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## Size Matters

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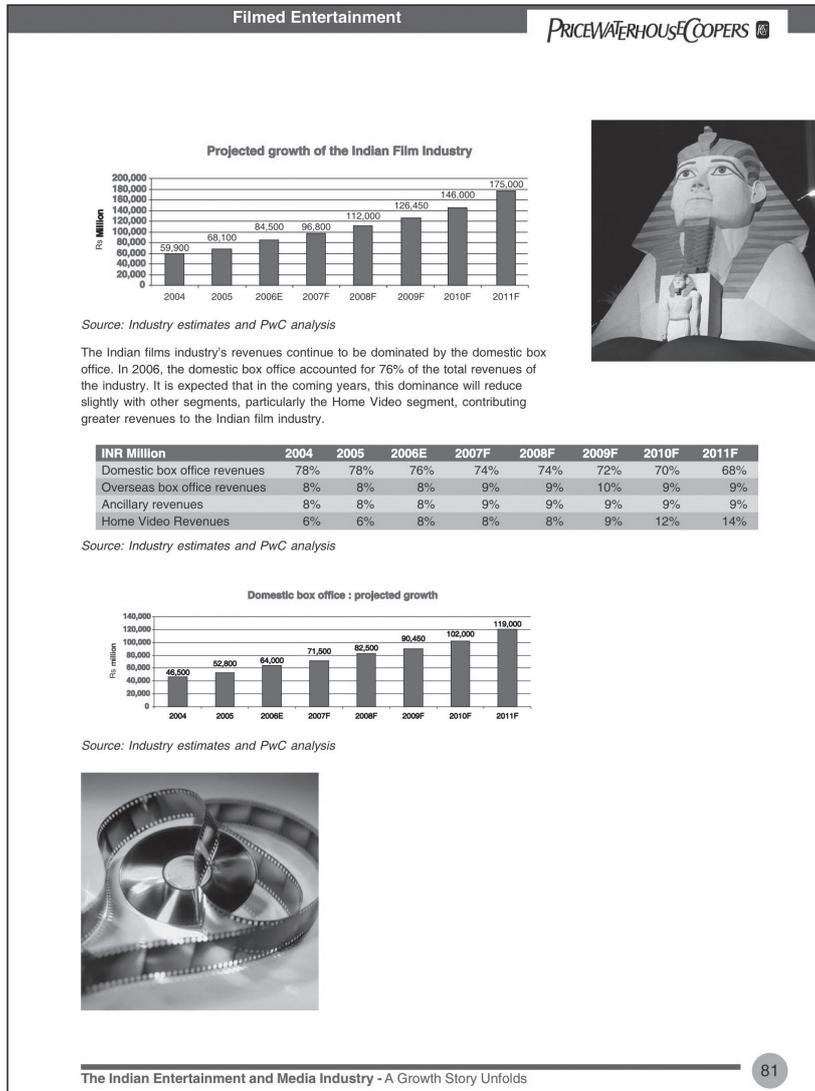
When “industry status” for the Indian film trade was announced at Bombay’s Leela Kempinski Hotel in 1998, Dilip Kumar joked about the aspiration toward a new corporate ethos. “We in the film industry are prone to be fictional in our approach to life,” said the old movie hero, “we are very bad at accessing the mathematics that are involved in industrial jurisprudence .... I have a mortal fear of mathematics. Whenever any figure work is involved, I get frightened” (Kumar, 1998). Given the irony that hindsight often brings, Kumar’s cheeky temerity now sounds like a prologue to the decade that followed, as big numbers came to dominate film industry discourse. As the twenty-first century opened for business, Indian media statistics circulated through the press, industry, and academy, enabled by the proliferation of reports produced by Indian business lobbies in collaboration with international management consultancies, like the Confederation of Indian Industries (CII), the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI), the US-India Business Council (USIBC), Arthur Andersen (AA), Klynveld Peat Marwick Goerdeler (KPMG), Ernst and Young (EY), and PricewaterhouseCoopers (PWC). A decade known colloquially as “the noughties” and “the Ohs” was presided over by a trail of zeroes criss-crossing the pages of glossy industry co-productions.

The procession of statistics, marching together with industry acronyms in a dazzling parade of letters and numbers, was orchestrated for globally interconnected investment communities hoping that the fortunes of the film industry might rally along with the SENSEX. Integral to this new speculative economy, numbers composed a future-oriented discourse. By mid-decade, the subtitles of entertainment industry brochures provided dreamy, tumescent figurations of possible futures: a 2005 report was subtitled *An Unfolding Opportunity*; a 2006 report, *Unraveling the Potential*; *A Growth Story Unfolds* for 2007; and by 2008, *Sustaining Growth*. A 2009 report, finding that the Indian media industries would not grow as projected, offered instead the more sober and succinctly titled *Outlook*. Nevertheless, by the end of the decade, these reports, despite having different points of origin, were all committed to the specificity of estimates. FICCI/KPMG’s 2009 Industry Report predicted a rise in the number of Indian multiplexes from 850 in 2009 to 1,254 in 2012, while the total Indian box-office of US\$ 1.6 billion in 2008 was projected to rise to US\$ 2.5 billion by 2013. The 2009 PWC report claimed that the Indian film industry would grow by 11.5 percent over the next five years, swelling from Rs 107 billion in 2008 to Rs 184.3 billion in 2013, while domestic box-office receipts would increase by 10.2 percent cumulatively over the next five years, from the present size of Rs 81 billion to Rs 132 billion in 2013. In a remarkable conceit of precision, the USIBC/EY 2008 brochure reported that piracy cost the film industry US\$ 959 million and 571,896 jobs in 2008.

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Painted in bold PowerPoint strokes during industry and academic conferences, such numbers were signified by graphical representations of an improbable certainty. As we were taken in by the *tamasha* of tables and totals, the news media followed the big numbers like an oracle, until film industry statistics achieved the kind of charismatic authority normally reserved for star salaries and sex scandals (see Image 1).



**Image 1.** Under the watchful eye of the Sphinx, the Indian film industry tackles the riddle of futurity.

**Copyright:** *The Indian Entertainment and Media Industry: A Growth Story Unfolds*. FICCI/ PricewaterhouseCoopers, March 2007, p. 81.

Despite the fact that the recent global market collapse has exposed the unreliability of business statistics, the film industry still suffers from a delirium of numbers. What are the politics that inform the film industry's culture of enumeration, this new business of bigness? After all, material practice in the Indian film industries has long thwarted the accuracy of data. Given the lack of an indexical correspondence between enumeration and industry practices—vaunted by Hollywood and other media industries as critical to fixing the feedback loop between prediction and risk—Indian industry numbers came across as ciphers. Historically, the Indian film industries often worked outside the numerical logic of calculation, mining instead the wisdom offered by the artful practice of making do. This history sometimes resonates in contemporary practice—think of filmstar Ajay Devgn, omitting the last vowel in his name for astrological reasons, or Bejan Daruwalla's horoscopes predicting a bright 2010 for Bollywood. In numerology, numbers cast the aspirations of the film industry skyward, but numeracy is driven by more worldly pursuits. Accounting practices in the film industries mark a slippage between science and superstition that is constitutive of modernity as well as its alternatives.

Yet it would be a mistake to assume that numbers are just for counting. Data is discursive as well as enumerative. Numbers are semiotic, representational forms implicated in certain performances of visibility and disappearance. Statistics can map the figurative traces of commodities in motion, but we must suspend our belief in their veracity in order to fully grasp the nature of commodity transit.

Our suspension allows for a number of observations. First, numbers speak the industry. Statistics are a mode of visualization that “frames” and “performs” the industry (Callon, 1998). Furthermore, numbers form a representational apparatus within which changes in the industry can be registered and regularized. In their sheer size, big numbers offer legibility and legitimation for the film industries, substantiating Indian media's claim to greater state and market support. Statistics aggregate disparate media practices under the sign of a single film industry as opposed to multiple ones, lending a notably precarious set of industrial practices the fictional stability of singularity. After all, “industry” refers less to an actually existing object or social practice than to a conceptual construct that does the work of drawing and illustrating connections between diverse ways of knowing and doing. Numbers serve as the content and the form of these connections. Finally, numbers offer a possible solution to perceptions of the Indian industries' deficit of reflexivity, providing an informatic of self-knowledge amenable to an era of information capital. It was the lack of accurate statistics that led to local and global dismissals of the casual nature of the Indian film industries, in which their failure to incorporate was tied to a lack of seriousness and organization. The industries' improvisational nature was based on dubious numbers, the occult significance of “black” money.

In the absence of an official statistical archive, recent entertainment industry reports suggest the promise of a future whose security is ensured by numbers. However, the Indian film industries have long rehearsed ways to account for themselves. Early film culture was enumerated through formal and informal inquiry. In the teens, municipal governments concerned about the fire hazards of makeshift theaters compiled lists of permanent and itinerant cinemas. Censorship regimes counted films in the process of certifying them. Foreign distribution outfits and local entrepreneurs kept records of imported exposed stock for duty purposes. Photography studios and practitioners monitored the circuits of new and used film equipment. Box-office takes were tallied and entertainment taxes were levied. Film clubs polled their members to get a sense of audience preferences. These various practices produced disparate sets of figures only occasionally combined in an aggregate sense of “an industry.”

Colonial governmentality, as well as proliferation of film trade organizations, shifted the politics of enumeration. Statistics could now serve as the administrative mechanism for greater managerial

efficiency and centralized control. Yet in 1928, the Indian Cinematographic Committee would bemoan “the almost complete dearth of statistics and reliable information” required for “a proper understanding of the real position of the trade and the best methods for improving it” (Government of India, 1928). Subsequent overviews tended to be less than sanguine about the possibility of an epistemic shift tied to enumeration. Niranjana Pal wrote in a 1931 issue of *Filmland* about the impossibility of progress given the film industry’s perpetual muddle. Figures quoted by K.S. Hirlekar in a Jubilee celebration of Indian cinema were only meant to “give an idea of the dimensions of the industry” (Hirlekar, 1938). Panna Shah’s doctoral dissertation, published in 1950, lamented the “sad dearth of authoritative factual data,” claiming that statistical “information is based on nothing more than common talk or mere guesswork, given out with the hope that in the absence of proof, it would not be easily challenged” (Shah, 1950). Undeterred, the Film Enquiry Committee’s 1951 report claimed that the figures given “to illustrate the progress attained by the industry are not comprehensive nor can their accuracy be fully vouched for. That cannot be so in the very nature of things” (Government of India, 1951). Such frank assessments of the unreliability of numbers permeate the history of Indian film discourse. For example, in his UNESCO study of university-level film education in India, Satish Bahadur breezily observes that “statistics can be confusing and need not detain us here” (Bahadur, 1966). Numbers were produced in droves, but there were few portentous claims to their precision. This fuzzy enumeration was tied to the present of the industry, rarely making a claim on its future.

The ensuing decades of broad economic transformation marked a critical shift in the deployment of bigness. While the monumentality of the built environment celebrated secular state development, big numbers came to pay tribute to a market-driven aspiration. An economic slowdown beginning in the mid-1960s, famously labeled the “Hindu rate of growth,” began to reverse in the late 1970s, with the slow death of the License Raj, the decline of import-substitution industrialization, and the onset of so-called “economic liberalization.” As the national government turned its interests toward the private sector, increasing international investment interest in India boosted the profile of big numbers and organized finance took note. It took globalization to reverse the marginality of data.

So it might be tempting to claim that the new industrial legitimacy attached to numbers is a wholly foreign one. After all, the West has a long history of knowing the subcontinent through numbers. Enormity was central to the Western vision of Indian fecundity; for example, the big numbers of Transcendentalism and Hindu cosmology fascinated both Emerson and Hegel. Although the absence of numbers frustrated the enumerative modality of colonialism—in his celebration of Lord Curzon, H. Caldwell Lipsett (1903) claimed that there were “no reliable statistics in a Native State at all”—they also pointed to the possibilities of untold wealth. Hence, the *Journal of the Royal Society of the Arts* would claim in 1908 that “there are, unfortunately, no reliable statistics of the amount of dormant riches in the country: that they must be enormous in the aggregate is obvious” (“Accumulated Treasure,” 1908). This confidence in uncoupled abundance pervades the contemporary production of big numbers, linking it to the historical discourses of monstrosity, magnitude, and mystery that constitute the Western enumeration of India.

But bigness is home grown too, and “Bollywood” has taken over as the preferred neologism for fecundity in the culture industries. Hollywood once signified a certain form of bigness, with its star lifestyles, bloated economies of scale, world market share, and opulent *mise-en-scène*. As we near the end of the first 100 years of Hollywood, however, its Bombay counterpart now lays a legitimate claim to a new gigantism. It is no accident that the most prominent Indian media company, now buying up the debt of moribund Hollywood production outfits, is called Reliance *Big* Entertainment. And the Indian

billionaire business dynasties like the Ambanis, who control Reliance, are called “bollygarchs” by the international news media.

Cutting across the sociology of facts and a phenomenology of everyday practice, big numbers now presume a discourse of futurity, of revenue projections, future earnings-per-share, and the imagination of “venture” capital. “The Indian entertainment industry is on the threshold of emerging as a large market globally,” wrote director Subhash Ghai in a 2005 CII/KPMG report called *Indian Entertainment Industry Focus 2010: Dreams to Reality*. Numbers have configured this slippage between fantasy and fact, affirming Baudrillard’s charge that, “like dreams, statistics are a form of wish fulfillment” (Baudrillard, 1990). In the grand unifying gesture of Brand India, the film industry has reached for the stars, making sure to count them along the way.

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