INDIA'S POPULAR CULTURE IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

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ABSTRACT:

This paper will explore India's influence on Southeast Asia during the 20th century, with a focus on its cultural dimensions. The Indian independence movement in particular played a significant role in shaping ideologies and spurring the creation of various movements and political groups in Southeast Asia during the early part of the 20th century. In the past couple of decades there has been a dramatic rise in the popularity of Indian cinema, dance, art and music among Southeast Asian audiences. Traditional and contemporary forms of Indian dance and theatre have gained recognition in Southeast Asia as many of its cities have begun to strive for world-class status through developing thriving scenes of the arts and tourism hotspots. Bollywood dance classes have accompanied the fitness-craze that has made its way from the United States to Southeast Asia. Hindi films have garnered a mass appeal not only among Indian diaspora in Southeast Asia but also among non-Indians, many of whom are familiar with the three 'Khans' of Bollywood – Shahrukh, Salman and Aamir, arguably the industry's biggest stars.

INTRODUCTION:

India's Cultural Influence Singapore One of the most important Indian influences in Singapore in the 20th century can be traced to the Indian independence movement, in particular the influence of Subhas Chandra Bose, one of the key figures in India's struggle for independence. On the invitation of revolutionary freedom fighter Rash Behari Bose, he arrived in Singapore on 2 July 1943. The Singapore chapter of Subhas Chandra Bose's life marks an important part of the story of the Indian independence struggle as he "proclaimed the formation of the Provisional Government of Free India at the Cathay Cinema Hall"2 in Singapore on 21 October 1943. His time in Singapore was equally important for the island-state for several reasons. While "the ideology of the Indian Independence Movement heightened the awareness of Singaporean Indians to their group status within a discriminatory system",3 it also "inspired progressive movements such as trade unions and women's groups"4 in Singapore. Influence of Indians in Southeast Asia In addition to the way Indian filmmakers have increasingly claimed for themselves a physical presence in Southeast Asia,

evident from their choice to film in the region, the films themselves depict other Indians who have made a presence for themselves in Southeast Asia. These include banking and IT professionals. Such Indians are often conveyed as models of success through the affluent lifestyles they lead in modern and international cities such as Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, Jakarta and Bangkok. The effects of this are numerous. Firstly, it reflects the growth in migration over the past two decades of Indians who have flocked to cities in Southeast Asia in search of job opportunities in the financial and IT sectors. Secondly, the featuring of such characters in films conveys the global aspirations of Indians. The narrative of an Indian working in a swanky office in Southeast Asia, driving an expensive car and being fully immersed in a vibrant night life and a social circuit of the wellto-do, is an extension of the idea of India commanding a greater presence in Southeast Asia, and this is likely to become a fixture in Hindi cinema.

METHOD:

Currently, Indonesia, more than most other countries in Southeast Asia, remains most heavily influenced by aspects of Indian culture. Bahasa Indonesia (the nation's official language) along with "Javanese and Balinese have all absorbed a great deal of Sanskrit vocabulary".27 Hinduism features prominently in day-to-day life, especially in the islands of Java, the most densely populated of Indonesia's islands, and Bali, the most popular tourist destination in the country. The pervasive legacy of Hinduism across Indonesia, not as a widely practiced religion but as a visual presence, is most evident from the 20,000 rupiah currency note of Bank Indonesia which has an inscription of an image of the Hindu God Ganesh. The very inscription of Ganesh on something as ubiquitous and significant as a currency note − an item that is strongly linked to national identity, is more frequently and widely used than almost anything else, and is of both economic and emotional value in people's lives − conveys the impact that Hinduism has managed to retain on the cultural landscape of Muslim-majority Indonesia.

DESCRIPTIONS:

The history of Singapore has seen the coming and going of several cinemas which have shown Hindi films, yet for much of the late-2000s, there was only one cinema house in Singapore where moviegoers could watch Hindi films - Bombay Talkies, a Hindi-specialist cinema located on Beach Road. Demonstrating the growing influence of Hindi cinema in Southeast Asia is the way in which this situation has changed dramatically over the past few years. Since 2011, Singapore's leading cinema exhibitor, 'Golden Village', which has 11 multiplexes and over 73 screens around the island, started offering Hindi films for viewing in several of its locations alongside its offering of mainstream Hollywood films. The impact of this on Hindi cinema's accessibility in Singapore cannot be understated. Both the popularity of Golden Village cinemas and their accessibility, in that these cinemas are located all across

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the island, have meant that the reach of Hindi cinema in Singapore has widely expanded to cover not only Hindi-speaking but also local audiences. The gap in the market provided the ideal setting for Hindi films, with their universal themes and ideas, to become a popular source of entertainment in Malaysia's multi-ethnic and multireligious society. This is particularly because Hollywood, the other popular form of cinema that has "dominated the Malaysian cinema for so long",13 is less of a competitor but rather more of an alternative to Bollywood's brand of fun and escapism. This is because Malaysian audiences turn to Hollywood for their concept-driven films, "effective use of technology"14 and special effects, unlike the films of Bollywood that attract audiences based on their usage of music, dance and romance. Furthermore, the fact that "Bollywood films" used to be "broadcast on Malaysian television channels without subtitles"15 despite most ethnic Indian Malaysians, let alone the general Malaysian population, being unable to speak Hindi, is a sign of the power such films carry in Malaysian society. This is because the most popular portions of Bollywood films, the song and dance sequences, hardly require an understanding of the language being spoken or sung in order to be truly enjoyed.

CONCLUSION:

When it comes to India's cultural influence in the form of cinema, Thailand presents an interesting contradiction. Indian cinema in Thailand has never been able to regain the relevance it once had, yet out of all the Southeast Asian countries, it is Thailand that has proven to be most popular among Indian filmmakers in recent years as a shooting location. "In 2003, 31 Indian films were shot in Thailand. The number rose to 104 in 2009, according to Film Journal International".19 The past few years may have seen almost as many films from India being shot in Thailand, as an "estimated one hundred Indian films were filmed in Thailand" in 2012. In fact, "in the first nine-months of 2012, India is the second country after Japan that has shot the most number of films (movies, TV, documentaries, and commercials in Thailand), totalling 94 projects and contributing US$ 5.8 million to the Thai tourism industry". 20 In addition to its popularity, Thailand is an increasingly relevant and bankable destination for Indian filmmakers. All the most recent films to be shot in Southeast Asia were done in Thailand, some of which have been the most successful at the box office. The Salman Khan and Katrina Kaif action film 'Ek Tha Tiger', the second most financially successful Bollywood film of 2012, was shot in Thailand, along with the sixth-highest grossing film that year, 'Housefull 2', and 'Student of the Year', which was the highest-grossing film in the month of October 2012 when it was released. It can therefore be said that the visibility of Thailand in Indian cinema has hardly diminished. The possibility that the cultural similarities between the two countries have allowed Bollywood to become a phenomenon in Indonesia can be seen from how "the Hindi film Kuch Kuch Hota Hai (1998) was a bigger box office success than "Titanic" when it was screened in Indonesia, and when the same film was shown on TV (2002), ratings shot through the roof (Ostepeev 2011)".29 In many cases, the ability of

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Bollywood films to do well in foreign markets where the influence of Hollywood looms large is attributed to the fact that they represent a completely different form of cinema and therefore attract a different kind of audience. The immense popularity of 'Kuch Kuch Hota Hai', which would have perhaps attracted a similar sort of audience as Titanic given that they were both marketed as romantic films, suggests that, genre aside, Indonesian audiences relate more closely to the characters in Hindi films, as well as to the "traditional values based on family honour and female chastity"30 that such films espouse. As the 1990s marked the time in which the narrative of Bollywood films began to dramatically shift, with the 'angry young man' action films of the 1980s giving way to romantic family dramas such as 'Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham' and 'Kal Ho Naa Ho', so did the meaning of Hindi cinema within public life in Indonesia. Representing a cleaner and more acceptable form of entertainment compared to those of previous decades, Hindi movies in the 1990s were able to capture a middle- and upper-class demographic in a way that the earlier movies could not. Much has been written on the historical and civilisational connections between India and Southeast Asia. This paper has aimed to contribute to the literature by mapping India's popular-culture influence in Southeast Asia during the 20th century and into the 21st century. The period has seen India wielding significant influence in Southeast Asia, starting with the Indian freedom movement which had played an inspirational role in the independence struggles of many Southeast Asian countries, and increasing in intensity during the latter part of the 20th century with the public proclamations of India's Look East Policy. In the two past decades, many Indian art forms have gained much popularity among Southeast Asian audiences. Since the 1990s, a dramatic change has occurred in the way Indian television- and cinema-products were consumed in Southeast Asia by local audiences. Replacing the darker tones and themes of the earlier decades was a glossy new vision of jet-setting Indians who played basketball and infused their Hindi with western slang. These films burst onto the screen at the same time that television sets were becoming a permanent fixture in middleclass households in Southeast Asia. As a result, such films became both culturally accessible.

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