

Indian Films in Global Context – Money or Creativity

Dr. Gurudutta P. Japee

Associate Professor
S.D. School of Commerce
Gujarat University
Ahmedabad

Abstract

‘Art does not go global because its creator is consciously working towards a worldwide impact.’ It ought to be straightforward to present a description of the ‘world’s biggest film industry’, but Indian film scholars find it difficult to come to terms with its diversity and seeming contradictions. The biggest single mistake that non-Indian commentators make is to assume that ‘Indian Film Industry’ is the same thing as Indian Cinema. It is not. The Indian film industry is always changing and as traditional cinemas close in the South and more multiplexes open, there may be a shift towards main stream Hindi films. But the South is building multiplexes too and it is worth noting that Hollywood distributors have started to release films in India dubbed into several languages. India's various popular cinemas are not all alike, and the differences among them are not restricted to language. They address different identities; the language communities sometimes transcend national boundaries, as when Tamil cinema is followed avidly in Malaysia. "Bollywood" is a recent, global appellation, but mainstream Hindi cinema tried to address national concerns even under colonial rule. When the English-spoken media in India clamour for a better quality of cinema, what they desire is a cinema that is forged in the Western tradition of storytelling and narrative.

Key words: Globalization, Indian Films, economy, social impact, global themes, audience in transition.

Introduction:

‘Art does not go global because its creator is consciously working towards a worldwide impact.’ It ought to be straightforward to present a description of the ‘world’s biggest film industry’, but even Indian film scholars find it difficult to come to terms with its diversity and seeming contradictions. Film is a reflection of society, both present and past. Sometimes it catches up with the society but sometimes it leads the society too. Films are communications about stories, which comes out from the society. It is all about society where it is today and where it has been in the past.

The films have gone global today because of its one of the most incredible qualities: - its movement. The other important reason is that the theatre and multiplexes have been coming up in many parts of the world. If one goes on YouTube, one can see the most talented young people all over the world who take a camera and start to film ideas they have and put them online. The internet has connected the world together. This has impacted Indian cinema also in a very big way. Bollywood aptly reflects the transformation of the Indian psyche from a post-colonial pastiche of politeness of the 1950s to the confident global Indian of present century. But the Indian films do not isolate themselves from the rest of the films across the globe. One of the biggest mistakes that non-Indian commentators (and some Indians) make is to assume that ‘Bollywood’ is the same thing as Indian Cinema. It isn’t. One way to think about Indian Cinema is to distinguish four categories (the boundaries between them are not fixed):

- Popular Hindi Cinema
- Regional cinemas
- ‘Art’ or ‘specialised’ cinema
- Diaspora cinema (films made by Indian filmmakers based overseas)

The Indian film industry is always changing and as traditional cinemas close in the South and more multiplexes open, there may be a shift towards

Bollywood (the term popularly given to Hindi Film Industry mostly concentrated in Mumbai and central India-). But the South is building multiplexes too and it is worth noting that Hollywood distributors have started to release films in India dubbed into several languages. India's various popular cinemas are not all alike, and the differences among them are not restricted to language. They address different identities; the language communities sometimes transcend national boundaries.

"Bollywood" is a recent, global appellation, but mainstream Hindi cinema tried to address national concerns even under colonial rule. When the English-spoken media in India clamor for a better quality of cinema, what they desire is a cinema that is forged in the Western tradition of storytelling and narrative. This paper aims to capture this hegemony of Hollywood merged with (Bollywood) Indian films and the resultant whole new genre of 'Indian Global Cinema'.

There are certain areas where this impact is highly visible:

Society and resultant social changes:

In the early days, Hindi films addressed people across the country, many of whom knew little Hindi. So they restricted their vocabulary to a handful of words - such as love, justice, good, bad, thief and kill. Consequently, understanding a Hindi film is extremely simple. These films allowed people across a vast territory to feel that they were part of one nation. They assisted in creating a sense of nationhood. These films also had a clear moral discourse, supporting honesty, true love and concern for the poor. By addressing public concerns, Hindi cinema made itself political, but never explicitly so. Rather, it couched political concerns in the language of myth. Its method was allegorical and covert.

As Jawed Akhtar, a renowned lyricist and script writer puts it, “Indian cinema is changing not because of outside pressure but because of inside pressure. Society is changing. Obviously, ideas change because of globalization, because of the huge middle class that is mostly first generation. [The change has been spurred by] Western influences and culture, industrialization, and the joint family system breaking up.

People are becoming more individualistic. That is reflected in cinema. In the new Millennium, the world came to terms with a cocky India bulging with a bare chest confidence. Sex was no longer a taboo and we had movies like ‘Murder’, ‘Khwahish’ and ‘Love, Sex Aur Dhokha’. On the other hand, masterpieces like ‘Company’ and ‘Satya’ were denoting the stronghold of underworld. If ‘Dil Chahta Hai’ ‘Zindagi Naa Milegi Dobara’ echoed self-assured, cool and keep smiling, live-today mantra of Indian youth; ‘Black’, ‘Corporate’, ‘Lage Raho MunnaBhai’ and ‘Black Friday’ vindicated that even Bollywood films can deal with the complex issues.

Films like ‘Vicky Donor’, ‘Dostana’, ‘Salaam Namaste’, ‘Cocktail’, ‘Kabhi Alvida Na Kehna’ have different stories. They discuss the taboo subjects of infertility, homosexuality, live in relationships and infidelity. These are the issues of our time and whether we like it or not, we have to address them.

Economics of Films and Globalization:

The globalization of the world economy has expanded the geographical boundaries of many industries including entertainment and people are exposed to more forms of entertainment globally. The increasing discretionary rise in income and changing lifestyle of the affluent urban middle class has divided the

audience further. Low budget films have provided scope for trying with different themes with minimal risk thus improving chance of striking a hit with audience.

Big budget films, burdened by a huge production cost, have to depend on a conventional winning formula for reaching to large homogeneous audience, but that is proving disastrous often.

Now, with globalization, a kind of consumerism has come into society. The middle class is celebrating its new affluence and multiplexes are a part of this. In the average multiplex, tickets are Rs. 350 to Rs. 500 (about US\$7 to US\$10). In a standalone theater in [the eastern state of] Bihar, the ticket is Rs. 50. It means that one person liking your film in a multiplex is good enough to cover 10 people in Bihar.

This also means you can make your film financially viable by attracting a small segment of society. That is what has been happening. With multiplexes, the game has changed because a film has become viable now even if it is appreciated or patronized by one segment of society. So the lowest common denominator is a segment of society, not the whole society.”

Socio-economic reality of India:

If you watch Indian cinema, you will realize that in the past 10-15 years, the protagonist doesn't come from the working class. In the 1950s, 1960s and the 1970s, the central character of a film was often a doctor, a lawyer, an engineer, a taxi driver, a welder, a rickshaw puller, a millworker, a farmer, an unemployed youth — all from the middle class. It's not so any more.

The hero lives in a big house [and] doesn't do anything at all. You are told that he's looking after his father's business or he's an architect. It's just information. It has nothing to do with the story. When he's kicked out, he is in Canada or

wherever. There is great variation, but one thing is missing and that is the sociopolitical reality of India and the socioeconomic reality of India. That's all forgotten.

Today's typical movie goer has an attitude that is very independent but also very self-centred. Because I am doing fine, I want to have a good time. Give me new stories. I have aspirations because, economically, I have come up. I don't want to believe that I enjoy those regular films because I have better taste. So give me a different kind of film, but don't tell me what is happening in a Bihar village because that will spoil my fun. Don't give me any reality which will spoil my mood. Give me variety, but be careful that it is palatable.

Blurred line of Morality and Social Ethics:

Very rarely does a mainstream film push the envelope. A film that's so-called mainstream and questions certain norms, certain notions of morality, and gets away with it opens doors. It means the common man, the majority of the people, have accepted it. But if you make an art film or a niche film, it is patronized by a very small, miniscule percentage of society.

Then you can't say that it will work everywhere or you have caused a change. But that also matters, because if you are changing two people, they may create further change. Unlike the past, no particular genre is determining the overall trend of romance, action or family drama. It has been replaced by movies with varied subjects. Quite a handful of films like "My brother Nikhil", "HazonKhwaishAisi", "Black" displayed a creative strength not so common for a typical commercial cinema.

A new pool of young directors, technicians, scriptwriters and musicians, though still in a minority, are trying to contribute to the fresh look on-screen. Unlike the

past, when image-conscious superstars played ‘nice guys’, today's actors are not averse to playing shades of grey with roles ranging from a common man to mafia don, psychotic killer, or a terrorist. One of the obvious reasons is the spectator's change in perception towards stardom. These have imparted a new dynamism in the creative aspects of filmmaking.

Use of English and Hinglish in the script and songs:

When you use English words or contemporary things, the song may start sounding like a comedy song or some kind of parody. But it did not. For example, in the film ‘Rock On’, the title song despite using phrases like “denim ka jacket” [denim jacket] and “Mary Jane kaek packet” [marijuana] and so on, the song remained a modern, contemporary, young person’s song.

Rise of Multiplex culture:

What has added to the viability of these niche films is the proliferation of multiplexes all over the country and especially in metros. Multiplexes with their smaller auditoriums provide such films an opportunity to be screened, which did not exist earlier. The average price per ticket in multiplexes is Rs. 100-150 against a national average of nearly Rs. 30.

That means it has far more flexibility to mix and match shows, films, timings and prices ensuring better returns even on average films. It draws crowd for its options under multiscreens, neat modern look. With seating capacities of 100-300 the viability of a single show improves for the exhibitor compared to showing it on large 600-1,000 seating halls.

TV Channels doubles as home theatres:

The unprecedented battle between television channels is helping in recovering the production costs effectively. In the last few years the TV companies have been paying more than ever before for small screen rights. TV with its high penetration is shaping the definition of home entertainment significantly and so the film industry, as the large Indian middle class is the biggest consumer for both of these entertainment sectors.

Added to that is the fact that the thriving international circuit is also keen on movies with middleclass themes. The satellite companies which are fighting their own battles are forking out anywhere between Rs. 5 lakh and Rs 30 lakh even for small budget films. So, many producers are hoping that even a moderate run in India combined with TV and the international circuit will take them into profit.

Impact of Technology :

Films today have gone through a complete paradigm shift in the use of technology in pre and post production and in all the other areas like marketing and publicity. Technologies such as 3D, Animation and CGI have changed the face of film all over the world. As 'Sound' revolutionized the films, these technologies have completely shifted the focus of film from just 'art' to 'science'. Technologies like 3D create an illusion and finally help us to escape, the most important goal of any film.

Other Factors:

There are other driving factors as well. There have been favorable Govt. policies like benefits for export industry including film, tax reduction for Multiplexes, rationalization of tax structure across the different phases from production to exhibition, etc. have augmented the growth. Again DVD, internet, TV etc. have been proving beneficial to marketing the products with much more capacity than the traditional forms.

The euphoria is on the air. The industry has gained a new momentum and so is its new consumer culture. “While the New wave of the 70s saw a rivalry between the art house and commercial cinema, today’s films seek new themes but within the paradigm of entertainment,” says Prithvi Nandy, producer of “Shabd”, “Jhankar Beats”. What is obvious is there is much glossy sophisticated look with these smart productions besides apparent novelty in themes.

Majority of the films deal on the social and individual problems on superficial level and hardly disturb with the feel-good factor of the easy-going audience. The new trend is not without a potential risk of being hackneyed over time like its big budget traditional counterpart.

Conclusion:

The power of films along with the synergetic impact of moving-image , sound, narrative and other elements- have created a powerful tool to communicate concepts, ideas and stories. All the major experiences- sensual, emotional, compositional and spatio-temporal are enhanced by films which no other medium of communication can achieve. It is an art, language, a medium for education, inspiration and so much more.

References:

- Barnouw, Eric and Krishnaswamy, S. Indian Film. New York: Columbia University Press (1963). Rev. edition. Oxford University Press. (1980)
- Dissanayake, Wimal (ed.) Melodrama and Asian Cinema. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. (1993)
- M. Madhava Prasad, ‘Ideology of the Hindi Film: A Historical Construction – ‘The Politics of Cultural Address in a “Transitional” Cinema’.
- R.Dwyer and C.Pinney (Ed.), ‘Pleasure and the Nation: History, Politics and Consumption of Public Culture in India’

Raymond, Bellour. "The Film We Accompany".

Rouge:www.rouge.com.au/3/film.html

Vasudevan, Ravi (ed). Making Meaning in Indian Cinema. New Delhi: Oxford University Press. (2002)