<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Foreign films and their influence on cultural values - the Indian experience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Author(s)</td>
<td>Vasudev, Anura</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date</td>
<td>1986</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>URL</td>
<td><a href="http://hdl.handle.net/10220/535">http://hdl.handle.net/10220/535</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rights</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Foreign Films & Their Influence On Cultural Values -
The Indian Experience

By

Anura Vasudev
The invention of cinema in the west led to a long Western domination over the means of production and most importantly, of distribution. As a result, its impact as a social force took on as much significance as the birth of a new Art. The captive markets of the rest of the world were flooded with images that reflected the own culture of the countries of Europe and America from where they originated. With no challenge to the cultural imperialism these countries enjoyed, allowing no opportunities for any kind of equal cultural exchange, their cinemas filled our minds and imagination to the exclusion of our own visions, hopes, ideals, sensitivities. Western cinema, predominantly Hollywood films, bequeathed to us its notions of history, its ideologies, its conceptions of heroes and villains, its own ideals of aesthetics and morality. And for all those decades we submitted to it. We had no choice.

In India, before new technologies transformed the mass media and made them an ubiquitous factor in our lives, the single most pervasive influence on behaviour, ideas and attitudes, was the cinema. Hollywood. A powerful advocate of the American way of life. With the market flooded with American films in the post-war, pre-Independence period, and the absence of any other means of information-entertainment-communication, it was inevitable that a disoriented urban elite, cut off from its own cultural roots through the years of colonial rule, disdainful of the popular Indian film, should fall an easy prey to such seductive images and take them as norms for both behaviour and morality. Urban adolescents, chafing under parental restrictions, teetering uneasily between Western sophistication and traditional conditioning, turned to these films for an initiation into the ways of the world that was emerging. Apart from superficial modes of dressing and eating, even relationships tended to pattern themselves on what was seen in these films. For the affluent young, it was the music, the dances, the jeans, the ideas of love and marriage that were acquired from Hollywood films. These, they thought, were the signs of modernity.
Equally damaging was the window on the world that Hollywood opened for us in India in those early years. We inherited its attitude to others through its distorted, Anglo-Saxon dominated, racial prejudices. With the Hollywood film we looked on the Frenchman as the indefatigable lover, the Frenchwoman as the eternal, elegant mistress; at 'Latin Americans', lumped together, as smooth-talking, oily and not to be trusted; at 'Africans' as primitive and childlike; at 'Asians' as inscrutable, faintly menacing Orientals. Along with average American audiences, we learnt to distrust the 'Red Indians' as cruel, implacable enemies, identifying rather with the dynamic, courageous white man opening up the Wild West for 'civilisation.'

The stereotypes developed by Hollywood came to us unchallenged by any attempt at genuine understanding. Together with an admiration for the free, open, relaxed American style with its ideal democratic norms. The effect was insidious because so well done. Who, for instance, could fail to be moved by the ex-butler's emergence as a free individual in Ruggles of Red Gap. Lent by his aristocrat employer to a wealthy mid-West American woman with social pretentions, her henpecked, basically free-and-easy (the American ideal) husband insists on treating the butler as a 'pal.' Ruggles is encouraged to strike out on his own, and makes a success of the English-style pub he opens. When his former employer arrives to reclaim him, Ruggles respectfully turns him down, quoting Lincoln's speech with its stirring sentiments about all men being created equal. Naturally we thrilled to these inspiring words and with them, to the spirit of America. It was much later that we recognised the brilliant use made of them and could look with less bemused attention at the harsh realities and the inequalities obtaining within that very system.

On another level and ultimately more durable level, our own Hindi (a generic name for the popular film made in Hindi in Bombay and which provides the model for similar ventures in other Indian languages) filmmakers learnt from them. But they transformed values of modernity to suit their own basically conservative value system. In brilliant inversions they showed, for instance, the love between two young people facing parental disapproval culminating in marriage when it turns out that the man or the woman is the long-lost son or daughter of family friends and that both sets of parents had always intended them to marry. By the young man.
3.

had always intended them to marry. Or the young man saves the girl's parents from a band of villains and earns their gratitude - and their daughter's hand in marriage. Or the young woman endears herself to his parents through her devotion and essentially traditional attitude. Westernization, considered reprehensible though attractive, would be shown through the life styles of the villains and vamps. Cultural values thus disseminated among a mass audience, allowed for an intrinsic divergence in attitudes to coexist peacefully. At the same time, styles of living learnt from the Western film, imposed themselves through the Hindi film. Western type furniture denoted affluence and sophistication. As did suits and ties for the men, dresses and skirts for the modern miss. Airy, loose, Indian clothes, minimally furnished interiors, were treated as old-fashioned, unsophisticated or just a sign of poverty. The outward manifestations of development appeared in a proliferation of electronic gadgets and a vocabulary laced with English words.

Today the foreign film is limited to theatres in large urban centres and to a thin layer at the top of the economic scale with its sights set firmly on the West. To do them justice, American filmmakers themselves are reevaluating their society through films that expose its ills. The result: films populated with dropouts, prone to drugs and guns, unhappy, lonely, lost - and tragic - figures. We see these images more clearly because the films no longer come to us isolated from other information sources. They have also lost out to the immense popularity of the Indian film.

In this, India suffered rather less than others. With our own film industry starting a rapid expansion with the advent of sound in the thirties, audiences in India by and large have preferred to see films in their own languages. Currently India makes around nine hundred films a year. Only about a hundred films are imported, and of these about fifty are American.

The most significant factor now is the proliferation of easily-procurable, usually-pirated video cassettes. Not only do they represent a much wider range in terms of subject and quality than what goes into the theatres, but they also bypass the censorship rules. Video cassettes so easily available make a mockery of the somewhat puritanical censorship of scenes of sex and nudity and violence to which films shown in the theatres are subjected. 'Video parlours' have sprouted all
over the country showing sometimes even hard core pornography at
a fraction of the price of a regular theatre ticket. Where cinema
had remained a principally urban based phenomenon all these years,
with the occasional travelling show held in tents or the open air,
in rural areas not too far removed from urban areas, today the
video parlours, together with television, have penetrated deep into
the countryside. But by and large, it is the Hindi film that is the
real draw. Its only challenge is television with its vastly popular
soap operas (in Hindi) with the big commercial filmmakers and film
stars are taking to in increasing numbers. The most interesting
aspect of this is that they follow the pattern of the Hindi film
rather than the kind of specialised, made-for-television programmes
in the West. But consumerism is creeping in, assisted by slick,
clever advertising campaigns whose models are unmistakeably American.

Today, the sahvp reaction of the industrialised nations to
the concept of "a balanced flow of information" formulated by the
developing countries, reveals how politically sensitive the issue
is. For the end of political domination did not
spell the end of economic and cultural domination. In this, the
dissemination of information plays a fundamental role. And, as we
all know, all forms of entertainment - particularly the cinema - are
potent carriers of information.