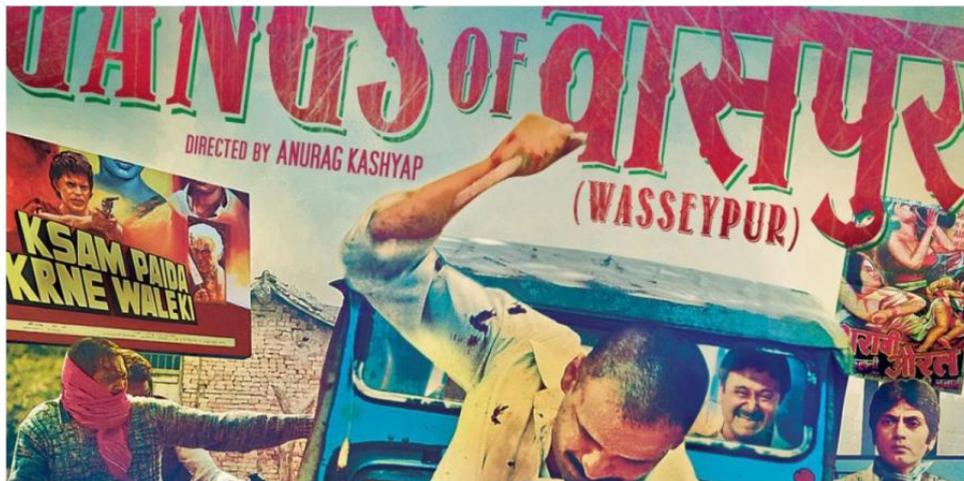


Article

Aysha Iqbal Viswamohan

## Popular Hindi Cinema: Cultural Capital and Soft Diplomacy



*'The French watch films in a theatre as if they were in a cathedral---with awe and reverence. In India, going to a movie is more like going on a picnic---the audience chats, sings, wanders out for a smoke.'* (Shedde 2006: 25)

Of all the arts in the global frame, it is probably cinema that has a big part in popular culture. In its history of 100 years, mainstream Hindi films have touched millions of people across the globe. That (in spite of, or perhaps because of), its glossy content, high melodramatic quotient, and song-and-dance routine, commercial Hindi films strike a chord with the NRIs settled in various parts of the world is a well-documented area. However, the fact that Hindi cinema and its popular stars have

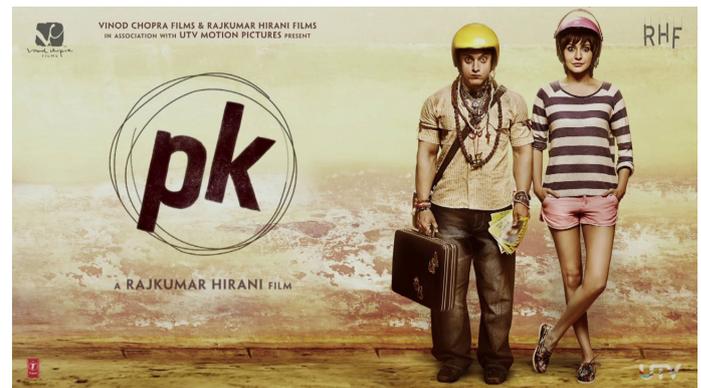
found an immediate connect with largely Asian as well as with Middle East populace, including from Saudi Arabia, UAE, Iran, Iraq, Fiji islands, Malaysia, and most South Asian countries, lends a fascinating dimension to the reading of the impact of Hindi cinema. Additionally, recent studies illustrate that mainstream Hindi films have also found resonance among the non-Asians, particularly in parts of Europe, USA, Australia, and New Zealand. This is an area that opens itself to further discussion.

Meenakshi Shedde's observation, at the start of this paper, is indicative of the carnivalesque nature of Indian cinema. Unlike the audience of art house European cinema, the consum-

ers of popular Hindi cinema treat cinema as ‘time-pass’ where they expect to be treated to three hours of high drama, family values, well-known stars, song-and-dance situations, glamorous clothes, and opulent sets. In other words, despite the acknowledged artistic brilliance and reasonable commercial successes of films such as *Ardh Satya* (Govind Nihalani, 1983), *Arth* (Mahesh Bhatt, 1983), *Jaane Bhi do Yaaron* (Kundan Shah, 1983), and more recently *Hyderabad Blues* (Nagesh Kukunoor, 1998), *Udaan* (Vikramaditya Motwane, 2009), *Gangs of Wasseypur* (Anurag Kashyap, 2012), *Ship of Theseus* (Anand Gandhi, 2012), and *Lunch Box* (Ritesh Batra, 2013), it is the commercial Hindi cinema that unites the audience, helping them foster a feeling of commune as they participate in the carnivals, from *Dharam-Veer* (Manmohan Desai, 1977) to *Amar Akbar Anthony* (Manmohan Desai, 1977); from *Maine Pyaar Kiya* (Sooraj Barjatya, 1989) to *Kuch Hota Hai* (Karan Johar, 1998); from *Kaho Na Pyaar Hai* (Rakesh Roshan, 2000) to *Kick* (Sajid Nadiadwala, 2014); and from *Disco Dancer* (B.Subhash, 1983) to *Dangal* (Nitesh Tiwari, 2016). Thus, for Daya

Asian diasporic constituency,’ (Thussu 2009: 97) popular Hindi cinema has decidedly come into its own as a soft power that demands more attention.

Cultural capital as a huge untapped territory is a fascinating area to study. As Pierre Bour-



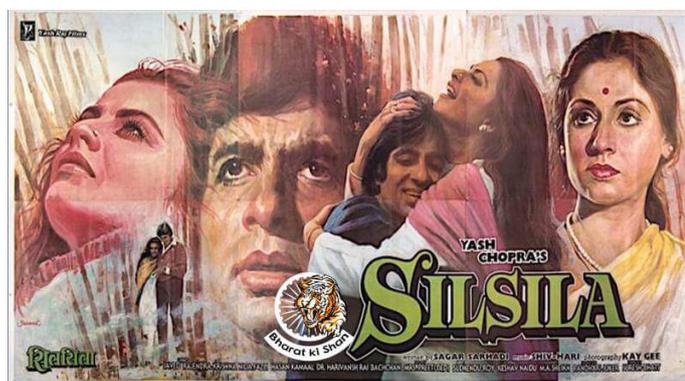
dieu explains, ‘The cultural capital objectified in material objects and media, such as writings, paintings, monuments, instruments, etc., is transmissible in its materiality.’ (Bourdieu, 1986) The ensuing sections discuss how popular Hindi cinema as cultural capital can be utilized for knowledge transfer and policy making in globalized times.

The study of “culture” needs to be focused on a non-reductionist and more democratic approaches. Rather than doing only ‘the best which has been thought and said’ (according to Matthew Arnold and FR Leavis), the culture project should insist on a more inclusive approach to do that has been thought or said. This brings us to another major element of popular culture, namely cinema. ‘Cinema, the world over, has played a major role in educating, informing and entertaining a wide audience in

areas where government outreach programmes have failed' (Chatterjee, 2012). This is all the more true in case of Hindi films. Popular cinema entertains, invigorates, and at times even provokes. A few cases in point are films such as *Border* (J.P. Dutta, 1997), *Refugee* (J. P. Dutta, 2000), *Lagaan* (Ashutosh Gowariker, 2001), *Gadar* (Anil Sharma, 2001) *Rang de Basanti* (Rakesh Mehra, 2006), *Lakshya* (Farhan Akhtar, 2004), *Veer Zaara* (Yash Chopra, 2004) and more recently *PK* (Rajkumar Hirani, 2014). Is there an element of knowledge transfer through the perceived representations in these films? Perhaps yes. This is cinema at its most escapist, taking strands of history and peppering them with age-old formulas: love story, song-and-dance, and melodrama. Still, for many of us it is only in representation that the world acquires meaning.

### Soft diplomacy– enhancing India's soft power?

David Malone analyzed some major features of Indian foreign policy in "Soft Power in



Indian Foreign Policy" (2011), emphasizing how the notion of soft power might be help-

fully related in matters of foreign policy by distinguishing between public diplomacy and soft power. Political scientists such as Joseph Nye have commented on Bollywood's power as a cultural institution that greatly enhances India's influence abroad. Nye notion of soft power is explained as opposed 'to the 'hard' economic and military power wielded by nation-states in the pursuit of their global interests' (Athique 2012 :114). Soft power, as theorised by Joseph Nye, is the ability of a nation to indirectly attain the outcome it desires through the use of soft resources, indirect means like co option rather than coercion. Soft power resources are those resources that produce attraction that could often lead to acquiescence, for example, democracy, human rights, religion, secularism. Soft power is particularly important in its role for broadening the understanding of some aspects of international relations as being non violent and non coercive. (However, Nye, being the first to theorise soft power, has been criticised for some drawbacks/ loopholes in the theory- there are difficulties in measuring soft power, obscurities in distinguishing soft and hard power, considering only the work of USA, etc).

As true of their Hollywood counterpart, Hindi film stars are the engines that drive the film industry. The songs they sing on-screen, the clothes they wear on and off-screen, their hair-style, make-up and sense of style is observed,

discussed and emulated by their admirers at



home and abroad. Film magazines, such as *Filmfare*, *Stardust* and *Cine Blitz*, glossies that function like the fan magazines in Hollywood, play a pivotal role in bringing stars closer to their fans. Alongside films, there is also the popularity of Hindi film songs, occasionally non-film songs and albums, that is fast becoming mainstream

Songs, and more recently dance, are also the key agents that have seen Bollywood spread not just throughout India but also across the world, spawning an array of syncretic sub-cultural forms globally...Bollywood dance, as well as bhangra, has become popular in clubs; and Bollywood and bhangra dance classes now reach well into non-South Asian population. In accessing the Western mainstream, Bollywood has become a high profile and high status global phenomenon. (Morcom 2011:157)

We are aware that several Indian artists have acquired global brand value, such as Amitabh Bachchan, Lata Mangeshkar, Shah Rukh Khan, Hrithik Roshan, and Aishwarya Rai,

many of who, through their various endorsements, deliver 'considerable cultural capital for companies targeting affluent Indian consumers.' (Athique 2012: 114) Bollywood shows abroad are another way of reaching out to fans. The practice of major film stars conducting live shows for international audiences started in 1981 in New York with Amitabh Bachchan's 'Live Tonite', where the superstar performed to his chartbuster songs from *Don* (Chandra Barot, 1978), *Mr Natwarlal* (Rakesh Kumar, 1979), *Silsila* (Yash Chopra, 1981), and *Laawaris* (Prakash Mehra, 1982) before a captivated audience. Other stars followed the phenomenal success of 'Live Tonite', most notably the new superstar on the horizon. Shahrukh Khan's world tour 'Temptation series' of international shows took the interaction between Bollywood film stars and the diaspora audiences to an unprecedented level. Further, 'The explosion of transnational television, international brands and global aspirations has produced a very different outlook on the cinema amongst these younger players. This is very much a post-satellite generation that is acutely aware of international trends in the cinema. Thus, Bollywood films are more outward-looking in their film style than the films made by the previous generation.' (Athique 2012:113)

This was also the time when, with increasing globalization, Hindi filmmakers started shoot-

ing an increasing number of films on foreign locales. Switzerland (and parts of Europe), Canada, Australia, New Zealand, UK, USA became the preferred destination for producers who attempted to present a slice of the global to Indian audiences, who were now accustomed to international exposure, a consequence of post liberalization. Post-90s, the romantic-cum-family films of Yash Chopra, and later Karan Johar and Sanjay Leela Bhansali, found a resonance with the audiences outside the Indian subcontinent. This period also witnessed the growth of daily soap operas most of which were targeted at women and families. Most of these programmes stemmed from the production house, Balaji Films where the stress was on extremely affluent joint families upholding traditions and sentiments. Thus

After all, the overseas territory has over the years become a crucial financial component of a film's total revenue and directors and producers also cater to an increasingly lucrative niche market that adds to the equally increasing urban yuppie audience in India. Exemplarity in this case is therefore also meant to please a particular audience, which will identify the NRI figure as a modern achiever. (Therwath, 2010)

Likewise, Charu Uppal elaborates on Hindi

popular culture and its power as an emotional capital, 'Diasporic communities fear loss of cultural values due to the psychological and physical distance between their children and the homeland. Media products from parent country (both movies and television shows) are used as bridges that both quench the nostalgic thirst and forge a consensus on 'family and life values' with the future generations. Indian diaspora remains privileged with regards to quantity and frequency of Indian media products at its disposal' (2011). Films such as *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun* (Sooraj Barjatya, 1994), *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jaayenge*, *Pardes* (Subhash Ghai, 1997), *Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gham* (2002), *Kal Ho Na Ho* (Karan Johar, 2003), and so on, reinforced the kinds of family values that the NRIs longed and are nostalgic for, and their phenomenal success created a template for a series of romantic, family dramas both in films and on television.

### **Hindi Films at International Film Festivals**

Hindi cinema's notable presence at international film festivals highlights India's cultural capital. Though festivals are the sites to cater to a niche audience, often they rely on marketing strategies that seek to construct a universal appeal. Over the past two decades, mainstream Hindi cinema has received substantial academic attention, popular stars are invited to attend prestigious events such as Cannes,

BAFTA and the Golden Globe Awards, major Hollywood actors attend IIFA, and international universities include mainstream Hindi films as part of their syllabus.

For independent filmmakers who rely mostly on festival outreach to promote their film, the Cannes event holds immense prospects, especially for creating a global buzz and securing alternate sources of funding. Interestingly, it is not just art house cinema such as *Masaan* (Neeraj Ghaywan, 2015) or *Newton* (Anil V. Masurkar, 2017), but also big-budget films with A-list star cast that are being showcased (and are benefiting) at Cannes, Tribeca, Toronto Film Festival, and Berlin Film Festival. The presence of *Gully Boy* (Zoya Akhtar, 2019) and *Sky is Pink* (Shonali Bose, 2019) point in a direction where an interaction of high brow with middle brow can result in quite satisfying results. Such attitudinal shifts are too many to ignore and lead us to conclude that popular Hindi cinema necessitates an investigation of how people and societies make culture from the commodities available by the culture industries, and provides scope for more rigorous study.

## Conclusion

I hark back to the previous assumption that cultures are generated from certain means of production, circulation and consumption of

meanings. It would be appropriate to mention Antonio Gramsci's notion of "hegemony" here, where the Italian thinker proposed a rethinking of popular culture. Popular culture, and popular cinema, is generally viewed as culture emerging from below, an authentic folk, working class, or the "voice" of the people. However, for Gramsci, popular culture is neither working class nor a culture simply imposed by the capitalist culture industries. Rather, it is "compromise equilibrium", a mix of both commercial and authentic. It is through this lens that we regard the position of popular Hindi cinema in globalized times.

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*Ms. Aysha Iqbal Viswamohan is Professor of Film Studies, Literature and Popular Culture in the Department of Humanities & Social Sciences, IIT Madras.*