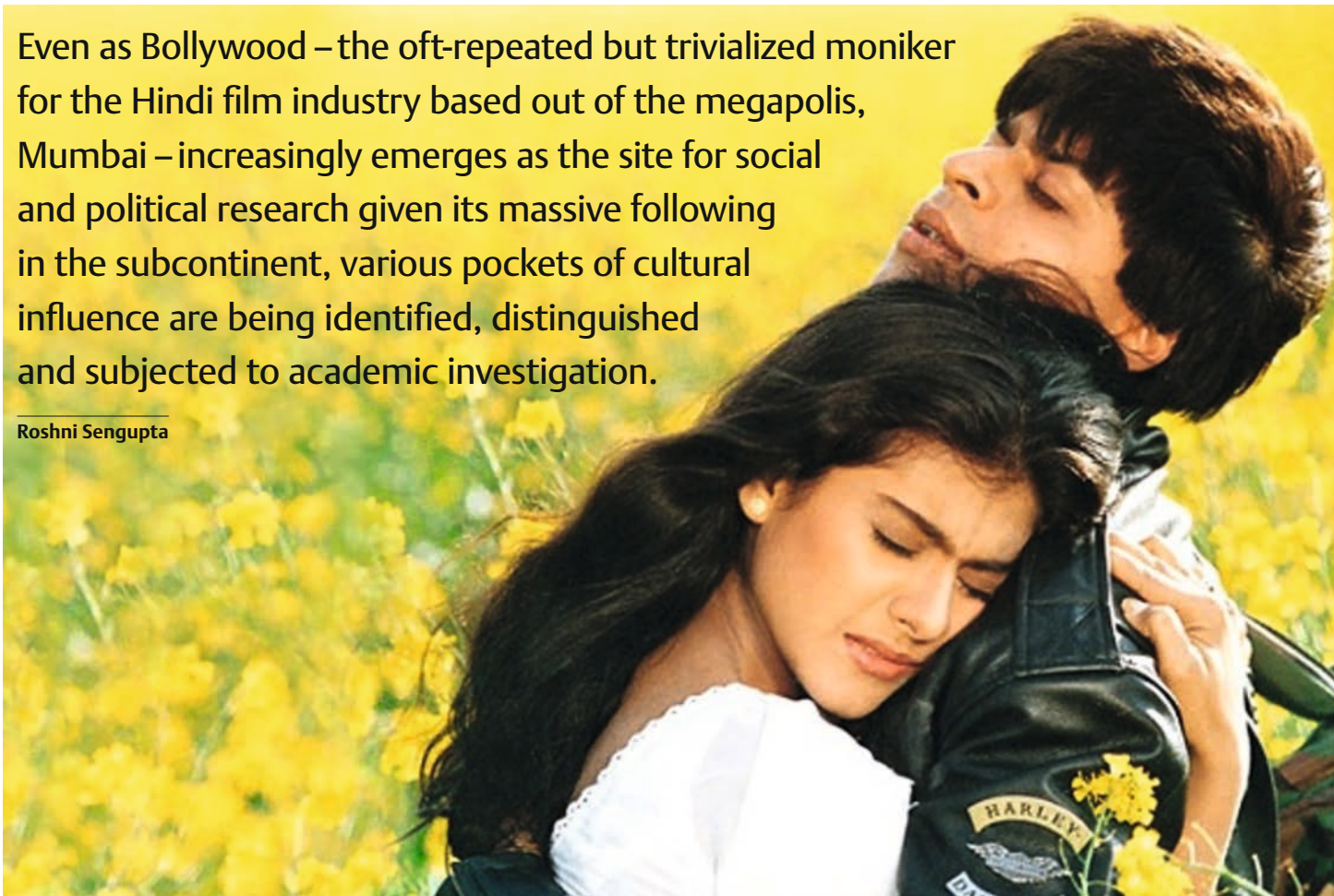


Bollywood dreams: far beyond Indian shores

Even as Bollywood – the oft-repeated but trivialized moniker for the Hindi film industry based out of the megapolis, Mumbai – increasingly emerges as the site for social and political research given its massive following in the subcontinent, various pockets of cultural influence are being identified, distinguished and subjected to academic investigation.

Roshni Sengupta



THAT THESE POCKETS EXIST outside the primary periphery of cultural influence makes the extent of the outreach fascinating indeed. For instance, the estimate of 50,000 viewers of Bollywood films in Austria and Switzerland is quite impressive if you consider that the group is local, and non-diasporic.¹ Further, the Korea India Film Association – boasting 14,000 members and counting – and the sporadic but important Bollywood-crazed individuals from countries as diverse as Germany, Finland and Japan are curious illustrations of an emerging pattern of the globalization of Bollywood.

The rapid movement of cultural flows across the world in an age of growing multi- and transcultural ideologies, and the advent and consolidation of a largely inter-connected and magnified media industry, appear to have been the harbingers of a perhaps unexpected cultural revolution through the visual idioms and motifs of the popular Hindi film. Through international film festivals, film tours and international premieres, co-productions, global film-based channels or even multi-plexes, the enhancement in the scope and reach of Bollywood cinema has occurred with tremendous rapidity in the past two decades. It's not, therefore, uncommon for a non-diasporic legion of German fans to welcome Shah Rukh Khan in Berlin, or Sufi worshippers in Nigeria to sing praises to Allah by adapting some famous Hindi film *qawwalis*.²

With the burgeoning Indian market attracting investors and world leaders alike, the blooming Bollywood story does not seem to be misplaced. What elicits specific interest, however, for scholarly investigation at least, remains the cultural ramifications of this visual expansion. Given the great pull of the overseas market, a completely new genre has emerged on the Bollywood landscape: NRI³ films or cinema that is tailor-made for Western audiences, as well as the growing Indian/South Asian diaspora worldwide – cinema that specializes in peddling traditional Indian values to the West and eliciting nostalgia among the diasporic communities. *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (Dir: Yash Chopra) started it all in 1995. With an overtly melodramatic storyline set in the United Kingdom, parts of Europe and Punjab in India, the tale of young romance between a spoilt, rich NRI boy played by Shahrukh Khan and a reticent British Punjabi girl, the film set the ball rolling for successors like *Dil Toh Pagal Hai* (1997, Dir: Yash Chopra), *Hum Dil De Chuke Sanam* (1999, Dir: Sanjay Leela Bhansali), *Kal Ho Na Ho* (2003, Dir: Karan Johar), among several others, promising rich dividends for Bollywood film producers and a ready stream of nostalgic visual material for the South Asian diaspora. Subsequently, visual extravaganzas like *Don* (2006, Dir: Farhan Akhtar) sought to bridge the gap between Western film genres and Bollywood by employing the expertise of technicians from Hollywood, resulting in the films garnering massive response among Western viewers. Somewhere between the revenue-happy movie mandarins of Mumbai and the nostalgic diasporas in the Western world, popular Hindi cinema started carving out a niche among young Western audiences providing Bollywood with an hitherto unforeseen visibility and legitimacy.

Transcultural audiences

Moving away from the West, the mainstreaming of Hindi-language cinema from India in diasporic bases such as South Africa fuels the assumption that the phenomenon of a

globalizing Bollywood is indeed a reality.⁴ The impact of Hindi films on 'crossover audiences' not only in the United Kingdom, United States, Canada, Australia and European nations with sizeable ethnic Indian/South Asian populations, but also in Africa and the Caribbean, further strengthens the argument in favour of a rapidly expanding visual and cultural language, which is being consumed with immense interest. Brian Larkin⁵ and Sudha Rajagopalan⁶ have written about the adoption of Indian (read: Hindi) film styles in Nigerian Hausa 'video films', the developing taste for Hindi-language cinema in post-Stalinist Soviet Russia, and the ever larger fandom for Bollywood cinema in Japan.

As a vehicle of transcultural movement, the Indian culture industry of which popular Hindi film remains the centrifuge, has succeeded in combining extensions and/or marginal reflections of this central element such as theatre, fashion, and media at large to create an assemblage that has relegated textual meanings and viewing pleasures to the background, while foregrounding forms of production and consumption derived from Bollywood visual matrices. These forms have been transfused into local cultures and histories to generate a new, hybridized cultural landscape. The corporatized Hindi film industry based in Mumbai has over time constructed a global cultural regime that brings these financial and cultural flows together, thereby positing the visual text as a by-product of a fusion of cultures – Indian and foreign. Raj Kapoor's fan following in Russia, therefore, is the stuff of legend, while Amitabh Bachchan and (surprisingly) Akshay Kumar remain top draws among Afghans, in Afghanistan and elsewhere.

Indonesia – a country with a meagre diasporic population of 120,000 ethnic South Asians – reports a steady increase in video rental parlours dishing out the latest Hindi films for a fawning audience. A video of a Jakarta traffic policeman dancing to the tune of *Chhaiyya Chhaiyya* went viral on the Internet making media pundits sit up and take notice of this new wave of interest in Bollywood cinema in South East Asia.

The deep inroads that popular Hindi cinema has made outside Indian shores became evident during a recent discussion with exchange students and young scholars from China, Indonesia, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. As the Chinese student expressed his ignorance of Indian screen idols like Amitabh Bachchan, the Indonesian student remarked, "It's rather strange that you do not know Amitabh Bachchan", and saying



Above: A still from the film *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge*, starring Shah Rukh Khan and Kajol.

Below: A Bollywood dance performance in Bristol, UK.

this she ticked off titles of Bachchan films she had watched. In another chat with a group from Gambia and Somalia, I was pleasantly surprised at the comparatively extensive knowledge they had of Bollywood films, and at their recall of names like Rajesh Khanna and Hema Malini.

These exchanges might not be conclusive but they certainly illustrate the spread of the Bollywood universe, and the roots of any further and comprehensive scholarship on the global outreach of popular Hindi cinema as a cultural product lie in these pools of interest that the visual material has been generating, especially since 1995. The liberalization regime of the early 1990s impacted functional and financial systems in the film industry, opening up more lucrative vistas for the dream merchants of Mumbai. Production houses like Yash Raj Films and Dharma Productions – currently two of the biggest enterprises in Bollywood – owe their initial success to the designer romance-NRI films they produced in the mid-to-late 1990s, which took the Indian diaspora, steeped in nostalgia for the homeland, by storm; not only establishing a sub-genre of films that catered specifically to Indians/South Asians living on faraway shores, but also exposing Indian idioms, tropes and motifs to the mainstream audience.

A song and dance

The Hindi film song could be considered as a cultural vehicle that has played a prominent role in this ongoing process of globalization of the Indian culture industry. When *Ghar aaja pardesi tera des bulaye re* [Come home O foreigner, your country calls you] played as the background score of *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge*, there was barely a dry eye. Or when *ghazal* maestro Pankaj Udhass sang *Chitthi ayi hai watan se chitthi ayi hai* [A letter has come from your homeland, a letter has come] in *Naam* (1985, Dir: Mahesh Bhatt), the impact was momentous. The enormous reach of the Hindi film song is inseparably linked to the global appeal of Bollywood films.

Nowhere is the impact of the Hindi film song more visible than in the emergence of *dangdut* music in Indonesia.⁷ The *dangdut* is a form of hybrid pop music popular with the working class and youth, which incorporates elements of Western pop, Indian film song and indigenous Malay tunes. In the Indonesian mediascape, therefore, Hindi film tunes perform a major cultural function, even shaping the birth of a local popular music genre. Subsequent to the airing of the Indian mythological serials like *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* on Indonesian television and the 'Kuch Kuch Hota Hai Fever' that gripped the country in 2001, the meteoric popularity of *dangdut* music elucidates the depth of the cultural mainstreaming of Bollywood in Indonesia. In 1996, Israel's national television network aired a couple of commercials in which characters were dancing to the tune of the old Hindi hit song *Mera Naam Chin Chin Chun* [My name is Chin Chin Chun], which apart from the fact that it exemplified the Israeli state's decision to eschew its own symbols in favour of appropriating the cultural motifs of the 'other', also solidified the wider acceptance of the popular Hindi film genre.

Aided by the song (and dance), Bollywood cinema has made its presence felt on the global platform, evolving as an alternative visual culture and at the same time assimilating itself in the local folk genres, thereby attaining legitimacy and acceptance. The hybridization of cultures remains one of the most significant contributions of popular Hindi films to global cultures. While it still could be described as fledgling, when compared to the reach and influence of Hollywood, celluloid dreams from Mumbai are sure to catch up soon.

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- NRI= non-resident Indian
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