

From *karwa chauth* to active Hindutva: Bollywood and the makings of a Hindu 'designer' diaspora

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Mammoth and growing, the extant reach of Bollywood cinema into diasporic cultures has emerged as a prime example of a rapidly transforming mediascape, informed hitherto by American popular cultural forms, now outdone in certain parts of the cultural universe by Hindi films. The liberalization regime of the early 1990s impacted functional and financial systems in the Bombay 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, quite literally, 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.

From shooting films in foreign locales in the 1980s to the opening up of the global market in the 1990s to the immense popularity of *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (1995) and *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* (1998) not only among diasporic South Asians but also a primarily Western audience, the tailor-making of what has come to be known as NRI films points towards an implicitly influential target group – the diaspora. Filmic melodramas have peddled overtly conservative content informed by the majoritarian discourse to an eager diasporic audience, hence feeding ultra-nationalist, very often fundamentalist tendencies. The paper would attempt to argue that the 'Hindutvization' of the diaspora – particularly visible on social media platforms – remains an epistemic response to and result of Bollywood cinematic content to which they have been continuously exposed. Based on visual analysis of selected Bollywood films such as *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun* (1994), *Pardes* (1997), *Hum Saath Saath Hain* (1999) and so on, the paper deliberates on the creation of the Hindu nationalist 'designer' diaspora.

The rapid movement of cultural flows across the world in an age of growing multi-and- transcultural ideologies and the consolidation of a largely inter-connected and magnified media industry which includes social and New Media networks 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 premiers, co-productions, global film-based channels or even multiplexes, 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 Prophet Mohammad by adapting some famous Hindi film *qawwalis*¹.

Commentators have ritually designated this phenomenon as the exertion of "soft power" by India, not only over its South Asian neighbours, but further out over the rest of the world. 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

¹ Larkin, B. (2005) Bandiri music, globalization and urban experience in Nigeria. In R. Kaur and A. Sinha (eds.) *Bollywood: popular Indian cinema through a transnational lens*. New Delhi: Sage.

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 – NRI 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 Dulhaniya Le Jayenge* (Dir: Yash Chopra) started it all in 1995.

With an overtly melodramatic storyline set in United Kingdom, parts of Europe and Punjab in India, the tale of young romance between a spoiled, rich NRI boy played by Shahrukh Khan and a reticent British Punjabi girl (Kajol), the film set the ball rolling for successors like *Dil Toh Pagal Hai* (1997), *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai*, *Hum Dil De Chuke Sanam* (1999), *Taal* (1999), *Kal Ho Na Ho* (2003), 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) and its sequel *Don 2* (2011) sought to bridge the gap between Western film genres and Bollywood by combining 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.

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 reality². 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, particularly South 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 (2002, 2003)³ and Sudha Rajagopalan (2005)⁴ 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, respectively.

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 which 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 which 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

² Ebrahim, H (2009) From ghetto to mainstream: Bollywood in South Africa. *Scrutiny* 2 13:2: 63-76, DOI: 10.1080/18125440802486035.

³ Larkin, B (2002) Indian films and Nigerian lovers: media and the creation of parallel modernities”. In J Xavier and R Rosaldo (eds) *The anthropology of globalization: a reader*. Malden: Blackwell Publishing.

Larkin, B (2003) Itineraries of Indian cinema: African videos, Bollywood, and global media. In E Shohat and R Stam (eds) *Multiculturalism, postcoloniality, and transnational media*. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP.

⁴ Rajagopalan, S (2005) *A taste for Indian films: negotiating cultural boundaries in post-Stalinist Soviet society*. PhD thesis. Indiana University.

the stuff of legend while Amitabh Bachchan and (surprisingly!) Akshay Kumar remain top draws among Afghans, in Afghanistan and elsewhere.

For Ashish Rajadhyaksha, Bollywood becomes more 'a producer of cultural commodities of which films is only one, and therefore the role that film plays is a key sub-set in its overall self-definition'⁵. Vijay Mishra views Bollywood through its relationship with Indian modernity, including its diaspora, which in the realm of culture is increasingly represented through the audio-visual idioms of Bollywood cinema⁶. Raminder Kaur and Ajay Sinha use the representative term 'Bollyworld' to outline its provenance, orientation and outreach which can be taken in at least three senses – to allude to the increasingly hybrid constituency of Bollywood yet also and index of variant senses of Indian identity; the global distribution of Bollywood movies and *more importantly* a conveyer of 'Indianness' to diverse audiences; and as a means of negotiating both Indianness and its transformation, particularly when representing and being received by diasporic audiences. The aim of this paper therefore is to examine transition from representing Indianness to exporting a certain variant of Indianness which is conservative as well as illustrative of a subversive sub-culture which seeks to redefine ideas of nationalism and citizenship through religious and political allegiances.

Bollywood roots of global Hindutva

From Raj Kapoor singing *Mera Joota Hai Japani* in *Shri 420* (1955) playbaked by singer Mukesh to the iconic status enjoyed by former dancing sensation Mithun Chakaborty in the erstwhile Soviet Union, the global outreach of Bollywood remains undeniable. Nowhere is the impact of the Hindi film song more visible than in the emergence of *dangdut* music in Indonesia⁷. The *dangdut* is a form of hybrid pop music popular with the lower classes 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.

The purpose of inquiry in this paper however is not the potential of popular Hindi cinema to garner eyeballs and audiences worldwide, but to engage with the manner in which the South Asian diaspora becomes an inadvertent consumer of nostalgia-steeped variants of right-wing Hinduism. Through a narrative of tradition winning over modernity in a largely foreign setting, the films produced and directed by production behemoths such as those belonging to Karan Johar (Dharma Productions) and Aditya Chopra (Yash Raj Films) inaugurated an era of 'diasporic nostalgia' in Bollywood. A newly liberalized India afforded Johar and Chopra the financial capital and wherewithal to not only shoot entirely on location in Europe and America but also juxtapose the moral high-ground occupied by traditional Hindu families based in foreign lands with the seemingly decadent and immoral ways of

⁵ Rajadhyaksha, A. 2009. *Indian Cinema in The Time of Celluloid: From Bollywood to the Emergency*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

⁶ Mishra, V. 2008. *Bollywood Cinema: Temples of Desire*. London: Routledge.

⁷ David, B (2008) *Intimate Neighbours: Bollywood, Dangdut Music and Globalizing Modernities in Indonesia*. In S Gopal and S Moorti (eds) *Global Bollywood: travels of Hindi song and dance*. Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press.

the West. In *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge*, the Punjabi male located in London feels the abject need to preserve the purity of his bloodline by promising his elder daughter's hand in marriage – born and raised in the UK – to the rustic son of a close friend and neighbor. DDLJ as the film is fondly remembered and watched by millions of diasporic Indians became the harbinger of a new genre – the NRI films – films made for and targeted at the already humongous and growing Indian diaspora. According to the Encyclopedia Britannica Online there are 761,689,000 Hindus spread across 144 countries⁸. Vertovec suggests that outside of India there are around 48,646,000 Hindus among a larger Indian diaspora that includes Sikhs, Muslims, and Christians as well as Jains who are counted as Hindus in some estimates⁹.

The expatriate Indian characters in this film as well as others such as *Kal Ho Na Ho* and *Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gham* (2001) which were once exposed as inappropriate and a counter-model to the 'ideal Hindu Indian' have become in the past twenty years or so Indian achievers – a kind of uber Indian able to assert his ethnic and national identity in a globalized world: successful, capitalist, male, family-oriented, technology-savvy and devoutly Hindu¹⁰. A few films like *DDLJ*, *Pardes*, *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai*, *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham* (K3G), *Kitne Door... Kitne Paas* (2002) and *Namastey London* (2007) have given him pride of place and have generated new practices (fashion trends, tourism in the locations shown on screen) or rejuvenated old ones (like the rekindled observance of the *karva chauth* festival in Northern India). The elites of the popular Hindi film industry, like producer-director Yash Chopra, are very conscious of their role. He for instance declared, during his address at the first Pravasi Bharatiya Divas (PBD), a government-sponsored conclave for the Indian diaspora, that 'our moral responsibility is to depict India at its best. We're the historians of India [...]. The Indian Diaspora must maintain its identity, its roots'¹¹.

The opening up of the Indian economy to foreign direct investment and economic liberalization coincided with the rise of latent Hindu chauvinism in the form of the Bharatiya Janata Party riding a wave of support for the Ramjanmabhoomi movement. Liberalization benefitted not only the growing middle classes in India and the boosted the political fortunes of the BJP but also exerted a major impact on the way films were made, produced and distributed overseas. The Non-Resident Indian or the NRI is seen by the Hindu chauvinists as Westernised but rich – contributing with vigour to the coffers of the Sangh Parivar or the Hindu nationalist conglomeration. The 'long-distance nationalists' – to use a rather bastardized version of Benedict Anderson's famous phrase¹² – proclivity to contribute financially to the Sangh Parivar has been documented by Christophe Jaffrelot and others¹³. Not surprisingly then, films with themes relating to the ideal diasporic Hindu families peaked during the BJP regime (1998-2004)¹⁴. In the context of the diasporic Hindu, Indian culture is

⁸ Vertovec, S. 2000. *The Hindu Diaspora: Comparative Patterns*. London: Routledge.

⁹ Ibid. p. 14.

¹⁰ Hariharan, K. 2002. 'Bilkul Nahin Khushi, Itna Sara Gham: Why So Much Dislike of the NRI?'. *Little India*. February, URL: <http://www.littleindia.com/India/feb02/bilkul.htm>

¹¹ Chopra, Yash (2003) 'Address', Pravasi Bharatiya Divas, 10 January.

¹² Benedict Anderson's theory outlined under the ingenious expression of "long- distance nationalism" suggests that a strong and nearly automatic allegiance binds members of an ethnic diaspora to their homeland. According to Anderson, immigrants continue to feel toward their native land identical sentiments to those nourished in the context of "traditional" nationalism.

¹³ Jaffrelot, C and I. Therwath. 2007. *The Sangh Parivar and the Hindu Diaspora in the West: What kind of "Long-Distance Nationalism"?* *International Political Sociology* 1 (3): 278-295.

¹⁴ Electronic reference

Ingrid Therwath, « 'Shining Indians': Diaspora and Exemplarity in Bollywood », *South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal* [Online], 4 | 2010, Online since 17 December 2010, connection on 30 September 2016. URL : <http://samaj.revues.org/3000> ; DOI : 10.4000/samaj.3000

presented as Hindu, family-oriented, the preserve of women within the home yet portable and therefore also transnational¹⁵. Cinema therefore becomes a vehicle for the circulation of the Hindu nationalist discourse, combining virtues of consumerism, devotion and cosmopolitanism. Christophe Jaffrelot et al. have argued in favour of a mutually beneficial relationship between the long-distance nationalists and their ultra-nationalist counterparts in the home country¹⁶. In a vicarious way then, popular Hindi cinema or Bollywood has emerged as one of the cultural nodes through which this mutuality is maintained.

The past two years have been witness to the consummate appropriation of an ambitious film project and the conflation of the symbolic value of the cultural product with a unique, overarching and global Hindu identity. *Baahubali: The Beginning* (2015) and *Baahubali: The Conclusion* (2017) are the films in question – a two-part narrative of mythology and warring families told in a well-mounted epic style – that have seem to have been surreptitiously appropriated by Hindutva ideologues as the definitive cinematic statement on Hinduism’s lost glory. While several social media platforms and ‘news’ portals waxed eloquent on the ‘reclaiming of Hindu identity through cinema’, several critics saw the blockbuster productions as definitely pandering to a global audience, drawing them into the processes of myth-making and image-making. The ‘Hinduization’ of Baahubali is perhaps the latest in a series of dramatic media takeovers by the burgeoning Hindutva universe – starting with Twitter and Facebook as media, particularly social media has cemented its place as the ideological battleground for the Hindu nationalists. It is also not the first instance of mythology being used as a political masterstroke – the *Ramayana* (1988) being one of the better known examples, even as the more immediate gains for Hindutva remained confined to electoral victories in India and their subsequent bid for power at the centre. The diaspora as an active participant in the hegemonization of culture on a global scale is better identified with a brief overview of the creative methodologies employed to make and sustain images that are then acknowledged as not only ideal but canonical.

Women as ‘keepers’ of Hindutva

Some of the more appropriate instances of the image of the ‘ideal Hindu woman’ could be found in filmic expositions such as *Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gham*, which also upheld and unashamedly overvalued the persistence of debilitating class structures in the Hindu society. The opulent landscape of KKKG is replete with grandiose song-and-dance routines celebrating births, engagements and most importantly *karwa chauth* – a ritual observed by Hindu wives who hold a day-long fast for the long life of their husbands. The genre of the NRI film could have single-handedly transported the ritual observance to being one of the key parameters of judging the ‘idealness’ of Hindu women. KKKG further exemplifies the contribution of popular Hindi cinema to the construction of not only a ritual-observing but also a subservient Hindu woman characterized by Jaya Bachchan’s character Nandini who plays wife to her real-life husband, Amitach Bachchan (Yashwardhan Raichand). A grossly unequal power structure can be observed in the Raichand family – Yashwardhan is the quintessential Hindu patriarch running family matters with an iron fist with his wife assuming the position of a maternal mute spectator. Nandini does not contest the power equation but is seen as participating in its perpetuation whole-heartedly, she being the flagbearer of the ostentatious *karwa chauth* celebrations in the family, bowing down to touch her husband’s feet at the conclusion of the ritual. The film narrative endorses the handing over of the unequal relationship between

¹⁵ Uberoi, Patricia (1998) ‘The Diaspora Comes Home: Disciplining Desire in DDLJ’, *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, 32 (2), pp.305-36.

DOI : 10.1177/006996679803200208

¹⁶ Jaffrelot, C and I. Therwath. 2007. The Sangh Parivar and the Hindu Diaspora in the West: What kind of “Long-Distance Nationalism”? *International Political Sociology* 1 (3): 278-295.

Yashwardhan and Nandini to their son – Rahul and his wife Anjali. The ritual of *karwa chauth* is showcased as one of the hallmarks of Hindu (read Indian) tradition which leaves room for geographical contestation since the ritual has its base in North India alone, with large Hindu populations in the southern, eastern or western states oblivious of the existence of any such festival. The export of the myth of the pan-Indian nature of *karwa chauth* – patriarchal and problematic – coincides with the global acceptance of popular Hindi cinema as the primary exemplar of diasporic Hindutva. Other Bollywood exports like *Hum Saath Saath Hain* (HSSH), *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun* (both directed by Suraj Barjatya and produced by Rajshri Productions) foreground the ritual of *karwa chauth* as exemplifying the role and the place of the ideal Hindu *bahu* (daughter-in-law).

Such cinematic material is consumed with supreme interest (often devotion) by diasporic Hindus already suffering repeated pangs of nostalgia along with the growing and sustained bonds with their home country – now made more accessible by cheaper transport options as well as mobile and smartphone technology. The ‘idealness’ of the Hindu family in KKKG, HSSH and even HAHK is established through the foregrounding of *karwa chauth*, thereby founding the role that Hindu women must assume in the family. Such representation blends in seamlessly with the image of the Hindu woman being constructed by the Hindutva ideologues, often heard commenting about the un-Hindu practice of women crossing the family threshold in pursuit of careers, working late, drinking alcohol or smoking cigarettes or even wearing Western attire.

The ‘superior Indian culture’ argument was invoked in *Namastay London* – a narrative that made a notoriously lopsided display of cultural misogyny. Not only does the film claim Hindu cultural overlordship of the expatriate and diasporic Sikh community, it puts to rest any questions critics might have regarding the female protagonist’s freedom to choose her partner. Most unsurprisingly, the film was a grand success among the Hindu diaspora – the monologue delivered by the eloquent male protagonist (played by Akshay Kumar) eliciting many a tear among overseas audiences. The diasporic Hindu immediately feels a sense of attachment with the spiel as it recounts the amazing advances India has made since Independence in response to an Englishman’s caustic remark about ‘snake charmers’ and the ‘Indian road trick’ with the ‘*Saare Jahan se Achcha*’ tune playing in the background. It lends credibility to the Hindu’s non-resident existence and is a stunning riposte to the many ways in which integration in the host country has been negligible, at best partial. The speech further exemplifies the attempt of the film to connect with the diasporic audience, playing to the gallery and on their emotions. Another curious aspect is discernible during this sequence in the film – the coming around of the heroine to accept her Indian roots and participate in the dramatic take down of the overzealous Englishman. Herein lies the central plot twist in *Namaste London* – one which obliterates the question of choice as the female protagonist is made to fall in love with her Indian ‘fiancé’ carefully selected by her father. It is important to also keep in mind the parameters for the selection which range from the man’s identity as a Punjabi, with traditional leanings and moral values.

The Hindu designer diaspora

The export of cinematic content tailor-made for overseas audiences makes possible the articulation of a strikingly reworked and refurbished definition of nationalism, more importantly long-distance nationalism. When new-fangled expositions of morality and Indianness are witnessed on screen by the diasporic Hindu, an immediate link is formed between the messaging through cinema and the hyper-nationalism that is now available for consumption through social media. The efficient use of social media platforms by the Sangh Parivar is well known and documented. As a result, a renewed sense of identification with image-making enables the Hindu to rearticulate his position in the world – driven mostly by a fierce sense of Hinduness which is interchangeable with Indianness, thus

leading to the creation of a 'designer' diaspora. In the adopted country, the Hindu becomes associated with an umbrella term – the model minority. Affectively then, the model Hindu gets immediately characterized as opposed to the Muslim 'trouble-makers'.

Popular Hindi cinema's contribution to this image-making begins from the representation of the ideal Hindu family as god-fearing, with strong familial bonds and an exaggerated sense of morality. Films such as KKKG and HAHK are instances of not only the moral compass of the ideal Hindu being ostensibly impregnable, they further lend credence to the teleological argument about the Hindu being a deeply religious individual. The association works in tandem with the Hindu nationalist agenda on the one hand, articulating an image of the peaceful and moral Hindu steeped in tradition and culture and on the other, positing the ideal and moral Hindu in contrast to the violent and fundamentalist Muslim, therefore effectively bridging the gap between the prachar (evangelism) of the Sangh and cultural capital derived from image-making.

Recent research in the Netherlands has revealed a newly established propensity of non-Indian Hindu women such as those from Surinam – inspired by Bollywood cinema – to observe karwa chauth even if in conjunction with expatriate Punjabis (the ritual being predominant in Punjab, Haryana, some parts of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Madhya Pradesh)¹⁷. The image of the ideal Hindu bahu therefore encompasses more than just the non-resident Indian community (read Hindu) but also Hindus from across the world. Much of the camaraderie between expatriate Hindus and those from Surinam and other parts of the Caribbean was in evidence during the visit of Prime Minister Modi to The Hague¹⁸. Implicitly then the overarching Hindutva project of global Hindu unity appears to have taken shape with significant contribution from the mandarins of cinema in Mumbai.

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¹⁷ Swamy. P. 2016. 'Let is Live as Hindus: Narrating Hindu Identity Through Temple Building Processes in Amsterdam Zuidoost (1988-2015)'. PhD Thesis. Leiden University.

¹⁸ Indian Prime Minister Modi – the face of Hindu nationalism – visited The Hague on 27 June, 2017.

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