

**Edited by Ellen Goldberg, Aditi Sen, and Brian Collins,
*Bollywood Horrors: Religion, Violence and Cinematic Fears in
 India*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021. 246 pp,
 hardcover. £76.50.**

As suggested by its title, instead of analyzing horror as a singular form, this edited collection by Ellen Goldberg, Aditi Sen, and Brian Collins discusses *horrors* in the plural. While the three renowned volumes on Indian horror films (the monographs by Merah Ahmed Mubarak, Meheli Sen, and Mithuraaj Dhusiya) preceding *Bollywood Horrors* focused primarily on supernatural horror, this collection broadens the parameter of Indian horror cinema by devoting its last section to the discussion of Bollywood horror films of non-supernatural kind. Though this review will mostly refrain from commenting on this particular section of the volume, keeping the journal's focus in mind, the aforementioned section is by no means an appendage.

The collection begins with a detailed Introduction (1-18) by the editors. Along with cogent discussions on the volume's overall scope and structure in its final section, this chapter offers insightful overviews of Indian horror films as well as the existing body of critical discussions in its first two sections. While this discussion is not exhaustive, it certainly adds surplus value to the volume and helps to orient the reader who may be unfamiliar with Bollywood horror. In the third and fourth sections, the editors explain the volume's methodology of analyzing Bollywood horrors using a framework that draws both upon Indian religion and *Rasa* theory. On the one hand, this framework uses a comparative method which involves mapping the presence of Indian religious figures, and the myths featuring such figures, in Bollywood horror films. On the other hand, as the editors explain in the fourth section, their collection is also about reading Bollywood horror using the concepts of *bhayanaka* and *bibhatsa*, among the *rasas* as explained by Bharata's *Natyasastra*.

In Indian aesthetics, the *rasas* refer to essences or core ideas that evoke emotional responses in audiences, when used in various art forms like poetry, music, sculpture, theatre, etc. Among the nine *rasas* described by Bharata, *bhayanaka* and *bibhatsa* stand for the sources of shock effects. While *bhayanaka* signifies the scary elements that evoke fear, *bibhatsa* refers to the gruesome that creates repulsion. This introduction explains these quite cogently (see 10-13) but when it comes to utilizing these ideas as a lens, the collection as a whole somewhat falls short as only two chapters (1 by Collins and 3 by Erndl) read Indian horror by drawing upon the concept of *bhayanaka* and the concept of *bibhatsa*. This appears in two chapters (3 by Erndl and 6 by Goldberg) and only very briefly. Nevertheless, the sections offer interesting insights and the following paragraphs will outline these.

The first section, comprising two chapters by Brian Collins, discusses Bollywood horror films mostly by moving beyond the boundaries of the films on screen. Chapter 1 "Monsters, Masala, and Materiality: Close Encounters with Hindi Horror Movie Ephemera" (21-43) in particular surprises by offering a layered analysis of the poster of the horror film *Darawani Haveli* (1997) and song booklets of numerous other Bollywood horror films. Collins's analysis explains how elements from both cult Hollywood films and Indian arts are mingled in this poster in question by highlighting traces of Hitchcock's *Psycho* as well as a particular mode of narration found in Buddhist architectures are mixed to lure viewers. Borrowings from Hollywood and Indian culture are highlighted in song-booklets too by drawing attention to the lifting of images from the poster of *Evil Dead II*, or the film *Monster on the Campus* in booklets of *Khatarnak Raat* (2003) and the allusion to a vedic demoness in the song booklet of *Daayan* (1998). This chapter identifies two tropes associated to Bollywood horror films as well as their promotional materials, namely, the fierce female figure and the devouring mouth.

The second chapter by Collins “Vampire Man Varma: The Untold Story of the ‘Hindu Mystic’ Who Decolonized *Dracula*,” (44-65) despite its interesting premise, appears comparatively underexplored. While the premise, that is, an assessment of the contribution of the underrated (and at times misinterpreted, see 55-59) Indian horror scholar Devendra Prasad Varma in Indianizing the vampire figure promises of a much awaited discussion, towards the end the analysis becomes sketchy. For instance, when Collins claims Verma’s association of Tantra and vampirism influenced Bollywood horror films like *Bhayaanak* (1979), *Veerana* (1988), *Bandh Darwaza* (1990) he speaks of the presence of “Indian cinematic *vampires*” (46) in each of these films but instead of discussing these films and the vampires featured therein individually, he focuses only on the film *Bandh Darwaza*. Collins argues that the Eastern fanged deities of Tibet, Nepal, and Mongolia are the source of the western figure of the vampire. But rather than argue this fully, Collins limits his discussion merely to the analysis of Varma’s writings (59-61). Even Mary Hallab’s brief and slightly sarcastic assessment (*Vampire God: The Allure of the Undead in Western Culture*, p. 71) of Varma’s observations regarding the Eastern lineage of vampires mentioned how Varma drew parallels between the vampire and Eastern deities like the Nepalese God of Death, but Collins’s chapter ignores even this kind of detail.

The first two chapters of the second section (Chapter 3, “Divine Horror and the Avenging Goddess in Bollywood” and 4, “Horrorifying and Sinister Tantriks”) further explore the presence of figures from Indian religion in Bollywood horror films by devoting separate chapters to the figures of the avenging goddess (a figure that Collins’s first chapter traces to a vedic demoness) and evil *tantriks*. Along with these, this section analyzes re-writing of Indian myths in Bollywood horrors in Chapter 5 “Do you want to know the Raaz?: Tropes of Madness and Immorality in Bollywood Horror” (94-111) using Vikram Bhatt’s *Raaz* (2002) as a case-study. Chapter 3(69-77) by Kathleen M. Erndl, published posthumously, offers notable insights like the mixing of all the *rasas* in the *Masala* Bollywood films and an exploration of select avenging goddess films of Bollywood that studies how these films create effects of horror utilizing the *rasas* known as *bhayanaka* and *bibhatsa*.

Chapter 4(78-93) by Hugh B. Urban moves the discussion from the goddesses to their ruthless followers known as *tantriks* in his study of the Bollywood films *Gehrayee* (1980), *Jaadugar* (1989), *Sangharsh* (1999) and the Telugu film *Ammoru* (1995). The chapter captures a number of notable features of Bollywood films featuring evil *tantriks* like their final defeats in the hands of the embodiments of holiness (like the holy *sadhu*, the virtuous trickster or the goddess herself) and their cultural appropriation of Hollywood horror classics like *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*, *The Silence of the Lambs*, etc. Despite such remarkable insights, Urban’s chapter ultimately ends up offering a homogenized view of the portrayal of *tantriks* in Indian popular films and literature. Going by Urban’s chapter, *tantriks* appears only as a charlatan figure in traditional Sanskrit literature as well as comparatively recent Bollywood films or famous literary texts like *Kapalkundala* (1866) which completely ignores examples of famous films like *Bhoolbhulaiyaa* (2007) or the stories featuring Taranath Tantrik, where the *tantrik* figure appears as the savior.

Adding variety to the section, Aditi Sen’s chapter on the surprise hit film *Raaz* discusses the film’s re-writing of traditional Indian myth of Satyavan and Sabitri, thereby highlighting a subversive potential of Bollywood horrors. This otherwise well-knit discussion, however occasionally leads the readers astray when it finds a parallel between Malini’s (the antagonist of the film) craving of sex and the *Petni*’s (a folkloric female ghost popular in Bengal) craving of fish or when it claims that Stoker’s *Dracula* is *clearly* borrowed from the Indian legends of *Betaal* in an endnote. In both cases, these conclusions are tenuous and require more full support.

Overall, the collection marks a promising start of critical discussions of the connections between Indian religion, myth, and Bollywood horror films. Apart from helping the global horror enthusiast take a notable step toward exploring the wide variety of Bollywood horrors, these essays will aid scholars of religious studies by drawing attention to the notable afterlives of the avenging female goddess of Hindu religion as well as the vilification of *tantra* and its followers across cultures. Most importantly, the collection caters to the cross-cultural approach of religious studies

when it explains the notable similarities between the male viewers of Bollywood horrors and American slasher films (43). Such references indeed bear the potential for furthering the study of horror films across the globe through the lens of religious studies.

Debaditya Mukhopadhyay, Manikchak College, affiliated with the University of Gourbanga, India