

Bollywood in Diaspora

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A few years ago, I attended an international congress on Indians-in-Diaspora, which was held in Prague. More than one thousand scientists who 'resembled' Indians gathered there to confer upon various aspects of the life of "Indians" outside India. It had never occurred to me that so many of them lived outside India. They came from Africa, the Caribbean, Asia, England, Australia, Canada, the USA, and Europe, and were a very mixed company: the majority consisted of first- and second-generation Indians who kept close contact with India and also defined themselves as "overseas Indian". Another part, among which I group myself, did acknowledge the "ancestry" of Indians, but without any affinity with the subcontinent.

In the corridor of the conference building, I met a shabbily dressed Indian; we were finished with our presentations and we had nothing much to do. "Let's go for a walk," he proposed. During the walk he expressed his need for coffee and we went into a café. In the meantime, he had established that I was not a "real" Indian and thus the inevitable question came: "Where are you from?" After I had explained to him that I was a third-generation descendant of "indentured coolies", living in the Netherlands and doing research on "minority elites" there (at that time), he told me that he was a first-generation Indian who lived in the USA. He was a professor in Asian-American relations at a university in Boston. Nothing unusual in that, for we were fellow congress attendants and all of the participants worked at a university.

At a certain moment, he interrupted his story and started, while he was drumming on the tabletop, singing a song of the famous and now-deceased Indian singer Mukesh. I was familiar with that behavior of Indian men in good cheer, especially after a drink. I also recognized the melody; it was a song that had been popular in my teens. But more took place there at that table. I realized with a shock that this strange man and I, due to the melody, had something in common, that we originated more or less from the same culture of which the

melody, the words, the language, and the singer were characteristic elements. We were not connected by the fact that we were both social scientists, but by Bollywood. Because of that Bollywood song, I felt a cultural kinship with this man.

The center of the Indian movie industry is in the Indian city known as Bombay, which has since been renamed Mumbai. Owing to the industrial resemblance with the American movie city Hollywood, they started to call the Indian movie industry "Bollywood". Bollywood is now a gigantic industry where most of the movies in the world are produced. It no longer only produces movies, but is also closely interwoven with industries dealing with music CDs and their related music videos, clothes, glossy magazines, DVDs, jewelries, cosmetics, song and dance, tourism, advertisements, musical instruments, educational institutes, and publishers. Bollywood has become "culture" which is distributed worldwide and sells briskly. The Bollywood film is not only popular in India, but also among the "Indians" in Asia (Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Singapore, Burma, Malaysia, and Afghanistan), countries where Indians were sent as *indentured laborers* such as Suriname, Guyana, Trinidad, Jamaica, Mauritius, Fiji, and South Africa, and increasingly with the growing group of Indians in western countries, especially England, Canada, the USA, and Australia.

These groups of people descending from one source-culture and living all over the globe are called a *global ecumenicity* by the Swedish anthropologist Hannerz (1996). The concept no longer refers to the biblical *Diaspora* in which the expulsion of the Jews determines the image. The present notion of "diaspora" is detached from its religious meaning and now refers to physically scattered, but still culturally related communities such as the Jews, Chinese, Arabs, who all form a specific global ecumenicity. In this sense, communities of Indian origin consider themselves as one large civilization of which the Bollywood culture is an intrinsic part. However, the popularity of the Bollywood movies is not restricted to the Indian global ecumenicity, but extends itself to the whole northern coast of Africa, parts of black Africa, the Middle East and even Eastern Europe. The success of Bollywood not only encompasses people of Indian origin, but also a major part of the world population.

Those populations who are neither part of the Indian global ecumenicity nor culturally related to it but who are nonetheless consumers of Bollywood products are generally speakers of neither Hindi nor English (the language in which the films are subtitled). Whence then the success of

Bollywood? There are many theories in circulation on this subject. The following four are notable.

1. The frequently heard explanation is that the Bollywood movie offers a refuge for all the poor wishing to escape the misery of daily life. In the cinema, people can lose themselves in beautiful, fantastic stories with which they can, at the same time, identify.

According to these stories, whatever happens to someone in life is the consequence of forces such as individual choice, will power, accomplishment, and above all, fate. In the same way that Karl Marx believed that religion was opium for the people, so - according to this popular theory - the Bollywood movie is a balm for the abuses of a callous world.

As popular as this theory is, it is, in truth, not very sound. After all, the popularity of the Indian movie is not limited to the poor sections of the population. On the contrary, the growth of the movie consumption is notable in western countries and takes place in particular through such channels as Internet, DVD and other modern electronic equipment, which are not exactly within the reach of the poor people in the developing countries. And the amusement and diversion that the movie offers are appreciated by all social segments of the population. This applies especially to the art of singing, which in India may be called folk art.

2. According to another explanation, the success of the Bollywood movies can be attributed to the childlike simplicity of the stories, such as the ones you can also find in the James Bond and Clint Eastwood movies. Therefore, one does not have to know Hindi to be able to understand the film. Leaving aside exceptions, the recipe is more or less standard and set up in such a manner that everyone can enjoy: a clown, which is interesting for children, a handsome man and a even more beautiful woman as leading actors, who fall in love with each other, then find themselves in a relational crisis and thereafter usually work it out; good for the teenagers. There is always a tension between the parents and the children, which appeals to the elders; usually there is a scoundrel who represents the *bad guy* and naturally the handsome male leading man is the *good guy*. And through all of this there is much singing, music and dance. Therein lies the secret of its success: Bollywood movies are *family movies* and that appeals to the crowd.

Although this family-movie hypothesis has its attraction, one or two points of criticism need to be mentioned. In terms of contents, the movies have changed notably in the last ten years. In former days, there were actors who specialized in playing character roles

and could make a whole cinema audience cry. Now these actors have made room for a younger generation that especially stands out in dancing. The content of the story has become less important, the show element is predominant: splendid clothes, large groups of dancers and impressive backgrounds. Also, the violence in the movie has increased and these scenes are generally so badly directed that any yellow band in karate could improve on them.

Even if the present movie stars must be able to do more than their western colleagues (cry, play the clown, dance), the real acting appears to be a dying art. The *show and glamour* dominates. The fact that these movies are increasingly aimed at a glitzy young generation thus contradicts the family hypothesis. India's having delivered a *Miss Universe* a number of times has no doubt led this *glamour* element to be intensified. This is especially noticeable in the pride and self-esteem of Indian teenagers, which is expressed in all sorts of shows and *beauty contests* in which female beauty is central.

3. Another hypothesis explains that the Indian movie industry "feeds" the cultural needs of the various groups of Indians in the world. This applies especially to the language, the religion (which is never absent in the stories), the customs and the traditions. Bollywood offers recognition and identification, pride and self-esteem, in short, cultural identity. This pride is increasing given this film industry's growing popularity in the west. All of the professional groups involved know their colleagues in Europe, Japan, and the USA, which is displayed at great length in the many *glossy magazines* and television programs. The identity hypothesis is noticeable as development, but still one remark needs to be made. This hypothesis suggests that the movies are static and not very susceptible to change. In other words, they are culturally conservative. The contents of these movies, however, do not confirm that. A shift can be noticed in the declining authority of the parents in favor of the children as portrayed in these films. Dialogue has become a more important means of communication between the generations. There is a more equal position of women with respect to men. In short, there is a development towards an *emotional democracy* in families, a combined action whereby the interests and emotions of others are increasingly being taken into consideration (Van Stokkum 1997). Moreover, cultural "preservation" presupposes that a permanent classification of the younger generation is taking place, a process whereby youngsters derive their cultural identity, to a predominant extent, from the content of Indian films. To a certain extent,

this is indeed the case, primarily in the case of youngsters who reside outside India. But at the same time, cultural mixtures with the culture from the countries in which these Indians live are taking place: a development termed *creolization* in the social sciences.

We can see that in western countries - but not only there - young people are explicitly creating a distinct profile for themselves by way of their appearance as belonging to the Indian civilization, while at the same time adopting the manners, career demands, and male-female roles predominant in western society. This development can partially be found again in the movies. Cultural preservation regarding these aspects is out of the question.

4. Fourthly, there is the theory that the attraction of Bollywood films can be attributed to their "universal" themes, such as love, loyalty, friendship and death. This explanation is weak, if only for the reason that the movies are not very popular with the western public. It appears that the "universal" character is considerably less universal. Moreover, in practice, the so-called universal themes are being translated in a very special, thus particular manner. That can be illustrated on the basis of the theme "love" in, for example, the movie *Devdas*.

The movie is about a boy of rich parents (Devdas) and a girl of poor parents (Paro), who are neighbors and grow up together. It is clear to everyone in the neighborhood that they are in love with each other and that this is an "eternal love". But Devdas' mother is against this relationship and publicly humiliates Paro's mother, who would like to be one of the few honorable people who trade in their daughters. Devdas' mother refuses to put her on the market. Paro's mother reacts to this humiliation with the announcement that her daughter will marry a man richer than Devdas within one week, or she will commit suicide. Paro asks Devdas to talk to his parents. Although Devdas disagrees with his parents, he does not support Paro and leaves the parental house. Too late does he realize that he has made the wrong decision. For meanwhile, an eligible candidate has been found for Paro and the marriage preparations are in full swing. The night Devdas asks Paro to spend their lives together is the night when the groom is to come to get his bride. Paro refuses to leave with Devdas, arguing that even the poor have a sense of honor and redeem their promises of marriage.

According to the logic of the Indian movie, no divorce is possible, and marital obligation and family honor surpass the interest of individual lovers. The solution to this predicament is that one of the three (Paro, her husband, or Devdas) must die.

And indeed: Devdas cannot deal with his sorrow and becomes addicted to liquor, despite the knowledge that Paro loves him. He does not want to live without her, but knows that she cannot live with him honorably. And, by choice, he dies of grief.

In all probability, the same story would take the following turn in a western movie. If one of the parents disagrees with a relationship, then the couple will still decide to live together, with or without the blessing of the parents. If a wedding takes place, as is the case with Paro, divorce can be a realistic possibility. If divorce is not possible and the "eternal love" continues to exist, then one would go to a therapist for one of the two matters. The death that Devdas wanted would be considered by the same therapist to be a pathological option. As mentioned before, the same "universal" themes appear to be less universal on closer examination.

Although the above-mentioned explanations are more or less plausible, an equal number of plausible counter-arguments are possible. In other words, the secret of Bollywood movies continues to be secret. The various hypotheses also do not exclude each other. That is why it is safe to suppose that viewers have different motives for watching Bollywood movies. If the attraction of the movie has many causes, it nevertheless leads to the question as to what connects the different colonies of "Indians". Is there something common in those movies with which all those communities can identify or, in any case, do not find that odd? In other words, what is the binding force of these movies?

The Dutch anthropologist Harry Hoetink (1973) developed the notion *somatic norm image* to indicate an ideal image, characteristic for a certain (sub) culture. This norm image is culture-specific and enables members of that culture to judge an actual situation. Hoetink adopted this view from a study of partner choices in the Caribbean. A somatic norm image refers to the existence of ideal images of appearance. Especially when choosing a partner, people are led by ideal images: hairdo, stature, height, color of the skin, etc. That image acts as an actual standard when judging particular 'individuals'. Thus, the norm image connects a person with the ideal.

In a similar way, there are norm images that refer to behavior and cultural norm images (Gowrichan 1992). Those are behavior requirements or expectations that have to do with aesthetics and morals: consider the appearance, manners, and charm, but also social roles such as "good husband", "good student" or "sweet child". Cultural norm images are therefore somatic, aesthetic as well as moral.

The Bollywood movies express these norm images. Male-female roles, power relationships, aesthetic preferences, clothes and hairdo, norms of decorum are all connected with cultural contexts and norm images. Despite the great variation of viewers and motives, these cultural norm images make recognition and acknowledgment of the "own" possible. The power relations between generations (respect) or the position of women (with respect to men) can vary greatly from one "Indian" community to another. Nevertheless, there is a communality with which the various groups can identify. The representation of *The Indian way of life* in the movie does not cause surprise. It is familiar (adjusted) and proper. Consequently, this leads to identification and an active adoption of culture.

A global ecumenicity does not always coincide with a transnational community. In the case of a global ecumenicity, we have culturally related groups of people that do not necessarily have contact with each other. As such, Indians in the Netherlands as a community are not in contact with Indians in Africa or Singapore. They do have this contact with Indians in Surinam with whom they are closely related and form a community that surpasses the nation state. This is why such communities are called transnational communities. The basic requirements for the development of transnational communities can be found in the increased prosperity, which makes it possible to have more short vacations "homewards." The mass use of communication media (telephone, GSM, e-mail) and of Internet, together with an increasing individualization, makes it easier for people to be physically and mentally mobile. This development results in a multitude of contacts with the country of origin. It concerns, among other things, trade (money and goods), the private household-support of relatives (also remittances and goods), maintaining religious ties, contacts with families, the recruitment of marriage partners, and matters that directly concern daily life in both countries.

Shifts are taking place among the Indians in the Netherlands, which are directly related to the influence of Bollywood (Gowricharn 2003). The Indian-Dutch community is increasingly orientated towards India, which has led to an increasing number of journeys to that part of the world that keeps the center of pilgrimage and tourism. Since much of Bollywood culture is also

available through England, the Indian-Dutch community is also becoming orientated towards England, with, as a consequence, an increasing number of journeys to especially London and Birmingham.

Purchases for a wedding, a show in which a Bollywood star performs, or simply staying at London South Hall, which is dominated by Indians, have become normal motives for Dutch Indians to visit England. This fact indicates the development of a new transnational community, which no longer consists of a migrant community in the Netherlands and Surinam, but of a polycentric community consisting of the Netherlands, Surinam, England, and India. Its most important binding element: Bollywood culture.

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