

## **Bollywood Cinema and Indian Diaspora**

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Today, more than ever, culture bestows a multi-perspectival and multidimensional “site of struggle.” The challenge before the pedagogues, therefore, is to join the collaborative contexts with people to further interrogate and illuminate the struggle on the cultural terrain. Production, application, or transmission of knowledge either in educational institutions or in society at large cannot be complete without addressing the multiple ways media culture shapes people’s everyday life. It is within this broader contour that I delineate the growing links between Bollywood cinema and the Indian diaspora. The subject matter at hand is vast, and this essay should be seen as an investigation to trigger further debates, discussions, and research across disciplines.

Bollywood is a conflation of Bombay (old name of Mumbai) with Hollywood and is informally being used for the Hindi language film industry in India. There are films made in several different languages in multilingual India, but over time the Hindi language films from Bollywood have assumed prominence probably because Hindi is the national language of India. The Bollywood output is so colossal that even films made in places like Chennai, London, and New York, or languages such as Punjabi and English are subsumed within it.

Cinema first came to India under British colonialism and slowly consumed folk traditions. The first indigenous feature film was made in 1913, and by 1930 films in India assumed

vibrancy. Gokulsing and Dissanayake (2004) suggest that during this time, filmmaking in India was Janus-faced—looking at Indian cultural tradition, on the one hand, and drawing from them, as well as being inspired by the techniques and aura from around the world but mainly from Hollywood, on the other.

During the same era, when Indians in the diaspora looked back nostalgically toward India, they looked at Indian cinema. Bollywood films such as *Anarkali* (Irani & Choudhry, 1928), *Madhuri* (Irani & Choudhry, 1928), *Veer Abhimanyu* (Sagar & Ghosh, 1931), *Maya Bazaar* (Sagar & Ghosh, 1932), and *Zarina* (Sagar & Ghosh, 1932) were screened in Suva, the capital of Fiji, around 1930 (see Mishra, 2002). From the beginning, Bollywood cinema had found a special cultural space among the Indian diaspora. Today, Indian youths in India and in the Indian diaspora find an identity repertoire from Bollywood cinema. Therefore, if cinema is the “temple of modern India” (Dasgupta, 1988) they are the “temple of desire” (Mishra, 2002) for the Indian diaspora.

The study of both India and its diaspora is important especially because of India’s growing population, its cultural diversity, and its linguistic complexity. Technological changes of the last century have significantly altered the production and consumption of information in India and its diaspora because of satellite television, transnational travel and tourism, Internet communication, and global consumerism. Sky Entertainment in Fiji, Sahara TV in the United Emirates, or ATN cable in Canada have been “crucial in bringing the homeland into the diaspora” (Mishra, 2002, p. 237). In fact, the ATN cable in Canada broadcasts directly from *Doordarshan* (national television channel) in India just to provide one example of the increasing transnational dimension of Indian media in general.

This essay discusses the link between cinema and the diaspora, especially the cultural and pedagogical power of cinema on youths in the diaspora, on the one hand, and the impact of the diaspora on Bollywood cinema, on the other—the two-way cultural exchange. The locale and constant reference to Punjab in Hindi films indicate the dominance of Punjabis in the Indian diaspora. More specifically, Baldev Singh in *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (Chopra & Chopra, 1995) lives in London, but his heart belongs to the “greenery” of Punjab.

It is interesting to consider how Gurinder Chadda packages and constructs the playing of *dandia* (from Gujarat played with two sticks) in Amritsar (Punjab) and how it is depicted in *Bride and Prejudice* (Chadha, Nayar & Chadha, 2005). It is like mixing cultural traits through Punjab to showcase India. Comparable to the cinematic discourse itself, I proceed with three brief “takes” on Bollywood cinema and the Indian diaspora. The first take extends the discussion of the contours of Bollywood cinema. The second zooms a little further to analyze the growing links between the Indian diaspora and the Bollywood cultural industry. In the third take, I focus on the impact of Bollywood cinema on Indian youths, especially in the diaspora.

### Take One

Gokulsing and Dissanayake (2004) list a number of elements usually noticeable in Bollywood cinema: lack of realism, escapist plots, melodramatic and exaggerated acting, song and dance

sequences, and obstructive editing. Even so, as Mishra (2002) has pointed out, Bollywood cinema has used metaphysical traditions to explain or resolve historical moments. For example, *Achhut Kanya* (Rai & Osten, 1936) contextualizes the subaltern politics of untouchability; *Devdas* (Barua & Barua, 1935/Roy & Roy, 1955/Shah & Bhansali, 2002) and *Aag* (Kapoor & Kapoor, 1948) defines human desire within social constraints; *Mother India* (Khan & Khan, 1957) shows the mother as politically naïve, yet humanistic and powerful; *Sholay* (Sippy & Sippy, 1975) and *Deewar* (Rai & Chopra, 1975) depict rebellion against the status quo; *Hum Apake Hai Kaun* (Barjatia & Barjatia, 1994) features family values; *Fiza* (Guha & Mohamed, 2000) and *Mission Kashmir* (Chopra & Chopra, 2000) points out the vulnerability but simultaneously the unity of the Indian nation, while *Gadar* (Kein & Sharma, 2001) further feeds the crescendo of nationalistic ideology. Mehta's *Earth* (Masson, Mehta & Mehta, 1998), *Water* (Hamilton & Mehta, 2005), and *Fire* (Bedi, Mehta & Mehta, 1996) or Nair's *Monsoon Wedding* (Baron, Nair & Nair, 2001), Chopra's *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* and their like, attempt to imagine social space outside the nationalist, masculinist, and hetero-normative paradigms.

The most significant element of Bollywood cinema is the "star value" of its actors, which can be positioned as representative of different strains of Indian society. The most popular ones have been Prithviraj Kapoor, Raj Kapoor, Dev Anand, Dilip Kumar, Ashok Kumar, Rajesh Khanna, Amitava Bachchan, Sanjay Dutt, Amir Khan, and Shahrukh Khan. Raj Kapoor's character typically discreetly fights traditions of family and community; the roles played by Dev Anand challenge enemies of the State, and Dilip Kumar's character is usually featured in roles that pitch him against the limitations in human relationships. Amitava Bachchan (AB) is the biggest star ever in Indian cinema. His larger than life status can be attributed to the different issues regarding social and moral order or change in India the characters he has played have addressed. Among the female stars Madhubala, Nargis, Hema Malini, Madhuri Dixit, and Aishwarya Rai have been very popular.

What Amitava Bachchan is to acting, "melody queen" Lata Mangeskar is to singing in Bollywood. Others like K. R. Sehgal, Kishore Kumar, Mukesh, Muhammad Rafi, Udit Narayan, and Asha Bhosle have been prominent singers. In recent times, lyricist Javed Akhtar, musician Mani Ratnam, and directors Karan Johar, Deepa Mehta, and Gurinder Chadda have won accolades. Mehta's trilogy of *Earth*, *Water*, and *Fire* generated controversy, but their embodiments have highlighted social categories that remain unthinkable within the Hindu nationalist imaginary in India and abroad. Mehta's other successful film is *Bollywood-Hollywood* (Hamilton & Mehta, 2002), the subtitle of which reads "nothing is what appears to be" is at the intersection of two different sets of cultures and values—Indian and Canadian (read, western), and epitomizes the struggle between immigrant parents and second-generation youths. The father (Kulbhushan Kharbanda) in the film is disturbed by his daughter's (Lisa Ray) behavior and says, "you will be lost in Lake Ontario, bobbling without the lifejacket of tradition."

Traditions scuttle dreams, while bending rules allows one to fulfill them. Gurinder Chadha's *Bend It like Beckham* (Nayar, Chadha & Chadha, 2003) is the heart-warming tale of an eighteen-year-old Indian girl in the diaspora, who is caught in the cross-fire of strict family values and her passion for soccer. Chadha's *Bride and Prejudice* (Chadha, Nayar &

Chadha, 2005) visualizes life within transnational dynamics and allows the bride (Aishwarya Rai) to live, love, and finally shed her prejudice. Although Chadda's and Mehta's stories do not take place in India, Bollywood subsumes their albeit fictional experiences in the Indian diaspora.

There has been growing trend in Bollywood to shoot films in foreign locales such as Switzerland, Mauritius, New Zealand, Australia, North America, or Europe. Several recent films are based on Indians in these countries, e.g., *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge*, *Pardes* (Ghai & Ghai, 1997) *Kal Ho Naa Ho* (Hossain et al. & Advani, 2003), and others. *Dil Chahta Hai*. (Sidhwani & Akhtar, 2002) and *Krish* (Roshan & Roshan, 2006). Akash (Amir Khan) and Shalini (Preety Zeinta) in *Dil Chahta Hai* go to Sydney to take care of his father's business and to meet her uncle respectively. It is in Sydney that they fall in love. The supernatural power of *Krish* (Hritik Roshan) is realized in Singapore. Moreover, lack of discipline and abnormality are also seen in foreign locales as manifested in the recent *Kabhie Alvida Naa Kehna* (Johar & Johar, 2006), directed by Karan Johar, which is about Indian families in the United States.

## Take Two

The increasingly tight link between Bollywood cinema and the Indian diaspora is indicative of the growing number of Indians living in the diaspora as well as of the fact that many Indians have lived in the diaspora for a long time. In fact, Bollywood generates significant revenue from countries where people from India have made their new home. The demand of Bollywood films in the Middle East is ever growing, and then there are historical markets, such as Mauritius, Fiji, Guyana, Trinidad, and others where Bollywood films are screened around the year in several theaters. Bollywood cinema is also seen by non-Indians. The popularity of Raj Kapoor in Russia, Shahrukh Khan in the Middle East, and Amitava Bachchan worldwide is a case in point.

It is likely that transnational links and connectivity are behind Bollywood's success in several countries, and the recent attempts in such films to incorporate cultural traits usually unfamiliar to Indian masses are further evidence of this trend. Transnationalism begins with defying marked borders and has deterritorialization as its base. According to Appadurai (1996) deterritorialization is one of the central forces of the modern world, and it is this fertile ground in which money, commodities, and persons unendingly chase one another around the world. Bollywood cinema is a cultural product of these deterritorialization phenomena. For example, *Bride and Prejudice* begins with Balraj from London traveling with his sister Kiran and their American friend Darcy to attend a wedding at Amritsar (Punjab). Once there, they meet the daughters of Mr. and Mrs. Bakshi—Jaya, Lalitha, Maya, and Lucky. Events unfold in Amritsar, Goa, London, and Los Angeles, and culminate when Balraj and Darcy marry Jaya and Lalitha, respectively, in Amritsar through what Lalitha refers in the film as "global dating service."

The influence of transnational culture on Bollywood cinema has been profound. Keeping the ever increasing diaspora and global audience in mind, Bollywood has come

further inside the grip of corporate culture. The India that is now being shown through Bollywood cinema covers only the cosmopolitan class. Only few films highlight social issues, and the ones that address these issues do not become "hits" at the box-office. An exception to this scenario is *Rang De Basanti* (Mehra et al. & Mehra, 2006). In this film Indian youths call for revolution against the corrupt and indifferent "power bloc" as it is represented by the political and business elite.

Dasgupta (2006) in her essay entitled "The Hindi Commercial Cinema in the Days of Globalisation" sees a lack of direction and hopelessness in current Bollywood cinema suggesting that it is without an ideology or a concrete message in this age of globalization. Specifically, Dasgupta (2006) suggests that Bollywood cinema has "ceased to be a critique of the system and instead moved into being an adopter" (p. 254). According to her, the current stars as, e.g., Shahrukh Khan (compulsive winner), or Saif Ali Khan (confused and getting along with his confusion), are portrayed as happy go lucky actors with usual Bollywood melodrama and dance numbers. Exceptions to this scenario, as Dasgupta agrees, are Amir Khan's *Lagaan* (Khan & Gowariker, 2001), which is about the anti-hegemonic strategy of Indian peasants to fight British power and their repressive land-tax, *Mangal Pandey* (Bedi & Mehta, 2005), where Amir portrays the life story of a revolutionary martyr, and *Rang De Basanti*.

Most song and dance numbers in Bollywood cinema have become a remix of Indian and outside influence. These cultural elements are as popular with youths in India as with youths in the Indian diaspora. Clubs in Delhi or "desi" clubs in Toronto play the same song numbers to accommodate the "new" taste of Indian youths. Through such intercultural exchange, the superiority of nation over diaspora is no longer valid. Diaspora has become an alternative and intermediary at a time when the role of nation-state is being relegated under the neo-liberal, neo-right schemata (Raj, 2006). Nevertheless, Bollywood cinema still has profound impact on those in the diaspora, especially young people.

### Take Three

Cinematic narrative, argues Hall (2003) serves as the repertoire for identification by providing a reservoir of multiple narratives. The themes, contents, and style of Bollywood films provide for identification, mediation, and negotiation of Indian youth identity. Such films may be criticized for lack of proper editing, but these films contain stories within stories that meander with narrative detours. Thereby, they contain something for every age, sex, generation, class, and culture. Cinema is without doubt an urban art and with resurgent globalization and urbanization of Indian society, Bollywood cinema dwells within cosmopolitanism and global urban locales. Cinema can be seen as a leisure activity for all ages, but for youths it also offers opportunities for courtship, fantasy, and motivation. Urban culture represented through Bollywood cinema is shaping the consciousness and social relationships of Indian youths in India and in the diaspora. Fashion, food, gender roles, and

role models are conferred by the representation in such films.

Youths forge identities not with reference to real communities but instead according to taste communities or "lifestyle systems," in which consumption is practiced in the absence of community regulation. Therefore, youths' "lifestyles" can be seen as a vocabulary of self-expression with cultural regulation from Bollywood cinema. Indian youths in the diaspora follow the cultural prescriptions Bollywood cinema has established, as is evident in the young people's clothes, their wedding preparations, salutation style, and mating desire. The stars' attire, their relationships, and their actions have profound impact on Indian diaspora youths. The panoramic narrative appeals to the nostalgia for Indian culture, desire, and reality. In recent years, the depiction of diasporic identities and cultural production has been the language of Bollywood cinema (see Desai, 2004).

Among the Indian youths in the diaspora, *mehndi* (temporary henna tattoos), *bindis* (forehead decoration), *beedis* (tobacco in flavored leaves), *sarees* (long cloth wrapped around the body) are basically the effect of the influence of Bollywood cinema. However, there is a "style" to each of these (and other cultural artifacts) depending on how the Bollywood stars use them. It may be that Madhuri Dixit prefers the *saree* style, Aishwarya Rai likes the *bindi* design, or Rani Mukerjee is most comfortable in *ghagra* (lower . . . ) and *choli* (upper decorative body wear). These cultural artifacts and practices of Indian youths in the diaspora have caught the consciousness of popular culture in their respective host societies (see Sandhu, 2004).

In the diaspora, it is common to find a Nirmala, the homemaker in Bharati Mukerjee's diaspora novel *Jasmine* (1989), who rents and watches Hindi films on her VCR every evening at her Flushing, New York, apartment. Similarly, one comes across car stereos playing Hindi songs in places like South Hall (England) or dancing to Punjabi folk dance at a wedding in Durban. However, Bollywood cinema's influence has different effects on different social categories in the Indian diaspora depending on their respective multiaxial social locations.

To the first generation in the diaspora, homeland is pure like Ganga in *Pardes*, where Kishori Lal (Amrish Puri) expresses his emotions melodiously as "I love my India" over and over again. To a young girl like Simran (Kajol) in *Dilwale Dulhania Le Gayenge*, Indian culture, as reflected in her father extending his hand to prevent her from going with her lover, is constraining. During social events Bollywood songs (*sangeet*) would be played, the cultural space would be assumed heterosexual, and the participants would wear Indian attire, thus reviving ethnic culture. To the second generation in a ghetto, Bollywood is leisure as well as aspiration for change from the mundane everyday life, which is racist, sexist, homophobic, and oppressive.

I do not want to conclude this essay but rather allow readers to understand the connection between Bollywood cinema and the Indian diaspora. The goal of this brief essay is to encourage discussion, debate, and research across disciplines in the cultural site of cinema. Only when this aim is achieved can the final "take" of Bollywood cinema and the Indian diaspora be made.

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