

Portrayal of Religion in the Indian Movie as Seen in *The Lunchbox*

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It is impossible to separate producing movies from the social situation, and a movie's content reflects social trends. The conventional Indian entertainment films follow the format in which the protagonist commonly dressed in gorgeous costumes and performed songs and dances, and the audience overlaid themselves on this figure and danced to songs in the theater. Commercial films focus on entertaining the audience, even through inconsistent storytelling.

Recently, films do not include songs or dances which are low-budget, star-free, but have universal themes have become commercially successful. These works are called new middle class subjects in Indian cinema, with the target audience being the wealthy new middle class that has grown in urban areas as a result of the 1991 economic opening policy.

The purpose of this paper is to take up *The Lunchbox* (2013), which is classified as the new middle class subject in Indian cinema, then I focus on the "religion" depicted in it and explore what it expresses in the movie's work.

Key Words : Religion, India, Movie, A New Middle Class

I. Introduction

It is impossible to separate producing films from the social situation, and a movie's content reflects social trends. The conventional Indian entertainment films follow the format in which the protagonist commonly dressed in gorgeous costumes and performed songs and dances, and the audience overlaid themselves on this figure and danced to songs in the theater. Commercial films focus on entertaining the audience, even through inconsistent storytelling. Indian entertainment films are called escapist media because they provide a dreamlike world and allow the audience to forget about their painful daily lives.

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Since the Indian government launched an economic opening policy in 1991, foreign capital has flowed into India. As the economy has steadily grown, the middle class increased, especially in urban areas. The Indian film industry reacted swiftly to these movements, shifting the new target audience from the poor to the middle and producing films tailored to the tastes of the target audience. As a result, unlike traditional Indian entertainment films, commercial films that do not include songs or dances are being produced.

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II. Censorship system in Indian Cinema

India has a movie censorship system. Censorship is applied not only to movies made in the Indian language but also to movies made in other languages, including Hollywood films. Films shown in India, including those at film festivals, must pass censorship.

Because India is a democratic country, the Constitution guarantees freedom of expression. However, excessive freedom of expression in a movie can cause major social problems. A censorship system has been established using modern technology to promote healthy public entertainment and education (Yamashita & Okamitsu 2010: 170–173).

Censorship is under the jurisdiction of the Central Board of Film Certification, which is headquartered in Bombay and is a suborganization of the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting. The Central Board of Film Certification provides censorship and ratings (age restrictions and regulations for watching movies). The Central Board of Film Certification was established in 1952 through the revision of the provisions of the Cinematograph Act of 1952; since then, censorship of Indian films has been under the jurisdiction of the Central Government. The Government of India appoints a member of the Central Board of Film Certification, one chairperson, and 25 private members. Movies shown in theaters and television in India are

shown after censorship by the Central Board of Film Certification and the necessary edits.

The ratings by the Central Board of Film Certification are in 4 categories: U, U/A, S, and A. U is a movie for all ages, and content includes education, family, romance, science fiction, and action. Mild violent expressions and indirect sexual depictions are allowed. U/A is a movie that requires parental guidance for children under the age of 12 and content includes adult themes with some tolerance for sexual and violent expressions. S is for a movie with content that can only be seen by people who meet special conditions and is limited to scientists and doctors. A is for a movie with content for adults that allows for extreme violence and violent behavior and nude depictions excluding top and under.

Censorship guidelines were issued on December 6, 1991, and are carried out accordingly. Censoring guidelines are quoted from the home page of the Central Board of Film Certification, as follows.

- The objectives of film certification will be to ensure that -
 - a. The medium of film remains responsible and sensitive to the values and standards of society;
 - b. Artistic expression and creative freedom are not unduly curbed;
 - c. Certification is responsive to social changes;
 - d. The medium of film provides clean and healthy entertainment; and
 - e. As far as possible, the film is of aesthetic value and cinematically of a good standard.
- In pursuance of the above objectives, the Board of Film Certification shall ensure that-
 - a. Anti-social activities such as violence are not glorified or justified;
 - b. The modus-operandi of criminals, other visuals or words likely to incite the commission of any offence are not depicted;
 - c. Scenes -
 - a. Showing involvement of children in violence as victims or perpetrators or as forced witnesses to violence, or showing children as being subjected to any form of child abuse;
 - b. Showing abuse or ridicule or physically and mentally handicapped persons; and
 - c. Showing cruelty to, or abuse of animals, are not presented needlessly;
 - d. Pointless or avoidable scenes of violence, cruelty and horror, scenes or violence primarily intended to provide entertainment and such scenes as may have the effect of desensitizing or dehumanizing people are not shown;
 - e. Scenes which have the effect of justifying or glorifying drinking are not shown;
 - f. Scenes tending to encourage, justify or glamorize drug addiction are not shown; Scenes tending to encourage, justify or glamorize consumption of tobacco or smoking

are not shown

- g. Human sensibilities are not offended by vulgarity, obscenity or depravity;
- h. Such dual meaning words as obviously cater to baser instincts are not allowed;
- i. Scenes degrading or denigrating women in any manner are not presented;
- j. Scenes involving sexual violence against women like attempt to rape, rape or any form of molestation, or scenes of a similar nature are avoided, and if any, such incident is germane to the theme, they shall be reduced to the minimum and no details are shown;
- k. Scenes showing sexual perversions shall be avoided and if such matters are germane to the theme, they shall be reduced to the minimum and no details are shown;
- l. Visuals or words contemptuous of racial, religious or other groups are not presented;
- m. Visuals or words which promote communal, obscurantist, anti-scientific and anti-national attitudes are not presented
- n. The sovereignty and integrity of India is not called in question;
- o. The security of the State is not jeopardized or endangered;
- p. Friendly relations with foreign States are not strained;
- q. Public order is not endangered;
- r. Visuals or words involving defamation of an individual or a body of individuals, or contempt of court are not presented;

Explanation: Scenes that tend to create scorn, disgrace or disregard of rules or undermine the dignity of court will come under the term “contempt of court”, and

- s. National symbols and emblems are not shown except in accordance with the provisions of the Emblems and Names (Prevention of Improper Use) Act, 1950 (12 of 1950)
- The Board of Film Certification shall also ensure that the film
 - a. Is judged in its entirety from the point of view of its overall impact; and
 - b. Is examined in the light of the period depicted in the films and the contemporary standards of the country and the people to which the film relates provided that the film does not deprave the morality of the audience.
- Films that meet the above - mentioned criteria but are considered unsuitable for exhibition to non-adults shall be certified for exhibition to adult audiences only.
 - a. While certifying films for unrestricted public exhibition, the Board shall ensure that the film is suitable for family viewing, that is to say, the film shall be such that all the members of the family including children can view it together.
 - b. If the Board, having regard to the nature, content and theme of the film is of the opinion that it is necessary to caution the parents / guardian to consider as to whether any child below the age of twelve years maybe allowed to see such a film, the film shall be certified for unrestricted public exhibition with an endorsement to that effect.
 - c. If the Board having regard to the nature, content and theme of the film, is of the opinion that the exhibition of the film should be restricted to members of any profession or any class of persons, the film shall be certified for public exhibition restricted to the specialized audiences to be specified by the Board in this behalf.

- d. The Board shall scrutinize the titles of the films carefully and ensure that they are not provocative, vulgar, offensive or violative of any of the above-mentioned guidelines.

(Quoted from the Central Board of Film Certification)

The Central Board of Film Certification consists of non-official members and a chairperson appointed by the Central Government. All of them are appointed by the Central Government. Currently (June 2022), the chairperson of the Central Board of Film Certification is Prasoon Joshi, a poet, screenwriter, and CEO of McCann World Group India. From 2004 to 2011, India's famous actress, Sharmila Tagore, was the chairperson. The Board's headquarters is in Mumbai, and it has nine regional offices: Trivandrum, Chennai, Hyderabad, Bangalore, Mumbai, Cuttack, Guwaati, Kolkata, and New Delhi (Central Board of Film Certification 2022).

Censorship is carried out by the regional office, where the Chamber of Commerce of Film, of which the producer is a member, is located. For censorship, the producer submits the film or video film, the film materials, requisite fees, and written matter to the regional office. After all of the necessary materials for censorship are available, the regional office forms an examination committee for censorship. For a short film, the examining committee is composed of an officer of the CBFC and one advisory panel member, either of them should be a woman. For a long film/feature film, the examining committee consists of four people, at least two of them should be women.

Mumbai's regional office is home to one-third of Indian cinema. The registration of the Chamber of Commerce is permitted as a dual membership, so some production companies have membership of the Chamber of Commerce at both Mumbai and other cities. Production companies which have a dual membership can censor at one of the two censorship offices at their convenience.

If the producer is dissatisfied with the results of the examination committee, the producer can appeal to the review committee. The Review Committee is organized in Delhi, the capital, and consists of nine panel members, one administrative officer, and 11 chairpersons. The chair is someone who understands the language of the movie in question.

If the producer is dissatisfied with the Review Committee's decision, the producer will leave it to the Film Certification Appellate Tribunal (FCAT) in New Delhi. The FCAT is equivalent to a court, and all members are lawyers. The FCAT is joined by a judge and a regional officer, and film producers hire lawyers to fight for

them. The FCAT's decision is final and cannot be overturned (Yamashita & Okamoto 2010: 108, 170; Central Board of Film Certification 2021).

III. Censorship and Religion in Indian Films

In Indian films, except for documentary films, religion and communal violence are rarely mentioned as themes of the film because religion is a check item in the Central Board of Film Certification guidelines—it is always a check item. Regarding religion, the guidelines specify the following:

- xii. Visuals or words contemptuous of racial, religious, or other groups are not presented.
- xiii. Visuals or words that promote communal, obscurantist, anti-scientific, and anti-national attitudes are not presented.

(Quoted from the Central Board of Film Certification)

Film censorship always checks for religion, religious groups, and religion-related matters. Therefore, a movie that deals with religion faces the risk of being caught by the censorship guidelines. Even considering that the mainstream of filmmaking has shifted from film to digital cameras in recent years and production costs have been reduced, film production is still expensive and time consuming. Censorship points out cuts and corrections, and the film producer can appeal to the FCAT, which is the final stage. Even if the FCAT accepts the filmmaker's claims, time and money are needed during the time of dispute that the film is not shown in India.

For example, *Bombay* (1995), directed by the Tamil movie director Mani Ratnam, is a typical example of the risk of censorship because it addresses religious issues. *Bombay* is based on the Bombay riot that happened in the city from December 1992 to January 1993. The story is that inter-religious marriage couple of a Hindu man (Shekhar) and a Muslim woman (Shaila) and their families were involved in the communal riot.

Bombay cannot be told without religion or communal tension. The main characters in *Bombay* are a love-married, inter-religious couple. In fact, interreligious marriages in India are very rare because marriage in India is a matter of family, and the will of the family is more respected than that of the individual. Marriage in India is carried out among people who belong to the same caste and follow the same religion. In particular, Hindu-Muslim marriages are strongly opposed by the bride's

and groom's families, and having such a couple as the main characters of a movie increases the risk of social opposition.

In addition, the story continues to the Bombay riot, triggered by religious conflict. The truth is that the Bombay riot caused religious tensions between Hindus and Muslims, and Muslims were targeted and slaughtered. In the film, the main character Shekhar covers the Bombay riots as a journalist, then interviews leaders, including existing Hindu and Islamic fundamental groups. Therefore the work features a person reminiscent of an existential religious leader, protests and complaints were lodged by both Hindu and Islamic groups.

Bombay would not have had a story without religious issues, which were caught by the censorship guidelines for Indian films. Therefore, it was predicted from the beginning that cuts and retakes would be pointed out as the result of the censorship. Although *Bombay* faced a difficult censorship until it was allowed a commercial screening, it could be done because the film was directed by Mani Ratnam.

In the 1990s Indian film industry, Mani Ratnam's fame spread throughout India, and commercial success of all his Tamil films gave him the momentum to shoot down flying birds. *Bombay*, unlike previous Mani Ratnam films, was designed to be screened in the larger Hindi market. Jhamu Sughand, who is based in Mumbai—the center of Indian cinema—joined the producers, and Hindi movie star Manisha Koirala was appointed the leading actress. *Bombay* targeted the larger Hindi movie market from the beginning.

As Mani Ratnam was one of the most popular director at that time, his work was well funded, so retook the movie scene at the request of censorship was no need to worry about. Mani Ratnam was also charismatic as a director, and the leading actor-class stars opened up their schedules and were eager to appear in his work. He did not have to worry about the actors' schedules for the retakes.

In fact, *Bombay* had difficulty passing the censorship. Cuts and retakes had to be done to enable the movie to pass the censorship. It is said that the works that needed to be done to pass censorship did significant damage to the original films. However, *Bombay* was commercially successful. The Hindi version of the film grossed 140 million rupees, and *Bombay* won various awards, including the Cinema Express Awards, Filmfare Awards, and the Jerusalem Film Festival.

However, a commercial film that breaks through strict censorship, as did *Bombay*, is very rare. Mani Ratnam was one of India's most popular directors at that time, he was well funded, and *Bombay* was commercially profitable after a time-consuming censorship process. However, most movies do not have the theme of reli-

gion because they cannot afford to get caught up in censorship guidelines.

IV. New genre of movies: New middle class subject of Indian cinema

In line with the emergence of an emerging wealthy middle class called the new middle class, a new genre film—with social issues and personal internality without unrealistic song and dance scenes in the form of Indian commercial films—has appeared, especially in Hindi films. These works deal with the difficulty of making train reservations, the inefficiency of office work, the inconvenience and inefficiency that everyone feels in daily life, such as frequent power outages, and the conflicts of the individual's mind. However, they are not denounced as social problems but have the characteristic of drawing them as frames of personal and daily events (Anjaria 2015: 153-154).

These new genres of work are commercial films; however, apart from the conventional stereotyped format, its theme is universal, even if Indians are the main characters. In addition, these films are not expected to be big hits from the beginning, so the production budget is small. Because of the low budget constraints, works in this genre do not include stars, large sets, flashy action scenes that use many explosives, heavy use of VFX, flashy song sequences, and others (Okamitsu 2019a: 124).

The worldview drawn in this genre often overlaps with the interests and consciousness of the new middle class. Moreover, the Indian audience for movies of this genre is the new middle class, so this genre is called the new middle class subject of Indian cinema. The new middle class subject of Indian cinema is a sober work, such as an art or documentary film with the theme of universal events, which is different from commercial films that include songs and dances. It was said that this type of film could not be commercially successful because it was far from the conventional Indian commercial film.

However, in 2009, *Taare Zameen Par* (2007), which deals with overcoming obstacles of dyslexic boy, was released as a serious movie without co-stars, flashy songs, or dance sequences. No one expected its actual huge commercial success. The commercial success of *Taare Zameen Par* proves that there is more than a certain type of audience in India—one that appreciates this type of movie—and paved the way to producing and screening a new middle class subject of Indian cinema.

The creators of this genres are young directors who have little experience making feature films. They write excellent screenplays full of originality and create

works with devotion to every detail. Many new genres of movies are excellent works with a high degree of perfection, and they have won numerous awards at film festivals in both India and overseas. In addition, it was once thought that even if a sober work received high praise at both home and abroad, it would not be commercially successful in India. However, the commercial success of this type of film proved that some Indian audiences have been waiting for something different from conventional commercial films.

English Vinglish (2012), a Hindi movie that represents one of the new middle class subjects of Indian cinema, depicts a housewife who cannot speak English but becomes mentally independent after attending an English conversation school in New York. The script for *English Vinglish* is an original work written by the director (Gauri Shinde) and inspired by her mother, who could not speak English.

Gauri Shinde, born in 1974, created commercials for IBM and others as a creative director. *English Vinglish* is her first feature-length film. Gauri Shinde believes that music is essential to the film, but she sticks to using the music as background music without lip-synching song scenes in her work.

English Vinglish was also mentioned about the leading actress Sridevi returned to



Figure 1 *English Vinglish* Retrieved from <http://madame.ayapro.ne.jp/story.html>.

the screen for the first time in 15 years, and the Hindi movie superstar Amitabh Bachchan and the Tamil movie superstar Ajith Kumar made cameo appearances. The production budget was as low as 260 million rupees, and the shooting period was as short as 18 days in India and 42 days in New York, for a total of 60 days.

Even the performers did not seem to expect this work to be a box office success. The performance fee of the starring Sridevi has not been disclosed, but it will be incomparable to the performance fee at her peak. Ajith Kumar, who appeared in a cameo, had no performance fee and paid for his travel expenses to New York by himself. In the end, *English Vinglish* was a huge commercial success, with more than 900 million rupees in box office revenue.

English Vinglish has won numerous awards at film festivals in both India and overseas, including the Filmfare Award for Best New Director for delicately portraying the feelings of alienation and loneliness that women experience both at home and in society. In particular, Sridevi's acting feat has been highly acclaimed, and Gauri Shinde won director awards at numerous film festivals. This work was also a national candidate for the 2012 Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Work in India but was not selected.

Another movie, *Newton* (2017), from the new middle class subject of Indian cinema, was selected for the 2018 Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Work. *Newton* is about a rookie civil servant, Newton, who is dispatched as an election commissioner to a jungle constituency controlled by the Mao Zedong armed group. Newton is escorted by the army while struggling to carry out fair elections in accordance with the rules of the election guidebook. The original script was written by the director Amit V. Masurkar. The filming was actually done in a jungle dominated by Mao Zedong under escort by Indian government forces.

Amit V. Masurkar was born in 1981 and has had a career as an assistant director of television shows. *Newton* is his second feature film.

The civil servant Newton, played by Rajkummar Rao, is reminiscent of the image of a sincere civil servant who frequently appears in Hindi movies produced after the independence of India. Immediately after independence, "nation building" was an important issue for India. Civil servants are indispensable to "nation building," and sincere public servant movies have sent the message "strengthen for nation building" to the public (Livemint. April 20 2018). *Newton* used fair elections as an example to highlight the reality of India of the numerous challenges in exercising fair justice and achieving efficient governance for the whole. In fact, inefficiencies and negligence in the Indian government are problems that plague many.



Figure 2 *Newton* Retrieved from <http://www.oaff.jp/2018/ja/program/s05.html>

In 2017, *Newton* won the CICA Award at the Berlin International Film Festival prior to its release in India, and it has won numerous awards at both national and international film festivals. The leading actor, Rajkummar Rao, has been described as one of the most talented actors, and his performance is highly acclaimed. Although *Newton* was produced on a low budget of 90 million rupees, it was one of the most profitable Indian films in 2017, with box office revenue of more than 310 million rupees (Okamitsu 2019a: 129–135).

V. People with Weak Social Ties and Religions in *The Lunchbox*

The Lunchbox is an international work produced in India, France, and Germany and directed by Indians, with music, editors, and photographers by Westerners. Director Ritesh Batra is a young filmmaker born in 1979, and this work is his original script.

The story of this work is a delicate romance between a young woman and an elderly man resulting from the misdelivery of a lunch box which is delivered by Dabbawala, a Mumbai specialty. This story could only be established in Mumbai, India. This movie brilliantly depicts the subtleties of the man and woman who are attracted to each other, although they have never met, they come to know through the ex-

change of letters hidden in the lunchbox and without dramatic events.

The three main characters are Ira, a young and beautiful housewife who entrusts Dabbawala with a handmade box lunch and delivers it to her husband, Sajan, an elderly accountant who receives her box lunch by chance, and Sheikh, the accountant's successor. What they all have in common is that they have little social connection with their families and relatives, which are important in Indian society. Moreover, although 80% of the total population in India are Hindus, the three core figures have different religious affiliations. The backgrounds of the three characters are as follows.

Ira lives in a suburban apartment in Mumbai with her husband and daughter, but her relationship with her husband is cold. She wants to rebuild the relationship by delivering a delicious handmade box lunch to her husband at his office. However, she finds her husband cheating, and her heart is not calm. She is also mentally distant from her parents, her father, who suffers from cancer, and her mother, who has been caring for him, and she had a younger brother who committed suicide. Her mother is also struggling to pay for his treatment and is tired of caring for her husband. Because of this situation, Ira is unable to discuss her worries with her mother, and she is a lonely woman who has no one to rely on. She begins to reveal her worries in the form of her letters to Sajan, whom she has never met.

Sajan is financially stable as an accountant. He lives alone in a suburban home and lost his wife. He is a man who has no children, close colleagues, relatives, or hobbies and lives a monotonous life just going back and forth between home and workplace. Sajan does not cook for himself and neglects to enjoy eating, and he orders his lunch from a nearby dining room, buys food from a restaurant, and eats alone. By some mistake, he gets the box lunch that Ira cooks. As he enjoys the delicious food, he becomes fond of Ira without meeting her.

Sheikh is a young man who grew up as an orphan and is lonely for the rest of his life. He becomes familiar with Sajan, who is instructed to take over his work and becomes fond of him like his own father. Sajan opens his heart only to Sheikh, and they begin to eat together at lunch time. Sheikh knows that Sajan exchanges letters through a lunch box and finds that Sajan is in love. Sheikh invites Sajan to his wedding as his guardian when he marries his cohabiting girlfriend.

The three have weak social ties with family, castes, and religious groups that Indians would not be able to escape. The three are in different positions and connected directly or indirectly. The person who connects the three is Sajan, who is the oldest and the one who most avoids connection with others.

Now, a close look at the religious depictions in *The Lunchbox* shows that the religious attribution of the three main characters can be deciphered from the setting which surrounds them. In other words, although there is no verbal explanation, but the religious attribution of the characters can be easily determined from the name, residential area, language used, clothes, and others.

Ira has no Hindi deities or posters in her house, but her religious affiliation is clearly majority Hindu. In particular, it is easy to find out that she is a Hindu when she goes out because she wears a married sign, Bindi, on her forehead (Figure 3).

Sajan is a Christian as seen in his family name Fernandez, (Figure 4). Visiting to his wife's grave also indicates that he is certainly a Christian because her graveyard is for Christians. There is a sacred heart of a Mary figure next to the television in his house, it reveals that he is Catholic. The dining room of the house next door is decorated with a picture of The Last Supper, indicating that Sajan lives in a Catholic-dominated area.

Sheikh invites Sajan to dinner. Sheikh is Islamic because his residence is in an Islam-dominated area. Sheikh's wife also does not have a bindi on her forehead even when they invite a guest to the house, it indicates that they are Muslims. The deci-



Figure 3 Image of Ira with a bindi on her forehead



Figure 4 Nameplate of Sajan's house labeled Fernandes

sive factor was Sheikh's wedding scene. The dresses of the bride and groom and the attendees were in the Muslim style (Figure 5) (Okamitsu 2020b: 131-132).

The Lunchbox carefully depicts a pair of man and woman who come to know each other through the misdelivery of a boxed lunch and become attracted to each other through the exchange of letters hidden in the lunchbox. It is obvious that this man and woman follow different religions, but the difference in religious attribution does not intervene in the relationship. The theme of this work is the fate of the delicate romantic feelings of the man and woman who met by chance and not the figure of lovers suffering from religious conflict.

The Lunchbox differs significantly from traditional commercial film stories, and in that film the religious differences between man and woman do not interfere with their love. Ira and Sajan know that their religious affiliations are different, but it does not affect their relationship. Rather than that, Sajan has a complex about being an elderly man who is in love with a young woman, Ira, which creates a crack in their relationship.

In *The Lunchbox*, the existence of religion is by no means conspicuous. No one mentions religion, religion and religious symbols appear casually on the screen. In Indian society, it is natural to know who belongs to which religion from the person's name, place of residence, clothes, and other clues, without telling the their religion. Religious matters naturally appear in the depictions of everyday life (Okamitsu 2020b: 131-132).



Figure 5 Sheikh's wedding with the bride and groom and attendees dressed in Islamic clothing

VI. Conclusion

Films in India must be censored by the Central Board of Film Certification prior to their release. Religion is one of the items to be checked as a delicate and awkward topic that can cause social turmoil. Because of these circumstances, few commercial films dare to take up religion itself head-on.

The Lunchbox is filled with glimpses of “religion,” but the depiction of religion is naturally done as part of everyday life without exaggeration or distortion. The natural depictions of religion are not an issue in censorship.

India is a country with multiple religions. In the real world, people who follow different religions work together, and people who believe in different religions form amicable relationships. The more urban an area, the more diverse the people and religions mix.

The religious element that appears in *The Lunchbox* is the religion commonly found in the city—the natural form of religion in everyday life. Religion is not a special entity that exerts a dominant force on an individual's consciousness, values, or life but is a part of people's lives.

The Lunchbox depicts the relationships between believers in different religions, but religion is not highlighted in the film—not because the film underestimates religion. *The Lunchbox* portrays the lives of ordinary people in a straightforward man-

ner because the religions that appear in the movie are just what they are in everyday life. In short, religion in *The Lunchbox* is a projection of the “living religion” in Indian society.

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