

# A critical analysis of the rise of Indian cinema: Drawing the west to the east

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## ABSTRACT

It has been more than 100 years now that Indian Cinema has flourished and Mumbai being the hub of Indian cinema has expanded multifold becoming a global industry of more than 183 billion Indian rupees. India celebrated 100 years of cinema on 3 May 2013, the same day when Dadasaheb Phalke made the film Raja Harishchandra (1913), a film that was directly inspired by Life of Jesus Christ, a Hollywood movie. Precisely, more than a century has passed since this 1913 film, and the equation seems to have reversed. Indian cinema has now become an inspiration for many Hollywood filmmakers, producers and actors. There are several reasons that contribute to the growing change. The present study is an attempt to explore and analyse the various films that were largely influenced with Indian culture and talent leading to an exposure worldwide. A total of 17 popular award winning films have been analyzed that were either made by foreign directors on Indian culture and society, had Indian setting but foreign actors, or had popular actors that were working alongside popular foreign actors.

## Keywords:

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## INTRODUCTION

With the success of films like Slumdog Millionaire by Danny Boyle, Hollywood's interest in India has escalated manifold. In today's world where India is fast growing as an economic power, it has become an attraction for many foreign industries to invest here. The increasing amalgamation of popular Indian cinema with the western world has led to many changes. Most importantly, the meaning of the term 'entertainment' has also changed for the Indian masses. With increasing number of television sets in majority of the households in India, one can comprehend the role and

Impact of entertainment in the lives of ordinary Indians. Indian popular cinema has been a main attraction for millions of people in India and Bollywood attracts the maximum. Bollywood is a term popularly known for Hindi language film industry based in Mumbai (formerly known as Bombay). It is the largest contributor to the industry's revenue, followed by the south Indian movie industry and other language cinema industries such as Bengali, Bhojpuri, Marathi and Gujarati (Chitrapu, 2012). The word 'Bollywood' is a portmanteau derived from Bombay and Hollywood. Bollywood

comprises a majority of the Indian film industry while regional and independently made films constitute the rest (Rai, 2015). India produces almost 1,000 films annually in several languages, out of which few of them find a place among international cinema lovers. With so many feature and regional films coming up annually, it isn't a surprise that India ranks first followed by Hollywood and China in the number of films produced each year.

### **Objective**

The present study is an attempt to understand the growing influence of Indian cinema particularly, Bollywood on the global media of entertainment. It is trying to assess and dissect the films that were made in Indian subcontinent or had a deep influence of Indian cultural diaspora. A total of 17 popular award winning films have been analyzed that were either made by foreign directors on Indian culture and society, had Indian setting but foreign actors, or had popular actors that were working alongside popular foreign actors. Psychoanalytical theories and contextual analysis of films have been used to derive the meaning out of these films. Alongside, textual analysis of certain films has also been done.

### **Findings and Discussion**

Assessing the interest of western filmmakers in India, one cannot ignore the films that were made in late 90's like the Octopussy (1983) which touched upon the exotic cultures and locations of India. The 1983 Octopussy directed by John Glen, starred Roger Moore as James Bond. He is an agent investigating the death of the British agent and following a general who is stealing jewels and relics from Russian government (Bouissac, 2006) most parts of the film were shot in India. In the film, James bond reaches Taj Lake palace in Udaipur while following an afghan named Khan. There he also meets Vijay Amritaj, an interesting likable character who helps Bond in the investigation and introduces him to various customs of the country. Many sequences in the film

like tuk-tuk (three wheeler vehicle) chase through the centre of the crowded city, the chasing of Bond and Vijay by Khan's men, shots of busy market featuring sword swallowers, men on hot coals and a bed of nails, the snake charmers, and shots of narrow crowded lanes are thrilling and memorable but at the same time they also reinforce the stereotypes and the English view of India. Indeed, these visuals and images of Indian in the global media, creates a distinct image of India in the minds of global citizens. Similarly, A Passage to India (1984) by David Lean is set in the backdrop of the colonized India during the British raj. The film follows the intersection of two unlikely people Ms Moore and Mr Aziz, depicting a tale of clashing cultures and civilisation. The trip to the Marabar caves, the shots of Ganges River, recurring rains, painted elephants, sexually-oriented statues and the discussions around spirituality, relationships and religion are carefully set in the backdrop of exotic culture and spectacular scenery of India (Benedito, 2017).

Since long, western filmmakers have shown keen interest in India's culture, tradition and the impact of colonialism in India (Matusitz & Payano, 2012). One of the finest examples is that of The Merchant Ivory productions founded by an Indian producer- Ismail Merchant and American director -James Ivory. It is one the biggest and successful film company, setup initially with an aim "to make English language films in India aimed at the international market" but not all films were shot in India. However, it produced and directed some great films like The Mummy (1969), A Room with a view (1985), In Custody (1994), Cotton Mary (1999), Heights (2005) and Before the Rains (2007).

Some of these films like *Before the Rains* depict English characters in Indian setting while others show the complexities of modernisation and tradition as shown in the film *In Custody*. Other top Hollywood movies based in India are *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* (1984) directed by Steven Spielberg, *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* (2011) directed by John Madden and *The Namesake* (2006) directed by Mira Nair. Like in the film *The Namesake* that chronicles the struggles of American born child Gogol who resents cultures and tradition his family upholds and is confused with his name and identity. Such films have been quite successful at the box office not only because of their characters and setting but also their storyline depicts the culture and tradition of India and the impact of globalization on the common man (Gopalan & Lalitha , 2002).

Over the last 20 years Indian cinema has changed, witnessing the emergence of realistic parallel cinema and the rise of commercial cinema. During that era very few producers and stars

monopolised the industry and talented newcomers couldn't break in. Producers couldn't afford to take risks and made 'formula' films to reach out to a maximum audience. Since there were very few producers, most of the money came from the underworld. The producers avoided new actors and new themes as it meant undergoing a financial risk. From the 1990s onwards, the liberalisation of the Indian economy opened the door for foreign industries. Internet and satellite television brought a new culture and dimension to Indian audiences and to the youth in particular. The end of Doordarshan's monopoly gave way to an explosion of private sector TV channels. More channels meant more actors, directors, scriptwriters, costume designer and of course many film schools that created them. The deregulation of many sectors like filmmaking, banking, capital markets, TV and lifting the price control on tickets brought about a revolution in the Indian film industry.i Many Bollywood films started getting recognised and acclaimed in South Asia and the western world. Subhash Ghai's *Taal* starring Aishwarya Rai and Anil Kapoor was the first film to enter the Top 20 chart in the UK. Films like *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* and *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai*, *Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gham* not only established Bollywood in the western world but the characters in the film also portrayed an undying spirit reflecting the spirit of a country in the throes of economic reforms. (Thussu, 2008).

Gradually it witnessed increasing returns from theatres in UK, Canada and US. With a growing number of Indians migrating abroad, the market for upscale Indian films also grew. From 2000 onwards plenty of films were made which told stories about Non-Resident Indians (NRIs) and also stories about protagonists travelling and living in different parts of the world. Many producers like Yash Chopra have set up studios in Switzerland and Austria in order to tap the NRI community.ii from the year 2000 onwards there was a growing expansion in the popularity of Bollywood. Celebrities like A R Rahman, Shekhar Kapur and Santosh Sivan have represented India to the world audience. Filmmaking is gaining new heights in term of quality, technical advances (special effects, animation and 3D), innovative stories, new age directors and fresh talent. The visual effects (VFX) industry is a rapidly evolving sector in India. According to estimates, there are more than 40 major domestic VFX companies catering to domestic and international markets. Presently, India accounts for only around 10% of the total animation and VFX outsourcing pie. However, there is scope for growth and the amount of work coming to India from Hollywood, is on the rise. With the opening up of the overseas market, more Bollywood releases abroad and the explosion of multiplexes in big cities, led to wider box office successes in India and abroad, including Lagaan

(2001), *Devdas* (2002), *Rang de Basanti* (2006), *Chak De India* (2007), *3 Idiots* (2009), *My name is Khan* (2010) and more recently *English Vinglish* (2012). *Lagaan* won the Audience Award at the Locarno International Film Festival and was nominated for Best Foreign Language Film at the 74th Academy Awards, while *Devdas* and *Rang de Basanti* were both nominated for the BAFTA Award for Best Foreign Language Film. These films not only worked well because of high budgets but also because their themes and location transcended beyond India, which appealed to a global audience. The demands of a multicultural, increasingly globalised Indian audience often led to a mixing of various local and international traditions. *Monsoon wedding* (2001) by Meera Nair is a story set in the modern upper-middle class of India, where telecommunications and a western lifestyle mix with old traditions. Such films not only exposed Indian talent abroad but also invited many filmmaker and actors to India (Álvarez, 2020).

In the recent time, with the huge success of the film, *Slumdog Millionaire*, (2008) Indian popular cinema entered into a new chapter in its history, one in which the eyes of the world paid closer attention to Indian cinema. *Slumdog Millionaire* was directly inspired by Indian films. It was shot in India with Indian actors and musicians and based on an Indian novel. The film was appreciated worldwide with Wall Street Journal critic Joe Morgenstern referring to *Slumdog Millionaire* as "the film world's first globalised masterpiece," while on the other hand well known Indian film makers and academicians referred it as anti-Indian. In spite of the controversy, this British movie shot in India bagged eight Academy Awards. Indeed with the immense success of *Slumdog Millionaire*, western filmmakers and producers began to set their eyes on India and its talent. It led them to believe that there is a valuable international market for quality independent films with Indian themes.

Similarly Oscar winning director Ang Lee's *Life of Pi* (2012) bagged several awards and appreciation worldwide. The movie's actors, themes, culture and its recurring Indian scenes in Pondicherry have opened a window to Indian culture and traditions to the global audience. No doubt, actors in the film greatly contribute to the success of the film and India has plenty of them. The talent is no more concentrated in Mumbai only (Barat, 2017). Many films have seen brilliant actors from the country suburbs, taking up leading roles and doing extremely well in their field. Plus, India is home to many stories and legends. There are a growing number of scriptwriters that have penned down some of the most innovative and brilliant scripts that worked well at the box office; stories that talk about India and the growing trend of globalisation, and themes that

Showcase westernization amidst the disparity that exists between rural and urban India. (Lalitha & Gopalan, 2002)

It is now very much evident that Indian culture and tradition along with new emerging talent draws many filmmakers to India. They find the place and characters colourful, contrasting and charismatic. Indeed, over a decade Indian cinema has become more artistic, aesthetic and edgier. It is already competing with the world outside. Many Hollywood production houses have started setting up ties with the Indian filmmakers and actors. There are lot of US companies forming relationships for digital effects and animation.

Dreamworks Animation is doing lot of animation work from India and building up a talent pool which is what is inspiring future-film making here in the digital world. And most recently, Reliance Big Entertainment, which is one of the most aggressively expanding entertainment company in India has signed a 1.2 billion-dollar, debt-equity deal with Steven Spielberg's DreamWorks SKG for 36 movies over six years. Studios all over the world have woken up to the fact that there's money to be made in India. Hollywood studios such as Warner Brothers, Walt Disney, Sony and Fox are already co-producing movies in India. Walt Disney, who earlier held a 50 percent stake in UTV, has now acquired a controlling stake in UTV Software Communications. In 2009, the international arm of the Motion Picture Association of America set up an office in Mumbai to represent the growing interests of Hollywood studios.

Other factors that contribute to the growing collaboration among Indian and western producers, are the low budget productions and talented technicians. One is witnessing an increasing demand of such technicians. The skyrocketing budgets for Hollywood films, shooting schedules in Indian locales and increased prominence of Indian cinema in the global film scene has led to the influx of Indian technicians in the world of Hollywood. However, process is slow because Indian technicians are not paid as good as their western counterparts, but the trend is definitely growing. India has the potential to offer talented crew in film-making at a comparatively low cost. The country has top-notch post-production capabilities including VFX, 3D and animation, which has led to an increase in outsourcing of post-production services. When foreign producers come to shoot a film in India, they can easily complete their entire movie in the country, from shooting to post- production, to cut costs substantially. For example, Indian post-production company Prime Focus has worked on 200 visual effects for James Cameron's Avatar, one of Hollywood's largest

Grosser ever. The above factors contribute significantly to Indian cinema if good incentives are provided to producers.

While for many, India serves as a perfect locale for shooting. There are several reasons that contribute to it. Firstly, as compared to other places in the world, India has a relatively new visual landscape and innumerable unexplored locations that can be ideal locales for shooting foreign films. The country rich diversity and terrain like mountains, beaches, forests and deserts is what draws them to India. It is home to many heritage and attractive locations. Secondly, westerners view India as a country rich in cultural heritage and want to explore it. Being a spiritual destination it has become a fascination for many filmmakers.

Films like Eat, Pray, Love (2006) showcased the spiritual aspects of the country to the world. British film producers like David Thompson, Leslee Udwin and McCarthy are keen to tap India's talent. Australian director Claire McCarthy shot her first feature film, The Waiting City, (2009) in Calcutta. It's the first Australian film shot completely in India and is about an Australian couple who come to India to adopt a child. Films like Gandhi by David Attenborough and The Darjeeling Limited, (2007) by Wes Anderson have experimented well on the Indian soil and inspired other filmmakers to turn their lens to Indian diaspora. Thompson believes that there is a growing interest among British filmmakers in India as it full of "colour, energy and emotions", "a natural place to make films" (Hoult, 2014). Harish Amin, who has produced several international movies from Salaam Bombay, (1998) to The Waiting City claims that nearly 10 foreign films come to India each year.

He thinks that foreign filmmakers are interested in knowing about India and want to explore the country. Similarly, about half-a-dozen India-centric films are under development in the UK and Australia. These filmmakers are not just looking to target the international viewership but also looking at the domestic multiplex audience in India as well.

### **Conclusion**

Now Hollywood is having its own Bollywood dreams. Many Indian traditions are being embraced by western celebrities that are fast gaining popularity in the world and attracting people to Indian places, culture and tradition. Be it, Hollywood actor Brad Pitt who loves the colour and drama involved in the Indian cinema or Julia Roberts' portraying the west's typical Indian spiritual quest in *Eat, Pray, Love*.iii Western filmmakers are interested in telling stories that take place in India but also make sure that they have few white characters in the film so that it has a global appeal.iv

Hollywood over many generations has built the American film tradition from international talent. Many years ago movies were made by the French, Germans, Chinese and many others from all over the globe. Their films really made a mark in the US film Industry. Over the years eastern flavour has been developing in the world and the keen interest of western cinema in India has altered Indian producers to the chance of making more money from an already profitable market. This can be a positive sign because traditional markets within India have also begun to change. They no longer depend on the North Indian market but cater to wider audience worldwide, in order to cultivate new audiences with crossover films. Indian popular cinema has grown over a period of time, and it seems that even the lines between commercial cinema and the art-house cinema are getting blurred. The Indian films are competing at an international level and the actors dreaming big. Over all, it is worth concluding by quoting few lines of Rudyard Kipling's 'The Ballad of East and West' "Oh, East is East and West is West, and never the twain shall meet, Till Earth and Sky stand presently at God's great Judgment Seat; But there is neither East nor West, Border, nor Breed, nor Birth, When two strong men stand face to face, though they come from the ends of the earth!"

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