



WESTERN REFLECTIONS IN THE INDIAN MIRRORS: THE GREAT INDIAN CINEMA

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Abstract

Indian Cinema has been catering to the Indian and the Western audiences by experimenting with its themes and forms in ways more than one. With the improving technology and the new-generation audiences, the challenges of the Indian Film Industry are multifarious. This paper delves into the History/evolution of Indian Cinema, the influences from the West, Shakespearean adaptations and also briefly touches upon how the Indian Films have influenced the Western Cinema.

Keywords: Hollywood, Neo-realism, Film adaptations, Indianization of Shakespeare

Introduction

Indian Cinema has almost reached its pinnacle of success in both form and content. In order to captivate the global audience, Indian Cinema is trying its best with all possible resources at hand to experiment with the themes/plots/sequences etc. The appetites of Indian and international audiences differ, and catering to such disparate appetites is a difficulty that the film industry must overcome. Because of the latest technologies, the art of filmmaking is undergoing a transformation. This, in turn, forces the Directors and his teams to experiment with newer themes. In Western cinema, the unseen, unwritten charters of human lives or galaxies are examined in visible ways, and Indian cinema is ebbing to follow suit. This paper delineates the History/evolution of Indian Cinema, the influences from the West, Shakespearean influences and the influences of Indian cinema on the Western Cinema.

From Hollywood to the Indian Cinema

A brief examination of the oldest Indian cinemas reveals that the first Indian film was clearly influenced by Western cinema. *The Life and Passion of Jesus Christ*, which was first released in 1902 by France's Pathé cinema studio, was afterwards enlarged and improvised upon for the next three years by many filmmakers before finally being completed in 1905. The original film *The Life and Passion of Jesus Christ* ran for around thirty minutes, and its expanded version ran for about 45 minutes, at a time when nearly all films were limited to one reel or fewer (i.e., no longer than ten or fifteen minutes). Because the film industry was still in its infancy at the time, this achievement was regarded as amazing.

Pathé's characteristic hand-coloring stencil process, in which selected specific objects — an angel's wings or a soldier's robe — were hand-dyed in each frame and print, is also notable in *The Life and Passion*. One cannot ignore the fact that during those times, it used to be black and white movies and colors had come much later. Since the film is based on the Catholic tradition, few scenes were remarkably portrayed like, when Veronica wipes the face of Christ, she finds the Holy Face on the cloth. Few supernatural events were also depicted very convincingly, like the miraculous catch of fishes and the walk on water.

The Indian scenario was occupied by Dadasaheb Phalke, the famous director-producer-screen writer, who had seen this film and wanted to portray Indian mythology in films. His debut film, *Raja Harishchandra*, a silent film, is supposed to have been the first Indian movie in 1913, and is now known as India's first full-length feature film. He experimented with photography, processing, and printing. He also learnt several techniques like the three-colour blockmaking, photolitho transfers, and darkroom printing techniques which were used in his films.

During Phalke's times, usually called "early cinema" certain unique features were followed. One was that those films used this concept of frontality, which means, addressing audience straight away. The silent films during that time used a lot of tableau, which meant several people in a single shot. *Raja Harishchandra* captured all those unique features. Phalke realized later that the Indian film makers needed to find their own way in Indian cinema. So, swadeshi cinema was the order of the day because Phalke believed that the Indians should not blindly follow the western cinema. He believed in applying the western cinematic culture into the Indian frame. For instance, he wanted to use Indian mythology so that the content

will be Indian. Therefore, the content will be traditional and technique-wise it would be modern; thus, a mixture of tradition and the modern in Indian Cinema.

After Phalke, several documentary movies were shot in India. However, those were random movies done by the colonial housewives. They were basically jobless in India, so they started making movies based on some Indian themes that were exotic to them. In 1924, Dhiren Ganguly's social film *Vilasi Fire* gave impetus to having social themes in Indian Cinemas. Later the melodramatic genre was explored in the 1930s and then back to the mythological and devotional themes.

Thus, we can see a certain circle of events here. The content was not western; the medium and the technique were western but themes/genres were Indian.

Indian Cinematograph Committee was set up for the first time. They wanted to find out why India is a fertile land for western cinema. A couple of other questions that arises here are: Why American cinema is more famous than the Indian ones? How did the Indian audience get to see American movies? One will be shocked to know that during those times too, Western films were smuggled and shown in Indian theatres; especially the American dramas. Nevertheless, this committee met in Chennai, Mumbai and Lahore to examine the standard of films. There were allegations about the quality of the films watched. And thus, the evolution of the present day CBFC, Central Board of Film Certification. Silent cinemas like the ones by Charlie Chaplin were also famous in India, followed by the fight cinemas like the order of Bruce Lee and Jackie Chan.

This suggests that during those days, the technicalities of Cinema Making were very significant. The story, of course, was equally important; but more importance was given to the production and the work behind the camera.

Evolution of Indian Cinema

Indian Cinemas during the 1900s focused on the Nationalistic fervor and portrayed the Indian mind and nature. Songs were incorporated (Western cinema didn't have songs). Melodrama as a genre was developed in India. From 1920s to the 60s, western cinematic movement was basically the Classical Hollywood. It was Melodramatic in its approach. Boy meets girl; several complications and resolutions. During the late 19th century, fiction romance became an inevitable component. This influence reached India as well. And all later innovations/developments in the field of movie making reached India in due course.

The Neo-realism movement of the 1950s which was basically an Italian Movement, could be seen in Satyajit Ray's *PatherPanchali*. Serious cinema began to emerge thereafter. The true definition of the Art form came into existence then. The Aesthetic nature of cinema was emerging in the Indian film industry. The unique features of the Neo-realism Movement were non-trained actors, actual locations and bleak world view (mostly due to the 2 World Wars). Satyajit Ray captured this Italian Movement and brought it to Indian Cinema. Mrinal Sen's films had these leftist leanings and he was considered a Marxist. Mrinal Sen and Satyajit Ray were recognized for their films in Cannes, Berlin and Venice Film Festivals.

Adoor Gopalakrishnan pioneered the New Wave in Malayalam Cinema around the same time. His movies raised the social concerns and the communist tendencies of Kerala. How can one forget *ShyamBenegal* here? In the 1970s, New Cinema, or Middle Cinema or Alternate Cinema discussed social concerns in his movies like *Bhumika* and *Manthan*.

Therefore, we can assume that most of these directors only borrowed the cinematic medium from the West and experimented on the Indian themes. Let us look at one Indian movie produced in the 1970s that had borrowed the theme/content/music from the Western Cinema. *Qurban* directed by Firoz Khan was influenced by the West of 1980s. The music was largely appreciated. It had the Western quality in it. One of the songs *aapjaisa koi meri* is still a very popular song. Biddu was the music director and the Pakistani singer Nazia Hassan is the singer. R.D. Burman also brought a lot of Western music to India. ABBA, for instance, could be heard in Indian cinema music.

The 1972 film adaptation of the novel by Mario Puzo, *The Godfather* was released with Marlon Brando as Don Vito Corleone and Al Pacino as Michael Corleone, directed by Francis Ford Coppola. The movie was a trilogy. Apparently this movie was adapted even in Malayalam in 1991 as a comedy-drama film and was directed by Siddique Lal. In 2004, Priyadarshan remade this film in Hindi and it was called *Hulchul*. *Nayagan*, the Tamil movie directed by Mani Ratnam is a Tamil version of the Gangster genre of movies. Kamal Hassan plays the lead role here. The songs of *Nayagan* were an instant hit. *Sarkar* by Ram Gopal Varma is also on similar lines to *The Godfather*. Amitabh Bachchan and his son Abhishek Bachchan acted in this film.

Thus, we understand that though the earlier cinema depended on the West for its themes, the present-day cinema is different. Indigenous themes have taken the place of Western themes now.

Shakespeare and his Drama: The Indianization of Shakespeare

Consider the story maker of all time, Shakespeare. The themes of his plays have been adapted in Indian Cinema for several years now. Vishal Bhardwaj's *Maqbool* (2004) adapted from *Macbeth*, *Omkara* (2006) based on *Othello*, *Haider* (2014) based on *Hamlet*, Manish Tiwari's *Issaq* (2012), based on *Romeo and Juliet* to name a few. Malayalam filmmaker V.K. Prakash's *Karamyogi* (2012) was an adaptation of *Hamlet*. These films achieved great success in India and Shakespeare's plays have been proved contemporary like never before. Shakespeare is Orientalized because he has been carried across languages and cultures in a such way that his motifs have become universal.

Omkara, directed by Vishal Bharadwaj is an adaptation of Shakespeare's *Othello*. It may not exactly surprise us to note that the characters in Bharadwaj's movie share the same first letters as their counterparts in the Shakespearean play – Omkara (*Othello*), Ishwar (*Iago*), Dolly (*Desdemona*), and so on. Saif Ali Khan, has always appeared in movies in characteristic chocolate-boy looks, fashionable clothes, and the image of a leading man, however, he has given a controlled, superb performance as a power-hungry, illiterate, rustic goon with a wonderful sense of humour in *Omkara*. Despite his unkempt looks, jarring language, and limp, Langda is made a lovable villain by Saif Ali Khan's performance. He acts marvelously even when he is not delivering dialogues. The audience sympathizes with him when he does not get the lieutenant post. Konkana Sen, who plays Langda's wife, Indu, seems to live the role. She slips into the character effortlessly. She is a versatile actor. After all, she has acting in her blood. The scenes of *Omkara* are very realistic. Though Omkara and Dolly are truly in love, he is stung by the parting words of her bitter father, which echo Shakespeare's "Look to her, Moor, if thou hast eyes to see: She has deceived her father, and may thee" (*Othello*, I, iii). This line is being said to *Othello* by *Desdemona*'s father when he feels ashamed of his daughter's act of running away with *Othello*. His words can be taken as a curse and a forewarning. If the daughter could deceive the father, she could do the same to *Othello* some day later. The words are important to the play and the movie as they ring in *Othello*'s and *Omkara*'s ears later, "Joh Ladki Apne Baap Ko Thug Sakti Hai ... Woh Kisi Aur Ki Sagi Kya Hogi."

Thus, Shakespeare's influence is pervasive worldwide.

Indian Films Influencing the Western Cinema

Indian films have indeed influenced the West in terms of their fashion, for instance, Lady Gaga and Uma Thurman wear Indian brands. Remember *Slumdog Millionaire*? This movie by Danny Boyle which won the Oscars was a British Director's take on Indian Culture and Bollywood music was appreciated globally, to the extent that the Pop Band Pussycat Dolls singer Nicole Scherzinger adapted the song *Jai Ho* and A.R. Rehman's composition topped international music charts. And then, we had Pop musicians like Akon and Kylie Minogue taking interest in collaborating with Bollywood's talents.

Deewaar, the 1975 Yash Raj movie has had an impact on Indian cinema as well as International cinema. It had several South Indian cinema remakes, including the Telugu remake *Magaadu* (1976), the Tamil remake *Thee* (1981), and the Malayalam film *NathiMuthalNathiVare* (1983). Shaw Brothers Studio also produced a Hong Kong cinema remake, *The Brothers* (1979), a film that later played a key role in the creation of Hong Kong's heroic bloodshed films, a genre that had a significant influence on the 1980s HongKong Action Cinema and later the 1990s Hollywood action films. *Deewaar* also had a Bollywood remake, *Aatish: Feel the Fire* (1994), and inspired Danny Boyle's *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008) too. The dialogue "mere paas maa hai" comes from this movie.

I would like to quote Shakuntala Rao's article "I need an Indian Touch: Glocalization and Bollywood Films" which appeared in the Journal of International and Intercultural Communication in 2010 here. The word "glocalization" is used to account for both the global and the local not as opposites, but a mutually formative, complementary competitors feeding off each other as they struggle for existence. This concept helps in recognition of transplantation of ideas/objects/images/performances which aid in a cultural translation.

Conclusion

The Indian Cinema has reached the golden age. This is an obvious result of the rapid development in filmmaking techniques along with other peripheral advances – the huge leap in the development of the communication system in the internet age etc., in short, the phenomena we call globalization. Such rapid growth, along with the aid of certain other socio-cultural and economic factors, has almost completely changed the viewing practice of the urban audience. Producers are now more willing to experiment with both content and

form of cinema and break free from the boundaries of the traditional storytelling modes and preferences. Also, Bollywood today readily finds at its disposal a widespread global audience, enjoys simultaneous international releases and higher ticket prices. Bollywood certainly enjoys a larger viewership than any other film industry in the world. Remember Shakespeare's famous "all the world's a stage"? Indian cinema has certainly proved this statement. In the sub-continental, as well as in a global context, Indian films can be seen as works that string together disparate aspects of a global trans-cultural history of art, across mediums of expression, adapting the English master in a foreign tongue and still managing to keep both cultural elements intact with all their nuances and flavor.

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