

Globalization of Bollywood: The Role of Online Media Content in Reaching Global and Local Audiences

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Indian cinema has captivated the attention of many people throughout the world. With the help of globalization, audiences are able to view and interact with media that is created in places that are physically distant and far away. The globalization of Indian cinema, has been evident for decades now, going as far back as the 1990's.¹ This notion of globalization has been a critical catalysis for the movement of people across the world. This movement of people has allowed the support and ability for global Indian media content to enter Western landscapes; thereby diversifying the channels of entertainment and providing a new narrative being shared across the world.

Globalization has a major effect on the success of media, which is evident in Indian media. The availability and access of Indian cinema to international viewers is unprecedented. These productions are no longer bound to a geographical area with defined borders. Appadurai shares that, "we must be reminded that media create[s] communities with 'no sense of place.'"² The physical distance is no longer a barrier in this digital age – thus reshaping the entire landscape. This change in what was once a previously defined space is a natural occurrence as it is "historically produced" and "did not pre-exist so that people could act in or with them."³ Other people created these landscapes and now, as humans continue to progress and create, these landscapes will change once again. As these physical borders decrease, the effects media has will increase. This idea sheds light on the far-reaching effects Indian media has on the globe. Although filmed and produced in India, the media that comes from India is disseminated throughout the entire world, impacting billions of people each day.

Although many folks may not recognize the influence that Indian media has on the entire world, the fact remains that globalization continues to spread and diversify the messages people digitally receive each day. Scholars have expressed that the global is "the site of mutual transformation of circulating forms."⁴ Therefore, these global messages are bound to create major impacts on society. This is especially true since Kraidy explains that "if globalization is experienced locally, then each place encounters globalization differently."⁵ This essentially means that each location that receives these messages may react and engage with them differently. Therefore, it is important to understand how one of the largest media producers – Indian cinema – shares its messages internationally, what types of conversations are had in its productions, and how cultural heterogenization is apparent in these productions.

Moreover, streaming platforms such as Netflix, Amazon Prime Video, and Hulu have given global access to media productions that were once only able to be seen on the local level. This gives the possibility of sharing diverse cultural narratives across physical geographic borders that were once not possible. However, some cultural scholars have wondered if business tactics such as Netflix's expansion into 243 countries is a means for cultural hegemony.⁶ Ultimately, these same scholars have concluded that Netflix is not actively participating in cultural hegemony because they do not provide a "one-size-fits-all programming" to all the viewers globally.⁷

Although as previously mentioned, these streaming services do not necessarily promote cultural hegemony, they may contribute to cosmopolitanism. The idea of cosmopolitanism can be defined as the “openness to engaging with the other, and toward divergent cultural experiences.”⁸ Therefore, as more non-Indians interact with Bollywood media, there is engagement between Indian culture and other global cultures. This may result in a mixture of cultures – and where Bollywood is not the dominant culture – the idea of cosmopolitanism may occur. Based on all these observations mentioned and the opportunities globalization has offered the media industry, this study explores what communication channels Indian media uses to captivate its global audiences, along with what messages and themes are discussed in the various Indian media productions.

Globalization: The Effect on Indian media

Recognizing the reach Indian media has on the world is an indication of the Indian diaspora. Not only has this provided people with an abundant amount of content from the homeland, but it also exposes the globe to the Hindi cinema – also known as Bollywood. Anjali Ram, researcher at Roger Williams University, shares that most “first-generation immigrant women of the Indian diaspora” who participated in her study preferred using the term Hindi cinema.⁹ Originally, media scholars and researchers considered the term Bollywood to be offensive or degrading as it was simply trying to “westernize” Hindi cinema by combining the name Hollywood and Bombay (now known as Mumbai) – which is the location of many production sites. This Western term is evidence of the heavy influence and domination Western media has on the entire globe. Nevertheless, as time progressed, the popularity of the term Bollywood increased, and Ram interprets this partially due to the world recognizing Hindi cinema and the “brand” the industry has created globally.¹⁰

Understanding the interest by global Indian citizens, and their desire to consume Indian cinema, is important when understanding the success of Bollywood. Although much of this interest in Bollywood has come from these global Indian citizens, there is also a rising popularity in Hindi cinema by people who are not Indian. Researchers on Indian cinema have written extensively on the emergence of “Bollywood’s new coolness” in cosmopolitan areas.¹¹ Sen recognized the rise in popularity in the New York City area during the early 2000’s.¹² The highly successful film *Kal Ho Naa Ho* directed by Nikkhil Advani and starring the international Indian superstar Shah Rukh Khan takes place in New York City. Moreover, Appadurai talks about the idea of deterritorialization, which is the concept of people groups moving to other locations while also “creating exaggerated and intensified senses of criticism or attachment to politics in the home state.”¹³ Appadurai continues sharing that this allows for more opportunity in various economic sectors, including the film industry.¹⁴ An example of this is Bollywood.

The diaspora and its influence on Hindi cinema is important to recognize in this industry’s success. Ram defines the diaspora as “communities composed of exiles, refugees, and immigrants.”¹⁵ Bollywood diasporic productions therefore take place outside of India, observing how the Indian interacts with the non-Indian world around them. This is often seen when films

compare Indian culture with other nations – thereby helping to propagate the beliefs, cultures, and attitudes of India while abroad. In older Bollywood films, this juxtaposition is seen more fervently as India – or the East – being the moral, traditional, and sacred; while the West is seen as an evil, foreign land.¹⁶ The dichotomy between the two geographic locations help create an environment that both interests the viewer abroad, and also the audiences domestically, that is, in India.

***Dil Dhadakne Do's* Conjunction with Traditional Indian Lifestyles**

Although older Bollywood films display Indian culture more blatantly, it is still evident in as recent as the 2015 film *Dil Dhadakne Do*. This film discusses several topics about traditions and family norms within everyday Indian life. Although this film may not use an orthodox way to discuss these topics, it brings an opportunity to converse about culture in ways that otherwise may be difficult. Nevertheless, even though this film discusses difficult and heavy topics, it does so in a comedic way.

For example, one display of traditional Indian culture within *Dil Dhadakne Do* is the idea of marriage and motherhood, which is extremely important and held to traditional values in India. In the film, the daughter, Ayesha, is married to a successful businessman named Manav. She determines that she is not happy in her marriage. She becomes more vocal in her discontent after she is chatting in a lounge with her husband, along with her brother, Kabir, and several other people. In this scene, viewers truly see the characteristics of Manav as he says sexist remarks to Ayesha in an ironic attempt to appear not sexist. Kabir calls Manav out on the sexism he just witnessed, but Manav brushes it off. Later that night, Ayesha tells Manav that she wants a divorce, which later turns into a family meeting with both Ayesha's parents and Manav's mother. Her parents try to insist that she should remain in the marriage and have a child, which should remove any issues. Ayesha continues to express that she does not love Manav and a child will not resolve the problem. Kamal, the father, is not content with this answer and begins to yell at his daughter to continue the marriage – irritating Ayesha leading her to leave the room, thereby being a visual representation of her being disowned by her family.

Further in the film, the family has another meeting regarding the marriage of Ayesha and Manav. This time Manav gets more upset and raises his voice and forcibly grabs Ayesha. At this point, Kamal becomes furious with Manav for treating his daughter that way. He recognizes the character flaws that Manav has, and ends up apologizing to Ayesha for not being more understanding in the situation.

As evidently witnessed in the aforementioned scenes, the idea of marriage and divorce are major cultural decisions that must be made carefully. Both of Ayesha's parents find her desire to get divorced troubling. In a traditional Indian culture, this could be a terrible outcome because being a wife gives the opportunity to become a mother – and motherhood is extremely valued. Gokulsing and Dissanayake explain the significance of motherhood in Indian cinema saying “she is caring, steadfast in her devotion to the family, nurturing and upholding moral values.”¹⁷ Ultimately, Ayesha's parents may be trying to preserve this valued characteristic in

their daughter. If Ayesha divorces, not only is it embarrassing for the family, but she may also lose an opportunity to become a mother, which would be a disgrace.

Moreover, this also sheds light on why the family suggested having a child. They thought becoming a mother and having that honor would outweigh the burdens of being married to someone who is sexist. This is ironic however, because Ayesha's mother was having issues with her husband at the same time despite already having two children.

This is only one example of the ways conservative Indian culture is propagated within Hindi cinema. There are plenty of other scenes in this film, along with other films and series that demonstrate the value of living a more traditional, or sacred, way of life – in the standards of conservative Indian culture.

Streaming Services & The Internet

Not only has Bollywood become more globally popular within the past two or three decades, the channels these studios have been able to use to disseminate the films and media has played a critical role in the globalization of Hindi cinema. The development of the internet and the growing bandwidth within the past ten years allows for new forms of distribution. The internet and new media have allowed this segment of the industry decades to captivate and intrigue viewers throughout the world. With the rise of streaming services such as Netflix and Hulu, these platforms have provided a much bigger audience for Indian media. People are no longer required to subscribe to international package deals with cable companies, but rather they are able to view whatever programs they wish through digital means and pay-per-view.

Even prior to the internet, it was easy for Bollywood cinema to be distributed to the average global citizen because the theatres were able to present these productions. However, with an entertainment series, it was more difficult to distribute shows because the most popular channels in each country would air original content that was usually made domestically. As a result, it would become much harder for a Bollywood entertainment series to be aired internationally – without the need for special cable plans. As previously mentioned, streaming services helped this issue. Platforms like Netflix, Amazon Prime Video, even Apple TV have contributed to the growth for international entertainment series.

A Case Study: *Mirzapur* and its Relationship with the Forces of Globalization

The web series *Mirzapur* directed by Karan Anshuman and Gurmmeet Singh is a crime/gangster web series that was released on Amazon Prime Video in 2018. *Mirzapur* is not a traditional Bollywood style production – in the way that one would see films. This series does not attribute the standard stereotypes and ideas that are often seen in Indian cinema. Perhaps this departure from traditional Bollywood cinema stems from the desire to “...provide a ‘legitimate’ and acceptable image of India...” as Sen explains and goes further to say has somewhat resulted from the “...post-globalized Indian film industry...”¹⁸ Moreover, this different style of representation within the series may create a higher relatability between characters and viewers.

By being released on Amazon Prime Video – a streaming service – it provides a much larger audience range as aforementioned. Even actors from the series recognize this. As Vikrant Masset says in an interview, “Digital medium has a [much] vaster reach more than any other medium as the content is watched globally, in various countries at the same time.”¹⁹ As a result, more people are able to experience the series and be exposed to a portion Indian culture.

Streaming services have revolutionized the film/media industry. The amount of content that is published digitally and shared through the internet allows viewers to access media like never before. The internet enables individuals to communicate over vast distances that simply were not possible in the past. This correlates to Yochai Benkler’s definition of a network information economy. It is explained as, “Individuals can reach and inform or edify millions around the world.”²⁰ Therefore, not only has the internet allowed Bollywood productions to be disseminated in ways like never before, but it also has allowed for discourse regarding these topics. People are able to share their thoughts and opinions with each other, regardless of where they are physically.

Yet there are hindrances. Netflix releases different content in different countries, for example. Therefore, an individual in the United States has access to certain programs/films while an individual in Singapore may be viewing different content. Nevertheless, there is still global content being released through these services. Other platforms such as YouTube, Vimeo, or other free websites allow glimpses into these paid genres. In other words, one can search the trailer for *Dil Dhadakne Do* on YouTube and determine whether they would want to watch the full film. Another positive aspect to media is that the consumers are not restricted to streaming services alone, consumers also have the option to purchase media through pay-per-view. This allows the viewer to select what they want, rather than having to pay a scheduled fee for streaming services. Although this is less common for an entertainment series, it is still possible.

Despite releasing the most films in the world, Indian Cinema – more specifically Bollywood – is often stereotyped as the film genre with song, dance, and long durations. While these may be characteristics of Bollywood films, it does not necessarily mean all Bollywood productions are as such. *Mirzapur* does not perform the common Bollywood characteristics, such as song and dance. Marková shares that other thrillers such as *Mission Kashmir* also does not show many song and dance numbers.²¹ Marková mentions that Indian thrillers “try to expose Indian viewers to something of the way in which the love for one’s country can exist regardless of religion, and to the specific Indian ties of love within the family, and much more, and this is in spite of some naiveties.”²² This has a major impact, especially when it comes to the diaspora. Many folks may grow their patriotism towards India through these productions, despite living abroad. These are characteristics that are not seen in Western, Hollywood films. Most mainstream Hollywood productions are not patriotic in nature.

Finally, Indian crime thrillers not only have an impact on the Indian viewers’ patriotism, but it also brings speculation to the global Indian. Many diasporic Indians may wonder if the city of Mirzapur is filled with crime and illegal activity, thereby creating interest in learning about a city in their homeland. This creates a relationship and a renewed interest in the possible issues

that arise in India, regardless if the depictions in productions are accurate. Ultimately, this contributes and reinforces the idea of patriotism – which is a common characteristic of Indian thrillers, but also Bollywood. The following sections describe some themes of *Mirzapur* and the topics shown in this series. All the topics are global issues; however, they are shown in India, thereby making them local issues as well. This concept of taking the global and making it relevant to the local is known as cultural heterogenization – more commonly known as glocalization.

Corruption & Violence

One of the most prevalent themes in *Mirzapur* is corruption. The entire series revolves around the family of Kaleen Bhaiya who owns and operates the family's successful gun and carpet business in the city of Mirzapur. However, the actual reason for this business is to support the gang the family leads. The family sells guns to the citizens of Mirzapur as a means to protect themselves, but it is Kaleen Bhaiya's goons that are spreading fear in the community. In addition to profiting by spreading fear, Kaleen also uses his carpet business in order to, corruptly, transport opium throughout the neighborhood. Many of his workers place these drugs inside the carpets to securely transport them without being caught. Kaleen also uses many people within these communities to transport the drugs and he ultimately profits significantly from his business as being a drug dealer and also selling firearms to the people of Mirzapur.

Given that Kaleen is extremely successful in the business, he is willing to be violent within the community and not afraid of murdering people for his benefit. Kaleen Bhaiya and his family gained a reputation within Mirzapur as the 'King of Mirzapur'. From the start of the series, Kaleen Bhaiya's son, Munna, accidentally kills a groom at a wedding – yet faces no consequences. The family of the groom file a lawsuit against Munna for the murder of their son. However, Munna tracks the lawyer who is taking the case and threatens him, his wife, daughter, and two sons. The two sons, Guddu and Bablu, fight back and eventually get brought back to Kaleen as he was impressed with their bravery. Guddu and Bablu end up working for Kaleen, and in return, they request that their father drop the case. The boys are unable to convince the father to drop the case, so they eventually go to the groom's family and threaten to kill them if they don't drop the case – they comply.

These examples of violence simply show how powerful and authoritative Kaleen is and the agency his family has on the entire city of Mirzapur. The themes of violence and corruption are crucial in the plot of this series. However, it may also be problematic for the series to focus on the violence and corruption in Mirzapur, because in actuality, Mirzapur is not a dangerous location, but rather in one of the safest states in India to live in.²³ On the global level, this may create the notion that Mirzapur, and India, is a dangerous place filled with crime, violence, and corruption. Ultimately this may result in stereotypes and racism towards Indians. Although it is the responsibility of the viewer to have proper media literacy and analyze the content correctly, designing the series like this may create confusion for the viewer. Perhaps a better alternative would be to have the series take place in a fictional location.

Gender, Romance, and Patriarchy

The role of gender played a significant role in the series *Mirzapur*. From the first episode of the series, when Munna comes to demand that Guddu and Bablu's father drop the lawsuit, he spends time flirting with their sister, showing his position of privilege and how he would objectify women. However, this is not tolerated by all people. Sweety, Munna's love interest is not interested in him and is not afraid to tell that to him. This makes him furious as he is unable to get what he wants, which ultimately leads him to kill her by the end of the series.

Continuing to understand how the series discusses gender, there is a 'gang' known as the tranny gang, which is comprised of transgender folks. One can observe how society has treated these people because they constantly need to beg for money in order to survive. Moreover, the police do all they can to avoid interaction with them, only talking to them when necessary. Guddu and Bablu use this to their advantage to sell opium. They recruit the transgender gang as distributors, relying on the idea that the police won't search them for the drugs. The gang then places the drugs high up on their thighs to hide them. In return, Guddu and Bablu said they would give them compensation for their work, meaning they would no longer need to beg for money anymore.

Near the end of the series, the police develop a hunch that the transgender gang are distributing the opium to Mirzapur. They end up taking the gang and begin abusing them – hitting them and demanding that they confess. They even go to the extent of asking them to undress and show between their legs if the drugs were there. The drugs were not found there, but rather hidden between their breasts. The officers begin beating them even more. The officers were doing this because they knew that no one would advocate for the transgender people. This is a representation how in the global society, transgender folks are often overlooked and degraded as less than human.

The romance that Munna displays throughout the series is unique in the sense that he comes from a place of privilege and feels as if he owns everything. It is obvious that he has an obsession with sex. He also, literally, acts as an animal in the sex scenes, growling and being rough. This leads to the idea that Munna is more animalistic in nature, and his true side is mostly seen during these moments – however his animalistic characteristics can be seen multiple other times throughout the series as well, such as when he kills people.

The series not only discusses romance with Munna, but also with his father Kaleen Bhaiya. His wife is often sexually dissatisfied with him, and she clearly expresses that to him. Throughout the series, she will secretly hook up with one of the servants, Raja. Towards the end of the series, Kaleen's father, who's surname is Tripathi, discovers this and is upset. He tells her that "only the Tripathi will fall into you" and forces her to have sex with him as punishment. Not only does this show how the Tripathi family treats women as objects, but it also shows their corruptness, which is represented in their inability to be good sexual partners. Every experience the Tripathi men had with women were negative, alluding to the idea they are evil people.

Furthermore, these three examples show the patriarchy in the series, and how people are poorly treated if they are not male. Regardless of whether it is the Tripathi family or the police, it

is evident based on the interaction of the Mirzapur community that men get a higher position in society because they are men. This is important to notice because the series shows this ideology explicitly, whereas in other genres and productions, this ideology can be more subtle.

Class & Status

Class and status can be seen in multiple ways through the various characters. For example, Guddu and Bablu come from a very humble family. They do not have the most luxurious home, nor do they have a reliable vehicle of transportation. Their father is a lawyer and does all he can to support their family. He is also considered honorable because even after Guddu and Bablu join the Tripathi gang, he refuses to take their money and gifts. Guddu and Bablu end up continuing to work for the Tripathi gang because they realize that it is a stable source of income that will change their lifestyle from lower middle class to upper middle class.

In addition, it appears that many people in the city of Mirzapur live in poverty. This is a problematic issue as the Tripathi family has become extremely wealthy in corrupt ways such as taking advantage of the citizens. Even the police department has fallen to the corruption of Kaleen Bhaiya. Many of them have taken bribes to improve their social status. Sadly, this has resulted in more corruption, ultimately leading to the community to fall into greater poverty.

Moreover, as previously mentioned, the transgender community at Mirzapur were considered a lower status. They did not have jobs, but instead had to beg on the streets until Guddu and Bablu recruited them for drug dealing. These folks were considered as castaways since most people did not want to interact with them, even law enforcement. Ultimately, it appeared that most people in Mirzapur lived in poverty and the lower class as Kaleen benefitted from them. These depictions of class and status in the fictional series may be a juxtaposition with the reality of many people currently living in India. It expresses who is valued in Indian culture and society, who has the most privileges, and how it affects them.

Viewing *Mirzapur's* Issues from a Global Perspective

Mirzapur is a small town in the northern part of the country; yet all the issues discussed in *Mirzapur* are global issues. *Mirzapur* simply shows them from the local lens. Class, status, patriarchy, gang violence, or financial troubles are all seen throughout the world. A majority of *Mirzapur* captures the idea that there is some form of power imbalance. Whether this power imbalance is caused by patriarchy, gang violence, or another reason, the plot develops significantly from these issues. Moreover, many folks can relate to these difficult issues because they are global problems. Narratives like *Mirzapur* are successful because they speak to the global and the local simultaneously. In addition to Bollywood's desire to appeal to the diasporic Indian by creating a series that talks about global issues in a local context, stories like this allow non-Indians to appreciate, understand, and connect while simultaneously providing them a glimpse into Indian culture and society.

Moreover, the direct results of the issues from the series show humanity, and human character traits that usually develop from hardships. Within the topic of patriarchy in the series, the viewer can see the effects abuse has on characters. Although this is a problematic issue, we see certain characters grow from these problems. Golu is one of these characters. After being treated terribly and having witnessed the murder of Sweetie, her sister, she develops the strength to shoot Munna. Although she misses, it causes enough of an uproar for her and Guddu to escape. This development of courage and strength can be seen in the everyday life of people. Although perhaps the issues that many people face may be less severe – or possibly more severe in certain cases – people grow and become stronger through difficult times and hardships.

The issue of gang violence and the problems it brings can be seen throughout the world. *Mirzapur* shows how gang violence shapes communities, including their unintended consequences. By the end of the series, Mirzapur has gained some form of resistance and tolerance against Kaleen's gang due to the increased sales of guns. People may feel safer and more confident to fight back against any threat. Obviously, this was not an intended outcome by Kaleen, but it was a direct result of him selling guns to the community. In the real world, this is seen when countries create deals with other countries, or even when governments make legislation without properly anticipating what could occur. Unintended consequences and problems are quite frequent in life, just as it was in *Mirzapur*.

Mirzapur discusses many of the issues that come along with financial needs. Many people seemed to benefit from the increase in sales of Kaleen's illegal business endeavors. More folks in the city received the opportunity to work and make money, specifically the transgender gang. This is important because it develops the idea that people are willing to do anything, even unethical things – such as selling drugs – to either survive or climb up the social class ladder. The same not only goes for the transgender gang, but also Guddu and Bablu. Everyone knew that Kaleen's gang was evil, yet they still chose to work there for the sake of money. Everyone did this except Bablu's father, who rejected the gifts that were given to him, because he saw it as corrupt money. In the everyday person's life, people are forced to make choices that are either ethical or unethical. The series communicates that most people are unethical by nature, and only a handful of people will choose to be good when given the choice.

Mirzapur shares a message that nobody's life is perfect. There are people who live corrupt and immoral and will do anything they can to keep the power they have. They abuse the people around them to help them achieve this goal. Furthermore, the people who are considered 'good' can change in an instant, willing to sacrifice their morals for the sake of a better life, finances, or safety and security. Although this series takes place in India, it can just as easily happen anywhere else as these are basic human nature tendencies. Overall, these messages – which are both global and local at their core – are distributed to a worldwide audience. *Mirzapur* thereby becomes a beautifully crafted series that shows the life and conditions of what many people may experience. Whether people's experiences actually occur as the ways that are depicted in the show, or in alternative ways, the issues that this series focuses on makes it relatable on a global scale.

Conclusion

Overall, the globalization of Bollywood has enabled diasporic Indians to engage with entertainment, issues, and topics that are discussed in India. Web series such as *Mirzapur*, although not portraying the accurate depiction of the city of Mirzapur, provides insight into the native entertainment industry of India. It gives a glimpse to how the culture and media industry has shifted throughout the years – providing those who have moved from India to other areas of the world an update on what is popular and trending in Indian cinema.

Technological advancements, such as streaming and similar platforms have allowed for Indian media content to be shared globally. Twenty years ago, the internet did not fully enable people to stream from their homes. Folks had to go to the cinema to watch the latest Bollywood film. Regardless, the internet did not make the Hindi media industry go global, as it already was doing this by the late 90s and early 2000s. The internet did enable the popularity and “coolness of Bollywood” to increase, while also allowing more channels to disseminate these messages to the global audience. Moreover, the relationship between the global and the local in this industry have contributed to the growth and development of Bollywood. The joint development of globalization, along with the advancements of technology such as the internet, has allowed these geographic boundaries to decrease, and pushed messages to locations further than ever before.

This study sought to discover what communication channels have been used by Bollywood to captivate its global audiences. These channels have been only the traditional ones such as movie theatres and television, which have now evolved to include the internet and streaming services. Over time, these channels have evolved to include messages that serve as responses to human, technological, and cultural changes. This research also discussed the messages and themes prevalent throughout Bollywood productions such as *Dil Dhadakne Do* and *Mirzapur*. Each production discussed different topics that related to people at different levels. *Dil Dhadakne Do* addressed issues that were more local, related to Indian culture such as the value of marriage and motherhood; while *Mirzapur* discussed social problems such as corruption, financial struggles, class and social status – which are all global issues. In this way, global Indian media content has evolved to include issues that are global in reach and local in content.

NOTES:

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