

Institution: Queen Mary University of London		
Unit of Assessment: 33B Music, Drama, Dance, Performing Arts, Film and Screen Studies		
Title of case study: New Approaches to Indian Cinema and their Impact on Creative Industries and Film Audiences		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2016-2020		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Dr Ashvin Immanuel Devasundaram	Senior Lecturer in World Cinema	September 2016-Present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2017-2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N		
1. Summary of the impact		
<p>Dr Devasundaram's research has contributed to the international recognition of a new genre of socio-politically self-reflexive independent film that is revolutionising Indian cinema. Through partnerships with leading cultural industries and arts organisations, including the UK Asian Film Festival (UKAFF), BFI, British Council, Heritage Lottery and Cinema For All, Devasundaram's work has facilitated a paradigm shift that led to an increase in the number of events directly concerned with Indian cinema. His research has stimulated new cross-cultural public awareness, engagement and impact in diverse national and international spaces, challenged the popular assumption that all Indian cinema is entertainment-based Bollywood, and generated significant cultural and perceptual change in turn.</p>		
2. Underpinning research		
<p>Devasundaram's research reveals how the emergence of a new wave of Indian 'Indies' has transformed contemporary Indian cinema. His investigations have helped establish new Indian Indie cinema as a fresh film genre distinct from Bollywood that deserves specific scholarly attention as a new sub-discipline. Devasundaram's research also reveals how international film festivals such as the UK Asian Film Festival (UKAFF) and grassroots film society screenings constitute a vital lifeline for Indie exhibition, distribution and promotion outside India.</p> <p>His monograph, <i>India's New Independent Cinema: Rise of the Hybrid</i> [3.1], is the first book on the topic. Likewise, his edited anthology <i>Indian Cinema Beyond Bollywood: The New Independent Cinema Revolution</i> is the first volume on Indian Indie cinema and presents a strong case for this genre to be accorded distinct attention, further international public access, and engagement [3.2]. His research demonstrates how independent Indian film 'firebrands' offer a refreshing alternative to the cultural hegemony of Bollywood blockbusters and presents a dynamic, self-reflexive, interrogative and global-meets-local - <i>glocal</i> - insight into modern Indian society and culture [3.3, 3.4]. Devasundaram's books reveal how international film festivals such as the UK Asian Film Festival, Frankfurt New Generations Independent Indian Film Festival and grassroots film society screenings constitute a vital lifeline for Indie exhibition, distribution and promotion outside India. In 2017, Devasundaram was appointed to the advisory panel of the BFI <i>India on Film</i> initiative launched to mark the first UK-India Year of Culture 2017. He subsequently provided academic advice and appeared in a BFI-supported 'Young Roots' documentary film on Southall's cinema history. His publications on the intercultural and interdisciplinary dimensions of new Indian films, including their engagement with gender issues, LGBTQ rights, popular geopolitics, South Asian diasporic identity in the UK, audience reception and film festivals served as a reference point for his leadership of a Heritage Lottery-funded project – <i>Memories Through Cinema</i> (2017-18).</p> <p>As creative director on the project <i>Memories Through Cinema</i>, Devasundaram drew on his original research to establish an evolutionary timeline of Indian cinema's influence on British South Asian communities, and to document both intergenerational oral testimonies about South Asian cultural contributions to Britain and the influence of Indian cinema on UK diasporic Indian lives and community histories. His development of research methodologies in</p>		

filmmaking, archival research and interview skills were central to the training received by the young volunteer filmmakers in the co-creation of the documentary *Movies, Memories, Magic*. Themes broached in Devasundaram's publications, from women's rights, diasporic identity and migration, gender-based violence [3.5], Female-rated (F-Rated) Indie films [3.6], film history and LGBTQ themes to politics and social history were channelled not only into the documentary but also into accessible and inclusive impact-based interactions such as screening events, young curator workshops and the project's public exhibition at the Nehru Centre in London, which featured a section on new Indian Indie cinema showcasing Devasundaram's research. The findings of this project inform his current Routledge monograph in progress, the third in the trilogy of works in this new disciplinary field.

3. References to the research

- [3.1] Devasundaram, A. (2016). *India's New Independent Cinema: Rise of the Hybrid*. Routledge.
- [3.2] Devasundaram, A. (Ed.) (2018). *Indian Cinema Beyond Bollywood: The New Independent Cinema Revolution*. Routledge.
- [3.3] Devasundaram, A. (2016). Bollywood's soft power: Branding the nation, sustaining a meta-hegemony, *New Cinemas. Journal of Contemporary Film*. 14(1), 51-70
- [3.4] Devasundaram, A. (2018). Beyond brand bollywood: Alternative articulations of geopolitical discourse in New Indian Films. In Saunders, R., & Strukov, V. (Eds.) *Popular Geopolitics: Understanding an Evolving Interdiscipline*. Routledge.
- [3.5] Devasundaram, A., and Barn, R. (2020). Performativity of rape culture through fact and fiction: An exploration of *India's Daughter* and *Anatomy of Violence*. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 23(6), 879-897.
- [3.6] Devasundaram, A. (2020). Interrogating patriarchy: Transgressive discourses of 'F-Rated' independent Hindi films. *BioScope: South Asian Screen Studies*, 11(1), 27-43.

Evidence of quality of Research

- [EQR.3.1, 3.2] Devasundaram [PI]. (2017-18). Memories Through Cinema Project [YR-16-02381]. *Heritage Lottery Fund*. GBP40,000.
- [EQR.3.1, 3.3] (May 2017). One of 20 UK academics selected to travel, participate and present research at a cross-national *AHRC/ICHR* (Indian Council of Historical Research) workshop on Cultural Heritage and Rapid Urbanisation in India, New Delhi.
- [EQR.3.4, 3.6] (Feb 2019). one of 20 UK researchers chosen for the UK-South Africa Early Career Knowledge Frontiers -Symposium on Urban Lives organised by the *British Academy* and Academy of Science of South Africa, Johannesburg.
- [EQR.3.4, 3.6] Devasundaram [Co-I]. (2019). Fictional Urban Lives Networking Workshop [22910]. *British Academy*. Seed funding, (with UK and South Africa co-applicants). GBP2,460.
- [EQR.3.5] Devasundaram, [PI]. (2020). Confronting Urban Violence: Brazil/India Bilateral Networking Workshops [KFSBSF\100003]. *British Academy*. Seed funding. GBP3,912.
- [EQR.3.5] (March 2020) one of 15 UK researchers chosen for the Knowledge Frontiers Symposium on Urban Violence organised by the British Academy and Brazilian Academy of Sciences, Rio de Janeiro.

4. Details of the impact

Devasundaram's research has achieved impact in several key areas: it has enhanced the practice of film curation and programming in the UK and internationally, increased awareness and understanding of independent Indian cinema amongst cinema professionals, and enabled bodies such as the BFI to advance the professional development of young curators. Devasundaram's research has also served to develop awareness and engagement in local and international audiences through participatory production of documentary film.

Devasundaram's, *Memories Through Cinema* (MTC) project produced a one-hour documentary, *Movies, Memories, Magic* (MMM) which has been screened nationally and internationally and has had a transformative effect on curation and programming practices of the UK Asian Film Festival (UKAFF). Devasundaram was first appointed to the advisory panel of the BFI India on Film initiative, launched to mark the first UK-India Year of Culture 2017, to

his subsequent creative directorship of MTC, working with nine young volunteer filmmakers in London to create MMM. This led him to establish the annual UKAFF Young Curators Lab (YCL 2019), a dedicated BFI-supported UKAFF strand to nurture future film curators (18-28 age range) which selects an Indian Indie film to screen at UKAFF. His research influenced social, cultural and professional engagement with Indian cinema locally, nationally and internationally, and has been instrumental in changing public perceptions of, and scholarly investment in, the cultural richness of Indian independent cinema.

Enhanced awareness of new independent Indian cinema in industry contexts

Memories Through Cinema (2017-18) draws on Devasundaram's research to present a timeline of Indian cinema's influence on British South Asian communities. As creative director of the project, Devasundaram demonstrated Indian cinema's influence on these communities, and used oral testimonies to document intergenerational cultural contributions to Britain and the influence of Indian cinema on diasporic Indian lives in the UK. Alongside this he developed research methodologies in filmmaking, archival research and interview skills as a central aspect of training given to young volunteer filmmakers who participated in the co-creation of the documentary *Movies, Memories, Magic*. As well as receiving the training, these young filmmakers were involved in the co-creation and development of the entire project, including an accompanying public exhibition at the Nehru Centre in London. Their participation provided them with additional skills in oral history and curation and helped to build cross-cultural connections and community-based impact through the creation and dissemination of the documentary. [5.1, 5.4, 5.9]

Through the programming of public screenings of the documentary, which included audience Q&A sessions, Devasundaram has developed film practice as a means for raising awareness and perceptual change amongst diverse communities [5.1]. Devasundaram's programming of the work has also enhanced awareness of new independent Indian cinema in industry contexts nationally and internationally as well as helping to shape a broader cultural reception. Several cultural organisations and academic institutions hosted special screenings of the documentary, including the British Council in Bangalore (2018), London Film Academy (2018), the Cinema Museum, London (2019), Nanyang Technological University, Singapore (2019), Wembley Park Summer on Screen Series (2019), Tower Hamlets Local History Library and Archives, Write Idea Literary Festival (2019) and Bioscope Independent Cinema, Johannesburg (2019) [5.1]. As Tower Hamlets Local History Library and Archives noted, the screening enabled important aspects of the research concerning the local community to be made directly available to them:

'We at the Tower Hamlets Local History Library & Archives note the social and cultural importance of the research contained in the film and its relevance to diverse local communities, especially to our readership which is made up of local residents of Tower Hamlets and beyond. In light of the impact generated from screenings of the film (at the Library, nationally and abroad) the Library would like to include the film in its collection, so it will serve an open access digital repository for the community and hopefully further screenings.' [5.6]

Devasundaram's leading role in the *Memories Through Cinema* project has contributed to increased programming of Indian Indies amongst a wide variety of stakeholders, including the UK Asian Film Festival, Frankfurt New Generations Independent Indian Film Festival and Cinema For All (British Federation of Film Societies) [5.4, 5.5, 5.12]. One of the board of directors from Frankfurt state:

'For us the main input is still [Devasundaram's] classification of the Indian Independent films as a full-fledged genre in its own right, based on [Devasundaram's] profound research. This gave our work an immense push as we now are able to represent our festival with much more confidence [...] and gives us the strength to promote and present the films based on a theoretical foundation more targeted and more self-confident. So, the impact of [the research] will sustain with as long as our festivals will exist.' [5.12]

In turn, this has diversified the cinema landscape, and increased opportunities for the public and professionals alike (and especially young filmmakers and aspiring film curators), to engage with Devasundaram's research and with new Indian Indie films themselves. Devasundaram was invited by Cinema For All to present at the Community Cinema Conference in 2017 [5.5] when they attested that:

'[Devasundaram] was key in raising awareness of new independent Indian cinema amongst the community cinema sector, introducing example programme suggestions and outreach recommendations. We have seen a recent 'ripple effect' following Ashvin's speech, in that many groups have enquired about the availability of films recommended during the keynote and enquiring as to the availability of Ashvin to speak at their own screening nights.' [5.5]

Influence on curation and programming practices

The national and international impact generated by the *Memories Through Cinema* project has also served to transform the curation and programming practices of UKAFF. Devasundaram's documentary has introduced more diverse, socio-political independent film content to the festival programme and to cross-regional audiences and showcased this material at hitherto inaccessible venues. This transformative work was commended by Lord Diljit Rana, a member of the House of Lords, and Honorary Indian Consul in Belfast, at the launch of Devasundaram's edited volume on Indian Indie cinema at the House of Lords as part of UKAFF 2019. Lord Rana noted the impact of the launch of Devasundaram's edited volume as 'important in bringing world-leading research on new Indian cinema to multicultural audiences in London. This public event transpired in a prestigious space that may not otherwise have been informed by or engaged with Indian cinema-related academic research' [5.2]. Another attendee at the same event, David Somerset, BFI Film Programmer, stated: 'I came today to develop my understanding of South Asian cinema' [5.1]. He subsequently testified to the impact of Devasundaram's research: '... The event, (as does the book), opened the minds of film programmers, academics and film enthusiasts alike. After the event I recommended the BFI acquire the book for its library, which it duly did... Dr Devasundaram who has made a significant contribution to scholarship and provided a resource for those who wish to learn more about contemporary independent cinema.' [5.3]

Following the House of Lords launch of Devasundaram's book during UKAFF 2019, Lord Rana invited Devasundaram to introduce *Movies, Memories, Magic* as the first-ever film screened at the Indian Community Centre in Belfast in September 2019, stating that 'this pioneering event will help the Centre in organising future film-based events to inform and entertain the city's communities. It has also set the foundations for further film screening events as part of a potential new Belfast edition of the UK Asian Film Festival' [5.2]. The subsequent success of this facilitated another planned House of Lords event curated by Devasundaram (by invitation from Baroness Manzila Pola Uddin) as part of UKAFF 2020. Devasundaram was due to chair a panel discussion on 'Soft Power, Stereotypes and Subversion in South Asian Cinema' at the House of Lords as part of UKAFF 2020, featuring the artistic director of the Mumbai Film Festival as panellist, and screening of *Movies, Memories, Magic* (see 5.7). Despite postponement of this event due to COVID-19, curated events at the House of Lords will now be an annual fixture of UKAFF.

Through programming activities in relation to *Movies, Memories, Magic*, Devasundaram has also extended awareness and engagement in Indian diasporic communities internationally. Following two public screenings of *Movies, Memories, Magic* in Johannesburg in 2019 at the Solomon Mahlangu Theatre and the Bioscope Independent Cinema [5.1], Devasundaram will establish an inaugural independent Indian film festival (moved to 2021 due to COVID-19) at Bioscope Independent Cinema, Johannesburg, in collaboration with Prof. Dilip Menon (Witwatersrand University). By screening a set of research-related films including *Movies, Memories, Magic*, handpicked by Devasundaram for UKAFF 2021 plus Q&A sessions and a film curation workshop with young people in Johannesburg (akin to Young Curators Lab) Devasundaram will transpose his UKAFF-related transformative impact activities to a South Africa context.

Digital commission to support funding

During the COVID-19 lockdown *Movies, Memories, Magic* was made freely available on the UKAFF website for a special 7-day streaming period. 4,588 people streamed the film in this period [5.8]. The overall wide-ranging impact of *Memories Through Cinema* has helped UKAFF gain funding from the Arts Council of England to offer a digital commission to five emerging artists – GBP1,000 each - to create 3min long digital films on the theme Ray of Hope (to commemorate the birth centenary of Satyajit Ray). The selected digital commissions will be presented at the 23rd UK Asian Film Festival in June 2021. [5.10]

Nurturing future young film curators

The success of the young volunteer-driven project paved the way for Devasundaram to establish and conduct the BFI-supported Young Curators Lab (YCL). YCL is a new annual scheme and UKAFF strand to nurture future film curators (18-28 age range), engage them with independent Indian Indie cinema, and empower them to curate an Indian Indie film to screen at UKAFF. This was devised by Devasundaram to equip aspiring professionals with the skills, knowledge and analytical acumen necessary for careers in programming and curation. The initiative, which mirrors the established London Film Festival Young Jury (BFI Film Academy) provides a network and mentoring forum for emerging professionals in the creative industries and enables the acquisition of skills (through training workshops) appropriate to curation career pathways. Devasundaram ran the first YCL workshop as part of UKAFF 2019 and continues custodianship of this initiative through UKAFF 2020, creating intercultural conversations and perceptual change amongst young people interested in Indian Indies and South Asian film curation as a career path [5.4]. Participants in the programme in 2019 and 2020 testified to its benefits [5.1, 5.4]:

- ‘My eyes have opened. There is a world beyond European cinema, and I have learned something new about cultures and traditions I didn’t consider’.
- ‘I didn’t know too much about Indian cinema, but I am so glad I am getting a chance to understand it. There are so many and refreshing films that are important to the global film industry’
- ‘This really reinforced me in my resolve to become a curator/programmer’

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

[5.1] [Film] montage of impact and perceptual change created through the avenues mentioned in section 4: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1DHds0u5tfC5PL11JOe-B7zDLsf8ani5B/view>

[5.2] [Testimonial] House of Lords, Lord Rana

[5.3] [Testimonial] Film Programmer, BFI [Corroborator 1]

[5.4] [Testimonial] BFI Young Curators Lab and webpage <http://tonguesonfire.com/the-bfi-young-curators-lab/>

[5.5] [Testimonial] Head of Operations and Sector Development, Cinema For All [Corroborator 2]

[5.6] [Testimonial] Tower Hamlets Local History Library and Archives

[5.7] [Programme] UK Asian Film Festival 2020 (details of House of Lords event)

[5.8] [Picture] Screenshot of UKAFF hosting online screening during pandemic

[5.9] [Testimonial] Tongues on Fire/UK Asian Film Festival (UKAFF) [Corroborator 3]

[5.10] [Webpage] Ray of Hope Digital Commissions UKAFF 2021

<https://tonguesonfire.com/ray-of-hope/>

[5.11] [Webpage] Coventry UK City of Culture 2021 – UKAFF creative team

<https://coventry2021.co.uk/coming-in-2021/uk-asian-film-festival/>

[5.12] [Testimonial] Director of Frankfurt New Generations Film Festival [Corroborator 4]