industrial setup, the central and state governments constituted several committees to assess problems and to offer possible solutions for industrial reforms.⁵ It was around this time, in the early 1950s, that film workers first began to organize themselves into craft collectives to negotiate and protect their interests.⁶

Finally, in December 1954, film workers and technicians met to discuss the possibility of an umbrella organization of film craft bodies, where they could collectively bargain for their rights and interests before the producers and the government. On March 19, 1956, nine craft associations came together to form the FWICE, which has since acted as a representative of all craft associations before producers' bodies and government agencies.⁷

Around this time, although stunt workers had started to organize informally into a collective, they were still years away from becoming a formal, recognized group. Stunt workers, in fact, had remained outside the loop of a specialized, determinate organization. While stunt masters were on the payroll of film studios, those who actually performed the stunts were hired as "extras" through agents or suppliers by the studios. Till the early 1950s, burly and/or agile men, who would later go on to become stunt artists, were called on to perform stunts and stand in as background artists or to help around film sets. Mostly, however, studios that produced stunt films had their in-house stunt specialists.⁸ With the collapse of the studios, this practice, too, was gradually dissolved, forcing stunt workers to seek work on a freelance basis. Under these new conditions, stunt workers were not only afflicted by precarious working conditions, they also faced imminent risk of injury and death, with no channels to address matters of compensation and medical aid.

In the light of this situation, in 1954, five stunt workers, including Douglas, Robert, Azim, Baliram, and Burhanuddin, came together to form the MSAA. No formal record pertaining to the formation of the Association exists, and historical accounts of the same are largely based on oral narratives. Chanana, who interviewed founder-member Burhanuddin's son, writes that the association was viewed unfavorably by producers such as Homi Wadia (Basant Studio), Nanubhai Wakil (Desai Films), Ramnik Bhai (Mohan Studios), and Nanabhai Bhatt (Prakash Studios), who were opposed to the formation of a separate association for stunt workers. The tussle between the two groups went on for about five years before the formal registration of the Association under the Trade Union Act in 1959 with about thirty-five members.⁹ Among the first rules introduced by the association was that stunt workers would get hired through stunt masters and not suppliers who charged a commission and siphoned off a portion of their payments. Over the years, they raised other demands such as the regulation of payments, specification of minimum wages, provision of insurance, medical aid, and compensation in case of death and injury as per legislative acts—pressing their demands in trade bodies and in negotiations with state authorities.

Today, MSAA is among the most powerful craft associations in FWICE, observing, for the most part, strict adherence to its rules in safeguarding the rights of its 585 members. Membership is open to men and women, although there are only ten female members in the association at present, the highest ever in its history. MSAA is responsible for the protection of workers' rights, collective bargaining, and arbitration in case of disputes. It is more akin to a craft association, in that its internal organization accommodates specialized kind of work and maintains a cap over the supply of labor. The association acts as an intermediary,

receiving workers' wages from film producers through checks and transferring them to members' bank accounts. It also maintains a pool of funds which is used to disburse interest-free loans for education and marriage, retirement fund, medical aid, and compensation for families of stunt workers, in case of death and injury. Membership to the group is rather exclusive, with protégés and sons (women hardly apply) of members often being selected over "outsiders." It is rare for people who come without any "via-via networks," as one stunt artist put it, to make it to the group. So "hardwired"¹⁰ is this network that it is not uncommon to find people who are third-generation stunt workers from their families.

Generally speaking, the MSAA takes a tough stand in relation to the hiring of nonunion members in film productions, be they local workers from Mumbai, workers from other regional film industries in India, or non-Indian workers. In the MSAA's charter of rules, there are strict guidelines in relation to the hiring of nonunion workers, the flouting of which can lead to the imposition of penalties or an outright boycott of noncompliant producers. Producers are often resentful of such muscle flexing, viewing this as a form of cartelization. Every production that hires nonunion members is required under these rules to also provide employment to members of the union in keeping with a ratio of 70:30 (70 percent local workers as against 30 percent nonlocal workers), an arrangement that has caused repeated conflagration between film workers and producers.¹¹ While this displays deep anxieties in relation to external labor groups, it is essentially a tool that attests to the union's unequivocal commitment to guarding its own turf and staving off competition. This feeling of resentment extends to foreign stunt teams, who are viewed with a mix of envy, awe, and scorn. Owing to their increased hiring over the past decade in Mumbai film productions, MSAA has come up with a set of rules that make the hiring of foreign teams a rather expensive proposition. Each member of the visiting stunt team must take an "honorary membership" of the association, the daily charges of which are US\$136 for a stunt director, US\$102 for an assistant, and US\$68 for a stunt artist. This amount is paid to the association by the producer, who must also pay the exorbitant fees of the foreign team (stunt masters themselves often charge over US\$1,000 per day). In comparison, local stunt workers are paid US\$66 per day, whereas stunt directors can earn between US\$475 and US\$680 per day.¹² Such measures are aimed at controlling and discouraging external agents from accessing the internal labor market.

In the past, there have been several complaints against producers employing nonunion members in contravention of FWICE rules, under which they have to be accountable before the industry's Joint Dispute Settlement Committees, the final body for the arbitration of disputes. At other instances, Vigilance Committees (constituted under a Memorandum of Understanding between FWICE and the producers' bodies) conduct raids on film sets to determine whether nonmembers are employed. Often, however, these also become a means to settle scores or to wriggle one's way into a production. A stunt worker, unwilling to be named, informed me that former MSAA president and stunt director Sunil Rodrigues conducted such a raid on the sets of the action film *Rocky Handsome* (Nishikant Kamat, 2016) in the city of Hyderabad.¹³ The Vigilance Committee found that the film's producers had hired a Thailand-based stunt group called JAIKA Stunts Team, but failed to employ any members from the Mumbai association, in contravention of its rules. Under the FWICE rules, such a violation meant the film's producers would be penalized for not hiring members of its union. Faced with the prospect of paying a heavy penalty, or worse, blacklisting, the producers

invited Rodrigues to join the production as a stunt coordinator and also bring in his own team to join the JAIKA crew. Such measures, while guaranteeing work for union members, no doubt peeve the producers, who then take recourse to measures such as arbitration before the Joint Dispute Settlement Committee.¹⁴

While this organizational resistance to the poaching of employment opportunities by non-union, especially foreign workers, is well-documented in the news media (with most of these accounts being unsympathetic toward film workers), what remains unattended is the complex dynamics and negotiations of the issue at an individual level. Almost every stunt artist I met over the course of seven months in Mumbai in 2016-17 was palpably dispirited by the new production culture that favors “foreign,” especially white, workers to them. In the following section of this article, I will be examining some banal, yet highly emotive, issues that are central to the way in which the fault lines in this conflict come to be strengthened. While most often film shoots and collaborations themselves may occur successfully (and even result in positive professional and personal relationships), the underlying tensions and insecurities contribute to the overall culture of mistrust and perceptions of victimhood.

The Subjectivity of Conflict

Cinematic action entails a certain kind of bodily practice that incorporates muscular memory and a routinization of embodied action. Each brisk move—a faux punch or a fall on the ground—has its own complex mechanics that comprise controlled bodily movement, an astute awareness of injury-minimizing techniques, and a flamboyant physicality that adds aesthetic grace to stunt work. Very often, stunt artists’ awareness of their own corporeality is also shaped by social perceptions of the body. Stunt workers view their bodies primarily through the lenses of athleticism and muscular physicality, but these are also supported by an acute awareness of gender and race. During numerous conversations with stunt artists in Mumbai, several stunt workers remarked with amusement that they had a “*goonda*” (thug) look—referring to their “dark” complexion, “harsh” features, and a general air of menace—the kind of men, they thought, one associated with goons and henchmen. In contrast, a “*gora, lamba, chauda*” (fair-skinned, tall, well-built) performer was often considered the “perfect double material,” ideal for being a hero’s duplicate. The deployment of these terms unwittingly ended up creating a hierarchy of looks, implying a bias against workers with darker skin tones, in keeping with an industry, and culture, that is obsessed with “fairness.” The relationship between skin tone and life chances, which has been a subject of enquiry in the social sciences in the United States,¹⁵ offers rich insights into the damaging racial bias in the commercial film industries in India, which have spawned entire subindustries of “fairness.” Onscreen actors and performers with lighter skin tones are preferred to those with darker skins, whether in the case of actors, extras, dancers, or stunt performers. Among stunt workers, it is very often stunt women who suffer under this prejudice. Female stunt artist Geeta Tandon recounted numerous instances where she lost film projects because the producers wanted “fair-complexioned” girls. She observed,

I have lost many films to European actors and dancers, who operate in the Mumbai film industry. Unlike me, these girls are not trained fighters, but they are routinely given stunt work as actresses’

stunt doubles because the production guys want “fair-complexioned” girls whose skin tone matches that of the heroines. I stand in the sun all day, getting tanned and dirty. I can’t help but be dark!

Her desperation and dejection was horrifyingly palpable when she added,

I’m even willing to take fairness injections that are all the rage these days, but there is no guarantee that even such an extreme measure will get me work. The craze for “whiteness” is not something I can fight. It is a systemic problem which no amount of rules can offset.¹⁶

Such perceived discrimination belies an insidious undertone insofar as the question of race is concerned. Geeta’s words not only bring into being the racial tension underlining the transnational exchange of labor, it also gives an insight into the sense of inferiority that plagues the local workers in relation to their white counterparts.

In his theory of the “politics of production,” sociologist Michael Burawoy uses the Gramscian concept of “hegemony” or “domination by consent,” to argue that there exists a dialectical relationship between structure and agency in places of production. He suggests that rather than being “coerced,” workers participate willfully in the capitalist system and “consent” in different ways to their own inhibition by the system. Here, I would like to borrow two terms from Burawoy, who tries to understand workers’ response to hegemonic regimes through two types of action—“making out” and “making do.” When a worker “makes out,” according to Burawoy, she/he finds the flaws of a system, manipulates them, and uses them to her/his own advantage. This not only helps recover a sense of agency through resistance but may also establish solidarity among the workers. Conversely, “making do” refers to the process of working with the grain of capitalist intention, aligning her/his actions with the normative discourse of efficiency, speed, and the like. Outside of theory, though, making out and making do, resistance and consent, are complex and ambiguous processes that often crisscross each other to produce equivocal end results. Many stunt workers admitted that the protracted and intensive working conditions on a film set often help nurture friendships with foreign stunt workers and directors. But the lurking bitterness may sometimes give way to abrasiveness, especially toward foreign stunt women. They admitted to having to “make do” with circumstances oftentimes while at others “making out” of prescribed norms. Below, we shall discuss some of the ways in which they manage to do so.

But before that let us take a moment to define resistance. By resistance, I refer to acts by way of which an individual asserts or reasserts his/her stance in a situation that is not originally very conducive to him/her. In the present case, this could mean small (or big) acts by stunt performers or stunt directors that allow them to reclaim a sense of agency within their field of operation. Resistance, coming from the Latin root word *resistere* meaning “make a stand against,” takes many forms with which to fight and oppose an unjust system that the film industry can often turn out to be.

As it so happens, it is not just the stunt workers who have to negotiate the question of racial difference and insecurities. Stunt directors, too, find themselves handicapped when it comes to the question of parity with their non-India counterparts. Pervez Sheikh, one of the most prolific and respected stunt directors in the Mumbai film industry, admitted to feeling discriminated against, especially when it came to codirecting action sequences with foreign

stunt directors. For all his success and inventiveness, Sheikh often feels disadvantaged because he does not speak English and feels left out of discussions involving other crew members, especially foreign stunt coordinators. He recalls being part of the action film, *Bang Bang* (Siddharth Anand, 2014), in which some of the action sequences were being helmed by the British stunt director, Andy Armstrong (whose credits as stunt director include films such as *The Amazing Spiderman* [Marc Webb, 2012], *Thor* [Kenneth Branagh, 2011], and *The Amazing Spiderman 2* [Marc Webb, 2014]). He related,

Everyone was going gaga over Andy, saying Andy this, Andy that. Though I respected his work, I was really hurt by the behaviour of the Indian members of the crew. They would plan everything with Andy, and leave me out of discussions because everything had to be translated for me from English into Hindi. I, too, was very hesitant to ask or to speak, so they just relayed orders to me about what needed to be done. I didn't have any say in the film, although I was co-stunt director.¹⁷

By a stroke of luck, Sheikh managed to reach the hill town of Manali for a production schedule a week before Armstrong and his team. While there, his team did some reconnaissance, choreographed a sequence, shot it on their iPhones, and sent a rough cut to the film's director Anand and to Armstrong. "They were overjoyed with my cut and approved it instantly. Without speaking a word of English, I could finally be a part of my own stunt sequences." Sheikh remarked that he buys every updated version of the iPhone to give to his team of assistants, who record rehearsals, exchange the videos using "AirDrop," and edit the sequence in a matter of seconds. "This way, the director and the DOP understand my vision for the sequence, and give me the creative space to do my work."¹⁸ This is how Sheikh "makes out" of the systemic discrimination against his inability to speak English and carves a creative space for himself. In his discussion of infrastructures, Ravi Sundaram writes that technology often latches itself onto subaltern populations to create pirate networks that provide greater access, and through it, political agency to such groups. Sheikh's use of new media technology bypasses the hierarchies of language, power, and race to create his own small "horizontal network," which he then uses as springboard to create "new platforms of political-aesthetic action."

Gender-based discrimination remains a particularly thorny issue in film production, and it is even more so in the masculinist field of stunt work. These biases become palpable when viewed through the lens of everyday practice on a film set. It would be fruitful, therefore, to discuss one particular case, made profoundly more interesting due to the involvement of a white woman. On the set of the film adventure-musical *Jagga Jasoos* (Anurag Basu, 2017), I met Mila Maximova, a stunt double for the lead actor, Katrina Kaif. Maximova is a Russian national, who graduated from the Russian Academy of Theatre Arts in 2014 before making her way to Mumbai to find work in the Hindi film industry as an actor and dancer. When I met her, Mila was getting ready in the action vanity van, where she stayed for the better of the day, not really mingling with the local film crew. Mostly, Mila said, she worked as a background dancer and a model, although of late she has been working as a stunt double in some films. She admitted to feeling frustrated about not being able to put her training as a theater actor to use: "but it's not as if I am spoilt for choices here."¹⁹ She said she liked Mumbai and earned a decent living working for films and commercials, although negotiating working conditions and relations could sometimes be overwhelming. "Of course, I meet all kinds of people but I have learnt to shut out negative and unsolicited attention." When I pointed out Geeta's anxieties vis-à-vis non-union

members like herself, she shrugged her shoulders: “I’ve come here on a legal work permit and if the stunt master himself is hiring me, I don’t see why that should be a problem for anyone.” In fact, her unwillingness to initiate workplace relations with anyone other than department heads became evident through the course of the day. She spoke to no one else, including members of the stunt team, who outwardly seemed indifferent to her presence but were keenly perceptive of her presence. Unlike their female colleagues from the stunt association, with whom these stunt men forge friendly relationships, an outsider like Mila remained an oddity, often likened to a lascivious object. At one point, stunt assistant, Rajesh Panchal, dispatched a junior to help Mila wear a body harness for a shot involving cable work. He excitedly turned to another stunt double and half-jokingly said, “*Ja ja, tu bhi chance maar le*” (Go, you too try your luck). Such “predatory masculinist aggression” must be commonplace for someone like Mila, although she evaded any direct response to such queries. It was not surprising that she remained in the vanity van throughout the day, barring the two occasions when she stepped out to perform her shots. At the end of the day, when she left with stunt director Allan Amin in his car, the stunt crew exchanged knowing glances. From a distance, I could see them muttering among themselves, before breaking into a raucous laugh. The gender-based discrimination meted out to Mila clearly originated from a combination of sexual and nonsexual impulses, making her an easy target in the gendered and racial power tussle. The workplace solidarity so famous among stunt workers was forfeited when confronted with a foreign worker, whose simultaneous perception as a threat and a desired object solidified boundaries of social exclusion and inclusion in the group.

The reasons given by film producers and directors for their preference in hiring foreign stunt performers and teams are that very often, unlike their Mumbai-based counterparts, they are specialists in martial arts, parkour, motorcross racing, car and bike stunts, underwater stunts, and so on.²⁰ It isn’t as if local stunt artists cannot or do not perform these feats, but the level of expertise among local stunt workers may fail to match that desired by the producers. When interrogated, several stunt artists informed me that their wages were so abysmal that they had to keep fishing for work to make ends meet, leaving them barely enough time to focus on skill development and training. In terms of career development, a few did show interest in acquiring new skills, such as scuba diving, car drifting, or motocross racing, but most complained of not having enough time or money to pursue these. Female stunt worker Geeta remarked,

Training for these new skills requires time and money. If I start investing my time and money in such expensive training, how will I find work and run my household? As it is, jobs are few and far between, and don’t pay particularly well.²¹

As these workers face intensified transnational and transregional competition, they appear ill-equipped to stave off the threat of missing work opportunities.

Reflecting on the altered position of “creative labor” in Hollywood, Susan Christopherson has argued that changes in the US media landscape—most notably the rise of huge media conglomerates—have resulted in the increasing precariousness of its workforce. One could argue that something similar seems afoot in the Mumbai film industry. A significant paradigm shift that has affected labor relations in the industry is the move to digital technology. While the Mumbai film industry has embraced digital technology, some of the fighters I spoke to were

not entirely enthusiastic about the results. Technologies such as face replacement, made possible with advancements in visual effects (VFX), can now substitute the stunt double's face with the actor's, practically erasing every trace of his labor. Moreover, the corporatization of the film industry, too, has adversely affected labor relations and conditions. International media conglomerates entering the Mumbai film business are keen on releasing their films overseas and arrange for the shooting of "quality" action sequences in international locations where they can get subsidies and tax benefits. Stunt artists, and sometimes masters, from Mumbai, however, hardly ever get to be a part of these. Stunt biker Amit Grover told me that although he performed a key bike chase sequence in the action-drama *Fan* (Manish Sharma, 2016), he had shot for it in front of a green screen in Mumbai, while some master shots were taken with a Korean stunt biker in Croatia.²² Missing these "outdoor" shoots upsets fighters immensely, not simply because of economic loss but also because they are increasingly feeling left out of their own films. Amritpal Singh, another stunt artist, remarked wryly, "If globalization is happening, it should work both ways. Why are we left out?"²³

Perhaps, in this light, it would be helpful to turn to Arjun Appadurai's concept of "production fetishism," which seems particularly relevant to the facets of Hindi film industry being discussed here. For Appadurai, Marx's concept of commodity fetishism has been replaced by "production fetishism" and "fetishism of the consumer." Here, we shall concern ourselves with the former. By "production fetishism" Appadurai suggests that by focusing on the local sites of production, we tend to overlook "the globally-dispersed forces that actually drive production processes today." As a result of this globalization of production, in the global or transnational economy of today, workers are not only alienated (in the Marxist sense) from the goods they produce but doubly so because the power that lies behind production processes is no longer in the same locality as the workers. In the case of stunt workers of Bollywood, with the increasing inflow of both foreign capital and foreign labor, the workers find themselves increasingly distanced from the very industry in which they operate and the media object they produce. For this reason perhaps, stunt performers often fail to recognize themselves on screen because a single action sequence may be heavily divided between their performance and that of a foreign stunt performer's.

The transnational exchange of labor can, however, also lead to increased awareness and inflow of knowledge, something that Christopherson overlooks in her analysis. Although most fighters and masters seemed resentful of the increase in the hiring of foreign stunt teams for Hindi films, they also admitted to learning a lot while working with them. Biker Amit Grover remarks that he learnt of the shocking pay disparity between stunt artists in Mumbai and Hollywood while working with a British biker in *Hero* (Nikhil Advani, 2015): "For a skid-and-accident shot, I get around US\$202, while this British biker is paid £1500. Converted into Dollars, that's roughly US\$1910. Why is there such a huge pay difference for the same stunt?"²⁴ Clearly, the mobility of capital on a global scale has intensified inequalities as well as competition among transnational labor networks, as discussed above. Nevertheless, it has also unwittingly allowed these to become visible through solidarities forged among workers linked across national borders in complex production chains dominated by a common employer. Workers exchange information and ideas on the performance of stunts, hiring opportunities, and, as described above, wage policies, among other things. This not only helps in drawing up comparative models with which to negotiate the operation of the

industry, but also in building bridges across transnational labor chains, relationships which need not always be, as we have seen, abrasive. These solidarities, significant as they are, are often missing from Christopherson's analysis of creative labor industries.

Just as a cinematographer plays with light and a lyricist with words, a stunt worker plays with risk, and this is true of stunt performers the world over. Undertaking risk, and being able to think judiciously in terms of risk, is quite simply the defining features of a stunt performer's working life. However, if we were to zoom out and view the Mumbai film industry as a whole, we will find that the systems and structures of the commercial industry rely considerably on the ideology of risk. It is in the push and pull of risk-taking that we can locate the work of stunt artists and their negotiations within a larger industrial framework. Action remains a safe bet in the Hindi film industry. From the "stunt films" of early Bombay cinema up to the VFX-aided blockbuster films of today, the spectacle of action has been a key node in the industry's regime of economic risk-taking aimed at guaranteeing footfall and minimizing economic risk. These spectacular box-office attractions are premised on the "foregrounding of risk" through thrills and stunt sequences, but the huge infrastructure and the intense physical labor and peril that back it remain unseen. As Sylvia Martin writes, while the risks themselves may become lucrative by generating spectacular images and profits for the commercial film industry, the act of risk-taking itself can be potentially destructive for the body of individual stunt workers undertaking such risks. I also found it curious how the norms of risk and safety were so closely linked to one's cultural moorings and industrial standards. Stunt biker Amit Grover recalled how during his work with a Hollywood stunt biker, Dan Whitby, he was amused by the latter's baffled reaction at seeing him perform dangerous stunts. "He told me I was crazy to be performing such stunts without 'proper' safety equipment. I have been doing these stunts for years and nothing much has happened so far," Grover avers, unconsciously underscoring the difference in the cultural and normative understanding of risk among workers from different industrial contexts.²⁵ Moreover, instances such as these also become the cause of bitterness among workers from different locales. At least three stunt directors I spoke to emphasized, with a sense of resignation, the difference in the attitude of film producers in their response to foreign and local stunt directors' demands for safety equipment. A veteran stunt director Allan Amin ponders,

When we ask a producer or charge him for the provision of proper safety equipment for a film shoot, they haggle with us or sometimes refuse our demands outright. However, if a foreign stunt director asks for a particular safety equipment or quotes a higher price as rental, the same producers willingly acquiesce. Are the lives and limbs of local workers less important than that of foreign ones? Why the differential treatment?²⁶

Conclusion

The world over, stunt workers are hired because they are a skilled labor group specializing in every aspect of stunt filmmaking—from the conceptualization and planning of stunts to their preparation and execution, and most importantly, the safety of the performers and the crew in attendance. The entry of external laboring pools always tends to upset the internal labor market anywhere in the world, but in the Mumbai film industry, it takes a particularly abrasive form because of the racial undertones undergirding the hiring of foreign stunt teams. As we

have seen above, the tension between foreign and local workers is not so much related to the fact of entry of foreign workers into the local labor market but to the differential treatment meted out to them by those at the top of the industrial power structures and hierarchies. As discussed in the article, stunt workers routinely engage in “making out” behavior by, say, using an iPhone to recuperate the creative space for oneself or by performing stunts that a foreign worker would find too risky. Conversely, by acquiescing to perform dangerous stunts despite being aware of the pay differential between themselves and foreign workers, these performers “make do” with the system, just as some of them are willing to undertake extreme measures (such as taking fairness injections) to conform to the acceptable notion of appearances. However, rather than being pitted against each other, perhaps stunt workers, both local and foreign, would be better off by forging transnational solidarities that create a salutary work culture that puts mutual support over atomized self-interest.

¹ Pawanpreet Kaur is currently pursuing her PhD from Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.

² The notable exceptions that engage with labor in the Mumbai film industry include Shuddhabrata Sengupta’s critical reflection on the work of A-list camerapersons; Madhusree Dutta’s examination of the intersection of labor, materiality, and desire; Claire M. Weber-Wilkinson’s analysis of the work, subjectivity, and marginalization of the Hindi film industry’s “dressmen”; and Debashree Mukherjee’s work on film workers filtered through the lens of the laboring body. I have found these interventions useful to think through the broader paradigm of my own approach. See Shuddhabrata Sengupta, “Reflected Readings in Available Light: Cameramen in the Shadows of Hindi Cinema,” in *Bollyworld: An Introduction to Popular Hindi Cinema*, ed. Raminder Kaur and Ajay J. Sinha (New Delhi: SAGE, 2005), 118–42; Madhusree Dutta, Kaushik Bhaumik, and Rohan Shivkumar, *Project Cinema City* (New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2013); Clare M. Wilkinson-Weber, “The Dressman’s Line: Transforming the Work of Costumers in Popular Hindi Film,” *Anthropological Quarterly* 79 (4, 2006): 581–608; Debashree Mukherjee, *Bombay Modern: A History of Film Production in Late Colonial India (1930s–1940s)* (PhD diss., Department of Cinema Studies, New York University, 2015).

³ This paper is based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Mumbai from July 2016 to April 2017.

⁴ The first Hindi film featuring the work of a foreign stunt team was the action blockbuster *Sholay* (Ramesh Sippy, 1975). The team included British stunt director Gerry Crampton and his team, including Jim Allen, Romo Commorro, and John Grant (Chopra, 2000, 175).

⁵ The reports of two such committees (The Central Government’s Film Enquiry Committee, 1951 and the Bombay State Government’s Enquiry into the Conditions of Labour in the Cinema industry in Bombay State, 1955), played a significant role in the campaign for industrial reform, laying the groundwork for subsequent laws pertaining to the organization and regulation of work in the film industry. See Opendar Chandra, *The Missing 3 in Bollywood: Safety, Security, Shelter* (Nyon: Uni Global Union, 2011), 292; Dutta, Bhaumik, and Shivkumar, *Project Cinema City*, 255.

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- ⁶ Opendar Chanana writes that although trade and producers' organization, such as Bombay Cinema and Theatre Trade Organization, and Indian Motion Pictures Producers Association had come into being in 1926 and 1937, respectively, film workers and technicians were not as proactive until the imminent collapse of the film studios. See Chanana, *The Missing 3 in Bollywood*, 9–13.
- ⁷ Among craft groups that signed up as affiliates of Federation of Western India Cine Employees (FWICE) in 1956 were talent agents/suppliers, cine musicians, cinematographers, film writers, film editors, costume and makeup artists, dancers, junior artists, and sound engineers. See Dutta, Bhaumik, and Shivkumar, *Project Cinema City*, 255.
- ⁸ Valentina Vitali, for instance, writes that filmmaker J.B.H. Wadia of Wadia Movietone, a prominent film studio based in erstwhile Bombay, remarked in his unpublished autobiography that the studio had its own group of “efficient and bold extras on the staff” who performed stunts, and dubbed them “The Fighting Squad of Wadia Movietone.” See Wadia, unpublished, cited in Valentina Vitali, *Hindi Action Cinema: Industries, Narratives, Bodies* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2008), 103–104.
- ⁹ The first president of the association was Douglas (real name was Mohammad Hussein), who acquired the sobriquet due to his striking resemblance to Hollywood star Douglas Fairbanks.
- ¹⁰ Susan Christopherson argues that there is a tendency in Hollywood's media and affiliated industries to perpetuate an “old boys' network” that prefers relatives and acquaintances, circumscribing employment opportunities for other groups such as women and ethnic minorities while also causing increased labor segmentation. See Susan Christopherson, “Beyond the Self-Expressive Creative Worker,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 25 (7–8, 2008): 75.
- ¹¹ As told to the author by Aejaaz Gulab, general secretary of the Movie Stunt Artists Association (MSAA), on September 8, 2016, in MSAA office in Andheri, Mumbai, India.
- ¹² Ibid.
- ¹³ Unnamed source in conversation with the author on January 21, 2017, in Malad, Mumbai.
- ¹⁴ In a rare case of bypassing the juridical authority of the Joint Dispute Settlement Committee, director-producer Vipul Shah filed a complaint with the Competition Commission of India (CCI) in 2014, alleging that FWICE and its twenty-two craft associations were indulging in “monopolistic trade practices.” Shah alleged that the Memorandum of Understanding between FWICE and the producers' bodies that made the hiring of union members compulsory was “anti-competitive” as it deprived film producers from employing workers freely and affected public interest. The CCI ruled in favor of the complainant, directing the film industry's trade unions to “cease and desist” from penalizing producers and from “harassing” them through the Vigilance Committees and tactics such as noncooperation and boycotts (Order of the Competition Commission of India, Case 19 of 2014, dated October 31, 2017).
- ¹⁵ In their study, *The Impact of Light Skin on Prison Time for Black Female Offenders*, Jill Viglione et al. analyze the relationship between the perceived skin tones of black female offenders and criminal justice outcomes in the United States. Analyzing court documents, FBI reports, and US Census Bureau records, the authors conclude that black women deemed to have a lighter skin tone received more lenient

- prison sentences and served less time behind bars. See Jill Viglione, Lance Hannon, and Robert DeFina, "The Impact of Light Skin on Prison Time for Black Female Offenders," *The Social Science Journal* 48 (1, 2011): 250–258.
- ¹⁶ Female stunt artist Geeta Tandon in conversation with the author on July 20, 2016, in Malad, Mumbai.
- ¹⁷ Stunt director Pervez Sheikh in conversation with the author on the set of the film *Bang Bang* on September 25, 2016, Film City, Mumbai.
- ¹⁸ Ibid.
- ¹⁹ Mila Maximova in conversation with the author on the set of the film *Jagga Jasoos*, on April 29, 2017, in Film City, Mumbai.
- ²⁰ Interview with film director Anurag Basu and associate producer Pooja Ladha Surti.
- ²¹ Geeta Tandon in conversation with the author on July 20, 2016, in Malad, Mumbai.
- ²² Stunt biker Amit Grover in conversation with the author on September 27, 2017, in Goregaon, Mumbai.
- ²³ Stunt assistant Amritpal Singh in conversation with the author on August 24, 2016, in Malad, Mumbai.
- ²⁴ Stunt biker Amit Grover in conversation with the author on September 27, 2017, in Goregaon, Mumbai.
- ²⁵ Ibid.
- ²⁶ Stunt director Allan Amin in conversation with the author on the set of *Jagga Jasoos* on April 30, 2017, in Film City, Mumbai.

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