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Bollywood goes Mofussil: Decentring Mumbai in Contemporary Hindi Cinema

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Abstract:

Popular Hindi cinema or Bollywood has had a tremendous fan base across the nation and even the world. The industry has been making new strides in recent times in all aspects. This article attempts to explore the changes in contemporary Bollywood that display an obvious shift towards regionalism. This is primarily understood through the changes felt in the setting or locale that has moved away from the urban centre, specifically Mumbai, to mofussil towns in other states; and also through linguistic changes as the brand of Bollywood Hindi called Bambahiya is being replaced by dialects and even other regional languages. This decentring has brought about a fresh set of movies that explore the culture and lifestyle in other parts of the nation thereby introducing a different cinematic perspective.

Keywords: Bollywood, Mumbai, regionalism, dialects.

Cinema, undoubtedly, has grown to be a medium that articulates the cultural attitudes and preferences of a community, of a nation, rather. Indian cinema has been an internationally recognizable brand in recent times and occupies a unique position among world cinemas by virtue of its variety. Though Indian cinema encompasses within its ambit regional, popular and artistic cinema, what is mostly known across the length and breadth of the nation is the popular Hindi film, commonly known as Bollywood cinema. The name Bollywood was derived from the fact that this brand of popular cinema was mostly manufactured in Bombay/Mumbai. The city not only provided a base for the burgeoning film industry but most often also supplied the raw materials and ingredients for the film being made, in terms of people, setting, themes and so on. It was probably the city's eclectic, cosmopolitan nature that might have enabled Bombay/Mumbai to maintain almost an absolute monopoly as the film city.

Hindi cinema and the city have always had a reciprocal relationship. In other words, they have had a mutual shaping influence on each other. In fact, there were a number of

movies featuring the city itself as a character. And in certain other movies the city has had a prominent presence more than as mere backdrop. Such movies also served in defining or clarifying the emerging modernity in a newly independent nation with the city as the centre. From 1950s through to the end of 1990s, film makers have contributed a great deal in cementing Bombay/Mumbai's profile as a dream destination, a city where everything was possible. This idea was integrated into most of the films – from Dev Anand's *CID* to Karan Johar's *Wake Up Sid!* – thereby giving Bombay/Mumbai a prominence in popular culture like no other Indian city has enjoyed. In short, for a sufficiently long time, Bombay/Mumbai was writ into the celluloid in the form of setting, character, ambience, attitude and even in song lyrics. As Madhava Prasad rightly comments: "For popular Hindi cinema the metropolis of choice has always been Bombay. From *Miss Mail* . . . to *Satya* . . . Hindi cinema's narrative geography, which is otherwise extremely unspecific, incorporates, as a significant turn in the plot, the event of 'going to Bombay'. (86)

In fact, the migration of the aspirant from a small town has been a regular part of many movies. Other tropes include the dream of making it big in Bollywood itself, domestic struggles including housing issues, the seamy underbelly of the city, lives in slums and chawls and so on. Interestingly, these narratives also often had as subtexts survival tips and the multitude of ways to navigate life in the city. The classic song "Ae dil hain mushkil jeena yaha" from *CID*, directed by Raj Khosla in 1956 is a case in point. In any so-called 'Bombay movie' it can be seen that the city plays a crucial role in the plot movement as well as the destiny of the character so much so that such movies carry substantial ideas on the plight of the middle class, the common man and the unsolvable dichotomy between the rich and the poor. These ideas formed the core of many a number of movies that came out in the 1980s and 1990s. Tracing a history of Bombay movies from Raj Kapoor and Dev Anand to Saeed Mirza and later Ram Gopal Varma, there can be seen not only the growth of Hindi cinema but an evolution of Bombay city as well. The city was often projected as a platform where life in a modernising nation was being played out, irrespective of the regional differences in a country of many cultures. In other words, in most Bombay movies the regional identity of the character was not always significant. The minute the protagonist stepped into the city he/she was part of it. This idea, albeit too ideal did rule for a long time in Bollywood before things began to change in the 'real city'.

However, this centrality of Mumbai seems to have encountered a challenge in recent times. In the past one decade Bollywood seems to have undergone a paradigm shift in almost all aspects of film making. New talents have entered the mainstream and consequently there

have been perceptible changes in themes and techniques. More than ever before, cinema seems to be a vehicle of identity projection and formation. The growing proliferation of digital lifestyle and ever-increasing access to global cultural products has only complicated concepts such as identity and individualism. In the case of an emerging economy like India it is imperative to define and project a profile that is suitable and acceptable both at the national as well as the global level. In India, one of the agencies aiding in identity definition is of course Bollywood. Seen in this light, the growing variety in Bollywood, especially a tilt towards regionalism, seems an interesting trend. In other words, one of the prominent trends in contemporary Bollywood is the marked shift from urban modernity to the showcasing of stories and lives from locales hitherto unseen, specifically rural/mofussil ones thereby shifting the focus away from Mumbai and its stock imagery. One thing to be noted here is that the shift in locale does not always suggest an emphatic return to the village but rather an attempt to look at stories lived away from the glamour and glitter of the city.

In recent times, there can be seen a discursive interest in the dichotomy between India and Bharat. In a nation where the average age of population is the thriving thirties, a considerable majority belong to the post-colonial, even post-Emergency generation. In a way these denizens are true hybrids in whom there is a desirable mixture of the best of the desi and the videsi (global), and for whom the burden of colonial yoke is mostly textual rather than empirical. Along with them are the growing Millennials – the post-1980s generation who have had a broader exposure to modernity as well as being digitally savvy. These groups form a major part of Bollywood's current audience.

A brief look at the history of Bollywood shows definite phases of evolution in terms of both theme as well as technique. From the pre-independent historic/patriotic movies to post-independent liberal-urban flicks, Bollywood has traversed a wide and varied path. Of late the industry has made another noticeable switch. From the rosy romances and flamboyant NRI family sagas, Bollywood now seems to round in on stories from the margins, from the rural belts far away from the cool campus and palatial bungalows and even the seamy underworld. This can be seen as indicative of a decentring of Mumbai, the heart of Bollywood. The changes are most manifest in setting and dialogues.

Language plays an important role in Bollywood. The industry has been almost singularly instrumental in giving currency to a version of the national language that is intelligible across the country. This is particularly significant when taken into consideration the multitude of languages India hosts. Bollywood manufactured a Hindi that was more eclectic than the original, most probably coined from the languages of all the people from

across the nation and the world who converged in Mumbai. As Salman Rushdie states in *The Moor's Last Sigh*:

. . . Bombay's garbage argot, *Mumbai ki kachrapati baat-cheet*, in which a sentence could begin in one language, swoop through a second and even a third and then swing back round to the first. Our acronymic name for it was *Hug-me*. Hindi Urdu Gujarati Marathi English. (7)

What Bollywood created was also this type of a mixed language. Named as Bumbaiyya Hindi, this filmy dialect reached out to every citizen mainly through film songs, dialogues and also advertisement jingles. As Shashi Tharoor avers, "Thanks . . . to the popularity of Bombay's Hindi cinema, Hindi is understood, if not always well spoken by nearly half the population of India . . ." (113). At the same time, as mentioned earlier, Bollywood also served in boosting the profile of Mumbai as the city of dreams, creating a pan Indian appeal to its landmarks, attitudes and culture. The cosmopolitanism and the merry attitude of 'anything goes' were spread across the nation through Bollywood cinema. As Suketu Mehta points out:

Through the movies, Indians have been living in Bombay all their lives, even those who have never actually been there. The wide sweep of Marine Drive, the beach at Juhu, the gateway to the West that is the Andheri airport – all these are instantly recognizable in Kanpur and Kerala. (377)

Most of the movies of the 1970s through to the 1990s also prominently featured the motif of urban migration, specifically migration to 'Bumbai' in search of better prospects. This interest in Mumbai as the destination was perhaps boosted by the cosmopolitan outlook that is one of the hallmarks of the city. As Sreya Mitra aptly says:

For [the dreamers], cities like Lucknow, Patna, Calcutta, or even the allure of the nation's capital, Delhi, the city of powerbrokers and politicians, do not exist as more attractive and viable alternatives, despite their geographical proximity. It is only Bombay – the *sapnon ka sheher* (city of dreams), the *maya nagari* (the magical city) – that offers them reprieve from the stifling conventionality and monotonous existence of rural and small-town India and, consequently, the only city that promises to fulfil the proverbial 'rags to riches' tale of Hindi films. (139-40)

However, in a number of recent films, Mumbai seems to be decentered or displaced in order to give place to regions hitherto rarely projected on the celluloid. Concomitant with this is the change in the language which now leans to rural dialects and other peers. Bollywood now seems at ease with using language as it is instead of mixing varieties. If

earlier Bollywood had smatterings of Punjabi and Urdu, now Bhojpuri, Bengali and a few other languages echo from the screen without being mixed with Hindi. This shift in language can be seen both in dialogues as well as songs.

There has been growing awareness and discussions on the impact of Bollywood cinema especially in the light of recent changes. As Ajay Gehlawat points out, Bollywood or Hindi cinema accounts for only 20 percentage of total film production in India but it has achieved a pan Indian success “. . . largely due to [their] commercial formulae, which are well known and can generally be seen as transcending the (regional) language barrier “ (54). There have also been arguments regarding the hegemony of Bollywood, which is urban and modern, which often undermines rural culture and outlook. Gehlawat further states echoing Bollywood critics: “Indians who watch Bollywood are participating in a mass hypnosis of sorts, one that . . . deprives Indians of their culture and their volition” (54). This accusation could mostly be targeting what is called the ‘Anglophone Hindi cinema’ which consciously projects a modern, urban, and even a global outlook. Blockbuster and even legendary movies such as *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge*, *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai*, *Kal Ho Na Ho*, *Kabhi Alvida Na Kehna*, *Wake Up Sid*, *Salaam Namaste*, *Hum Tum* can well be classified under this category. Common to most of these movies are factors such as the city, foreign locale and modern attitudes. It is indeed necessary to study how a rural audience would have responded to such movies.

The recent paradigm shift in Bollywood probably started with Ashutosh Gowariker’s *Lagaan* which grabbed international attention without any of the stock Bollywood formula, except perhaps for the profile of the leading hero. Set in a remote colonial village with typically rural cast *Lagaan* offered a different fare that took it to a global level by means of Oscar nomination. It also set the tone for what was later to become prominent as sports cinema. A decade after there came a series of biopics on forgotten or less known heroes from history and sports. *Guru*, *Bhaag Milka Bhaag*, *Mary Kom*, *Dangal* belong to this class wherein the narrative uses locale and language of the character depicted which, if translated into Bumbaiyya, would have been inadequate and unsatisfactory. Perhaps their stories required their own idiom to ensure authenticity. While this was indeed necessitated by the plot it must also be considered as part of decentering Mumbai and Bumbaiyya from Bollywood. Because these movies have been inspiration enough for similar others as also for the growing interest in history as evinced by period films such as *Bajirao Mastani*, *Padmaavat* and *Manikarnika*.

Some of the recent commercial movies such as *Sui Dhaaga*, *Batti Gul Meter Chalu*, and *Loveyatri* are set in Madhya Pradesh and Uttarakhand respectively and thereby offer alternative locales. Such movies seem to point to the possibility of narratives outside the tried and tested and now clichéd Bollywood formulae. By decentring a predominantly urban terrain what follows is a set of little narratives that shed light on different kinds of lives. For instance *Sui Dhaaga* narrates the story of a small town family and their efforts to come up in life. It effectively portrays the struggles and tribulations of a lower middle class family without painting it in too dark hues nor endowing on them an aura of suffering. It is a plain tale of how a couple embarks on self-employment and eventually develops a clothing brand and style. There is nothing of the over glamourised, brightly lit city, except perhaps towards the end as the venue for a show. Similarly, *Batti Gul Meter Chalu* exposes certain prevalent social concerns that hamper the lives of ordinary people. *Dhadak*, which launched two star kids, is also surprisingly mofussil in nature and has none of the trappings that launch films usually have. Other examples include films such as *Newton*, *Toilet: Ek Prem Katha*, *Secret Superstar*, *Nil Battey Sannata*, *Bareilly ki Barfi*, *Padman* among others, all of which present innovative story lines set in lesser known Indian towns. One important feature of most of these movies is the way they give particular attention to local cultural nuances. For instance in *Toilet: Ek Prem Katha*, mention is made of the superstitions held by the community in a humourously satirical manner. It can be said that these new set of movies seek to showcase different hues of regional cultures at the same time giving voice to collective concerns such as issues of hygiene.

Going back to the issue of language, it must be noted that there is a proliferation of local dialects in mainstream Bollywood cinema so much so that non-Hindi audience may have begun to find it difficult to follow; even actors undergo accent training. This trend is often interpreted as an attempt to enhance cinematic realism. According Pratik Ghosh:

Bollywood, of late, has been consistently churning out movies inspired by real life events, in which the plot revolves less around larger-than-life heroes and more around the common man. In tune with that, the backdrop has changed from exotic international locales to dusty villages in Rajasthan, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh and West Bengal. This transition is further reinforced by regional dialects.

While location changes can be welcomed as a means to showcase the nation on a broader scale, dialectical language could pose a problem for both national and international audience. Earlier, Hindi movies playing in southern states such as Kerala came without

subtitles. It was probably assumed that the audience who went for these movies would automatically follow the language. And it was so too since most of the audience were familiar with popular Hindi used in serials and other programmes on TV. AIR's Vividbharati and channels such as MTV too contributed in popularising the film songs which served to great extent in language acquisition. However, nowadays Hindi cinema comes with subtitles probably as part of multiplex package, but it would also be to aid the audience in following the dialogues. *Dangal* is a case in point wherein Aamir Khan speaks a tough Haryanvi accent which may be quite difficult to follow for people who are not conversant in Hindi.

Here it should also be noted that a shift in language can be seen in TV too. Whereas the earlier saas-bahu hits used the popular version of Hindi, increasingly most soap operas of today are set in mofussil towns or even hinterlands and accordingly make use of dialectical Hindi. Even Bollywood songs too have undergone remarkable transformation so much so that at times it is difficult to decipher the lyrics, which is often a heady blend of Hindi, Urdu, Punjabi, English and what not.

Thematically too Mumbai has been displaced in that now there are few narratives of dreaming it big in the city. Instead what the camera prefers to show is the dry and dusty yet beautiful environs of the hinterlands, the simple lives of ordinary people and their daily struggles, the growth of legends and so on. There is a satiated feel about the Queen's Necklace, the city skyline and the sea, the dark, threatening and eerie gullies as also the picturesque meadows and mountains of the West. Bollywood is in a way deglamourised and emphasises stark realism. As director Alankrita Shrivastava points out, Bollywood cinema has evolved from big cities to small towns to hinterlands. But these rural landscapes are neither idyllic nor ideal but are presented in all its true colours without any polishing. That is, there is no glorifying the rural terrain as was once the case. As she further states,

Now, falling in love in Europe and exploring foreign locales are over. Newer filmmakers are trying to look for stories that are more authentic and grounded. There is a lot to explore and portray in the smaller spaces. The big cities have already gone through the transitional phase. (98)

It is now established that Bollywood has gone beyond conventional formulaic films. There is a new set of filmmakers and actors who have expanded the scope of the industry immensely and who strive to bring in stories that have more than entertainment value. These cinematic shifts are indeed interesting as it shows a definite turning point in the evolution of Bollywood. Decentring of the Mumbai/city is also emblematic of the dismantling of a grand narrative that has made possible many new narrative views and voices to come to the fore. It

should also be noted that quite a number of popular actors of today also hail from places other than Mumbai and do not have a legendary film tradition behind them. Heroes and heroines are also now increasingly deglamourised and deurbanised. When movies with regional elements become part of the mainstream they also reach out to a national audience who get a chance to be familiar with aspects of their nation that were under-represented so far. It can also be seen as a pointer to the rise of Bharat, an identity that now encompasses a glocal attitude, confident in its native attributes at the same time being at home with global modernity.

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