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.

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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 a Hindi film in Indonesia suggests that there might be a significant audience for Hindi film across South Asia. Apart from India itself, among Western viewers, popular Hindi cinema started carving out a new, hybridized cultural landscape. The corporatized Hindi film industry based in Mumbai has over time constructed a global outreach of popular Hindi cinema as a cultural product with exchange students and young scholars from China, India, and the Caribbean, further strengthens the argument in favour of the Hindi film industry's potential to appeal to the diaspora.

With the burgeoning Indian market attracting investors and world leaders alike, the blossoming 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 that gripped the country in 2001, the meteoric popularity of designer romance-NRI films they produced in the mid-to-late 90s, 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 Chhaya pardey tero des bule 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 Parvin Udhas sang Chittte li hai watan or cherti ahi (A heart has come from your homeland, a heart beats in you) in Noor (1985, Dir: Mahesh Bhatt), the impact was momentous. The enormous reach of the Hindi film song is inseparably linked to the global audience.

Nowhere is the impact of the Hindi film song more visible than in the emergence of dangdut music in Indonesia. As a vehicle of transcultural movement, the Indian culture industry, opening up more lucrative vistas for the Hindi film industry, has over time constructed 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 positioning the visual text as a by-product of a fusion of cultures – Indian and foreign. Raj Kapoor's fan following in India, therefore, is the stuff of legend, while Amitabh Bachchan and (surprisingly) Akshay Kumar remain top draws among Hawaiians, in Afghanistan and elsewhere.

Global Bollywood: travels of Hindi song and dance

The deep inroads that popular Hindi cinema has made on faraway shores, but also exposing Indian idioms, tropes and motifs to the mainstream audience.

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 sizable 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 Larkin and Sudha Rajagopal5 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-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 films 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 regulated textual meanings and viewing pleasures to the background, while foregrounding forms of production and consumption derived from Bollywood visual matrices. These forms have been transposed 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 positioning the visual text as a by-product of a fusion of cultures – Indian and foreign. Raj Kapoor’s fan following in India, therefore, is the stuff of legend, while Amitabh Bachchan and (surprisingly) Akshay Kumar remain top draws among Hawaiians, in Afghanistan and elsewhere.

India – 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 faxing audience. A video of a Jakarta traffic policeman dancing to the tune of Chhaye Chhaye 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 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 their rather extensive knowledge of the art 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.

References

1. Ashwin Ahmad, April 2014, Mail Online India (http://tinyurl.com/z5w66x)


3. NRI - non-resident Indian


