

Bollywood and the Indian Diaspora

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Abstract

According to a UN report the Indian diaspora is the largest in the world with a population of about 25 million stretched across the globe and impacting the host nations in multiple ways - political, economic as well as social and cultural. By virtue of their skills and culture, a great number of individuals belonging to the Indian diaspora have been able to enhance the image of the country of their forefathers abroad, while at the same time adding value to their respective host countries. However for most of them, longing for the motherland they left behind has been strong. They quite often suffer from the nostalgia of family and friends, with the memories of yellow mustard fields and home-made food (chappatis, tarka dhall and sarson ka saag etc). Bollywood remains the only vehicle that has been able to articulate their emotional life. It has helped them remain connected with their cultural values thus making them feel 'Indian'. For them, Bollywood symbolises something other than mere entertainment. The Bollywood connect is in fact the simplest and easiest way to connect with their roots without actually having to travel to India. In the words of a well-known poet 'Woh tarse hue log hain...'; indeed it's an insatiable urge.

Bollywood, the Common Denominator of the Indian diaspora

Professor Reuben Gowricharn recounts his experience with a first generation Indian-American professor working in a university in Boston on how surprised he was when it dawned on him that they were connected by Bollywood, and that Bollywood was the common denominator of the Indian Diaspora. Gowricharn was attending an international congress in Prague on Indians-in-Diaspora. After he had presented his paper and was leaving the conference centre, he met with the Boston professor and they went together for a cup of coffee. At the café, the Indian-American professor started singing a song of the famous Bollywood playback singer, Mukesh, while at the same time drumming on the table top. Although Gowricharn was a third generation of Indian-indentured labourers, living in the Netherlands, he immediately recognized the melody as it was a song that was quite popular when he was a teenager.

The song made him realize that his Indian-American companion from Boston had something in common with him, that they originated more or less from the same culture of which the melody, the words, the language, and the singer were characteristic elements. Gowricharn felt a cultural kinship with this Indian-American from Boston not because of their academic and professional background, but because of that Bollywood song. He was convinced that Bollywood was much more than entertainment, entertainment and more entertainment; Bollywood was the common denominator of the Indian diaspora.

The first three Bollywood producers who realized that NRIs have an inherent need to connect with their motherland, its culture and traditions were Subhash Ghai, Aditya Chopra and Karan Johar in their respective blockbusters *Pardes* (1997), *Dilwale Dulhaniya Le Jayenge* (1995) and *Kal Ho Na Ho* (2003). These movies portray the Indian Diaspora as deeply attached to their cultural matrix.

Bollywood has become the heartbeat [*dil ki dharkan*] of the Indian heart [*Hindustani dil*]. Descendants of the diaspora often express their most heartfelt sentiments by singing Hindi songs of Mukesh, Lata Mangeshkar, and Mohammad Rafi among others; whenever you visit them in their adopted countries there is always ongoing Bollywood music playing at home while most of the time they are watching Bollywood movies on DVDs or satellite TV.

Pankaj Udhas's song *chitthi ayi hain ayi hain* - [I have received a letter], has always been extremely popular with the Indian diasporas. Wherever he sings that song to his audiences outside India most of them have their eyes filled with tears as they are overcome with nostalgia. This was prior to the explosion of Information Communication Technology (ICT), facsimile, long distance telephone calls, video calls, social media such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter and

Instagram. When the means of electronic communication did not exist, a letter took several weeks or even months to reach them; this was the only way they could get news of the beloved ones they had left back home.

Being the great granddaughter of an Indian indentured labourer born and bred in Mauritius which was a British colony until 1968, I as well as most of my friends who grew up with me, have been deeply impacted by Bollywood. In those days, communication with the country of our forefathers was very difficult; our only link with Mother India was Indian films. I literally grew up in Mauritius with Hindi movies and Hindi songs. Indian films thus became my identity.

Indian films were shown overseas from the earliest days of Indian cinema, especially in countries with a sizable population of Indian origin. In Mauritius, for example, in the five cinema halls created by an entrepreneur, Major A.I. Atchia whose father migrated to Mauritius from Surat, State of Gujarat, in the 1950s, 60s and 70s, one could see two Indian films at a cost of RS 1.25 (*premiere*), RS 0.75 cents (*second*) and RS 0.50 cents (*third class*). Increasingly, many non-Indian origin citizens also went to these shows.

Dr Michael Atchia, a well-known educator and writer, the grandson of Major A.I. Atchia who saw all these Hindi films at his grandfather's cinema halls between 1946 and 1956 (then aged 8 to 18) comments on how in his view, Indian films had a major influence on languages and cultural relations in Mauritius. People of Indian origin who before 1938 were downtrodden and poorly represented in Mauritian society, emerged on many fronts. Indian films gave them a boost of recognition, examples to follow; and they gave others of European and African origins a new knowledge of what India and Indian culture is. The dominance of song and dance in Indian films (even in the most dramatic ones) provided unforgettable examples of optimism and joy of life, contrasting so strongly with Hollywood and European films where shooting and violence often predominated.

Professor Ramesh Ramdoyal, a renowned Mauritian author and scholar, recounts the impact of the religious film *Bharat Milap* (1942) on the people of Indian origin in Mauritius when it was screened on the island. Never before had Port Louis, the capital of Mauritius, been flooded by such large crowds coming from all parts of the country, most of whom having to sleep raw on the footpaths of the capital and catch the first early buses out of town the following morning. The movie, directed by Vijay Bhatt, tells the story of the *Ramayana* and narrates the tribulations of Lord Ram when one of the three queens, Kaikei, influenced by her maid, Manthara, succeeds in coercing her husband, Dasaratha, the king of Ajodhya, to make good the two boons he had once granted her. Her first wish was that her son Bharat should succeed him as king; and the second one, to impose a 14-year exile on Lord Ram, son of his first queen, Kaushalya, and heir to

the throne. Many of the older cinegoers liked to think of themselves as exiles from the country of their birth, which they lovingly called *Bharat Mata*. The movie promotes virtues such as patience, endurance, loyalty and forgiveness embodied by Ram and struck a chord with the people of Indian origin at that time.

The Indian Diaspora Becoming Narratives of Bollywood Filmmakers

The Indian diaspora, spread over more than 70 countries across the globe, is known to have played an important role in promoting and propagating Bollywood films in their countries of adoption. Bollywood has always been an omnipresent cultural entity and has a significant impact on the Indian diasporas. However, this movie genre started from the 1990s, where the diaspora itself became narratives of filmmakers. The bond has since grown leaving scholars wondering whether the cinema for the NRIs connotes India.

Once, around the last quarter of the century or so, portrayed as incarnating a model of moral corruption and bad influence, the NRIs have now often been looked upon as role models affirming an international presence and being able to assert a distinct identity in a globalised world. For example, the film *Swadesh* (2004) is based on the true life story of an NRI couple, Ravi Kuchimanchi and Aravinda Pillalamarri, who returned to India and contributed meaningfully in the country's development. One of their very first contributions was the setting up of a pedal power generator to light schools in poor and remote villages where the underprivileged students lacked basic amenities.

The hero of *Swadesh*, the character of Mohan Bhargava, is a project manager at the National Agency for Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA). After spending more than a decade in the US, he decides to take two weeks' leave to go to India to look for Kaveri *amma* a woman who looked after him during his childhood. After witnessing the hardship of the people of the village of Charanpur, such as extreme poverty, illiteracy, caste discrimination, child marriage etc., he gives up his high-profile NASA career as a scientist and becomes a social worker in a remote village in India. With the help of the villagers, he successfully establishes a hydroelectric power plant using his own money, which solves their problem of electricity inconsistency and irregular power supplies.

Earlier, in the 1970s there were some films which portrayed the NRIs in more of a grey shade, such as *Purab aur Paschim* (1970), showing that for many of them, India has become a land of no return.

In the 18th and early 19th centuries there was a taboo in India about crossing the *kala pani* (black waters); the offence of crossing the sea is also known as '*Samudrolanghana*' or '*Sagarollanghana*'. According to this, the offence of undertaking a journey by sea causes the loss of *varna* (caste). Many of the upper

castes principally did not want to undertake this, because when they undertook such a journey, they were required to carry out certain rituals of purification before they could get back their original status and reintegrate in their society. There are also additional explanations which have been given regarding this prohibition, the main ones being that it prevents the Hindu traveller from performing his daily rituals and most importantly since the traveller is cut off from the rejuvenating waters of the holy river, Ganga, it entails the end of the reincarnation cycle.

People leaving India and crossing the *kala pani* were therefore frowned upon. History has witnessed many such instances such as in the case of Dadasaheb Phalke, father of the Indian cinema, who wanted to go overseas to acquire knowledge in filmmaking and other domains; and also in the case of Raja Ram Mohan Roy who faced severe opposition when he wanted to go to the Privy Council in Britain to ban the *sati* practice.

An Evening in Paris (1967) was among the very first films depicting NRIs and this time it was in the city of Paris which, since the 17th century, had been known as Europe's major centre of finance, commerce, fashion, cuisine, arts and culture. The film is about the character Deepa, a rich and beautiful young girl who flees her home in India and goes to Paris in search of true love which she could not find in her motherland as all her suitors were only after her money. There she pretends to be a poor Indian girl walking about the Eiffel Tower and other landmarks, barefooted and in Indian attire. During one of her outings in the romantic city, she meets the character Shyam, an NRI who normally calls himself Sam so as to sound more Western. For Sam, it is love at first sight. He starts following her everywhere to woo her. Finally both fall deeply in love with each other. Then comes the twist in the storyline when Deepa is kidnapped by gangsters and replaced by her lookalike, Suzy, a cabaret performer. As is usually the norm in Bollywood movies, the standard coincidence scenario surfaces with Suzy turning out to be Deepa's twin sister who was abducted in her childhood. Sharmila Tagore who plays both the role of Deepa, a 'sanskari' (imbibed with traditional values) girl from India and also Suzy, a casino entertainer from Paris, successfully manages to depict the contrasted Indian and Western stereotypes. This is the only cultural aspect which the film explores, the way a virtuous Indian girl should behave in a foreign country far away from home.

In *Purab aur Paschim* (1970), some NRIs in the movie are portrayed as wanton and dubious characters. Bharat (Manoj Kumar), a patriotic young man, is immediately identified by the name he bears, which means 'India', and whose father, a freedom fighter, was killed during the British Raj. Bharat leaves for UK to pursue higher studies and upon his arrival there, meets his father's college friend, Mr Sharma. Sharma's wife who has been brought up in England is completely anglicized and calls her husband 'darling'. Bharat is shocked as this can

be considered sacrilegious in conservative Hindu families. Out of respect the women never pronounce the name of their husbands (husbands are given the status of God (*Patiparmeswar*) and usually when addressing them, they will say 'souniye ji' or 'he ji sounte ho ji' [please listen to me] or when referring to them, they will use the name of their child which can be Babloo or Chintu and thus say *Babloo ki pitaji* [Babloo's father] or *Chintu ki papa* [the father of Chintu]. When they do not have a child yet, they will say *Laddoo ki bhaya* [Laddoo's brother] as Angoori does in the hilarious TV serial, *Bhabiji Ghar Par Hain?* [Is sister-in-law at home?]. In Indian culture, the highest ideals for a woman are purity, faithfulness and dedication to her husband and also the word *pativarta* which applies to the exemplary wife whose behaviour and feelings should only reflect her husband's state of mind.

Mr. Sharma's daughter Preeti (Saira Banu), a peroxide blonde is a copycat of her mother as far as her behaviour and lifestyle are concerned as she also drinks and smokes and on top of that wears miniskirts and revealing décollets. Sharma's son is a hippie and calls himself Orphan.

Manoj Kumar, who is also the director of the film, shows the NRIs in a very unfavourable light, having lost or renounced their original values and traditions. There are also a few who long for their motherland and its traditions but cannot go back for certain specific reasons just as Mr Sharma with his pile of old records of the 1950s which he cherishes, mainly of K. L. Saigal. One of the scenes shows Sharma reminiscing one night and listening to the unparalleled voice of K.C. Dey in the song, *Baba man ki aanken khol* [open the eyes of your heart O man] followed by K. L. Saigal's soulful song, *Babul Mora Naihar Chhooto Hi Jaye* [expressing the sorrow on leaving the parental home] from the film *Street Singer* (1938) which is indeed the agony of a bleeding heart. This scene depicts the kind of emotional feelings and disillusionments that Sharma is going through as he feels helpless. He is scolded by his wife because of K. L. Saigal and K.C. Dey, on who she has no clue nor is interested in knowing, for preventing her from getting her night's sleep. On the other side, he witnesses his teenage daughter arriving home late at night, completely drunk and puffing a cigarette, while Mrs Sharma in her pink skimpy nightie rushes out of her bedroom and abruptly switches off the record player.

Bharat decides to try and bring them back to their roots and in so doing, he and Preeti fall in love. They have the blessings from both sides of the family, but Preeti insists that she will only tie the knot with Bharat if he stays in Britain. Bharat agrees on the condition that Preeti visits India to learn more about the country. The deal is done and they all leave for India. After going through all the stages of culture shock that India presents where you either make or break, Preeti obtains redemption and gives up smoking, drinking and skimpy dresses to adopt the traditional Indian lifestyle. The film has a happy ending with Preeti deciding

to stay in India and the end sees everybody joining her in the temple performing the *aarathi*, *Om Jai Jagdish Hare*. *Purab aur Paschim* has also done its bit to instill pride in the local Indians against the perceived threat of Western culture.

Nikhil Advani's film *Kal Ho Naa Ho* (2003) is set in the heart of modern day New York, where Naina Kapoor, an MBA student, lives with her mother Jennifer Kapoor and her paternal grandmother Lajjo, her biological brother Shiv and her adopted sister Gia. Here the film depicts NRIs who are well settled in the US and do not talk about going back to India though they do follow most of the Indian rituals during weddings and other festivities and Lajjo and her friends usually sing *bhajjans* (devotional songs). Jennifer is struggling to make ends meet as the restaurant she owns with her partner Jaswinder, 'Jazz' Kapoor, is running at a loss. Being a staunch Christian she keeps believing that: '*Hamara Angel Ayega*' [our angel will come] to save us. Throughout the beginning of the film there is a pessimistic atmosphere mainly caused by the loss of the head of the family. Eventually, however, the 'angel' appears in the person of Aman Mathur, a cheerful and good-natured young man who moves in with his family next door to the Kapoors. Aman who is known for spreading positive vibes around soon wins over Naina's family and the first thing that he does is turning Jennifer's restaurant into a profit-making business as he injects new ideas in the venture. He changes the name from Cafe New York to Cafe New Delhi with an Indian menu and an Indian touch to the decor. Seeing all these exceptional qualities in the good-looking and romantic Aman, Naina falls in love with him but unfortunately the same cannot be reciprocated by Aman who is a terminally ill patient and has only a few months left to live. His dying confession to Rohit is that he really loves Naina and though he is allowing him to have her in this birth, he will ensure that she is all his in the next birth. As a matter of fact, most Hindus have a strong belief in reincarnation.

The watershed movie *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (1995) [The brave heart will take the bride] stands among the longest-running films in history and until recently was still playing with a packed hall in the wellknown Maratha Mandir in Mumbai almost two decades after its release. It is also one of the only three Hindi movies in the reference book *1001 Movies You Must See Before You Die*. The movie is about first-generation British Indians, Raj and Simran, who insist on upholding all Indian traditions, mainly respect for parents and chastity. Choudhury Baldev Singh, Simran's father, continues living in Britain for economic reasons but his heart is in Punjab (India), and as a rule all his sentences begin or end with the words like '*aapna desh*' [my country], '*meri hi mitti*' [my soil] and '*hamare desh ki mitti*' [our country's soil]. Lajjo, Baldev Singh's wife, is the typical Indian wife whose life revolves around daily chores, cooking, cleaning and looking after her family's wellbeing and above all following the guidelines set by the patriarch. In short, in many ways the film is not different

from many other Bollywood movies as it revolves around the family, their values and conservative ideas and problems arising when their offsprings want to choose their life partners. However, the movie succeeds in showing that Indian family values are migratory assets that can still be upheld no matter in which country one resides.

Baldev Singh had promised his friend who is still in Punjab that he would have Simran marry his son Kuljeet. One of the most regarded values in Hindu religion is what Lord Ram has taught them through the *Ramayana* - that one must always keep his promise, come what may [*Ragukhul reet sada chali aayi, pran jaye par vachan na jaye*] which can be freely translated as 'promises are more important than a person's life and they must be kept, even if he has to sacrifice his life.' Simran is told to get ready to go to Punjab to be married to Kuljeet. Though the idea does not appeal to her as she has always cherished her own dreams about her life partner. However, she understands that she has no choice but to comply with her father's will, but begs him to allow her to go with her friends on a tour around Europe before she gets married. Baldev Singh reluctantly gives his consent. Then enters Raj, whose father, Mr Malhotra is a very rich man and has spoiled his son because his mother died when he was a child. Raj is an 'all play no work kid', a spoilt brat, a '*rais baap ki bigadee aulad*' as they usually call it in Hindi. When Simran and her friends are on the train to start their journey, they come across Raj and his group who are also setting off on a trip on the same train. During the trip, Raj tries to woo Simran; this irritates her. However, when in Zurich, they both miss their train and are separated from their friends. One night, Simran gets drunk after imbibing a whole bottle of vodka and has no control over her, and Raj carries her to his room. On waking up, Simran wants to know where she is and who has changed her clothes. She starts suspecting Raj of having taken the liberty of having sex with her while she was unconscious. This is when Raj utters the following discourse to show that he knows what chastity and honour mean to Indian girls:

Main janta hun ki tum mere bare mein kya sochti ho. Tum samajhti ho ki main bahut hi ghatiya kism ka awara larka hun. Par main itna bhi gira hua nahi hun Simran. Main ek Hindustani hun aur main janta hun ki ek Hindustani larki ki izzat kya hoti hai. Main sapne mein bhi tumhare sath aisi harkat nahi kar sakta [I know what you think about me. You think that I am a worthless boy but I am not that bad. Simran, I am an Indian and I know what her honour means to an Indian girl. Even in my dreams I could not do something like that to you.]

This epic tale of love and drama then continues in Punjab amidst the yellow mustard fields where Raj follows Simran and her family who have set off

for her wedding. Fighting against all odds, confronting an outraged Baldev Singh and even getting badly thrashed by Kuljeet and his friends, he finally gets the approval of Baldev Singh who allows his daughter to follow Raj on the train while letting go of her hand which he was holding tightly and adding: '*Jaa Simran, jaa. Jeele apni zindagi.*' [Go Simran and live your life.]

Indeed, Bollywood has most of the time encouraged young lovers to follow their heart, but not at the expense of leaving heart-broken parents crying and mourning for the rest of their lives. The lovers have to plead rightfulness of their cause in order to win over their parents who for years have been wishing, hoping and praying for their children to find the right life-partner and get married.

In the case of the movie *Salaam Namaste* (2005), the romantic comedy produced by Yash Chopra and his son Aditya under the Yash Raj film banner, the storyline is quite different as it is neither about second nor first generations of NRIs but about two young Indians, Nick Arora and Amber Malhotra who supposedly left India for Melbourne, for studies. Amber is on a one-year exchange programme. The film has for backdrop neither the usual Bollywood West, UK nor USA, but the eastern side of the world, Melbourne, which is considered to be the most liveable city in the world and recognised for its healthcare, education and infrastructure. The city is superbly pictured in this movie.

Amber who has taken a job as a radio jockey in the local radio station to subsidise her studies and living costs in Australia had booked Nick for an interview on her programme for '*Salaam Namaste*'. However, due to his bad habit of oversleeping, Nick misses the interview and an irritated Amber insults him on air. Amber arranges for another interview with unfortunately the same result. Nick does not make his appearance as he is sound asleep, and an angered Amber insults him again on air. Finally both Nick and Amber meet at a wedding but they have no idea who each other is, as Nick introduces himself as an architect and Amber introduces herself as a student of medicine. However, they feel attracted to each other and finally also discover each other's real identity. Nick gives the long awaited interview to Amber for her radio programme and publicly states that he is in love with her. They both fall in love and this is where the film introduces the idea of live-in relationships and premarital sexual relations, pregnancy and children born out of wedlock. There is also the debate about abortion when Nick asks Amber to terminate her pregnancy. Many people in India disapprove of this kind of relationship being portrayed in the film which gives preconceived ideas of *Indianness* and *Westernness* and assumptions that women in India are different from diasporic Indian women. The film also reveals a clear-cut distinction between the traditional values of India and the liberal thinking of the West. On the other hand, there were others who believed that Bollywood films should more often address the issues of sex, homosexuality, and other taboo subjects within India in an effort to educate people, mainly the masses of

the country.

Author Sri Rao, a renowned screenwriter of Bollywood, describes his early experience with Bollywood films in his small Indian-immigrant community in the US: 'A lot of us second-generation Indian-Americans look at our culture through the lens of food and film. These movies are meant more for us than for our cousins who grew up in India'. In his book *Bollywood Kitchen: Home-Cooked Indian Meals Paired with Unforgettable Bollywood Films*, the author, Sri Rao, recalls how his parents, together with others in the Indian-immigrant community, would go to great lengths to be able to watch Bollywood films. They used to collect film reel canisters packed in huge wooden boxes at the local Greyhound station and made arrangements to watch these films which had travelled long distances, in the community's college auditorium.

The Indian diaspora has always been eager to watch Indian movies because of their emotional relationship with them. Bollywood movies for them are far more than mere entertainment, as they take them back to India and allow them to soothe their nostalgia while feeling surrounded by their own people.

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