

# Soviet-Indian Coproductions: Ali Baba as Political Allegory

by MASHA SALAZKINA

**Abstract:** This essay considers the history of Soviet Indian coproductions focusing on *Ali Baba and 40 Thieves* (1980) as a political allegory over the fate of the multination state. It addresses the formal utopian character of the film and the excessive threat of sexual violence in the song-and-dance numbers.

The subject of this essay is the little studied phenomenon of the Soviet-Indian cinematic coproductions. While giving a general outline of the history of these coproductions, I focus primarily on the most commercially successful of these joint efforts, *Ali Baba and 40 Thieves* (*Alibaba Aur 40 Chor/Priklyucheniya Ali-Baby i soroka razboinikov*, Latif Faiziyev and Umesh Mehra, 1980), henceforward *Alibaba*. I argue that the film contains a political allegory expressing anxiety over the fate of the multination state; that anxiety lies beneath the formal utopian character of the film, which attempts to show the constitution of a new community on the screen and to define the role of its political subject in the face of crime and governmental corruption. I will address these issues through discussing the directors' choice of the material (a story from *One Thousand and One Nights*, or *The Arabian Nights*, as it is better known in English); the narrative structure of the film; performance histories of the Indian and Soviet actors; and, finally, through a reading of the excessive threat of sexual violence concentrated in the film's song-and-dance numbers. *Alibaba*, I contend, is of interest not only due to the formal and institutional hybridization of two autonomous cinematic traditions, Indian and Soviet, but also as a cultural object which displays a shared anxiety over the role of the state as its existing political and economic order moves palpably toward the brink of collapse.

**The Film.** *Alibaba* was cowritten and codirected by a team of Soviet (mostly Central Asian) and Indian film makers as a coproduction between Uzbekfilm (USSR) and Eagle Films (India); the picture was shot on locations in Buhkara and on sets in India. In fact, the film's credits show a careful adherence to the principle of almost equal participation from both countries, following the principle that was established

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during the first wave of Indo-Soviet coproductions in the 1950s: script, direction, set design, cast, and even music involved cineastes from both countries.<sup>1</sup> The director on the Soviet side was an Uzbekistani, Latif Faiziyev, whose career stretched back to the 1950s, beginning with solid socialist realist productions such as *On the Way Traced by Lenin (Po Putevke Lenina)*, 1957) and moving toward national epics of the Soviet republics. He apprenticed as an assistant director to the celebrated pair of Soviet film-makers Aleksandr Alov and Vladimir Naumov on their 1951 adaptation of Nikolai Gogol's Ukrainian national classic, *Taras Shevchenko*. Thus "imprinted" by his background and training, Faiziyev incorporated the tropes of Socialist Realism and the highly theatrical monumental style of 1950s Soviet cinema into the making of "thematic" films celebrating the national heritage of the Central Asian republics (*The Fall of the Emirates/Krushenie emirata*, 1955; *The Star of Ulugbek/Zvezda ulugbeka*, 1964). Along the way, he directed a minor Soviet-Indian coproduction, *Eastward, Beyond the Ganges (Voshod nad Gangom)*, 1975). Location scouting for that film, Faiziyev made contacts with the Indian team he was later to use for *Alibaba*.<sup>2</sup> Thus Faiziyev's background must have seemed right for helming a bigger Indo-Soviet production: he'd shown himself to be an ideologically reliable representative of the Soviet Asian republics, already familiar with Indian cinema. And his touch is certainly evident in some of the idiosyncratic elements of the film, in particular its peculiar mixture of socialist realist tropes with folkloric elements and the antirealist conventions of Indian popular cinema. Faiziyev's Indian counterpart was Umesh Mehra, whose only feature up to that date was a romantic family comedy, *Hamare Tumhare* (1979). He was nonetheless touted in Soviet publicity as "one of the most successful commercial film-makers in India."<sup>3</sup> In fact, he got a head start in Indian film as the son of F. C. Mehra, head of Eagle Films (which produced *Alibaba*) and assistant to Shammi Kapoor.<sup>4</sup>

If neither director was a household name in his respective country, the actors they had to work with were some of the most celebrated Soviet and Indian stars. On the Soviet side, these included Rolan Bykov, who was not only one of the most important actors of the postwar Soviet Union but was also noted as a director of eccentric and experimental children's films; Sofiko Chiaureli from Georgia, well-known from Tengiz Abuladze's and Sergei Paradjanov's films; and Frunze Mkrtchyan, an Armenian actor and a star of many of the 1960s–1970s Soviet comedies. On the Indian side, the film stars Dharmendra in the role of Ali Baba, and Hema Malini and Zeenat Aman in the two leading female roles. Dharmendra and Hema Malini were the star Bollywood couple of the 1970s and well-known in the Soviet Union after the 1975 release of *Sholay* (Ramesh Sippy, 1975), one of the highest grossing Bollywood films of all times both in India and abroad. Hema Malini conquered Soviet audiences in her double performance (playing the two roles of the twins separated at birth) in *Zita and Gita (Seeta*

1 Olga Zlotnik, "Tales Recognize No Boundaries," *Soviet Film* 11 (1979): 4.

2 Mikhail Sulkin, "Old Tale Revisited," *Soviet Film* 4 (1980): 9.

3 I. Zvyagintseva, "Sovmestnye sovetsko-indiiskie fil'my," *Kino Indii* (Moskva: Iskusstvo, 1988), 285.

4 Eagle Films corporate profile, [http://www.eaglefilmsindia.com/profile\\_umeshmehra.htm](http://www.eaglefilmsindia.com/profile_umeshmehra.htm) (accessed September 10, 2009).

AU: This actor goes by three alternate spellings of his name; however, I used the spelling given online for the actual Alibaba film listing, Mkrtchyan. OK?)

*Aur Geeta*, Ramesh Sippy, 1972), a film that was released in the Soviet Union in 1976 and surpassed *Sholay* in its popularity, with a recorded audience of 55.2 million.<sup>5</sup> The other major presence was that of Zeenat Aman who had just starred in the hugely successful *Sabyam Shivam Sundaram* (Raj Kapoor, 1978) and earlier in *Hare Rama Hare Krishna* (Dev Anand, 1971), both of which were released in the Soviet Union. Zeenat Aman's role in *Alibaba* prefigures the motif of the avenging woman which became widespread in 1980s and 1990s Indian popular cinema, to which she also contributed when she played the rape victim in B. R. Chopra's *Insaaf Ka Tarazu* (1980). As the Bollywood industry is famously star-driven, the presence of these first-class stars was an important indication that this coproduction was intended to be a major cinematic event as well as a commercial success, which it indeed proved to be.

Why focus on this film out of a dozen other Soviet-Indian coproductions? A brief history of Indo-Soviet productions from the 1950s to the 1990s will elucidate the particular importance of *Alibaba*. While *Alibaba* may be the best remembered of Soviet-Indian coproductions, it by no means stands alone.

**Indo-Soviet Coproductions.** The history of Soviet-Indian cinematic ties goes back to the 1950s when the Soviet Union was courting neutralist India. As part of this effort, a delegation of filmmakers and officials, including director Vsevolod Pudovkin and actor Nikolai Cherkasov, was sent on an official cultural visit. The trip resulted in the first Indian-Soviet exchange of films, which is how Russian audiences came to catch their first glimpse of Indian film culture.<sup>6</sup> However, real exchange between India and the Soviet Union had to wait until after de-Stalinization when, as Sudha Rajagopalan has explained, Indian festivals began taking place in the Soviet Union, leading to the very successful booking of Indian films in Soviet theaters. Nehru's stance of nonalignment was favored by Khrushchev, which led to a quasi-alignment lasting to the very end of the Soviet period. Ties were further strengthened when America under Nixon tilted toward Pakistan and China in the 1970s. Paradoxically, Indian cinema—auteur and commercial alike—was initially received in the Soviet Union as part of the larger neorealist turn in postwar film cultures. Neorealism for the Soviet cinema of the Thaw meant an emphasis on individual experiences, emotions, and ultimately the sphere of the private rather than the public and the political, which is something Indian “melodramas” (as they were often referred to) provided.<sup>7</sup> Crowning the first official visit of Indian filmmakers to the USSR in 1954 (the Indian delegation included writer/director K. A. Abbas, director Bimal Roy, and actor/director Raj Kapoor, all important figures in the nascent Indian film industry who would prove to be instrumental to all the future Indo-Soviet coproductions) was an official proclamation of “friendship and cooperation between the cinemas of the two countries,” which

5 Sudha Rajagopalan, *Indian Films in Soviet Cinemas: The Culture of Movie-Going After Stalin* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 183.

6 Ibid.

7 Rajagopalan, “Emblematic of the Thaw: Early Indian Films in Soviet Cinemas,” *South Asian Popular Culture* 4, no. 2 (2006): 83–100.

in practical terms meant the lessening of barriers to the import/export of Indian and Soviet films in each country and the possibility of binational film coproduction. These coproductions were meant to create films that would hybridize each culture's favored motifs and narrative structures, in the hopes of creating truly popular films. Accordingly, both countries would have equal representation in all functions, including two directors, two scriptwriters, and popular Soviet and Indian actors, in order to "fuse the cinematic and pictorial traditions of both film industries."<sup>8</sup> Most Soviet-Indian coproductions, including *Alibaba*, followed this model. K. A. Abbas and Vasili Pronin directed the first Soviet-Indian coproduction, *Pardesi/Khozhdenie za tri morya* in 1957. It was nominated for Cannes's Palme d'Or Award in 1958 and remains the most critically acclaimed of the coproductions. It was based on the travels of a fifteenth-century Russian merchant to India, and featured such big stars as Nargis and Oleg Strizhenov. It was followed by *Black Mountain (Chernaya gora)*; M. S. Sathyu and Aleksandr Zguridi, (1971) and *Rikki Tikki Tavi* (Zguridi, 1975), based on Kipling's story. The next coproduction was Faiziyev's *Voshod nad Gangom* (1975), which reversed the story of *Pardesi* and attempted to follow many of its techniques, but proved to be a failure both critically and commercially.<sup>9</sup> As is evident from their literary sources, these coproductions relied either on mythological/folkloric or Colonial heritage and stayed away from contemporary issues. Standing apart is Raj Kapoor's film *My Name Is Joker (Mera Naam Joker)*, (1970); an Indian film made with the participation of Soviet actors and partly shot on locations in Moscow, it is best seen in the context of Kapoor's own oeuvre. Surrounded by financial and political scandals, the film had mixed reception both in India and in the USSR.<sup>10</sup>

While none of the coproductions following *Pardesi* managed to achieve much visibility, by the 1970s it had become clear that Soviet audiences fully embraced commercial Indian cinema with its stars and its aesthetic formula, making Indian films profitable at the same time that the audience for Soviet films was declining. At the time when Indian popular cinema shifted away from the social and political issues of the 1960s toward entertainment-driven cinema in the 1970s (with less explicit social and political themes), the Soviet Union increased its import of Indian popular cinema in order to generate revenues for Soviet distributors.<sup>11</sup> Such was the trend toward entertainment that each copy of an imported Indian hit was shown on average two and a half times more extensively than that of its Soviet competitors.<sup>12</sup> Notably, *Alibaba* marks the turning point from the more ideologically oriented coproductions toward entertainment cinema, designed to follow the crowd-pleasing conventions of contemporary Bollywood.

In fact, unlike earlier Soviet-Indian coproductions, *Alibaba* proved to be a financial success in both India and the Soviet Union. In India it reached "Silver Jubilee"

8 E. T. Ermash, "Novyi etap sovetsko-indiiskogo sotrudnichestva i sodruzhestva kinematografii," *Iskusstvo kino* 4 (1981): 150.

9 Zvyagintseva, "Sovmestnye sovetsko-indiiskie fil'my," 279–286.

10 Rajagopalan, *Indian Films in Soviet Cinemas*, 88.

11 Ibid., 66–98.

12 Viktor Filimonov, "Zachem my khodim za tri morya?" *Iskusstvo kino* 6 (1990): 126.

status, running for twenty-five weeks continuously in all major centers all over India.<sup>13</sup> In the Soviet Union it was an even bigger hit: its recorded viewer turnout in 1980 was 52.8 million. Of the large number of Indian popular movie imports into the Soviet Union that played to audiences of over 20 million, only four Indian films before *Alibaba* had a higher audience turnout (*Awara*, Raj Kapoor, 1954; *Bobby*, Raj Kapoor, 1973; *Seeta Aur Gita*, Ramesh Sippy, 1972; and *Barood*, (Prmod Chakravorty, 1976), and only one other Indian film was to surpass it (*Disco Dancer*, Babbar Subhash, 1983).<sup>14</sup> In addition to its commercial success, the film was awarded the Grand Prix from UNICEF/UNESCO Children's Films Festival in Belgrade.<sup>15</sup> Unlike the earlier coproductions such as *Pardesi* or *Mera Naam Joker*, Soviet participation in *Alibaba* was not emphasized and it was largely received as a domestic film.<sup>16</sup> At the same time, as it was based on a classic/folk-story type of fairy tale, in the Soviet Union the film was exempted from the prevailing ideological pressures of "realism," instead fitting into the long history of stylistically flamboyant Soviet fairy-tale adaptations (such as Ptushko's famous films). Ultimately though, the key to its success was its star power and music. Unlike Hollywood films, which depended more heavily on original scores, Soviet films relied on the use of songs (instead or in addition to leitmotifs and orchestral scoring) in their sound tracks.<sup>17</sup> This made the song-and-dance convention of Indian popular cinema work particularly well in the Soviet context. Indeed, there was an active and growing Soviet fan base for Indian stars in the 1970s, as evidenced by articles in the popular film magazine *Sovetskii ekran* (*Soviet Screen*).<sup>18</sup> In fact, *Alibaba* ushered in a decade of commercial Indian film dominance in the USSR, while the Tashkent film festival (a major vehicle for "progressive" cinemas of Asia, Africa, and Latin America) increased the number of noncommercial Indian films (known as "parallel cinema") it accepted in a futile attempt to counter the ever-increasing popularity of Bollywood films. It is notable that in 1982, at the Seventh Annual Tashkent International Film Festival, *Alibaba* was repeatedly referenced in the symposium on the topic of coproductions, even as Indian filmmakers were arguing for a turn toward the present and confronting the contemporary issues facing both countries.<sup>19</sup>

On the basis of its success, *Alibaba* was followed with another film made by the same team, with some of the same stars, popular musical numbers, and similar mythological/folkloric/epic literary origins. This time it was a popular Punjabi medieval poetic legend, *Sohni Mahiwal* (*Legenda o lyubvi*, Umesh Mehra and Latif Faiziyev, 1984), starring Dharmendra's son Sunny Deol. Mehra went on to make a

13 Eagle Films corporate profile.

14 Statistics quoted in Rajagopalan, *Indian Films in Soviet Cinemas*, 182–183.

15 Ermash, "Novyi etap sovetско-indiiskogo sotrudnichestva i sodruzhestva kinematografii," 152.

16 In fact, to this day you can buy the film in the Indian section of a DVD store without any indication of its coproduced status.

17 Andrei Pavlovich Petrov and Natal'ia Kolesnikova, *Dialog o kinomuzyke* (Moskva: Iskusstvo, 1982), 20.

18 In turn, the success of the film led to another series of articles about all the stars of *Alibaba*. See O. Ferbenko, "Dharmendra," *Sovetskii ekran* 18 (1981): 15–17; and Iu. Korchagov, "Indiia: Hema Malini," *Sovetskii ekran* 6 (1984): 19. Gosti nashikh ekranov: Zeenat Aman," *Sovetskii ekran* 16 (1985): 22.

19 L. Budiak, "Ukrepiaiaia družbu i sotrudnichestvo," *Iskusstvo kino* 11 (1982): 151.

AU: Please see note regarding this spelling in note 20, Chernyj

Also used the spelling listed online for the actual film listing, Gennadi Vasilyev. OK?

number of action films in India in the 1980s, many starring Mithun Chakraborty, the enormously popular star of *Disco Dancer*, which gained a cult status among the lovers of Indian cinema in the Soviet Union. With Mithun in tow, Faiziyev and Mehra attempted a more “contemporary” topic with their last coproduction, *Shikari* (*Po zakonu džhunglei*, 1991). It was a love story centered on an elephant tamer and a Russian circus actress, but next to Mithun’s other films it passed unnoticed. The final success of the coproductions made in *Alibaba*’s wake was *Ajooba* (*Chernyj Prints Adžhuba*, 1991) starring Amitabh Bachchan and codirected by Shashi Kapoor and Gennadi Vasilyev.<sup>20</sup> The only other coproduction made in the Soviet times, a documentary film about the life of Nehru, was barely screened either in India or in the Soviet Union.<sup>21</sup>

Having unpacked the place of *Alibaba* in the history of Soviet-Indian coproductions, we can now turn from historical background to textual analysis of the film itself and a broader argument about the film’s significance. The question which most interests me here is, given the ideological and commercial pressures on Soviet-Indian coproductions, how can we make sense of the negotiation of these tensions and conflicting ideologies through the text of the film? I argue that at the core of the film is an implicit rejection of the modern, liberal, Eurocentric concept of the nation-state, and the problem of constituting another symbolically unified utopian community is put in its place. On the surface, the film formulates the legitimizing ideal of the powerful populist state, which was the self-image that both the Soviet Union and India promoted. But even as the film is organized to fit the official ideology, it displays powerful contradictions and anxieties that lie behind such a state organization. These anxieties are most directly manifested in the figurative status of the “false” versus “true” fathers, and in the representation of the rebellion of the “daughters” as a response to the constant threat of sexual violence and symbolic objectification (economic and sexual, often at once). Their rebellion is potentially subversive of both the patriarchal state (they refuse the role of dependent) and commodity culture (they refuse the role of object of exchange). While the conventional ending neutralizes both anxieties, the narrative logic of the film necessarily depends on the possibility not only of exterior threat from criminals or paramilitaries but also of a libidinal threat from within, from the daughters. While not contradicting in any way the pleasures Soviet and Indian audiences derived from the film, the existence of such threats complicates the issue of the ideological import of entertainment cinema,<sup>22</sup> which can only be understood within the context of the complex geopolitical nexus in which *Alibaba* was situated. What is implicitly at stake here, then, is the question of how coproductions manage to serve heterogeneous ideological needs.

Coproductions between various national film industries have been very common in the history of cinema, and yet they are rarely considered from the point of view of

20 A. Sealov, “Chernyi princ Adžhuba,” *Sovetskii ekran* 4 (1989): 8–9.

21 Zvyagintseva, “Sovmestnye sovetско-indiiskie fil'my,” 286.

22 Here I am thinking in particular of the work done by Richard Dyer and Fredric Jameson. See, for example, Fredric Jameson, “Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture,” *Social Text* 1 (1979): 130–148; and Richard Dyer, *Only Entertainment* (London: Routledge, 1992).

their inherently double aspect.<sup>23</sup> Highly complex ideological negotiations take place in such a hybrid form. *Alibaba* is unique precisely because it was successful at bringing together the seemingly conflicting commercial and ideological demands of both the Soviet and Indian state, the ultimate backers of the project. Thus, *Alibaba* presents us with more theoretically interesting issues than it may seem to at first. For instance, it can be seen in the context of the site-specific issue of the Soviet “blockbuster”<sup>24</sup>—films oriented toward a “mass audience” such as musicals and action films which began to emerge in the Soviet cinema in the 1970s and early 1980s as a response to failing profits and the fragmentation of the film-viewing public.<sup>25</sup> Despite apparently belonging to a different generic category (fairytale/adventure), *Alibaba* can also be viewed as one of the examples of the transition of Indian popular cinema toward the bandit and avenging women films of the 1980s.<sup>26</sup> The question I am most concerned with here, however, is how form can meet such complex and multifaceted ideological, geopolitical, and commercial demands within two separate filmgoing cultures.

A brief turn to the literary origins of the film in relation to the contemporary Soviet-Indian geopolitical situation provides some clues as to the variety of issues at stake, as well as their fictional solutions.

**The Background: *The Thousand and One Nights*.** “Ali Baba and Forty Thieves” is a story from *The Arabian Nights*; it is a literary artifact whose origins are hotly debated. Even the debates are hotly debated, as the scholarship is often vulnerable to the charges of bias made in Edward Said’s *Orientalism*. What the scholars agree on is that the stories in the collection as it first appeared in the West may be traced to Arabic-Islamic as well as Indian, Persian, and Greek cultures. The tales underwent constant transformation over the course of centuries so that the “origins” of the collection as well as its “original textual form” became part of the myth.<sup>27</sup> The stories themselves, many of them travel narratives, absorb motifs and vernaculars from the many different cultural and geographic areas they span. The story of Ali Baba in particular only

23 More work has been done on issues of national identity, transnationality and/or globalization. See Tim Bergfelder, *International Adventures: Popular German Cinema and European Co-Productions in the 1960s* (Oxford and New York: Berghahn, 2005) and “The Nation Vanishes: European Co-productions and Popular Genre Formula in the 1950s and 1960s,” *Cinema and Nation*, eds. Mette Hjort and Scott MacKenzie (New York: Routledge, 2000), 139–153; Laura Podalsky, “Negotiating Differences: National Cinemas and Co-Productions in Pre-Revolutionary Cuba,” *The Velvet Light Trap* 34 (1994): 59–70; Teresa Hoefert de Turegano, “The International Politics of Cinematic Coproduction: Spanish Policy in Latin America,” *Film & History: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Film and Television Studies* 34, no. 2 (2004): 15–24; and Mark Betz, “The Name Above the Subtitle: Language, Coproduction, Transnationalism,” in *Beyond the Subtitle: Remapping European Art Cinema* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 45–92.

24 On this topic, see Birgit Beumers, “Soviet and Russian Blockbusters: A Question of Genre?” *Slavic Review* 62, no. 3 (2003): 441–454.

25 Joshua First, “From Spectatorship to ‘Differentiated’ Consumer: Film Audience Research in the Era of Developed Socialism (1965–1980)” *Kritika* 9, no. 2 (2008): 317–344.

26 See Lalitha Gopalan, *Cinema of Interruptions: Action Genres in Contemporary Indian Cinema* (London: British Film Institute, 2002).

27 Wen-chin Ouyang, “Foreword: Genres, Ideologies, Genre Ideologies and Narrative Transformations,” in *New Perspectives on Arabian Nights: Ideological Variations and Narrative Horizons*, eds. Wen-chin Ouyang and Geert Jan van Gelder (New York: Routledge, 2005), ix–xv.

appears in the eighteenth-century French translation by Antoine Galland. Galland did have a Syrian informant, a Maronite named Hanna Diab, who told Galland stories as well, so it is possible Ali Baba comes from this source.<sup>28</sup> On the other hand, as no one has been able to locate the story in any form in any earlier Arabic manuscript, many scholars attribute the tale to Galland himself. However, as Madeleine Dobie has argued, Galland's translation itself is best understood as a cultural encounter reflecting the heterogeneity of the text.<sup>29</sup> Whatever its origins, Ali Baba quickly became one of the most popular and recognized stories from *The Arabian Nights*.<sup>30</sup> The first movie of the Ali Baba story was made in 1902 by Thomas Edison, and it has since become a staple for the Western Orientalist genre in European and American cinema. It has also been translated onto the screen many times in Indian cinema, including a recent Tamil version. The general outline of the story is then familiar and instantly recognizable to audiences around the world (an important consideration for the Bollywood Industry, which exports its films worldwide, sometimes without subtitles or with subtitles in English only). While in the West most of the film's renditions were directed at young audiences (as was also the case in the Soviet Union), Indian popular cinema rarely makes this kind of age-based distinction. In addition, the stories of *The Arabian Nights* provide a perfect narrative structure and stylistic choice for a Bollywood film, since they include romantic motifs and comedy mixed with adventure, and they even present inserts and comments in verse, comparable to the music numbers in a film.

This generic and stylistic hybridity fit in well with the reinvention and reinvigoration of popular Soviet film in the 1970s, which saw an abundance of highly stylized comedies, musicals, costume dramas, literary adaptations, science fiction, and children's films in an attempt to retain the audience with entertainment. These films often placed particular emphasis on nonrepresentational, or self-consciously conventional, qualities. And by the 1970s, Soviet cinema was clearly divided between "popular" and auteur films, paralleling a similar development in India. In addition, Hollywood continuity editing rules and generic classification, which Bollywood style violates, never took hold in popular or auteur-driven Soviet cinema, therefore making Indian popular film aesthetics less startling to the Soviet audiences. Given Soviet cinema's long history of stylistically flamboyant fairy-tale adaptations, the figure of Ali Baba as a good-hearted simpleton—Dharmendra's trademark of the 1970s, which was a transposition of his roles in the "socials" of the 1960s, such as *Anupama* (Hrishikesh Mukherjee, 1966)—resonated with the Russian folk tradition of a simple peasant hero, linking the two film iconographies. Seen in its historical context, the turn to the Arabian Nights as a mythological instance of a pan-Asian culture implicitly affirming the unity between the Central Asian Soviet Republics and India has sinister overtones in the context of the Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan with which the making of the film coincided. By the late 1970s, the relations between the USSR and India were particularly

28 Heinz Grotzfeld, *Dreihundert Jahre 1001 Nacht in Europa: ein Begleitheft zur Ausstellung in Munster, Tubingen und Gotha* (Munster: LIT Verlag 2005), 13.

29 Madeleine Dobie, "Translation in the Contact Zone: Antoine Galland's *Mille et une nuits: contes arabes*," in *The Arabian Nights in Historical Context: Between East and West*, eds. Saree Makdisi and Felicity Nussbaum (London: Oxford University Press, 2008), 25–51.

30 Robert Irwin, *The Arabian Nights: A Companion* (London: I. B. Tauris & Co., 2004), 17–18.

close, officially conducted through the rhetoric of Indira Gandhi's commitment to socialism, while in practical terms primarily driven by the rise of new geopolitical zones of conflict, specifically the frictions between Pakistan and Afghanistan.<sup>31</sup> The return of Indira Gandhi to power in 1980 (and the country's return, among other things, to a planned economy and nationalized banks, while at the same time accepting International Monetary Fund loans) not only solidified Indian-Soviet relations but also backgrounded India's continuing support of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan at the General Assembly of United Nations in 1980.<sup>32</sup> This historical overview helps us place the Indian-Soviet coproduction of *Ali Baba* in its proper historical and political context—after all we are talking about a story about bandits (*razboiniki*), which soon became the Soviet military term for the mujahedin in Afghanistan. Such a reading is further justified by the fact that the costumes of the forty thieves in the film coincide with the generic visual representation of the “mountain warriors,” and unlike the costumes of other characters in the film are not marked as either Indian or Uzbek.

**The Narrative.** In *Alibaba*, the famous forty thieves are led by a crafty chief, Abu Hassan (Rolan Bykov), who poses, in disguise, as the Vizier of the town in which Ali Baba (Dharmendra) lives. Sim Sim is the female Jinn who inhabits the bandit cave and provides her master Abu Hassan (whom she refers to as her father) with power and advice. One day the bandits raid a caravan, kidnapping a man and his daughter, Fatima (Zeenat Aman). The daughter, negotiating with the bandits for her and her father's freedom, helps them raid another caravan led by Ali Baba's father, Yusuf, who has apparently been away from his family for years. Yusuf survives, and recuperates at the Shah's palace. Here, again, violence threatens when the Shah is overthrown just as Ali Baba is coming to take his long lost father home. He does manage to rescue his father and the Shah's daughter, Marjina (Hema Malini), but just as Ali recognizes that the man he saved is his father, bandits attack again, Yusuf is mortally wounded, and Marjina is captured and sold into slavery. During the bandit attacks the dam that holds the town's water supply has been ruined. Ali Baba resolves to fix the dam—which he does by organizing the town's labor—and find the bandits. To free Marjina, he borrows the money from his brother in exchange for his part of their father's property, but when he does find the bandit cave (following the story's tradition) he uses the money he steals from the thieves to pay for the dam building. Then he tells the Vizier of the town about his discovery. But, due to a ring that the Vizier is wearing on his finger, which was stolen by the bandit chief from Ali Baba's father, Ali deduces that the Vizier is really the bandit leader, Abu Hassan. The Vizier orders a celebration, but places the bandits in large jars, from which they are supposed to arise during the celebration to kill Ali Baba. But Ali now joins forces with Fatima, and while Marjina dances before the Vizier to distract him they kill all the bandits. Abu Hassan then attacks Ali, and when Fatima physically interposes herself, kills her. Abu Hassan then kidnaps Marjina and takes her to the cave. After subterfuges involving Abu Hassan's magic, Ali Baba finally slays Abu Hassan and rescues his beloved Marjina.

31 Vinod Bhatia, *Indira Gandhi and Indo-Soviet Relations* (New Delhi: Panchsheel Publishers, 1987), 82–83.

32 Robert Horn, *Soviet-Indian Relations: Issues and Influence* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1982), 182–183.

AU: Used the spelling listed online for the actual film listing, Marjina. OK?

The narrative of *Alibaba* is apparently structured around two enigmas, which split into a series of interwoven narrative strands; the two key mysteries (which turn out to be one and the same) are the identity of the ruler, and the identity of the father. This “doubling” and parallel structure is far from unusual for Indian cinema with its tradition of Persianized narratives, including the so-called Islamicate romance narratives of the 1930–1940s, which all share this interest in good and bad governance and the role of female characters in recovering the good state. In fact, in many respects *Alibaba* with its endless string of action stunts and fairy-tale adventure seems like a throwback to Fearless Nadia films.<sup>33</sup> Moreover, the doubling structure has become a staple of Indian melodrama and fundamental to the formation of its star personae.<sup>34</sup> In the case of *Alibaba*, however, the doubling points not merely to the binary logic of the melodramatic imagination but to the moral codes related to the patriarchal bourgeois family and state structure.<sup>35</sup> The figure of the father is in continual transit between the categories of the literal, the metaphoric, and the metonymic. The “shifter” that embodies these various regimes is Yusuf’s ring, which functions both as Yusuf’s signature and—through the copy of it that Ali Baba possesses—Yusuf’s way to recognize his son. The good biological fathers of Ali, Marjina, and Fatima function in this natural order. Structurally, within the film’s narrative, they function not so much as unique persons but rather as interchangeable markers of authenticity and vulnerability. Each is overthrown. Each loses his possessions. Ali and Fatima’s fathers become dependent on their children and ultimately sacrifice their lives protecting them. On the other side is the Vizier, who presents himself as “the father of the people” both visually and verbally, and Abu Hassan, who is also the “father” of the bandits. These fathers take on the properties of the father, but are, in reality, fakes, simulacra. This is literalized in the final scene of the film, where Ali is confronted with multiple reflections of Abu Hassan in the cave of which he has to find—and kill—the “real” Abu Hassan. The mediated quality of this simulacrum is further underlined by the presence of what appears to be a TV screen inside the cave, and by the repeated use of superimpositions and time lapses. It is Abu Hassan’s possession of Yusuf’s ring, the instrument that joins together his identity as bandit leader and Vizier (and that also has unique cinematic powers, itself acting at times as a mini-screen), which both places him in the position of playing false father to Ali, and also provides the fatal clue to the falsity of that position, as the “true” Abu Hassan is the only one among the reflections with the ring on. Stealing the symbol of the good father reveals his true identity as the “false” (or “bad”) father to his people.

It is the fact that the nuclear (bourgeois) family as the basic unit constitutive of the modern state can be questioned and reconfigured, just as the father’s identity,

33 On Fearless Nadia films, see Rosie Thomas, “Not Quite (Pearl) White: Fearless Nadia, Queen of the Stunts,” in *Bollywood: Popular Indian Cinema Through a Transnational Lens*, eds. Raminder Kaur and Ajay Singa (London: Sage Publications, 2005), 35–43.

34 See Neepa Majumdar, “Doubling, Stardom, and Melodrama in Indian Cinema: The ‘Impossible’ Role of Nargis,” *Post Script* 22, no. 3 (2003): 89–103.

35 For an in-depth discussion of melodramatic codes in Indian cinema, see Ravi Vasudevan, “The Melodramatic Mode and the Commercial Hindi Cinema: Notes on Film History, Narrative and Performance in the 1950s,” *Screen* 30, no. 3 (1989): 29–50.

dependent upon a ring, can potentially enter into a circulation of counterfeits that allows Abu Hassan to gain power. As natural relations are vulnerable, so, too, are those metaphorical relations, such as the figure of the head of the state. The film not only follows the Oedipal narrative structure where the young hero's maturity is signaled by eliminating the father and father-substitutes, but it also effectively gets rid of the father-figures in the metaphoric domain, where they operate in relation to the community. In that sense, the real ending of the film would be the scene of the arrangement of Abu Hassan's murder, which is planned as a public event and involves all the members of the community. This potential (and yet unrealized) ending reaffirms the radically new formation of the community and succeeds through an important symbolic event—an explosion of violence that is not directed *against* but rather *by* the women in the film, the rebellion of the “daughters,” Fatima and Marjina. It is done through particularly spectacular and loaded formal means: as a song-and-dance number. Up until that point in the film, such numbers had been coded as performances of the threat of public humiliation and sexual violence against women. Here, however, consistent with Dyer's famous argument, the genuinely liberatory utopian dimension of mass entertainment finds its clearest manifestation through music and movement.<sup>36</sup> However, this turns to be a false ending, and is at its actual conclusion—Ali's fight with Abu Hassan in the cave—that the film reverts to the very traditional Oedipal ending that reconstitutes the couple enabling for the creation of the (bourgeois) family.

While this actual ending closes off the more radical possibilities in the film's allegorical meaning, the culminating moment shifts to that of discovering the “authentic” Abu Hassan from among the myriads of “fakes,” an act of recognition made possible by means of the ring once possessed by the authentic father, Yusuf. It seems that of the forty images of himself that Abu Hassan magically projects, only one wears the father's ring. In the dream logic of this sequence, the space of the cave and the ring are both invested with magical powers of projection, which are of course parallel to cinema's own power to reveal as well as to deceive. Thus the narrative doubling coincides not only with the inherently cinematic simultaneity of presence and absence, identification and disavowal, but also with the potential of entertainment cinema to create false consciousness (to “deceive” the viewer ideologically) and reveal genuine collective anxieties and liberatory solutions alike.

**The Threat of Inflation.** *Alibaba's* narrative and visual preoccupation with false identities and images can also be linked to a historically specific anxiety about inflation, both economic and symbolic. The anxiety of the possibility of endless counterfeiting and therefore further devaluation of currency is manifested here in this trope of “real” versus “fake” father, further linking the political structure to the economic one. And like the economic inflation, the symbolic inflation of the figures of the state was hidden and never acknowledged in the stagnation period (of the 1970s and early 1980s) in the Soviet Union. The devaluation of social and political symbols from any meaning showed, increasingly, that only raw force held the system together.

36 Dyer, 17–34.

In terms of economic development, the late 1970s was a time of anxiety about the issue of privatization in India, and a time of anxiety about hidden inflation linked to the rise of commodity culture in the Soviet Union. In particular, as credit was squeezed and prices became uncontrollable, the notion that a centralized, superior sector could plan the economy began to lose credibility. In the film, however, “the private sphere” is disavowed in all its manifestations. Two images from the film emerge to balance each other here: one is the village water supply and the dam, which is threatened with privatization; the other is the cave with its treasures, in which the central transformations take place. Such a paradoxical doubling of the internal and external spaces is, of course, a traditional marker of meaning in melodrama.<sup>37</sup> But in its recourse to the dam as the image that stands for the public sector threatened by privatization, the film is consistent with the moment when India started its massive efforts of irrigation which involved the construction of hundreds of large dams. In the enthusiasm of the initial period of decolonialization, dam and water projects were considered the keystones of modernity. Finally, many of the films locales were shot in Uzbekistan, which is an ironic coincidence: a fairy-tale film about the misuse of water was shot in a place and time in which the misuse of water—namely, the water from the Aral Sea, to irrigate cotton crops in Uzbekistan—was creating one of the greatest environmental scandals and frauds in Soviet history.<sup>38</sup>

At the same time, *Alibaba* offers a dream vision, a premodern community in which the problems of an ossified governing class and an unruly populace are solved by a magical return to the local and yet multiethnic pan-Asian community, a vision of mythological premodern pan-Asian unity as an alternative to the modern political and economic structures (either capitalist or state socialist per se). Thus the film sutures together a popular utopian impulse for a better, alternative future while affirming the state ideologies of countries that backed its production. However, at the same time as the film encodes the rejection of representation or mediation between the people and the state, it betrays a profound anxiety about the fragility of its state apparatus and the violence which it yields. This reading fully affirms Madhava Prasad’s statement that “what the allegorical dimension of the text of the film represents is the continuing necessity to conceive the state form which could serve as the ground for cultural signification. This allegorical scaffolding registers the instability of the cultural and political reality/practice itself and hence the possibility of struggles over the state.”<sup>39</sup> It is in this spirit that the state can be reconstituted, installing the possibility of change in the power structure.

In *Alibaba*, the multiplication of the father threatens the very idea that there is an authentic father, thus questioning the very foundations of the social power structure. The role of the identity of the father as constitutive of the family feudal romance structure is above all to mark the centrality of patrilinear descent intended to facilitate

37 See, for example, Christine Gledhill, “Signs of Melodrama,” in *Stardom: Industry of Desire*, ed. Christine Gledhill (London: Routledge, 1991), 107–131.

38 William A. Clark, *Crime and Punishment in Soviet Officialdom* (New York: M. E. Sharp, 1993), 187–190.

39 M. Madhava Prasad, *Ideology of the Hindi Film* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), 9.

the legitimate heritage of both property and power.<sup>40</sup> At the same time, it is central to marking sexual boundaries, defining licit and illicit sexual relations. This process guarantees the continuity of economic, social, and political power within the feudal state and its stability. In the film, however, this lineage is symbolically redrawn across the lines of biological family and, furthermore, local and ethnic lines. Ali and Marjina symbolically exchange parentage as Ali's father becomes a substitute father to Marjina when her own father is murdered, while Marjina's biological father, on the other hand, has previously acted as the protector of Ali's father by saving his life. This "exchange of fathers" exhibits a utopian impulse, allowing for the formation of a community different from the nuclear (bourgeois) family and national unity alike. Through the exchange of the fathers that brings together Ali, Marjin, and Fatima, a pseudo-familial communal unit is formed, which crosses over class and local community boundaries: Ali is from a merchant family presumably near Bukhara; Marjina is a Hindustani princess (as marked in particular by the elephants that form part of the courtly entourage, her clothes, and her dancing); and Fatima is the daughter of a wealthy merchant and, judging by the reference to Bahrestan, she is of Persian origins (or generally of "foreign lands"). This again alludes to a formation of a post-nation state by means of resorting to a pre-nation state culture and renegotiating the lines of lineage within it. Of course, the Soviet Union was officially founded as a post-national state, in accordance to Marxist internationalism and the rejection of the nation-state as imperialist. The crossing of ethnicities and the return to a lineage entailed by the choice of this story from the Arabian Nights casts a certain light on the anxiety over the violence that could disturb the post nation-state states, as central planning withers and local communities are left to either fend for themselves or become prey to predator states. However, like any pseudo-familial community, the pseudo-family of *Alibaba* remains bound by its underlying patriarchal structure and is thus always shadowed by the question of the real father. Yusuf's ring, then, plays a complex role in the sequence of discoveries and narrative twists, playing a key role in the melodramatic family feudal romance structure—a structure that governs much of Indian traditional narrative.

If this new community is fused through an exchange of fathers, one that ultimately returns to patriarchal lineage as its essence, the new community's bond is sealed over the expulsion of the wicked Father, whose very wickedness is defined by his ability to play the "fake" patriarch. The Father position, it turns out, is vulnerable to counterfeiting, to parasites and tricksters. Just as currency is susceptible to inflation, the father-position may turn out to be empty. And given the importance of the iconography of the time representing Indira Gandhi as "Mother India"—the title of another tragic and utopian film about dam construction as a foundation for national identity—the absence of mothers as authority figures in the film (as opposed to the dominance of mother figures in such classical family melodramas of the period as *Deewar* [Yash Chopra, 1975]) is also particularly conspicuous.

40 See Ravi Vasudevan, ed., *Making Meaning in Indian Cinema* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000), 99–142; and Vijay Mishra, *Bollywood Cinema: Temples of Desire* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 38.

It is also emblematic of the mixed generic origins of the film, which fuses melodramatic feudal family romance with socialist realism, such that all the fathers die sacrificing themselves for their children: Fatima's father commits suicide in hopes of liberating her from captivity, Marjina's father dies protecting her honor (and by extension the future of the kingdom and desirable lineage), and Ali's father is killed protecting both Ali and Marjina. This fundamental element of the narrative goes counter to the well-established Indian cinematic tradition of self-sacrificing mothers. This theme of martyred fathers instead resonates with the conventions of socialist realism, in which the hero is often "adopted" by a communal body (the army or the party) while the father-figure (the more enlightened member of the party who serves as his mentor) dies facing the class enemy, which serves to allow the hero to take his symbolic place. This formula at the time of its origins (in the 1930s) represented the official legend, behind which the Stalinist repressions made it the case that any member of any community could "disappear" at any time, or could lose his/her status as a citizen and hence as a legally recognized member of the collective. At the same time, as Katerina Clark has argued, the party structure at work in the socialist realist narrative reproduces/replaces the family patriarchy, regardless of the gender of the actual members of the community; in the semiotic space in which a son, as in Gorky's *Mother*, can take the place of the "father figure" to his own mother, gender is an invisible element of socialist patriarchy.<sup>41</sup> With another recognizable socialist realist touch, Ali's father refuses to take his last sip of water because it was bought—that is, turned into a commodity and privatized. But perhaps an even more recognizable to the Soviet audiences gesture is that of the Vizier positioning himself as the Father of the People—which is emphasized pictorially over and over by him picking up children in a quasi-Stalinist gesture, one we can almost surely attribute to the actor, Rolan Bykov, who had a long history of battles on- and offscreen with some of the conventions of socialist realism and played an important role in the history of popular Soviet cinema, both as an actor and a director.

Bykov, who was almost unrecognizable to the Soviet audiences in this performance, managed to blend in very well to the Bollywood film genre. His film career in the Soviet Union often thrust him into films of eccentric and exaggerated theatricality, for which he became famous. Yet those films are now almost forgotten, and international filmgoers know him more for his extraordinary dramatic roles in *Commissar* and *Andrei Rublev*, both eccentric tragic performances in highly controversial films by auteur filmmakers. Bykov's legacy is very complex and is only now, years after his death, becoming available to film historians.<sup>42</sup> In addition to his contributions as a remarkable actor, he directed a number of highly original children's films. In his most famous film of that period, *Oh How It Hurts 66* (*Aybolit-66*, 1968), Bykov stars as the main villain, giving a memorable performance as the pathetic philistine, Barmalei, a familiar boogeyman to all children of the last Soviet generation, hinting at the relationship between political power and the state (these undertones were made even more explicit in the intended

41 Katerina Clark, "Socialist Realism with Shores: The Conventions for the Positive Hero," in *Socialist Realism Without Shores*, eds. Thomas Lahusen and Evgeny Dobrenko (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), 27–50.

42 See Alexander Prokhorov, "Arresting Development: A Brief History of Soviet Cinema for Children and Adolescents," in *Russian Children's Literature and Culture*, eds. Marina Balina and Larissa Rudova (London: Routledge, 2007), 129–152.

follow-up to the film, which was aborted by the state censors). His next children's film, *Attention, Turtle!* (*Vnimanie, cherepakha!* 1970), was severely criticized for its climatic scene where children rescue a turtle from the wheels of a tank—the scene was taken to be an allusion to the 1968 Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia. Further, scenes of children playing irreverently with toy soldiers were accused of communicating a message mocking patriotism and the Soviet military (one newspaper ran a review with the headline, “Flag Covered in Urine”).<sup>43</sup>

Bykov's struggles with the official censorship and his participation in the banned films were well-known to the Soviet audiences, making his performance in *Ali Baba* even more politically evocative for them. His appearance in the film is itself coded, making implicit the connection between the dual role Bykov plays and the Soviet audience's understanding of the political power of the state. In this double role he establishes a continuum between robbery, private enterprise, and state corruption, linking the two spaces of the film that he controls—the dam and the cave.

Given the dominance of this motif, I would argue that the political climax of the film is the scene of the public exposure of the identity of Abu Hassan and the Vizier. In this scene, done as a song-and-dance number, Marjina's dance with knives is a symbolic enactment of the killing of Bykov's character, while his real strength is being secretly sapped by Ali and Fatima, who dispatch the forty thieves. What is particularly striking about this sequence is its peculiar violence, which this time is turned around and manifested by Marjina, the most fragile and feminine character in the film. Her provocative dance with the knives, intercut with Fatima's actual violence toward her former captors, makes more explicit than elsewhere in the film the centrality of women in the symbolic cluster through which the logic of the film unfolds. Women in the film figure as treasures and commodities, sold and bought, traded and stolen, as objects of exchange in the patriarchic lineage of fathers and sons, but also as the bodies upon which is inscribed both the violence of the state and the violence of those outside the state. In turn, they take on the role of avenging the good fathers against the “bad” fathers. In what follows I will explore the representation of women through its enactment in the song-and-dance numbers in the film, with reference to the performance history of one of the film's stars, Zeenat Aman.

Sexual violence is a constant undercurrent in the film: the world of *Alibaba* is one in which a woman's honor (and life) is constantly threatened. Rape is the social bond that welds together the false family of thieves, which, by extension, is the false, or other community mirroring the town over which the Vizier rules. The violence to which the state has recourse gets played out on the woman's body, as is typical in melodrama, where the body becomes the framework of all meaning. The figure in the film that best embodies this both narratively and through her on-screen performance history is Zeenat Aman.

**Zeenat Aman, Sexual Violence, and the Conventions of Song-and-Dance Numbers.** Zeenat Aman was the first Indian star who wasn't a good dancer, who refused a bouffant. She bobbed her hair at the height of her career and hardly ever

43 “Rolan Bykov,” <http://www.peoples.ru/art/cinema/producer/bykov/index.html> (accessed September 11, 2009).

appeared in saris and bindis. Her specialty was the modern urban Indian woman, who made no excuses and took no prisoners. Zeenat began a new trend, helping launch careers for male actors—something Indian actresses had never done.<sup>44</sup> She starred in a number of socially conscious films, most notably as the avenger-woman in *Insaf Ka Tarazu* (B. R. Chopra, 1980), the first film in the genre, in which she portrayed a rape victim who, failing to receive justice from a court that doubted that she did not consent to having sex with her attacker, took her own personal revenge on him. The success of this “notorious rape film” was described as largely due to Zeenat Aman’s performance (as well as the larger conditions of its reception in the wake of feminist activism of the 1970s), and thus began the genre of avenger-woman films.<sup>45</sup> Her roles in *Insaf Ka Tarazu* and *Alibaba* resonate with the themes of sexual violence and the “avenging woman” (in this case coded specifically as Muslim) for which her later, more famous, performances would be known. But while Zeenat’s Fatima is consistently coded as a “dangerous” woman, Hema Malini’s Marjina is her “good” sister (a common doubling for Indian films) who for most of the film is represented through passive and unthreatening femininity. A sudden change occurs when Marjina comes into close contact with Fatima, whose presence seems to be contaminating. Hema Malini’s expectedly violent performance in the last song-and-dance number in *Alibaba* seems to belong not so much to that film as to one of her later films, standing out from *Alibaba*’s clear set of stock and utterly predictable characters. While the earlier song-and-dance numbers by Hema Malini in the film are very similar in their masochistic psychodynamics to, say, her famous dance on broken glass in *Sholay*, the final dance with the knives clearly, symbolically reverses the direction of violence, making a bridge from her earlier roles of spunky but ultimately unthreatening Basanti (*Sholay*; Ramesh Sippy, 1975) and Geeta (*Seeta Aur Geeta*, Sippy, 1972) to her roles as an avenging woman from the 1980s films.

Given the kinds of characters Aman had played, and those she would later play, we can see how sexual violence crystallizes as a key motif of *Alibaba*. In folk narratives, women are often treated as units of exchange, yet the refusals of the women in the film to accept that fate, which provokes physical and sexual threats, becomes a major driver of the narrative progression—crucially in Fatima’s willingness to cooperate with her thief captors in order to save herself and her father, and in Badshah’s decision to take Marjina by force by killing her father. The theme comes through even more forcefully in the song-and-dance numbers, which stop the narrative action and present themselves as pure spectacle.

In *Alibaba* every single song-and-dance number is framed through the threat of some form of gendered violence. On the one hand, this isn’t particularly unusual: near-rape scenes have long been standard in Bollywood films. On a simple level, just like the inclusion of harem scenes, such scenes allow for a narratively justified display of nudity and sexual titillation while preserving intact the moral code’s insistence that a woman’s honor is at stake in guarding herself from sexual contact, even to the point

44 “Altekar, Parshwanath Yeshwant,” in *Encyclopedia of Indian Cinema*, by Ashish Rajadhyaksha and Paul Willemen (London: British Film Institute, 1999), 41.

45 See Lalitha Gopalan, *Cinema of Interruptions*, chapter two.

of risking death. However, it is unusual that *every* single song-and-dance number in *Alibaba* is framed this way. What is absent, for example, is a “happy couple” song-and-dance number. The narrative importance of the subversive potential of a sexually abused woman is signaled by the words of Sim Sim (who herself is a captive, albeit a powerful one) who warns Abu Hassan that he is going to be destroyed by a woman (a warning that lingers of the narrative but is not realized literally, as it is in the end Ali Baba who kills Abu Hassan). The overemphasis on sexual violence from the very beginning of the film foregrounds such violence as a structuring motif of both the plot and its cinematic representation. The use of the cave brings out, as well, the tradition of “Indian gothic,” which establishes the foundational staging of melodrama with a set of stereotypical scenarios and settings, bringing attention to what Mishra calls “the central themes of the gothic—the idea of claustal and confined space as the metaphor of the unconscious in the dark passages . . . the terror that this space creates, the absence of transcendence, the threat of sexual violation.”<sup>46</sup> The settings of the cave provide a stage which allows for the usual conventions of staging and editing of the time: frontal composition and direct address, lack of the 180 degree rule and, given that the cave seems to consist of interdependent spaces providing for only partially coherent spacial organization, parallel editing within the short segment, a technique which will be used again and to great effect in the last song-and-dance number of the film. In a striking moment, the floor of the cave where Fatima is dancing lights up and turns into a disco floor, an anachronistic moment further marking the space of the cave as the space of display and of a particular kind of a recognizable sexualized performance. The next song-and-dance number features Marjina (again in a captive situation) forced—and refusing—to dance for the new Badshah as a token of her subjugation and humiliation, and managing to escape only through the trick, engineered by Ali, of a provocative, mirage image of a false Marjina. The following number is staged at the slave market, where Marjina is singing to Ali to rescue her while she is being forced to undress. The penultimate song-and-dance number is under a double sexual threat, where Marjina and Fatima team up to ward off the sexual advances and threat of physical violence coming from several directions.

Only the final song-and-dance number is not a scene of a woman’s performance as an attempt to ward off a sexual menace. Instead, this number depicts a double revenge. Marjina simulates the murder of Vizier by dancing with knives and fire, and this is crosscut with Fatima and Ali actually killing the bandits. In fact, each movement of Marjina’s dance is intercut with a false match-on-action; with each strike of Marjina’s knives, there is a cut to Ali and Fatima killing the bandits.

This constant conflation of sadomasochistic gender dynamics (and actual violence) with dance and sexuality further foregrounds the avenger theme as a particular obsession. The decision to frame the song-and-dance numbers in terms of contexts of violence directed against women further erodes the difference between rape and sexualized representation of women, mixing two codes: one code being the antirealistic conventions in which the visual pleasure of the spectator derives solely from the display of the woman as a sexual object in the traditional song-and-dance number, and the

46 Mishra, *Bollywood Cinema*, 49.

other centering on the sexual aggressor's pleasure in being titillated. This association is made even more explicit by the intrusion of a thoroughly modern element, a disco floor, into the space of the ancient cave, framing Fatima's song-and-dance number explicitly as a performance, and a thoroughly modern one at that. Thus, the spectatorial pleasure with which the film engages us throughout is put into a clear relationship to the constant threat of sexual violence against the heroines. Gopalan makes the same observation in describing the interplay of the conventions of disrobing in Indian cinema as they are employed in the rape scenes.<sup>47</sup> I would argue, however, that this example of incorporating near-rape into the musical number makes this relationship between the representation of gender and depictions of rape even more obvious.

This equation is particularly significant given the traditional alignment between the spectatorial gaze in Indian cinema with the state (both in its censoring capacities, and as a formal structure of the gaze, as argued for example by Madhava Prasad), which is paralleled, I would argue, in the Soviet tradition. The state, then, becomes the editor of last resort, enters the frame as both the censor of cinematic pleasure and, by the parameters of decorum it enforces, the condition for the more and more eccentric forms of sadomasochistic spectacle it activates.

Here I should note a further tie between the state and sexual violence that comes out of the double role of the Vizier/Abu Hassan. In both domains in which the double figure operates—as the representative of the state and of the counterfeit thieves' state—Abu Hassan presents an impression of potential sexual aggression. This violence in turn is also implicitly connected with capitalist commodification and privatization. First a link is established between slavery and prostitution through the parallel of the two numbers—the first one in which Fatima is selling herself in order to avoid being gang raped by the bandits (singing “the one who will give the most for me can have me”) being mirrored by the second one, Marjina's singing while being displayed for sale at the slave market (“today your love is sold on the street”). The privatization of water, Ali's father's death (from refusing to pay for water), Marjina's sexual enslavement, and Ali's sale of his birthright to his brother to buy her out of slavery are clearly metonymically linked. All of these elements are conditioned by the transformation of a public good—water—into a private good, and the greed such a transformation introduces. Thus, the issue of commodification and its link to the representation of women (performing, dancing, and singing on and off disco floors) is as much at the core of the film as its preoccupation with the Father and state. The two themes come fully together, fully illustrating Lalitha Gopalan's argument that avenging-woman films “feed off the crisis of legitimacy of the Indian state, a crisis that unleashed an open display of the state's coercive powers and precipitated most visibly after the state of emergency between 1975 and 1977. . . . [The state of emergency] set into motion contestations between power and authority which have pressed upon a more thorough exploration of hegemony, citizenship, community, nationalism, and democracy in India. [These films] stage some of the most volatile struggles over representation that shape our public and private fantasies of national, communal, regional, and sexual

47 Lalitha Gopalan, “Avenging Women in Indian Cinema,” in Vasudevan, *Making Meaning in Indian Cinema*, 219.

identities.”<sup>48</sup> In retrospect, the particular cluster of anxieties the film symbolically portrays—of the simultaneous fragility and oppressive potential of the state apparatus, of the instability and unsustainability of the top-down economic system and at the same time of the dangers that commodity fetishism posed to local communities, of the multi-ethnic conflicts on the brink of complete disaster and the threat of nationalism as the ultimate solution to these problems—all became historically justified within less than a decade of the making of the film. In addition to being an example of the excessive pleasures of 1970s Bollywood and a product of a fragile but powerful geopolitical alliance, *Alibaba* remains a rare cultural document of shared transnational and trans-cultural anxieties and dreams.

48 Ibid., 215–216.

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