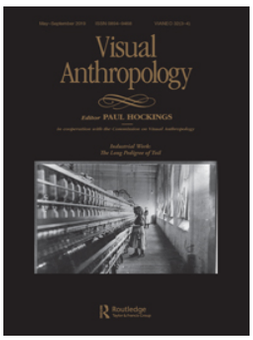

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Sara Jahan Hamara: Indian Films and Their Portrayal of Foreign Destinations

Pankaj Jain

This article explores the connection of Hindi and Tamil films with outbound tourism from India. Some of the older Hindi and Tamil films portrayed foreign locations and their cultures in quite critical ways. Often protagonists in earlier films would go for a short trip abroad for immediate career-related needs and then return faithfully to their motherland. However, after the 1990s, Indians emerged as a confident globe-trotting people covering the entire planet for their career as well as tourism needs. This changing national trend accordingly found a voice in contemporary films too. Additionally, Indian films are increasingly sought after by dozens of countries from many parts of the world, not just by their respective consumers but also by their respective tourism boards and other agencies, so as to promote inbound tourism by Indians to those countries. Finally, this article concludes with the postmodern analysis of some of the contemporary Hindi films in the 21st century that are transcending spatial and other kinds of barriers in a truly globalized world.

THE WORLD IS ONE FAMILY

One of the earliest Sanskrit texts declared *vasudhaiva kuṭumbakam* ("the world is one family"), thereby embracing the entire planet as family. Millennia later, one of the most celebrated Hindi film lyricists, Sahir Ludhianvi, rephrasing Allama Mohammad Iqbal's words, wrote the song "*Sara jahan hamara*" in the film Phir subha hogi (1958), which also means that this entire world is ours. Although that line was a satirical comment on India's high ideals amidst excruciating poverty, today's wealthy and influential Indians seem to be embracing the globalized world with their ubiquitous travels. Much of the recent arrival of Indians in Western countries occurred since 1965, when graduate students and computer professionals began looking for greener pastures.

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Centuries before this recent outbound travel, British imperial rule had transplanted thousands of Indians as indentured laborers to remote lands such as East Africa, Fiji, Surinam and Trinidad. Many such migrant communities have, in turn, created localized travel patterns inspired by their religious traditions, although in some cases their motivation remains unclear (Gold 1988, 260). In this article I am comparing the motivation and the cinematic portrayal of the early outbound Indian travelers with the contemporary ones. Today, with over 62 million passport holders as potential travelers, India has emerged as the second fastest growing outbound market, after China, in terms of visitor numbers. From the forced migration for indentured labor under the British Raj, the number of Indians traveling abroad today is growing nearly as fast as are the Chinese statistics. What are the motivations and reasons for Indians traveling today, compared with those during the British Raj? — and how have Indian films played a role in this transformation? These questions I explore here. According to N. Collins-Kreiner and K. Tueta Sagi (2011), there is a growing number of Western spiritual tourists going to India for self-fulfillment; but in this article I explore whether Indians find self-fulfillment and self-realization during their travels abroad. I begin with a brief exploration of Tamil cinema's portrayal of foreign countries and Indian emigrants to different countries (this is an old and lively regional cinema based in Chennai and Bangalore).

EARLY TAMIL FILMS

According to Preeti Mudliar and Joyojeet Pal (2016), *Nava yuvan/Geeta saram/Modern Youth* (1937), *Anda nāl/That Day* (1954) and *Ulakam cu̲rrum vālipa̲n̲/World Roaming Bachelor* (1973), were some of the earliest Tamil films to be shot in foreign locations, and all of them show the protagonist becoming morally corrupt after his trip abroad. After the Tamil (and general Indian) diaspora started growing in the late 1990s there was a gradual shift from shooting in the standard foreign locations, such as Switzerland and Australia, toward more exotic locations by shortly after the turn of the century. However, the "foreign-returned" characters in films such as *Nala Damayanti* (2003) and *Varaṇam āyiram/A Thousand Elephants* (2008) are still portrayed in the same terms of native morality versus Western corruption, just as was shown in older films such as *Paṭṭikada paṭṭaṇamā/Village and Town* (1972). Mudliar and Pal summarize this feature of the Tamil films:

> In portraying the native Tamil who not only stays but also persuades others to stay, Tamil films differ deeply from their Bollywood counterparts. Mainstream Hindi cinema is friendlier to the desires of the middle class to be upwardly mobile and partake in [the] global market, whereas Tamil films portray the benefits of insulation from the foreign. Thus, eventually the salvation of the characters in Tamil films lies within the geographies of Tamil Nadu. The foreign, for all its attractions, rarely serves up a happy ending onscreen. For a cinema that has traditionally been deeply political in its narratives, the centrality of the tension may have moved from Tamil as superior to Hindi to Tamil as superior to all Western culture. (2016, 246)

HINDI FILMS AND THEIR LOVE–HATE FOR FOREIGN CULTURES AND COUNTRIES

Let us now see how Hindi films portray foreign themes. Dudrah starts his book (2012) with the song from the film *Shri 420* (1955), to highlight the patriotism that was prevalent even with international undercurrents in that era: "*Mera joota hai japani, yeh patloon inglistani, sar pe lal topi rusi, phir bhi dil hai hindustani*" (My shoes are Japanese, these trousers are English, the red hat on my head is Russian, yet my heart is Indian). In several other films the West is also presented as a place of opportunity for travel for academic and/or economic advancement. Dudrah then highlights the two commercially successful films, *Purab aur Paschim* (1970) and *Namastey London/Greetings, London* (2007), both upholding Indian cultural values against Western ones. As mentioned, although by the 2000s millions of Indians had settled overseas, many movies portrayed the diasporic Indians with their culture still rooted in traditional Indian values instead of in "corrupt" Western ones. However, Moorti looks at several English magazines in India in this same period, and concludes that

> No longer are India and [the] West presented as antithetical or as constituting a binary; rather the site of the diasporic population becomes one of confluence. Visually, East and West have melded into the liminal migratory space of the diaspora. The Other or alterity appears in these magazines only as a spectatorial backdrop against which a global Indian identity is performed. (2005, 53)

This love-hate relationship with foreign locations and Western culture has continued in Indian films from its earliest phase, as noted above with Tamil films. Although traveling abroad was discouraged in medieval times for Hindus, Indians did start traveling abroad during the colonial period. As already noted, indentured laborers were perhaps the first wave of Indians in recent history who went to countries such as Trinidad and who became the subject of a Hollywood film, *The Mystic Masseur* (2001).

The second stream of Indians going overseas, especially to the United Kingdom, was also during colonial times, largely to advance their professional careers. We have a long list of names, such as M.K. Gandhi, Rabindranath Tagore, Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, Subhas Chandra Bose, Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Vallabhbhai Patel, Jawaharlal Nehru, B.R. Ambedkar, along with three Oxonians from South India: the philosopher S. Radhakrishnan, the anthropologist M.N. Srinivas, and N.G. Ranga, founder of the Swatantra Party (who gained a world record by sitting in parliament for sixty years). Usually these men chose the UK as their destination for higher studies, but upon returning to India nearly all eventually became political leaders. Most have also been portrayed in films such as *Gandhi* (1982), *Rabindranath Tagore* (1961), *Veer Savarkar* (2001), *Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose: The Forgotten Hero* (2004), *Lokmanya: ek yugpurush* (2015), *Sardar* (1993), *Jawarharlal Nehru* (1983), and *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar* (2000). Their foreign trips and connections remain a significant part of their lives, as is clear in some of these films. Of course, out of all the eminent Indians, Gandhi remains the most celebrated name worldwide and in the world of cinema too. Although Hollywood celebrated Gandhi in Richard

Attenborough's 1982 film with several academy awards, other Indian films have also portrayed various aspects of his life and his principles (as described in detail by Murthy and Tariang 2013). Several films reviewed by them accord particularly well for the purpose of this article. In some ways, his experiences in a foreign nation (South Africa) led him towards self-actualization and self-realization. It is Gandhi's outbound travel and stay abroad that transformed him from an ordinary lawyer to eventually emerge as a "great soul".

Early black-and-white Indian films in the 1940s and 1950s, perhaps due to the heavy influence of nation-building leaders and their ideologies, largely portrayed their protagonists as following in the footsteps of Indian leaders. The hero goes abroad, gets his advanced degree, and then returns faithfully to India. Until the 1960s not only the characters in Indian films but even the film crews never traveled outside India, probably for reasons of patriotism and/or limited production budgets. For instance, Mehboob Khan, although well-known for his films with lavish sets and big-star cast, avoids showing any foreign locations when Rajan (Raj Kapoor) returns from London in his film *Andaz* (1949). Similarly, in *Bees saal baad* (1962), Kumar Vijay Singh (Biswajeet) returns from abroad to a village yet no further information is shared about his trip.

However, in *Dr. Kotnis ki Amar Kahani* (1946), mirroring his real life, Dr. Kotnis dies in China where he had gone on a medical mission during the Second World War. Many of the early Hindi and Tamil films were largely showing physiological motivations for the protagonists' trips abroad. If they were traveling overseas at all it was to sustain or improve their socio-economic standing; though with an occasional exceptional film such as *Dr. Kotnis ki Amar Kahani*, where the doctor goes to China for a higher humane purpose.

With the advent of the 1960s Indian films seemed to take the next step. Suddenly, just as the films embraced color, they started discovering picturesque locations all over the world. As already noted for Tamil films, Hindi films also broke the geographical barriers by starting to shoot all over the globe. Some of the earliest such films were *Singapore* (1960), *Sangam* (1964), *Love in Tokyo* (1966), *An Evening in Paris* (1967), *Around the World* (1967) and *Ankhen* (1968). According to Ranjani Mazumdar,

> India's defeat in the 1962 war against China was critical to this moment since it was the first public shaming of the nationalist state. This was followed by other issues—the failure of state planning, food shortages, the crisis of foreign currency, and the eventual turn to the US for grants to purchase food grain. In cinema, however, consumerist imaginations of excess held sway and sought to break free from the Nehruvian language of developmental consciousness. The nationalist limits on consumption, which had dominated the 1950s, faced pressure from all around. (2011, 130)

This was the time for Indians to break from the Gandhian and Nehruvian high ideals of simplicity and abstention as they, along with the Bollywood heroes, started traveling *around the world* virtually. In most of these films, the protagonists entered an alternative world of desires and excitement as they explored foreign locales. This is different from the alternative world of career ambitions that we find in 1940s and 1950s films such as *Andaz*. In the 1960s the

films are now increasingly using foreign locations for sensual enjoyment and adventure. For instance, in *Sangam, An Evening in Paris,* and *Love in Tokyo*, leading characters are shown controlling their erotic desires, even as non-Indians are shown indulging in passionate embraces (as noted by Mazumdar 2011).

However, it was the advent of Shah Rukh Khan in Hindi films with blockbusters such as *Dilwale dulhania le jayenge* a.k.a. *DDLJ* (1995) and *Pardes* (1997) that ushered Hindi films into a new globalized era (Uberoi 1998). While *DDLJ* was shot in Europe and *Pardes* in the United States, both films celebrated the greatness of Indian culture, traditions and family values in contrast with Western culture (as we have already noticed in earlier films). Mittal and Anjaneyaswamy (2013) also note *DDLJ* as heralding a new era that was taken to greater heights by films such as *Zindagi na milegi dobara* a.k.a. *ZNMD* (2011), the first true non-India-based "Travel Fiction," shot almost entirely in Spain, and no longer showing any comparisons or contrasts with Indian culture.

Encouraged by that film's success India's prominent travel company, SOTC, launched a Spain tour package focusing on the locations that were spectacularly depicted in the film *ZNMD*. Similarly, in 2010 SOTC designed a special package called "Enchanted Journey," to take Indian tourists to major locations that used to be the favorite locations of Yash Chopra, one of the earliest pioneers of the Hindi film industry, who fell in love with Switzerland. Similarly, after *Krrish* (2006), the Singapore Tourism Board launched its own package to welcome ever-increasing numbers of Indian tourists buoyed by this major Hindi film, shot so magnificently in Singapore. The UK came up with a "Bollywood Map" in 2007 to continue to lure Indians motivated to visit that country too, after their watching London and other locales in umpteen films. Several other similar Bollywood-inspired tour packages and facilities can be found online which take tourists to different Asian countries, such as Hong Kong and Dubai, and to European countries such as Germany and Italy, where a large number of Hindi films have been shot. In addition several government and non-government agencies from a long list of countries (including Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Cambodia, Canada, Czech Republic, Colombia, Cuba, Egypt, Fiji, Finland, Greece, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Japan, Jordan, Kenya, Malaysia, Maldives, Mauritius, Morocco, New Zealand, Poland, Russia, Seychelles, South Africa, Turkey, USA, Vietnam, Zambia and Zimbabwe) have been keen to invite Indian filmmakers to shoot their films around attractive tourist destinations (as noted by several news reports listed in the appendix).

It is amply clear from this exploration of Indian films that there has been a fairly recent transformation in their portrayal of foreign locations. Most Indian films no longer criticize foreign, "Western" culture even as they adoringly portray the exotic locales of foreign countries. Foreign countries in turn are eager to invite more Indian filmmakers to come and shoot their films at these venues. The Indian audience in India and in the diaspora, as well as the non-Indian audience in other countries, continue to consume and promote Indian films actively all over the world, and with great enthusiasm. Remote places in turn are opening up to Indian tourists from India or elsewhere in the diaspora. Let us now look at some examples that manifest this changing trend in Hindi films.

Devdas is an iconic film that can help us understand the changing trends of many kinds in contemporary Hindi films. This film has appeared in more than a dozen versions in various Indian languages in the last century, all loosely based on the story originally written by the Bengali novelist Sarat Chandra Chatterjee in 1917 (2018). Corey Creekmur (2007) has analyzed this seemingly endlessly repeating trope in Indian films. Not only does the story seem to be in an endless recursion in Indian films, but there are many events within the main plot that repeat throughout the story, such as the protagonists visiting the same locales over and over again. The hero Devdas, for instance, keeps going to the city of Kolkata, symbolizing modernity, in many versions, but keeps returning to his native village, symbolizing tradition. For our purposes here it is interesting to note that the symbol of modernity shifts to England in the two recent Hindi versions of the film, while all the earlier ones were confined within the boundaries of India. While all the earlier versions emphasized the childhood lives of the protagonists as a statement to underscore and balance tradition with modernity, 21st-century versions completely avoid showing that aspect and take the audience into a big, bold world full of spectacular opulence and filled with heavy music and vivid colors. As Wright (2017, 154) notes, the 2002 version is filled with a nostalgic appeal to diasporic Indians for their homeland.

This radical break from tradition that we see in the recent incarnations of *Devdas* is explained well by Wright (2017). She employs postmodernism theory, with all its usual caveats in a non-Western context, to argue that the films made in the 21st century, i.e., post-millennial films, introduce innovative ways and technologies of filmmaking in India. She presents *Dil chahta hai* (2001), *Om shanti om* (2007), *Koi … mil Gaya, Abhay*, and several other films that blur the temporal distinction between past tradition and contemporary modernity. Building on her observations, I would argue that contemporary films also blur the spatial distinction between India and the rest of the world. In this brave new global world of Hindi films, modernity crosses all the proverbial oceans and the entire planet is the domain both for the protagonists and for the audience. For instance, as Wright notes (*ibid.*, 94), *Om shanti om* mocks and mimics an earlier film with the patriotic title *Phir bhi dil hai Hindustani* (Yet my heart is Indian) lifted from the popular song from Raj Kapoor's film *Shri 420* mentioned earlier. Interestingly, instead of an Indian heart, now the title refers to a heart that is in a foreign country, i.e., *Phir bhi dil hai NRI* (Non-Resident Indian, an Indian living in a foreign country).

In another film, *Hum dil de chuke sanam* (1999), a husband takes his wife from India to Italy to unite her with her ex-lover, but in the final scene the wife ceremoniously rejects her ex-lover in Italy and loyally embraces her husband, to return and live happily ever after in India. However, such a binary opposition which was also present in the earlier films of Karan Johar has now melted away (Wright *ibid.*, 28). While Johar's earlier films portray Indians as nostalgically reminiscing about the great Indian values, his later films do not have any such binary division between Indian and Western values. While *Kabhi khushi kabhie gham* nostalgically celebrates Indian values even outside India, *Kabhi alvida naa kehna* (2006) and *My Name is Khan* (2010) have no such

emotional attachment to India, and protagonists are shown as if they have no connection with India at all. Wright also argues (*ibid.*, 33) that most film scholars have paid little attention to this transition of Hindi films into Bollywood, a term encapsulating the globalization of Hindi films in many ways.

CONCLUSION

As Vinay Lal (1998) had argued for Hindi films, becoming an outsider is an impossibility because the very duality or otherness is unacceptable in the Advaita school of Indian philosophy that arguably remains a subtle influence for Indians' worldview. Wright (2017, 178) makes similar observations about *Kaante* (2002) and *Tashan* (2008), in which instead of "otherizing" America and contrasting it to India, American identity and Hollywood are embraced by Bollywood. In an earlier article (Jain 2011) I had demonstrated this with reference to Hindu-Muslim harmony and collaboration as shown in dozens of Hindi films. Similarly, in such a worldview, it is hardly surprising that postmodernism today is breaking all the remaining barriers of countries, colors, or races in today's Bollywood.

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