"Invisible Work" in the Indian Media Industries

Ranjani Mazumdar¹

Jawaharlal Nehru University (IN)

ranjani.mazumdar [AT] gmail.com

Abstract:

Media production is a practice that draws on the creative skills of many different kinds of professionals including those who belong to the margins. This world of "invisible workers" includes stunt artists, body doubles, dancers, junior artists, makeup artists, lower-end technicians, and spot boys. The lives of these workers remain largely peripheral to the hype and spectacle generated by media industries. In deeply hierarchical societies like India, production practices tend to reinforce the existing social and class hierarchies, but on a much bigger scale. When industry practice is analyzed, these people often appear as statistical information sets. The article makes a strong case for detailed ethnographies of such working practices as a methodological intervention within media industries scholarship.

Keywords: Class, Labor, Production, Research Methods, India

The research on media industries in recent years has expanded its scope to include many different kinds of sites and areas. If at one end of this scholarship we have seen work on financial flows, technological transformations, cultural policy, and high-profile production practices, the other end has witnessed a growing interest in the functioning of informal media economies, pirate cultures, and lower-end technological infrastructures. The approaches at both ends remain important and scholarship on media industries will need to continue in this direction. But there is another critical dimension that has not yet received adequate attention: the social, economic, and cultural context of the lowest rung of the workforce in the world's biggest media industries. In contexts such as South Asia, this lower-end workforce of the entertainment industries is sizeable, and its members constitute a major part of the informal sector of the economy. It is this terrain of "informal work" that needs deeper investigation that goes beyond numbers.

Given the scale of invisibility as well as the complex social and cultural structures through which these working lives are mediated, ethnographic approaches seem to hold new attractions. Ethnographies of media industries are not new; in South Asia this turn to field investigations of the entertainment sector has generated an interesting body of work on production contexts,² advertising practices,³ organized and visible fan associations,⁴ and television and its audiences.⁵ Perhaps it is time now to turn this ethnographic lens to the direction of the lowest rung of industry personnel also. Given the large numbers of people, both

skilled and unskilled, involved in film production, the paucity of information and material on them is surprising. Scholarly work on media industries in South Asia needs to take serious note of this amorphous world that many have referred to as “invisible work.” These are people whose working practices are central to, but remain on the margins of, big-budget production discourses.

This world of invisible work would include stunt artists, body doubles, dancers, junior artists, makeup artists, lower-end technicians, and spot boys. These are the people who form the backbone of our media industries. Yet the lives of these workers remain largely peripheral to the hype and spectacle generated by media industries. In deeply hierarchical societies like India, production practices tend to reinforce the existing social and class hierarchies, but on a much larger scale given the ubiquitous presence of film production practices in the film cities of India. When industry practices are thought of analytically, these people often appear as statistical information sets. While there are a few documentaries and some journalistic articles available on these film workers, to date, little academic writing exists on this vast body of industry personnel: their lives, social context, and working conditions. We require an approach to production as a form of culture—to recognize that in the making of media output, various kinds of personnel produce themselves as workers in a modern mediatized society. These workers negotiate formal and informal networks, institutionalized hierarchies, and structures. In doing this, shared languages, communities, and identities, come to the fore.⁶

If the popular media in India hypes the expansion of media industries, the critical writings talk of corporate culture, designer dreams, and a downward swing in content. No matter how much we focus on the financial, technological, and cultural movement of media industries, unless the emphasis takes into account production practices beyond the “visible spectacle,” forms of media work will continue to remain hidden, reinforced systematically even by academic scholarship. It is here that the turn to ethnography could play a major role in excavating and foregrounding this vast world of industry personnel, their struggle to retain a dignified existence, the associations through which they fight for leverage, and the social and cultural contexts that shape their working practices. A cursory map of the terrain of issues involving this sector of media work shows how new research agendas can be framed to expand the scope of media industry scholarship in South Asia.

Music and dance have played a major role in Indian cinema ever since the arrival of sound. Dance on screen is rarely an individual act done by stars: it is always also a spectacle choreographed with several dancers around the stars. The [Cine Dancers Association](#) provides the dancers for all the major choreographed dances in cinema. The Dancers Association is especially active in Chennai and Mumbai. Dancers from diverse backgrounds become members of the association, which remains the contact point for choreographers. In Chennai, several choreographers are also members of the association. The dancers’ association functions with a set of norms to which the hiring side must adhere. Thus the eight-hour shift, overtime (if they are made to work beyond eight hours), and a regular, fixed wage per day are issues that the association handles. In return for this, the dancers provide the association with a fee. It is the same story for associations of character artists, junior artists once known as “extras,” and stunt artists’ associations.

Stunt artists take great risks for action sequences when the star is unable to deliver. The stunt artist’s association president in Mumbai insists that almost every star has had to use body doubles at some point.⁷ Yet the remuneration received by the stunt artists is usually Rs.2,500–

3,500 (approximately US\$40–\$60) for an eight-hour shift. Suriya Bano Bodiaji works in the film industry as a body double for female stars. She has been admitted to the hospital on several occasions because of the injuries caused by accidents during her stunts.⁸ People are drawn to this risky profession because it provides them the “opportunity” to make a little money even if it’s nominal. A well-known stunt director, Bhiku Verma, believes that while the quality of stunts in India can be spectacular, the equipment used is not good enough to ensure the safety of the artists.⁹ This is largely due to the heavy taxes and duties required for the purchase of these items. While stuntmen and women are insured in other parts of the world, in India they have to rely on the generosity of the producer or the actors for whom they work.¹⁰ The Stunt Artists Association generally fixes the wages for stunts. In general, the fee does not exceed Rs. 10,000 (approximately US\$165) for a sequence. But there are a few who have made it big and can therefore charge up to Rs. 50,000 (a little over US\$800).¹¹ Producers pay the association, which then disburses the money. But erratic or no payment is also a regular problem faced by stunt artists. Reportedly 75 percent of the stuntmen registered with the Stunt Artists Association live below the poverty line. Only 20 percent seem to secure regular jobs, and a tiny 5 percent of stunt doubles make it big. Most retire to face bleak and uncertain futures.¹²

There are many female body doubles who perform intimate scenes for the female stars. These doubles work on the condition that their names and faces will not be revealed. To this effect, the double and the producer sign a contract and affidavit. These underpaid doubles remain unknown to the world but are critical to films requiring them to play roles to which the stars would not agree. Doubles are sourced from informal networks to present on screen what the star will refuse to do. There are occasions when these issues turn sour, such as when a star is unhappy about how a double has been used. For example, Manisha Koirala, a well-known actress, had a body double (Jessica Choksi) who performed some of the intimate sequences that were required by the film *Ek Choti Si Luv Story* (2002).¹³ The director, Shashilal Nair, promised Jessica that her name and face would not be revealed. She was paid only Rs. 12,500 (approximately US\$200) for performing nine scenes and Rs. 9,000 (approximately US\$150) for the affidavit guaranteeing her privacy.¹⁴ Jessica’s name, however, was dragged into a public spectacle when Manisha quarreled with the director over what she thought was obscene in the film. She revealed Jessica’s name and then the press went to town over the issue.¹⁵ A report in the *Times of India* narrated the matter thus: “Manisha alleged that producer Shashilal Nair had used a duplicate in obscene scenes which portrayed her in bad light. Nair said he had used Koirala’s duplicate with her permission because she has become obese. Koirala had denied Nair’s allegation that she gained weight.”¹⁶ Such incidents foreground the lines that separate stardom from this other kind of creative work.

Junior artists were once known as extras. They usually appear as part of the crowd in action scenes, in dance sequences, or any other situation, dramatic or otherwise, that requires their presence. The Junior Artists Association in Mumbai has more than ten thousand registered members.¹⁷ They are now often required by television since so many of the shows require junior artists, who often complain that television pays them lower wages than what they earn in the film industry. The average payment for these artists working for television is approximately Rs. 750 (approximately US\$13) per shoot, while in the film industry they are paid between Rs. 900 and 1,000 (approximately US\$15–\$17).¹⁸ These artists are generally classified into three categories based on experience and acting talent—A, B, and C—and the payment is made according to the classification. An A-level, experienced artist can sometimes get up to Rs. 5,000 (approximately US\$80) a day.¹⁹ However, the average remuneration rarely crosses Rs 2,500

(approximately US\$40) a day. Junior artists have to operate through coordinators and must be registered with a body under the Cinema India Television Artists Association (CINTAA), an organization that first started in 1959.²⁰

In the contemporary transformation of the film industry, junior artists have been the worst hit. One of the arguments for this has been that the urbane quality of the major A-list films requires a certain “look” that is fulfilled by models and foreigners.²¹ In 2008, almost one hundred thousand junior artists registered with the Federation of Western India Cine Employees went on strike, demanding regular payment and work for extras. Finally, some of the producers agreed to these demands but also managed to secure a clause that allows the producers to hire outside the association if required.²² The new scenario has adversely affected the traditional base of junior artists who generally belonged to a particular kind of social background in which they worked as informal labor for a low daily wage. Many migrated into the city in search of work. These traditional junior artists are unable to compete with the glossy, fashionable, and cosmopolitan appearance of many contemporary junior artists who play upper-class roles on screen. The shift in screen culture in the last two decades has resulted in an overwhelming focus on upper-class families; and the traditional junior artist does not easily find a place in many of these new films.

How do we classify this world of work in the larger context of media industry scholarship? Perhaps a methodological concern with excavation, documentation, oral narratives, and memories would invigorate and challenge certain assumptions in scholarly approaches. If media is a form of practice, then we need to open out this world of practice to include not just higher-end, visible professionals such as camerapersons, sound recordists, scriptwriters, directors, and their assistants but also those whose work continues to remain invisible. The term *labor*, or even *cultural labor*, has increasingly become rhetorical and abstract and can hardly represent the lives and experiences of the lowest rung of the media industry’s workforce. We need an approach that is fresh and interdisciplinary, one that is not just about reiteration of economic difference in abstract terms. The issues in South Asia that I have briefly discussed remain at the surface level of what journalists have been able to access. We now need to move backward and forward in time, tracking this world of invisible work historically through traces in films and memories of surviving workers, ensuring documentation of those working today and detailed observation of negotiations between associations, unions, and the industries. What we need is not a notion of an amorphous hidden mass of workers but a detailed archeology of the identities and lives of the lowest rung of workers who fuel the media industries of the world. Thus, ethnographic approaches and a desire for oral documentation must fuel the excavation of the lives, identities, and shared imaginations of these invisible cultural workers.

¹ Ranjani Mazumdar is Professor of Cinema Studies at the School of Arts and Aesthetics, Jawaharlal Nehru University. Her publications focus on urban cultures, popular cinema, gender, and the cinematic city. She is the author of *Bombay Cinema: An Archive of the City* (2007) and coauthor with Nitin Govil of the forthcoming *The Indian Film Industry* (2015). She has also worked as a documentary filmmaker, and her productions include *Delhi Diary 2001* and *The Power of the Image* (codirected). She is currently working on globalization and film culture, and the intersection of technology, travel, design, and color in 1960s Bombay cinema.

- ² Tejaswini Ganti, *Producing Bollywood: Inside the Contemporary Hindi Film Industry* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012); Rosie Thomas, "Indian Cinema: Pleasures and Popularity," *Screen* 26 (May–August 1985): 3–4, 116–31.
- ³ William Mazzarella, *Shoveling Smoke: Advertising and Globalization in Contemporary India* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003).
- ⁴ S. V. Srinivas, "Devotion and Defiance in Fan Activity," in *Making Meaning in Indian Cinema*, ed. Ravi Vasudevan (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000), 297–312.
- ⁵ Poornima Mankekar, *Screening Culture, Viewing Politics: An Ethnography of Television, Womanhood and Nation in Postcolonial India* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999); Sara Dickey, *Cinema and the Urban Poor in South India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).
- ⁶ Vicki Mayer, Miranda J. Banks, and John T. Caldwell, eds., *Production Studies: Cultural Studies of Media Industries* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 2.
- ⁷ Vidyottama Sharma, "Boomtown Gladiators: for a few rupees more," *Tehelka*, January 7, 2004.
- ⁸ "Bollywood stunt artists view for more discipline in the industry," *Oneindia News*, June 7, 2004.
- ⁹ Vidyottama Sharma, "Boomtown Gladiators: for a few rupees more," *Tehelka*, January 7, 2004.
- ¹⁰ Ibid.
- ¹¹ Ibid.
- ¹² Ibid.
- ¹³ Piali Bannerjee, "Bollywood's Body Doubles: *Ek Choti Si Sad Story*," *Times of India*, December 8, 2003.
- ¹⁴ Ibid.
- ¹⁵ Ibid. See also Bhawana Somaaya, "Crying Wold," *Screen*, February 20, 2004.
- ¹⁶ "HC Stays Release of *Ek Choti Si Luv Story*," *Times of India*, September 5, 2002.
- ¹⁷ "Bollywood's 'Extras': Story of Dream Unfulfilled," *CNN IBN Live*, June 13, 2011.
- ¹⁸ Ibid.
- ¹⁹ Ibid.
- ²⁰ Opende Chanana, *The Missing 3 in Bollywood: Safety, Security, Shelter* (Nyon, Switzerland: UNI Global Union, 2011).
- ²¹ Meenakshi Ganguly, "This Year's Models," *Time*, July 22, 2002.
- ²² "Bollywood Junior Artists Feel Threatened by Foreigners," *Indian Express*, October 6, 2008.

Bibliography

- Chanana, Opende. *The Missing 3 in Bollywood: Safety, Security, Shelter*. Nyon, Switzerland: UNI Global Union, 2011.
- Dickey, Sara. *Cinema and the Urban Poor in South India*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.
- Ganti, Tejaswini. *Producing Bollywood: Inside the Contemporary Hindi Film Industry*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012.

- Mankekar, Poornima. *Screening Culture, Viewing Politics: An Ethnography of Television, Womanhood and Nation in Postcolonial India*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999.
- Mayer, Vicki, Miranda J. Banks, and John T. Caldwell, ed. *Production Studies: Cultural Studies of Media Industries*. New York: Routledge, 2009.
- Mazzarella, William. *Shoveling Smoke: Advertising and Globalization in Contemporary India*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003.
- Srinivas, S. V. "Devotion and Defiance in Fan Activity." In *Making Meaning in Indian Cinema*, edited by Ravi Vasudevan, 297–312. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- Thomas, Rosie. "Indian Cinema: Pleasures and Popularity." *Screen* 26 (May–August 1985): 3–4, 116–31.

Copyright © 2015 (Rajani Mazumdar). *Media Industries* is an open-access, peer-reviewed, online academic journal. As such, we aim to participate in the open exchange of information. This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution Noncommercial No Derivatives \(by-nc-nd\) License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/). Under this license, this work is available for sharing and noncommercial distribution provided the appropriate attribution is given.