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The transnational tales of an Indian creative producer: the case of Guneet Monga

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ABSTRACT



Studies of Indian cinema have traditionally placed more emphasis on directors, stars, aesthetics and issues of ideology than on the practices of creative producers. Although these are important concerns, the role of Indian producers deserves careful scholarly attention, especially in the context of transnational film projects, where producers are often involved from the pre-development stage through production and distribution. To address this problem, this article examines the production stories of an Indian creative producer, Guneet Monga (1983-), who is well-known for setting up Indian-European co-productions that deviate from contemporaneous spectacle-driven mainstream Bollywood productions. Through an in-depth personal interview with the producer herself and insights from film and media production studies, this article demonstrates how Monga's micro-production stories reveal larger creative and collaborative practices that are transforming India's independent film production culture and making it more transnational. This article shows that producers—the least researched figure in Indian film scholarship—gain several navigational tactics through transnational co-productions such as telling tales of tenacity, hustling and interpersonal networking, among others. These tactics, in turn, challenge the precarious conditions of working in the Bollywood-dominated film culture of India.

KEYWORDS

Producers; transnational cinema; production culture; precarity; international co-productions; creative labour; Indian independent cinema; film festivals

New breed of creative producers in India

Guneet Monga, the Oscar-winning producer of the short film *Period: End of Sentence* (2018), has shaped independent filmmaking in India for the past decade.¹ The producer of over 30 films, Monga is well-known for setting up independent Indian-European co-productions, including *The Lunchbox* (2013), *Monsoon Shootout* (2013) and *Masaan* ('Fly Away Solo', 2015). These films premiered at the Cannes Film Festival and received positive reviews from international critics. However, transnational productions did not translate into positive box-office results, with the exception of the global success of *The Lunchbox*. This article utilizes the production stories of the creative producer, Monga, as the vantage point for a deep cultural understanding of the

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independent transnational film production scene of the Mumbai-based film industry in which producers have traditionally been exclusively associated with funding a project; therefore, their role and creative labour remained largely underdeveloped. This article offers a rich, detailed and nuanced cultural understanding of the changing role of Indian producers and the independent film production world by interrogating what the production stories reveal about India's changing independent film production culture and how it is becoming more transnational. Therefore, through a production studies lens, the article examines the production stories of Monga with specific reference to the making of *The Lunchbox* (2013) in which she worked together with 16 co-producers, including established mainstream Bollywood producers such as Anurag Kashyap, Karan Johar, Ronnie Screwvala and Siddharth Roy Kapur. Other co-producers also involved in the film's production were: ASAP Films (France), Rohfilm (Germany), Cine Mosaic (USA) along with private production companies DAR Motion Pictures, UTV Motion Pictures, Dharma Productions, Sikhya Entertainment, and National Film Development Corporation (Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India). The film was produced with the support of ARTE France Cinema, CNC (France), and MEDIENBOARD Berlin-Brandenburg (*The Lunchbox*, n.d.). This article seeks to present how Monga's micro-production stories reveal larger creative practices, precarious working conditions and related navigational tactics of producers within the independent transnational film industry culture of India.

As a contribution to the de-westernization of transnational cinema, this article utilizes insights from production studies to examine Indian producers and their production milieus. In recent years, the term 'production studies' has become widely accepted as a way of studying film and media production from a cultural perspective. The central focus of production studies is to examine the term 'producer' and how 'media producers make culture' (Mayer, 2). The expanding field of production studies emphasizes the importance of understanding the role of producers – particularly in the production and distribution of transnational films (Mayer, Caldwell John, and Banks 2009; Szczepanik and Vonderau, 2013; Spicer et al., 2014 Mayer et al., 2015). Anthropological studies of the Indian film industry and culture, discuss mainly the roles of popular Bollywood actors, directors and producers and questions of caste, identity and gender (Wilkinson-Weber C. M., 2013; Pandian, 2015; Ganti 2012) while ignoring the function and creative labour of producers, who produce alternative or independent films in India.

This article presents the first fully-developed critical study of an Indian creative producer in the examination of India's independent film production culture. It focuses on the evolving role and 'trade stories' of creative producer Monga in constructing a transnational culture for independent films in India. The 'trade stories' model is proposed by Caldwell (2008) in his ground-breaking work, *Production Culture*, which is an examination of cultural practices, habits and conventions of Los Angeles film industry workers and sheds light on how participants in that culture understand and articulate (and even theorize) the work that they do. The 'trade stories' model is built on the notion of 'thick description' that entails interpreting the information provided by the informants. This involves a deeper 'microscopic' understanding of the context and codes of culture by 'reading over the shoulder' of the informant (Geertz 1973, 453). Caldwell interprets the 'trade stories' of Hollywood workers by asking

Who tells them, using what forms of plot and character development and then placing trade storytelling within specific labour sectors and working contexts. The final aim is to analyze the possible cultural function of the story (37)

In this way, the production stories are classified into various genres such as ‘against-all-odds’, ‘genesis myth’, ‘paths-not-taken’ and ‘making-it sagas’. The author notes the genres are not restricted to a particular production community; however, below-the-line workers and production workers (e.g. editors, camera operators, grips) frequently narrate against-all-odds stories, which typically stress ‘modest or lowly origins, physical perseverance and tenacity’ (40). Above-the-line professionals (such as creative producers, writers and directors) tend to narrate ‘genesis myth’ or ‘paths-not-taken parable’ to establish professional legitimacy, and industrial heritage to celebrate an ‘originating moment’ in order to gain career capital. Agents, reps, producer assistants and managers work in unregulated and non-unionized sectors; therefore, they narrate ‘making-it sagas’ stories and use workplace networking as a tool for survival (38).

The ‘trade stories’ model is particularly useful in examining the production practices of Monga, who has received considerable media attention over the past decade for her contribution to world cinema through Indian-French co-productions, and was also recently conferred the second-highest French civilian award ‘*Chevalier de l’Ordre des Arts et des Lettres*.’ Consequently, there is no dearth of data in the media to analyze her production stories. This allows for the study to be conducted by combining published interviews with bottom-up methods such as personal interviews, participant observation, and narrative analysis. Monga discussed her career path, creative contributions, industrial changes, challenges, and work culture during a personal interview conducted virtually, as well as in a production workshop entitled ‘Producing 101’ (2020), where the author was invited as a participant-observer. The above-mentioned methods aid in understanding and analyzing the production stories and narratives that are constructed by Monga, allowing the identification of cultural codes, practices, and social behaviour, which can then be examined in relation to the domestic and global industrial structures. In this way, Monga’s production practices are contextualized within the larger Hindi-language film industry structure and culture that she negotiates every day.

India is one of the largest producers of films. Between 2015 and 2016, approximately 1,900 films in 41 languages were produced there, about 340 of these in the Hindi-language (‘Film Federation Of India’ n.d.). However, Bollywood has become synonymous with all Hindi-language films and Indian cinema, overshadowing the heterogeneity of the cinematic traditions of India (Velayutham and Devdas, 2021). The Hindi-language independent filmmakers often struggle to fund their films and find theatrical distribution even more challenging due to the dominance of Bollywood. Devasundaram (2016) points out that independent filmmakers work in a close relationship with the hegemonic structures of Bollywood, seeking financial and infrastructural support from big corporate studios, Bollywood actors, producers, and big production houses for survival (273). Even a cursory glance at Hindi-language independent filmmaking thus reveals that it exists in the Bollywood-dominated and corporatized cinema culture of Mumbai. Therefore, there is a growing demand for trained producers with creative interests among independent filmmakers (FC Team, 2021). Ganti (2012) discovered that the Hindi-language film industry suffers from looming anxieties against a segment

of untrained producers, who were labelled as ‘proposal-makers’ or ‘adventurers’ that run after popular Bollywood stars with an idea for a film without a script, in search of ‘easy money and fame’ (Ganti, p. 185). As a result of the rise of black money and corruption, film production has grown into a breeding ground for independent producers and investors looking to turn black money into white. This contributed to disorganized, chaotic and fragmented production conditions in the 1970s and 1980s (Pendakur, 1996, 148). However, such narratives construct stereotypes about the role and function of producers in Indian filmmaking culture. Through a production studies approach, which ‘theorizes production as culture’ (Mayer, Caldwell John, and Banks 2009, 4), this article offers a more detailed, holistic and cultural understanding of the function of producers in the transnational independent scene of India.

Large corporate studios and production houses such as UTV and Reliance Big Pictures dominate the Mumbai film industry, providing financial support to contemporary independent films and replacing the category of traditional independent investors and producers (Devasundram, 2016, 85). However, I argue that in the past decade, a new type of producer – a creative producer, has emerged in India, playing a key role in exploring international training and funding options to build a creative team (e.g. finding a director, writer, sales agent and distributor) and produce alternative stories or independent films that deviate from mainstream conventions of Bollywood. The new Indian producer emerges as a creative collaborator in the production of independent films internationally. Through their creative participation and collaboration in script development, editing, pitching, and financing, this distinctive class of producers is redefining the role and job of independent producers. This, in turn, is transforming India’s independent film production culture.² Monga, the CEO of Sikhya production company in Mumbai, remains at the centre of these changes by working collaboratively with independent film directors. Monga chose the isolating path of a creative producer-collaborator with the independent film director, Ritesh Batra. The collaboration resulted in the transnational journey of *The Lunchbox* debunking the myth of associating producers with money and directors with art. Monga states:

We both started working together on it. We both got a scholarship to go to Rotterdam. And then we spent 10 days in Rotterdam together as a director, producer, and we got to know each other as people, you know, it’s almost like you’re entering a partnership, a business partnership or a work partnership and a filmmaking partnership (personal interview, 14 June 2021)

Monga further mentions that ‘the job of a producer is to protect the vision of the director’ (personal interview, 14 June 2021). In another interview, a film festival programmer also comments that creative producers protect the artistic values of independent directors (D. DCunha, personal interview, 11 June 2021). Script development thus is another aspect of the creative collaboration between the director and producer. According to Monga,

Scripts can come at any stage. You develop them, give notes, ask so many questions, and debate with the director/writer in a healthy manner. What is the purpose of the character? Why are they doing what they are doing? The more you read scripts, watch content and study reviews . . . you inform yourself and giving feedback to the director then become an art form. The film needs to be nurtured at all stages from development, pre-production to post-production and distribution by a creative producer. (personal interview, 14 June 2021)

By working collaboratively with the director, creative producers take part in virtually every aspect of independent films. For Indian creative producers, participation in script development emphasizes the artistic aspects of their jobs. To collaborate efficiently and find innovative ways of financing and distributing small-budgeted films, the producer applies various creative navigational tactics intending to carve a space for these indie films and for themselves. This kind of production studies research aid in understanding Indian independent filmmaking with greater detail and nuance by studying the function of producers and production as a collaborative culture. In what follows, I analyze the case of Monga and her production stories further to discuss three major creative navigational tactics: telling tales of tenacity, hustling, and interpersonal networking.

Telling tales of tenacity

Monga belongs to an Indian middle-class family and started her journey as an intern for her best friend's mother, line producer Anureeta Sehgal on an international co-production, *Valley of Flowers* in Delhi (Kapur, G. R. S. & M., 2019). An excerpt from our interview describing the precarious nature of working on independent films in India is worth quoting:

Independent filmmaking in India is hard. It is hundred percent equity-based . . . without any government grants. It is not based on the creative position of the script. It is based on who you know! It is tough to navigate that ecosystem and find the best like-minded people who would like to invest in a story. We don't have any parallel cinema theatres, platform screenings [. . .] It is very tough given the limitations. Our mindset stops at 'who is the star'? That is directly related to the box office. Bollywood casts such a big shadow on our Hindi-language film industry. There is no model for indie filmmaking to thrive. Having a different conversation is difficult; assuring that it is a beautiful story, it will travel and will also make money. (personal interview, 14 June 2021)

This lack of infrastructure and the dominant presence of Bollywood create precarious working conditions for independent Hindi-language filmmaking in India. However, alternative digital distribution systems such as Amazon and Netflix offer new exhibition opportunities for Indian independent films (G. Monga, personal interview, 14 June 2021). The corporate and capitalist nature of the Hindi-language film industry continues to create harsh working conditions for independent filmmakers and producers. Besides 'Bollywoodization',³ corporatization and capitalism, Ganti (2012) further points out the patriarchal dimension of the Bollywood film industry, noting that 'the sites and spaces of production until the early 2000s were highly masculine' (32). The media frequently represents Monga as a self-made woman in a male-dominated world of film producers.⁴ The newspaper titles often refers to her tales of tenacity and struggles, for instance, 'with money borrowed from a neighbour, Monga went on to co-found production company with Anurag Kashyap' (Thomas, S. M. n.d.) and 'How Guneet Monga raised money for films: posting online to selling her house' (2019). Simultaneously, she tells stories of her humble beginnings, survival and growth in media (Favre-Leuba 2019), and through such tales of persistence and tenacity, Monga establishes her identity and proficiency as a creative producer of small-budgeted independent films. Her micro production tales expose the larger structural inequalities in the Hindi-language film industry; Monga often emphasizes her persistence and tenacity 'against-all-odds' in

relation to the way she has been ‘written off as young and judged for being in a power position’ (Favre-Leuba 2019) by fellow film and media professionals. Monga claims to have had her hair coloured grey to be taken seriously as a young producer in the film business. Monga, being an outsider in Bollywood-dominated film culture, narrates these stories of hardships and growth publicly to establish both professional authority and accumulate career capital to resist the male-dominated production world of Mumbai.

These obstacles only made her push boundaries and try to find the best possible solutions to the problems that she has encountered given the gender and ageist bias of independent filmmaking and the Mumbai-film production world at large. In her several other interviews, Monga states how she has been an outsider, on the ‘periphery of Bollywood’ (Bhadani, 2020). These discriminatory accounts show that she can not only survive but succeed despite a lack of resources and support. Industrial exclusion is a common feature that Caldwell (2008) defines to be a primary trait of ‘against-all-odds’ narratives, which pushes production workers towards ‘creative triumph of the will’ (46). Monga narrates the ‘against-all-odds’ story behind the making of her first film as a producer, *Salaam India*, about a children’s cricket team, in the following manner:

No one was picking up our movie because India lost the world cup miserably. And that was my neighbour’s money. I left my job [...] Long story short, I went on to do 350 shows like this; hired interns, and returned all the money. Cyrus if you give us your 50 lakhs. You know that will be safe. (Barocha 2021)

The story emphasizes how obstacles pushed her toward exploring creative ways of selling the film. Monga explains how she creatively recouped all the money by screening the film to school children and selling several DVDs. Notice how, in the end, Monga adds that the money will be ‘safe’ with her so as to form trust with the interviewer. Note that she tells the story of production struggle and success to pitch herself as an excellent saleswoman who knows the business of filmmaking. One creative way to pitch indie films, therefore, is by telling tales of tenacity. Being a creative producer, she is extremely aware of the power of storytelling. Telling stories of obstacles becomes a tactic used to navigate the risky business of filmmaking and attract investors. In ‘against-all-odds’ narratives, stories often emphasize low budgets as the key to innovation (Caldwell 2008, 42). Monga asserts that innovation in financing independent films became the key to her success. For instance, she states that ‘we literally killed ourselves to make films on such low-budgets that people could take a chance on us’ (Personal interview, 14 June 2021). Monga further uses her stories as a tool to legitimize her command over the film business:

I tell them how my films give a high return of investment. The budgets they’re made in, the budgets we have been able to sell them in, give a huge return of investment. They’re all profit-making (“Guneet Monga on Being Valued at Festivals”, 2020).

Note that Monga views low-budget independent filmmaking as accomplishment and self-celebratory, explaining how one can pull a profit-making creative film with micro-budgets. Bowen (2020) makes similar remarks about Italian independent filmmakers and producers who celebrate obstacles, sacrifice and hardship. However, Bowen argues that indie film practitioners tell such ‘against-all-odds’ stories as a ‘marketing strategy’ and also to gain empathy and support from critics. In the same vein, Monga emphasizes how she finished films in less than a month:

We have been very hard on ourselves with *Peddlers* and *Haraamkhor*, making them really low-budget. Vasan Bala and Shlok Sharma, the directors, supported that. We finished *Haraamkhor* in 16 days, aware that we could pull it off with the script. *Peddlers* were spread [sic] all over Mumbai but finished in 30 days (Singh 2013).

Monga creatively raised 10 million Indian Rupee (INR) for *Peddlers*, which had a total budget of approximately 20 million INR. by posting the film's script on Facebook ("How Guneet Monga Raised Money for Films", 2019). Monga views these production 'tales of tenacity' as a form of achievement; therefore, the telling of the tales itself becomes a navigational tactic for her to pitch independent films, but the independent director, Makhija (2021) expresses contempt for harsh working conditions in the Indian film industry. During the World Cinema International Conference held in Madrid virtually, Makhija (2021) points out the exploitative dimension of working on an indie film under the corporatist environment with particular reference to Yoodlee Films, a division of India's oldest music company, Saregama India Limited, which has recently begun producing and distributing alternative cinemas of India across languages and genres. Makhija worked with Yoodlee for *Ajji* (2017) and asserts that the team was forced to work on a shoestring budget, which created precarious working conditions for the crew. These remarks suggest paradoxical and sometimes contradictory characteristics of the Indian production narrative. The exploitative nature of the commercialized and corporate Bombay-motion film industry which extends itself into a 'multimedia juggernaut with skyrocketing revenues and blockbuster production budgets' (Curtin and Kevin, 2016, 5) forces creative producers to make indie films on lower budgets.⁵ On one hand, creative producers of independent films demand support, and on the other, they internalize the precarity to the point of self-exploitation. These precarious working conditions push creative producers not only to work long hours but also to view precarity as a catalyst for creativity and celebrate it as an achievement. For this reason, the hustling of producing independent cinema in harsh working conditions is discussed in the next section of the article.

Hustling

In the 'against-all-odds' trade story genre, innovation and a hostile environment often work simultaneously (Caldwell 2008, 51). In several published interviews, Monga associates producing with 'hustling' and calls herself a 'proud hustler' and a 'disruptor' (Ghose 2021; *The "Women In Labour" Podcast*, 2020). Monga emphasizes how she 'hustled' her way creatively and made it happen despite several challenges. During her hustle at the international film festivals, she creatively disseminated earlier films of Anurag Kashyap, the pioneer of contemporary independent filmmaking in India. For this, Monga used a pen drive with Anurag Kashyap's name and her own e-mail id. She argues 'at some point, it was so widely available at festivals. [...] just these creative ways of hustling' (Kiran 2021). In the personal interview, she explains that, for her, hustling results from her passion for the profession and the enthusiasm to tell stories to a global audience. Structurally, hustling emerged because of the entrepreneurial origins of the Indian film industry that comprises 'independent contractors or freelancers' flourishing

independently of state aid for decades, (Ganti, 19) except for the heydays of the Parallel Cinema Movement and Indian New Wave, which was largely funded by the state⁶. Ganti (2012) remarks:

Flexibility, fragmentation, decentralization and their associated occupational and employment insecurities that are cited as characteristics of a global, late-capitalist order, have actually been the defining features of the Hindi-language film industry since the end of Second World War. (19)

However, these characteristics – the flexible capitalist hyper-working world of the Hindi-language film industry – inevitably result in self-exploitation and precarious working conditions for creative producers. The continuous hustle for creative producers results from a lack of resources, peer groups and state support in the Indian Indie filmmaking scene. Monga speaks of the hustle in Indian independent filmmaking and her beliefs in the following manner:

The Indian independent cinema is about human experiences. I know that we do not do escapist cinema. We do . . . I am attracted to more human experiences and putting that to make people feel something, it's really important to me, you know, taking somebody's couple of hours and not taking them for granted is very important to me. (personal interview, 14 June 2021)

By distinguishing between independent filmmaking and Bollywood, Monga establishes a unique identity for herself, while carefully referring to Bollywood as 'escapist' cinema. This is a common trait of the 'paths-not-taken parable', in which film professionals find gratification in choosing alternative career paths. The Hollywood above-the-line professionals, for instance, emphasize financial and moral differences as reasons for preferring prime-time television over big-budget films (Caldwell 2008, 50). Similar to the Hollywood filmmakers, however with more restraint, Monga shows disdain over the work done in Bollywood to establish herself and her independent film project as relatively superior. Caldwell also mentions that the habit of telling one's personal career trajectory is more common among Hollywood above-the-line professionals, which acts as a celebration of artistic pedigree that Caldwell calls 'genesis myth'. Monga habitually narrates what Caldwell calls 'originating moments' within the 'genesis myth' genre; however, it must be noted that Monga belongs to the Indian middle class and her career trajectory is not the result of an ancestral legacy as is often the case with above-the-line production narratives of Hollywood. Alternatively, for Monga, the telling of a career trajectory becomes self-affirmatory and provides much-needed genuine self-talk and psychological support required in an indie filmmaking business in India. The hustling stories sometimes serve a dual function of heroism and pedagogy. Monga says:

I tell people to go study producing or start ground up and not judge the process. Every day it felt like life was not moving, but I feel I could move a mountain. [...] I have had great mentors, and I believe in mentoring. (Ghose 2021)

Note that Monga compares her work to moving 'a mountain', emphasizing that the profession of a creative producer requires both physical and mental strength. She further asks 'not to judge the process,' which implies self-exploitation in the business of indie

filmmaking. In addition, Monga views producing as synonymous with learning and mentoring and refers to the title of her production company, Sikhya Entertainment, in which ‘Sikhya means learning and I am still learning’ (personal interview, 14 June 2021).

While hustling her way through the transnational independent filmmaking sector, Monga found that the role of a creative producer is highly misunderstood and undervalued by fellow film industry professionals in India. The producers lack peer support and guidance; therefore, the pedagogical function becomes even more important with the need to educate others about the challenging job of a creative producer. In order to mentor aspiring producers and celebrate reaching a hundred thousand followers on Instagram, Monga organized an industry workshop, ‘Producing 101’, in which the author was invited to be a participant-observer on 8 May 2020. In this workshop, Monga emphasizes the important yet neglected role of a producer in an Indian film during the workshop:

In India, every actor became a producer, so the industry underestimated the job of a producer. The producer is an invaluable asset. More responsible than a director, a producer is a collaborator—adds value to it [sic] and expands the journey of a film. That’s a lot of work! (‘Producing 101’, 8 May 2020).

Monga frequently speaks about the value of a producer in the Indian filmmaking process through media platforms because Indian independent producers have traditionally been associated with investing money rather than creativity in a film project, which left a functional gap in the filmmaking process. Additionally, after the Indian state gave industry status to the film industry in 1998, corporate houses and conglomerates began investing heavily in the film business (Ganti 2012, 70). Many popular Bollywood actors turned into producers, producing their own films and establishing their film production and distribution companies. The first of its kind was—Amitabh Bachchan Corporation Ltd., which was established in 1995, soon after the economic liberalization of India in the early 1990s. Many other popular stars followed the trend, for instance, Aamir Khan production house (1999), and Red Chillies Entertainment (2002) owned by popular Bollywood stars Aamir Khan and Shahrukh Khan, respectively. When corporate studios began investing in non-Bollywood films, several independent directors chose to directly pitch and produce their own films to avoid financial dependence on the independent as well as creative producers of the corporate studios (Mazumder 2015). These business changes assembled actors, directors, and producers in one category in India, which becomes a major reason behind the lack of admiration and understanding of a producer’s job in the Hindi-language film industry. Monga worked on several projects and took many production roles, including executive producer and line producer to gain industry experience. For instance, she began her journey as a line producer for an internationally co-produced film, *Valley of Flowers* (2006). She worked as an executive producer for *Colours of Passion* (2008) and a line producer for a Bollywood film, *Ghajini* (2008) (Kiran 2021). In this way, she eventually hustled her way to becoming an internationally-recognized creative producer. However, besides gathering financial support and bringing established production companies on board (a role that producers were already fulfilling in India), the most important contribution of Monga to the Indian film industry lies in her efforts to successfully establish the distinct role of a producer in a creative project, in line with several filmmaking cultures in the world. Creating this

parity in production culture in India opens up many possibilities for aspiring Indian producers to co-produce internationally and create an identity of their own in the industry.

Interpersonal networking

The hustling of producing independent films often involves interpersonal networking. As Monga explains: ‘it was a hustle of keeping those relationships, informing yourself, and then showing them one film after another, and making the best out of the opportunities’ (personal interview, 14 June 2021). Monga’s production stories often revolve around collaboration and interpersonal relationships as necessary tools to thrive in the world of independent filmmaking. In the ‘Producing 101’ workshop, Monga places special emphasis on informal networking in the international film festival circuit – a skill that she thinks is indispensable for success in the film business. Networking acts as a tool for professional growth and development in ‘making-it sagas’, especially within highly unstructured environments (Caldwell 2008). Monga explains how she navigated the international film festival circuit through interpersonal networking:

In 2010, I went to the Venice film festival with the posters of ‘That Girl in Yellow Boots’. I did not know that you need sales agents. I later learned that you need to book meetings several months ahead. I bought cheap flight tickets for travelling to Europe in the off-season, writing hundreds of emails for 5 years to meet international buyers. Follow-up. [...] Networking is a big part of it. (personal interview, 8 May 2020)

The transnational journey of Monga through *The Lunchbox* is an excellent example of interpersonal networking, which acts as the most potent tool to ‘make it work’ (Gershon and Deuze 2019, 297) in the film and media industry. The director, Ritesh Batra. Monga and Batra met at a speed-dating event at South Asia’s largest film market, Film Bazaar, held in Goa annually. The Bazaar invites approximately 1000–1600 delegates from 36 different countries each year, providing delegates with the opportunities to network with distributors, sales agents, film curators and programmers, producers and filmmakers from around the globe (Bazaarindia n.d.). Monga owes her entire career to the Bazaar, where she is also known for throwing birthday parties (G. Monga, personal interview, 8 May 2020, and S. Chauhan, personal interview, 3 July 2021) to cultivate social relationships and maintain a professional reputation. Interviews of several film workers at the Bazaar further reveal that Monga has earned a reputation as a collaborative creative producer in the Hindi-language film industry within the past decade (P. Mohite 8 April 2021; D. DCunha, personal interview, 11 June 2021). Monga navigated the international film festival circuit together with the director of the film, Ritesh Batra. The script was part of several talent development programmes, such as Cinemart at Rotterdam International Film Festival, Torino Film Lab and Talent Project Market at Berlin International Film Festival. Along with the efforts of director Batra, Monga took international production training, including the Producer’s breakfast programme at Cannes, Rotterdam Lab for producers, Trans-Atlantic Partners training and networking program, and several other co-production labs. These networking meetings and workshops with the international film festival community equipped her with the knowledge to explore the official co-production treaty between India and France that was initially

signed in 1985. Monga used the treaty for the first time for *The Lunchbox*, which became an Indian-French-German co-production in 2012. The film was low-budget and did not require numerous co-producers. Initially, Monga, therefore, faced resistance in India in pursuing international co-productions. As she states:

[...] nobody in India was ready to hear it when I spoke about co-productions. They were like, 'If you need \$1.5 million to make your film, then take it entirely from India. Why do you need to raise chunks of it from four different countries?' There's a landlord mentality. It only changed after a lot of talking. (Singh 2013)

Monga explored the international co-production model for small-budgeted independent films for 'creative' experimentation (DCunha, personal interview, 11 June 2021). Not only did the film 'receive a standing ovation at Cannes', but it also received distribution agreements for over 20 international territories. Monga states she sold the film to the entire world within 24 hours at Cannes (*The Lunchbox*, n.d.). Monga explains how she met Karan Johar, CEO of Dharma Productions, Bollywood's largest film production and distribution company, at the festival, and both agreed to arrange a screening in the home country. Johar immediately appreciated the film and marketed it as a love story, with the tagline, 'can you fall in love with somebody you never met?'. He played a huge role in the film's domestic box-office success (G. Monga, personal interview, 14 June 2021). Thus, the distributor became part of the film later at the Cannes Film Festival. However, the alternative distribution system of film festivals doesn't work consistently for independent films. Scholars often question the distribution function of international film festivals. Iordanova (2009) notes:

It is not correct to think of festivals as a distribution network. Festivals are exhibition venues that need a sporadic supply of content. The network aspect only comes later and on an ad hoc basis. As temporary exhibition venues, festivals have difficulties maintaining steady relations with suppliers and cannot commit to working with distributors the way distributors would like. (26)

Monga networked with European buyers and sales agents in the off-season for years; the worldwide distribution of *The Lunchbox*, therefore, was not merely the result of one screening and a Critic's Week Award at the Cannes film festival. As Iordanova (2009) rightly points out,

Sending a film to a film festival cannot possibly make economic sense. There must be a string of festivals for the effort to pay off, and there must be a distribution network beyond for it to make real sense (and maybe even turn it into profit. (33)

Contrary to what Monga believes, *The Lunchbox* was not sold out overnight at the Cannes film festival. The global success of the film results from years of invisible and unpaid labour by film industry professionals, especially producers at these international festivals and markets, that make the wider distribution of internationally co-produced independent films possible. The international co-production model for small-budgeted films was an extremely difficult process because the model involves massive human management skills to deal with multiple film professionals on relatively lower-budget films (G. Monga, personal interview, 14 June 2021). Therefore, as a creative producer, she spends a considerable amount of time maintaining human relationships to navigate the independent transnational filmmaking world. Informal networking is a common and

vital ritual within the international film festival circuit, which is loosely connected because festivals emerged independently of each other; therefore, there is no central organization that organizes and coordinates the 'circuit' (Iordanova, 2009, 33). Managing human relationships and socializing become an important part of the creative producer's professional world through which they 'build a tribe' to navigate and survive the informal structures of the Indian film industry. In Caldwell's 'making-it-sagas', the rationale behind networking and building relationships is the job insecurities in the highly flexible world of American studios and corporations (59). Ganti (2012) refers to the informality and 'centrality of kinship networks' within Bollywood (70), and in a similar vein, independent filmmaking culture in Mumbai is also built through informal structures and networks, however for distinct reasons. The creative producers build strong long-term professional relationships to continue working and producing independent film projects for a sustained period. Interpersonal networking and maintaining social relations further become a potent tool to manage the hardships of working on indie films because films generally do not make money. In Monga's case, she accumulated cultural capital (e.g. festival awards, training and recognitions) and social capital (i.e. informal networking and interpersonal relationships) that brought credibility and appreciation nationally and internationally. Thus, creative producers of small-budgeted films build credibility for independent film projects through international awards and recognitions, and in the process, they also build a distinct identity for themselves in Bollywood.

Conclusion

Using a cultural studies of film production approach as a framework, this article adds new perspectives to the study of Indian cinema. This article employs the production narratives of Monga and *The Lunchbox* as a case study to provide a comprehensive analysis of independent film production culture in India and its recent transnational developments, which, in turn, expose and raise criticism against the Mumbai film industry. More broadly, the article opens new lines of inquiry by stressing the importance of creative producers, their function and their production worlds in studying global film industry structures and production cultures; therefore, it contributes to the growing scholarship on production culture studies of film and media industries.

Notes

1. In addition to Monga, there are several other women director-producers who are shifting India's film production culture by playing similar roles. For example, Reema Kagti and Zoya Akhtar established the production house *Tiger Baby Films*, in 2015 and since then have produced a number of transnational productions including *Gully Boy* (2019) – with Nas (noted American rapper, songwriter and entrepreneur) as the executive producer – which premiered in Berlin International film festival 2019 and was India's official entry to the Oscars. Several others such as Rima Das, Rohena Gera, Leena Yadav and Shonali Bose have directed and produced independent films that have travelled through the international film festival circuit over the past decade.
2. Several other creative producers interviewed for this study such as Maathivanan Rajendran and Harsh Agarwal (*Nasir*, 2020), as well as Aditi Anand (*The Extraordinary Journey of the Fakir*, 2018), among others are following similar paths in the industry.

3. The term was coined by Rajadhyaksha (2003) to denote the hegemonic position of Bollywood as an all-encompassing cultural industry due to globalization in the 1990s.
4. There have been similar female figures – such as the Seher Latif, Alankrita Shrivastava, Leena Yadav, Kalpana Lajmi, Ajita Suchitra Veera – who shared Monga’s background and worked in highly male-dominated production contexts in India.
5. There is a huge disparity in funding of independent film projects depending largely on the production companies backing the projects. Low-budget films can cost anywhere between 10 million to 20 million INR compare to average cost of Bollywood films range between 200 million and 500 million INR. Films with micro-budgets, which can have a budget below 10 million INR are generally funded outside Mumbai and its dominant Bollywood production structures.
6. The National Film Development Corporation (previously known as The Film Finance Corporation) – established in 1975 by the Government of India – not only provided financial support to artistic projects of the 1970s and 1980s but also produced, promoted, and distributed these films worldwide.

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Appendix

Interview Questions

- (1) You've been involved with independent filmmaking for over 10 years now. How has it and your role in it evolved?
- (2) Could you talk about the way people form creative partnerships?
- (3) What kind of creative contributions do you make in the film's direction?
- (4) Do you take part in the development of a story script? Do you recommend changes in the script?
- (5) What prompted/motivated you to pursue international co-productions? How did it extend your network?
- (6) In your opinion, how does one replicate global success such as that of *The Lunchbox*?
- (7) How would you define your film projects in the global film marketplace?
- (8) How do you finance your films and get them distributed?
- (9) How was your experience working at Film Bazaar?
- (10) What kind of support network exists for creative producers in India? What do you wish to see?