

Book Review

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India Through The Western Lens: Creating National Images in Film, Ananda Mitra, New Delhi, Sage Publications, 1999.

The work *India Through The Western Lens* by Ananda Mitra, tackles a controversial issue—the role of movies in creating and reinforcing distorted images of South Asia and South Asian immigrants. The author professes that his use of the term "South Asia" included Pakistan, Nepal, India, Afghanistan, Tibet and Sri Lanka. Thus, the book should have been appropriately titled—Asia Through the Western Lens.

One noteworthy aspect of the book is the author's use of a few rather than many illustrations. For instance, movies such as 'Mississippi Masala,' 'Lawrence of Arabia' and 'City of Joy' were analysed. Mitra does not condemn all the productions of the West as being inaccurate. For example, he praises and draws frequent reference to 'Gandhi,' produced by Richard Attenborough, as a film which sought to depict Indian life as accurately as possible.

The sub-sections within each chapter allowed for a better analysis and proved advantageous in presenting a cohesive argument. One of the themes of the book is the stereotyping of Asians and the relegation to an inferior status. The author highlighted the plots of 'City of Joy,' 'Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom' and 'Around the World in 80 Days' in not only stereotyping Indians but also conceptualised a struggle involving: evil vs. good, East vs. West and saved vs. saviour.

It would have been interesting if the author had included a chapter on the reaction of Asians in the United States to inaccurate portrayals on the screen. Certain questions remain answered—did these films invoke protests or boycotts? Were there angry letters to the editors of newspapers and magazines?

An obvious shortcoming is that the author states his intention of examining cinematic images produced and circulated in the West in the post-1930 decades (p 14); yet the focus is on films produced in the 1980s and 1990s. Furthermore, Mitra should have interviewed some of the persons involved in the making of these films to determine their motives and knowledge of Asia. The author should have emphasised that often the appeal of box-office success overrides the historical and accurate depiction of Asia.

New ways of representing India in film such as 'Bombay Talkie' and 'Heat and Dust' still have elements of the dependence on the colonial image. The author contends that this "new history" of Indian has the transient presence of the whites. Mitra offers hope for the proper depiction of Asians in the West, especially as new filmmakers refuse to adhere to the traditional stereotypical images. He uses the illustration of "My Beautiful Launderette" as one such movie in which the narrative is not confined to inaccurate dichotomies.

The book ends in an optimistic note with the author encouraging the Asian diaspora to become more active in representing themselves in popular culture. Apart from the minor inadequacies, the book is worth reading. Undoubtedly, it will prove useful and interesting to both researchers and the general public.

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