

Teaching India with Popular Feature Films

A Guide for High School and College Teachers

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Introduction

Popular films tell us a lot about the culture where they are seen and enjoyed even though they may not reflect “reality” in the way that academics may want to portray a country. Popular films get at the deepest longings and fears of their viewership and their biggest hopes for the future. Teaching India through popular films is particularly important because that country is the largest producer of films in the world and claims some of the largest markets for films.

This article lists and describes some popular feature films that teachers can use to talk about India and their general themes. All of the films are quite appropriate for a high school or higher education audience, and all but one of them been made in India by Indian directors.

A Short Introduction to India

India is the second most populous country on earth and is the world’s largest democracy. Its written history spans many thousands of years from the Indus Valley Civilization, of which the earliest evidence dates back 9,000 years. All of the world’s major religions are represented in India, with Hinduism being the most prominent. The other significant organized religions include Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, Jainism, Zoroastrianism, and Sikhism.

The various dynasties that have ruled large regions in India include the Mauryas and the Guptas in the north and the Chalukyas, Cholas, and the Vijaynagar empires in the south. Later, the Mughal rulers from central Asia conquered much of India, followed by the British Empire. From the middle of the 1800s, Indians

organized to fight for their independence and they finally succeeded in 1947.

Before the British left, they divided the sub-continent into two nations, acceding to some Muslim demands for their own country by creating Pakistan. Since its independence India has burgeoned into the second most populous country and the largest democracy on earth.

Cultural Information

India is an extremely diverse country with a high degree of cultural continuity as well as syncretism. The Indian constitution recognizes 22 Indian languages and there are over 1600 dialects spoken by people in India. Hindi is spoken by a larger proportion of the population than the other languages, while Sanskrit, Tamil, Kannada, and Telugu are all considered classical languages.

Indian food is characterized by its complicated use of many spices that vary regionally. Rice is eaten in the south while wheat is the staple in the north. Pulses and vegetable protein are the predominant source of protein in the diet and dairy products, especially in the form of yogurt (or curds), are an integral part of most meals.

Caste

The Indian caste system has played a dominant role in community life, not just among Hindus but also among members of other religions. Caste is an important consideration when marriages are arranged and during communal celebrations. Historically, the major castes across the subcontinent have included the Brahmins (priests and teachers), the Kshatriyas (warriors and kings), Vaishyas (the merchants), and the Shudras (menial workers). The untouchables were outside of the caste system and performed chores involving ‘unclean’ objects.

Since independence, the government has made a concerted effort to deliver justice to those on the lower rungs of the caste

ladder by instituting the quota system in higher education and government positions. However, life for most Shudras and Dalits (the untouchables) is still oppressive.

The Arts

The Indian subcontinent has a rich tradition of both the fine and performing arts. There have been a number of influences on Indian sculpture, painting, architecture, dance, drama, and writing. Some of the earliest and most profound influences have been Buddhist. The characteristic Buddhist rock-cut sculptures were later imitated by Hindus and Jains. In the south, mural paintings by the Chola and the Chera kings survive.

The various musical styles of India have often borrowed from each other. Classical Indian music can be broadly categorized into the northern Hindusthani and the southern Carnatic styles. There are innumerable folk styles of music that have become popular with music composers in the film industry.

Indian dancing has a very long history with many different styles dominating in different regions of the country. During the British rule, public dancing was prohibited and there was a significant decline in the performance of Indian dances. Since India’s independence, the government has encouraged the development of both folk and classical dancing styles, with eight styles being designated as classical. These are: Bharatnatyam (Tamilnadu), Odissi (Orissa), Kathak (North India with Mughal influences), Kathakali (Kerala), Mohiniattam (Kerala), Kuchipudi (Andhra), Manipuri (Manipur) and Sathriya (Assam). Besides these, there are a multitude of folk dances that have thrilled both urban and rural Indians alike.

The Indian Film Industry

India produces more films than any other country and there are more people

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watching Indian commercial films than the number watching Hollywood films. In fact, every three months, a population equivalent to the entire population of India (1.3 billion), watch Indian films.

Indian films had their origins in the late 1800s and developed rapidly in the first few decades of the 20th century. The early inspirations for Indian films were the India mega-epics, Ramayana and Mahabharatha. The characteristics of even current Indian films borrow heavily from the classics, using side-stories and parallel narratives along with comic relief, all interwoven into the main plot of the feature film. Indian films have been influenced by the varied dance traditions in the sub-continent. Like ancient Sanskrit plays, almost all commercially successful films have catchy song and dance sequences, typically used to depict emotional themes.

In the last couple of decades, Hollywood has influenced Indian popular films in terms of both their themes and film-making style. Technology from the west has been freely adopted in Indian movies and today India has been a popular destination for Hollywood producers to send their films for editing and finishing.

Why Use Indian Films To Teach About India

In spite of the extraordinary number of films made within India, few get recognition or are distributed in the West. Some of them are watched outside of India, but mostly by Indians living in the West. Most films set in India that Westerners watch are made by Non-resident Indians with the aim to please the Western artistic and cultural sensibilities. Most Indians do not watch these films.

Films made in India by Indians have a different story grammar, take up local themes, and use traditional story-telling methods. Emotional expressions take the form of song and dance and the joys and sorrows are not muted, like they are in a Western context. Thus viewers have a much more intimate glimpse into ordinary lives in India.

In the following section, I have listed and described some acclaimed feature films that have dealt with the central themes of Indian life and culture. I have not included films (except one) that have been produced and directed by movie-makers outside of the sub-continent, even though they may have been popular with Westerners.

General Cultural Themes and Popular Films

The following are some films that are entertaining but also teach students about Indian culture, history, and current concerns. Most of them have been made in the last ten years; some are older but have been included because they have been considered cinematic milestones. Since India makes several hundred films a year it is hard to have an exhaustive list of all the great films that have been made. However, the list included for this article covers a wide variety of subject matter. The films are as follows:

Mirch Masala (Chilli-Spice)

Language: Hindi

Themes: Gender, Rural life in India

Set in colonial India, the film explores gender relationships in a small village in western India. The 'Subedar' or the chief law-enforcement office for the British government demands beautiful Sonbai entertain him sexually. Sonbai runs for shelter into a spice factory that employs many of the women in the village. The Subedar chases her into the factory while the women in the village, fed up with the constant torture from men in power, decide to collectively face the Subedar and his henchmen. The colors are beautiful in the film and the story is gripping.

Mr. And Mrs. Iyer

Language: Hindi and English

Themes: Caste and Religious conflict, prejudice, gender, and romance

The film garnered a number of awards in India. It is set in Bengal where a Muslim man (Raja Chowdhury) travels to Calcutta with a South Indian Brahmin woman (Meenakshi Iyer) and her infant son who he promises to look after for the duration of the ride. The tensions that arise between the couple because of their different religious affiliations are very sensitively portrayed by the actors. Their journey is disrupted by some fanatic Hindus who are hunting for Muslims. The rest of the film is about how Meenakshi and Raja take care of each other in the difficult circumstances that ensue. The violence in the film is implied, more than it is explicit, which makes it ideal for both middle and secondary school students.

Dharm (Duty)

Language: Hindi

Themes: Caste and religious issues, gender and social class

The film is set in Varanasi (Benares), one of the holiest pilgrimage destinations for Hindus. The wife of a poor but very orthodox Brahmin priest finds a baby boy who has been abandoned by a Muslim woman. The wife decides to hide the religious origins of the baby and brings him home since they do not have a son. The priest showers his love on the boy, only later discovering the truth that his wife has tried to hide from him. He decides to undergo a very rigorous penance for the religious infraction of touching a Muslim. In the midst of his torturous penance, the boy returns to seek refuge from religious fanatics who are attempting to murder him. The events that follow lead the Brahmin priest to realize that devotion to his deity involves humanity and compassion towards all human beings.

Firaaq (Separation/Quest)

Language: Hindi

Themes: The Gujarat riots of 2006, Hindu Muslim conflict

The film follows the lives of several people and families in the eastern state of Gujerat who were all involved in a bloody communal riot in 2006 between the majority Hindu community and the minority Muslim community. The film is based on real life narratives from about a 1000 people who were involved in the riots. The film depicts the conflicts and traumas that both the aggressors and the victims face in the years following the riots.

Ramayana (The epic story of Prince Rama)

Language: Hindi

Theme: Indian mythology

This animated version of the great Indian epic, Ramayana, traces the 7th incarnation of the supreme god Visnu, one of the three major gods in the Hindu pantheon. Rama is the first of four sons to King Dhirutharashtra. Even though he is the rightful heir to the throne of the kingdom of Ayodhya, his stepmother forces his ill father to hand over the kingdom to his brother Bharatha. Bharatha refuses his mother's wishes to ascend the throne, but Rama convinces him to rule while he is banished to the forest for 14 years. The film follows his adventures, culminating in Rama's final battle with the demon king

Promising Practices

Ravana. Through his many adventures his constant companions are his wife Sita and his brother Laxman.

Mahabharatha

Language: *English*

Theme: *Indian mythology*

This is the only foreign production that I have included in this collection, since there is no other film that entirely captures much of the long Indian epic Mahabharata. The film narrates the story of two warring families, the Pandava brothers who are five in number and the Kaurava brothers who number one hundred. The feud ends in an eighteen day war where the righteous Pandavas win against the evil Kauravas.

Akaler Sandhane (In Search of Famine)

Language: *Bengali*

Themes: *Rural poverty and activism*

In 1943 a massive famine kills five million Bengalis; the famine was not natural but was the result of war. In 1980 a film crew arrives on the site to document the famine. As the movie develops the present begins to resemble the past and there are weird omens of the future resembling the present.

The Apu trilogy (The three stories of Apu)

Language: *Bengali*

Themes: *Gender, poverty, social class, and work and family life*

The three films depict the life of Apu from birth to young adulthood. Following are the three films in order of chronology:

Pather Panchali (The song of the road) is the story of Apu's birth and childhood in a small village in Bengal. His father is an aspiring but frustrated writer and his mother has to raise his sister and he with the meager income that his father brings. Yet Pather Panchali brims with the innocence and joy of childhood.

Aparajito (The undefeated) depicts the middle childhood of Apu in Varanasi, the holiest city in India for Hindus. The passing away of his father brings new challenges to the family.

Apu Sansar (The World of Apu) depicts Apu as a young man forced to assume the responsibilities of adulthood at too young an age.

Swadesh: We, the people (Made in India: We the People)

Language: *Hindi*

Themes: *Community action, social justice, modern India's development choices*

This is a relatively recent release starring Shahrukh Khan, Bollywood's hottest star. Mohan Bhargava, a scientist, is a man of Indian origins who has lived in the U.S.A. for many years. He returns to India for a holiday only to be morally and ethically challenged by the terrible injustice in the countryside where his family lived. At first, he refuses to acknowledge the existence of poverty and then denies that he is personally responsible for changing the system in any way. Eventually, he is forced to confront the role that professionals like him have played in the socially unequal society that exists in India and the positive influence that he could have in changing the situation.

The Legend of Bhagat Singh

Language: *Hindi*

Themes: *The Indian Freedom Struggle, Bhagat Singh, social inequality*

The film is the story of one of the key leaders in the Indian independence movement from British rule. He was born in 1908 in Punjab where he grew up witnessing numerous atrocities committed on Indians who dared to challenge British rule. In college, he was exposed to socialism and he decided that freedom can have no value without class and caste equality. He sacrificed himself to the cause of independence and social change. Initially he was a member of the Congress Party along with Gandhi; he later left the Party and started his own agitation because he felt the Congress Party was not really challenging the deeply embedded inequalities in Indian society. The film stays faithful to the life of Bhagat Singh while exploring little known details about his life.

Asoka

Language: *Hindi*

Themes: *Asoka, Non-violence, Buddhism*

The film depicts the life of Ashoka (3rd century), a great Maurya king and warrior who conquers almost all of North India. His many battles lead him to the bloody fields of Kalinga where Ashoka's army had managed to decimate the local population

and claim the land. Suddenly Ashoka remembers his grandfather's words that sword when unsheathed constantly claims blood. He undergoes a tremendous transformation of heart and converts to Buddhism. He gives up his throne and dedicates his life to spreading his message of peace.

Junoon (Mutiny)

Language: *Hindi*

Themes: *The 1857 Indian Mutiny against the British, British Indian relationships, Social class during British rule*

1857 was an important year in the struggle for independence by Indians. There was a huge uprising by Indian soldiers in the employment of the Britishers. Even though it failed to overthrow the British government in India, it did result in tremendous changes in what the Indian masses thought was possible. The film is set amidst the chaos of the mutiny right after the leader of the Indian insurgents, Mangal Pandey, was killed. Romance, jealousy, and family squabbles all get full play as the Indian elite struggled to identify their loyalties and the British march into Delhi.

Parineeta (A Married Woman)

Language: *Hindi*

Themes: *Love and faith, social class*

This was a low budget film that was a huge box-office hit in India. It is a light, entertaining film, but it does explore the issue of class and gender in Calcutta of the 1960s. Lolita, a young orphan girl, befriends a rich boy, Shekhar, in her neighborhood and they form a deep friendship. His greedy father however, eyes Shekhar's huge hereditary mansion and wants to grab it to convert it into a hotel. The father attempts to create distance between Shekhar and Lolita. Eventually of course, love triumphs!

Makhdee (Spider)

Language: *Hindi*

Themes: *Gender, childhood adventures, friendship and sibling relationships*

The film depicts life in a village through the eyes of two girl children who happen to be twins. Legend in the village has it that there is a very old witch who lives outside the village who changes children into animals. One of the twins

wanders into the witch's mansion and is transformed into a hen. The rest of the story follows the other twin as she rescues her twin from the clutches of the witch.

Manthan (The Churning)

Language: *Hindi*

Themes: *Community organizing, collective farming*

The story is set in Gujarat, amidst the 'White revolution of India.' In the 1970s, for the first time in its history, farmer's cooperatives around the buying and selling of milk and milk products, began to take root in several rural areas in India. The film traces the initial challenges that organizers faced as they tried to organize farmers into a collective union. The film was financed by the Gujarat Co-operative Milk Marketing Federation Ltd. (GCMMF) which had a membership of 500,000 people. All the members contributed \$2.00 each towards the making of the film. Today, most milk in India comes from a gigantic grid of milk cooperatives.

The film depicts the experiences of Dr. Kurien, who is often called the "The father of the white revolution." As he attempts to organize farmers, he faces resistance from the middle-men who had been making enough profit from the feudal arrangements that were prevalent, as well as farmers themselves who feared for their welfare in this confrontation. The attempt at forming a collective throws prevailing caste and gender relationships into chaos and creates the space for enormous change.

Thanneer Thanneer (Water Water)

Language: *Tamil*

Themes: *Community organizing, water issues*

Set in Athipattu in Tamilnadu, Thanneer Thanneer depicts the struggle of a parched village to bring water to quench its thirst. While many politicians make promises to bring water to the village, not one elected official fulfills those promises. Amidst this terrible situation, a fugitive seeks refuge in the village and what follows is an escalating conflict between the government and the villagers, as they attempt to organize and take matters into their own hands.

Ramchand Pakistani (Ramchand From Pakistan)

Language: *Hindi*

Themes: *India Pakistan border conflict, social class, gender*

Released in 2008 as a joint Indian-Pakistani venture, the film attempts to explore the devastating impact the India Pakistan border has had on communities in either side of the divide. Ramchand is an eight-year old low caste Hindu boy living on the Pakistani side of the border. After having wandered into the Indian side of the border, he is caught by some Indian soldiers. His father, having followed him, tries to have them both extricated from the border police, but fails. They are held in an Indian jail for the next five years; in the meantime, their community in Pakistan suffers from local oppression by money-lenders and land-lords. Eventually, the boy is set free and he makes his way back to his village where his mother awaits his arrival.

Bombay (Mumbai)

Language: *Hindi and Tamil*

Themes: *Religion and conflict, the Mumbai riots of 1992*

Bombay explores issues of religious differences and communal violence. Shekhar (a Hindu) is a journalism student from Bombay who falls in love with a Muslim girl, Shaila Bano, in his village in Tamilnadu. Facing considerable family opposition to their union, the couple flees back to Bombay and gets married quietly. As they begin their adjustment as a family in the big city of Bombay, there is an outbreak of religious violence. The events in the film coincide with the razing of a famous mosque by a Hindu fundamentalist group in 1992 in the Hindu holy city of Ayodhya. After the destruction of the mosque there were riots across several cities in Bombay, resulting in the violence and the killing of people, mostly Muslim. Shekhar and Shaila Bano stand as a testament to the unity of India as a nation as they are perceived as enemies by both Muslims and Hindus amidst Bombay's communal riots. The film explores issues related to dogmatism and fundamentalism of religious beliefs.

Dil Se (From the Heart)

Language: *Hindi*

Themes: *Terrorism, romance*

Journalist Amar Varma is sent by his newspaper to the very troubled region of Assam to report about attitudes towards India's 50th anniversary of independence from the British. He meets the beautiful Meghna in one of the towns most plagued by insurgency against the Indian govern-

ment. Amar falls in love with her. However, she will have nothing to do with him and spurns his attentions repeatedly. He returns to New Delhi and his family, which has arranged a marital alliance for him. As the preparations for his wedding proceeds he meets Meghna again and this time she is staying as a paying guest at his house. The rest of the film is a heart-wrenching examination of the impact of injustice on the marginalized and whether violence is really a moral response from the disenfranchised.

Notes and Resources

Indian cinema typically includes songs and dance numbers that Western audiences may find distracting. However, the songs are an integral part of the story and will give Western students an appreciation of Indian art. It would make for an interesting discussion to explore differences between the grammar and formula of a successful Indian film versus a traditional Hollywood film.

The following are sources that explore Indian cinema from historical, cultural, economic, and sociological perspectives:

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