ISAS Working Paper

India's Popular Culture in Southeast Asia

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Introduction

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. The cost-effectiveness of filming in cities such as Bangkok, Kuala

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Lumpur and Singapore, as compared to London or New York, has gained them popularity as settings for Indian films.

Furthermore, the strong Indian-movie following in such cities has made them ideal for hosting Indian film awards ceremonies, leading to the increasing relevance of India within the circuit of Southeast Asian popular culture. Regarding the films themselves, the narrative of the upwardly mobile globe-trotting yet culturally-rooted Indian in such films is one that connects with the aspirational middle classes of Southeast Asia. The elements of music and dance in Indian films resonate with Southeast Asians who share similar musical cultures with Indians. Even the changing depictions of youth in the Indian cinema capture the imagination of the westernising sections of Southeast Asia's youth populations. These are just some of the reasons why Indian films have arguably begun to gain new meaning within the Southeast Asian context.

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.

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[2] Wong, Heng and Ong, Eng Chuan. 2007. Subhas Chandra Bose. *National Library Board* [online]. Available from World Wide Web: <http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_745_2005-01-22.html>.
[3] Abshire, Jean. E. 2011. *The History of Singapore*. Santa Barbara: Greenwood, p.74
[4] The Indian Express. 2012. Subhas Chandra Bose inspired movements in Singapore, Malaysia. *The Indian Express* [online]. Available from World Wide Web: <http://archive.indianexpress.com/news/subhas-chandra-bose-inspired-movements-in-singapore-malaysia/918151/>.

Towards the end of the 20th century, it was India's Look East Policy, most notably enunciated on 8 September 1994 by Prime Minister Narasimha Rao when he visited the city-state, which enabled India to increase its political and economic influence in Southeast Asia. In delivering the Singapore Lecture that day, Rao framed the Asia-Pacific region as the launch-pad for India's entry into the global market-place. In the case of Singapore, it was the Look East Policy that Rao was so strongly associated with (as he was known to Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong as "someone who looked both East and West"[5]) that had a definitive impact on the diplomatic relationship between the two countries. Not only was Rao the first Indian Prime Minister to visit Singapore since Indira Gandhi, but his visit itself marked a rare occasion when elder statesman Lee Kuan Yew chaired a session for a political figure, especially as Lee had not done so for "President Kalam, Prime Minister Vajpayee, or even international celebrities like Nelson Mandela".[6] This reveals how Rao's speech in Singapore, signalling India's clear intention to increase its presence in the Southeast Asian region, was met with a response indicative of strengthened and intensified ties between the two countries.

Today, India's cultural influence in Singapore is nowhere more apparent than in the Little India district. Originally known as Serangoon Road, it "provided employment opportunities for the Indian community and served as a magnet for Indian immigrants"[7] in the mid-19th century. Though it may seem more appropriate now as a symbol of Singapore's ethnic Indian community than of any current relationship between Singapore and India on a broader level, it does provide an example of how Indian culture in Singapore has continued to play a role in strengthening economic ties between the two countries. Through its Indian decorations, music, temples, Indian food- and groceries-outlets, Little India especially on festive occasions "is the representation of Indian-ness, Indian religion and culture". As a result, it has been able to increase the visibility of Singapore as a popular destination for tourists from India. Its influence is evident in how "35% of all international tourists, who totalled 9.7 million in 2006, spend some time in Little India", and it is also "especially popular with Indians".[8]

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[5] Datta-Ray, Sunanda K. 2009. *Looking East to Look West*. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, p. 291
[6] Ibid
[7] Chang, Toh Chuang. 2000. Singapore's Little India: A Tourist Attraction as a Contested Landscape. *Urban Studies.* **37** (2), p.349
[8] Henderson, Joan C. 2008. Managing Urban Ethnic Heritage: Little India in Singapore. *International Journal of Heritage Studies.* **14** (4), p.339

India's film industry is illustrative of the growing physical as well as cultural presence of India in Southeast Asia. Singapore, for example, has emerged as a popular location for filming over the last decade. The 2006 Hindi film *Krrish*, starring Hritik Roshan and Priyanka Chopra, was "the first international Indian blockbuster film to be shot in Singapore under the Singapore Tourism Board's Film-in-Singapore subsidy scheme".[9] Since then, two other high-profile films, *De Dana Dan* and *Pyaar Impossible*, have been set and filmed in Singapore. The shooting of Indian films in Southeast Asia demonstrates the growing business partnerships (for example hotels, flights, etc.) between the two regions as well as the physical movement of Indians into Southeast Asia for the purposes of film production. The choice to set the stories in the Southeast Asian locations they are filmed in (which is not always the case as many films are shot in studios or other countries which in the film are presented as different locations) conveys the crucial role that Southeast Asia plays in the telling of Indian stories on screen.

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 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 current demand for live Indian entertainment in Singapore, for example, can be seen from the fact that high-profile musicians and music composing duos and groups such as A R Rahman, Vishal Shekhar, Shankar Ehsaan Loy, Shreya Ghoshal and Sukhwinder Singh, among others, have all performed in Singapore either this year or in 2013. Outside the sphere of Indian film music, notable classical Indian musicians such as Shujaat Khan, and

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[9] Yue, Audrey. 2009. Film-Induced Domestic Tourism in Singapore: The Case of Krrish. In: Singh, S. (eds.) *Domestic Tourism in Asia: Diversity and Divergence*. London: Earthscan, p.267

independent musicians from other genres of Indian music including folk and rock such as Delhi's Indian Ocean and Bangalore's Agam, have made similarly high-profile appearances in Singapore. Both have headlined 'Kalaa Utsavam', an annual Indian cultural festival, playing in the very same venues as their Bollywood and Kollywood counterparts, allowing them to reach similarly large audiences. The representation of the diversity within Indian music in Singapore conveys the way in which Indian music, in all its varied forms, has been able to find a place among Southeast Asian audiences. In addition to the temporary appearances of Indian musicians, more regular fixtures in the Singapore entertainment scene can be seen in the clubs and pubs that play Indian music. There are at least four Bollywood Bars where club-goers can experience a taste of India's night life by dancing to DJs spinning Hindi tunes. The fact that all four clubs are cleverly located in Singapore's most popular nightlife spots, Clarke Quay and Boat Quay, ensures not only heavy traffic, but also the possibility of Indian music gaining prominence in a clubbing scene such as Singapore's that prides itself on its ability to attract leading world DJs from the United States and Europe such as "Carl Cox and Paul Oakenfold to the Chemical Brothers and Primal Scream".[10]

Malaysia

The Indian independence movement had a direct impact on Malaysia's political developments. Originally established by Indian Malaysians in August 1946 to assist in the fight for India's independence from British rule, the Malaysian Indian Congress grew to play an important role in the struggle for the independence of Malaya which was achieved in 1957. India's independence movement also influenced other aspects of Malaysia's social and political life. This included the eagerness of Indian Malaysians "to take part in political and trade union activities" which was, to some extent, "influenced by their involvement and participation in the Indian independence movement organised around the Indian Independence League and the Indian National Army".[11]

In today's context, India's cultural influence in Singapore can be largely attributed to the demand for Indian entertainment by the country's Indian expatriate community. Malaysia, on

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[10] Your Singapore. 2013. Zouk. *Your Singapore* [online]. Available from World Wide Web: <http://www.yoursingapore.com/content/traveller/en/browse/see-and-do/nightlife/dance-clubs/zouk.html>.

[11] Ramasamy, P. 2002. Nationalist power. *Indian Malaysian* [online]. Available from World Wide Web: <http://www.indianmalaysian.com/nationalist_power.htm>.

the other hand, represents the extent to which Indian entertainment has been able to carve a space for itself within popular Southeast Asian culture. First appearing in Malaysia's cinemas as early as the 1950s, Hindi films have since been able to garner enormous appeal among not only Malaysia's ethnic Indians but also among the indigenous Malay population. The period of the 1970s, during which Malaysia underwent a phase of Islamic revivalism, saw the creation of government policies aimed at promoting the culture of its indigenous people in order to protect it from being subsumed by the cultures of Malaysia's substantial population of Chinese and Indians. One such policy was that films produced in Malaysia had to "adhere to noninflammatory, non-political and religiously sensitive story themes" as well as have at least "70 percent of content and dialogue"[12] in the national language *Bahasa Melayu*. The impact of such strictures on the ability of Malaysian filmmakers to not only freely create and develop films, but also make films that could be commercially successful and attract non-Malay audiences, meant that Malaysia's film industry at the time could never really take off in the way that filmmaking did in countries such as India and China.

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 multi-religious 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. In fact, many Malaysians "take

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[12] Raj, Sony Jalarajan, and Sreekumar, Rohini. 2013. *Desi* Turns Malay: Indian Cinema Redefined as Crossover in the Malaysian Market. In: Khorana, Sukhmani (eds.) *Crossover Cinema: Cross-Cultural Film from Production to Reception*. New York: Routledge, p.157

[13] Chee Kit, Liew and Weng Chuan, Lee. 2012. *Hollywood films and Local Films: A Quantitative Study on Malaysian Young Generations' Preference.* Paper presented at International Conference on Social Sciences and Humanities 2012, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

[14] Ibid

[15] Raj, Sony Jalarajan, and Sreekumar, Rohini, above n 12, p.159

pleasure in the song and dance" of such films, "fetishizing them as cultural links to their own people".[16] These sequences containing music and dancing, arguably the more traditional and historically-rooted aspects of Indian culture, though heavily modernised through film, are in many ways similar to music in Malaysia in terms of style as well as the meanings they hold in people's day-to-day lives. Much like Indian music today which draws on the Hindu traditions of poetry and music as well as Sufism and Urdu poetry, Malaysian music has similarly grown out of "diverse cultural traditions, in which elements from indigenous, Hindu and Islam traditions are blended together".[17] The similarities between the two countries' art forms helps to explain the popularity of Indian music and dance in Malaysia, both as a separate entity from Bollywood, as well as a factor that has helped Bollywood films gain popular appeal in a largely non-Hindi speaking country.

Bollywood is now increasingly looking to Malaysia for inspiration, rather than just Malaysia looking to Bollywood for entertainment. The country has featured numerous times in at least a dozen high-profile Hindi films, all of which were released post-2000. This highlights the relatively recent nature of Indian cinema's physical treading into Malaysian territory, as opposed to its cultural crossing into the country during the 1950s when its films were first being screened. Notable films such as the 2006 film 'Fanaa' starring Aamir Khan and Kajol, and 'Don' which was released that same year starring Shahrukh Khan and Priyanka Chopra, have featured Malaysian locations such as the city of Kuala Lumpur and the beaches of Langkawi in their stories. This has only served to increase the influence of Bollywood in Malaysia to such an extent that "private tour operators, hoteliers and airlines are also offering special deals and discounts to Indian filmmakers".[18] The fact that the most recent film to be partially shot in Malaysia, 'Don 2', was released as recently as 2012, reveals that the desire among Indian filmmakers to capture Malaysian audiences and feature Malaysian locations in their films is still as relevant and strong as ever.

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[16] Ibid
[17] Abdullah, Mohd Hassan. 2004. *Idiosyncratic Aspects of Malaysian Music: Thee Roles of the Kompang in Malay Society*. Hong Kong: UNESCO Regional Expert Symposium on Arts Education in Asia, pp.5-6
[18] Indo-Asian News Service. 2006. Malaysia's picturesque locales beckon Bollywood. *Bollywood.com* [online]. Available from World Wide Web: <http://www.bollywood.com/malaysias-picturesque-locales-beckon-bollywood>.

Thailand

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.

In spite of the continuing popularity of Thailand as a shooting location for Bollywood films, it seems that Bollywood, as a source of everyday entertainment in Thailand, has struggled to regain the popularity it once achieved during its peak in the 1970s. For example, "Hathi Mere Sathi, the Rajesh Khanna starrer" which reached iconic status in Thailand when it was released in 1971, was even dubbed into Thai and marketed as "Chang Puen Kaew"[21] (which in English translates to 'Crystal Elephant Friend'). The film's enduring appeal in Thailand lies in how "the ethos of the movie touched an emotional chord with the Thai people, aided

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[19] Associated Press. 2010. Thailand shakes its hips like Bollywood. *NDTV* [online]. Available from World Wide Web: <http://www.ndtv.com/article/world/thailand-shakes-its-hips-like-bollywood-38558>.

[20] Menasveta, Chamsai. 2014. Bollywood Blockbusters Shot In Thailand. *ThaiIndia.net* [online]. Available from World Wide Web: <http://www.thaiindia.net/en/top-stories2/item/1015-bollywood-blockbusters-shot-in-thailand.html>.

[21] Singh, Bajinder Pal. 2013. Slowly Bollywood Disappears from Thai Memory. *Dateline Bangkok* [online]. Available from World Wide Web: <http://datelinebangkok.com/slowly-bollywood-disappears-from-thai-memory/>.

by their love for the elephant motif".[22] Bajinder Pal Singh writes that "even today, mention the name Chang Puen Kaew, and faces light up, and people can narrate sequences from the movie".[23] However it was in 1977, when "heavy duty and taxes" were imposed on foreign films in Thailand, a "spurt in the local industry and the decline of foreign films"[24] occurred.

Further hampering the spread of Bollywood in Thailand has been the growing popularity of Chinese and Korean films, which have been able to effectively capture the imagination of Thai audiences through treating their stories with a more East Asian sensibility, their stars who physically resemble Thais more closely than Bollywood actors, as well through the fact that their movies are separated along lines of genre. There are signs however that the cultural relevance of Hindi films in Thailand may re-emerge, but in a different form. Rather than the visuals or the stars, it is the music of Bollywood that is making a comeback through the rising popularity of Bollywood dance classes in Bangkok, many of which are attended by Thais, as well as through nightclubs that play the Bhangra music that has, particularly in the last couple of years, become a common fixture in Bollywood films.

Indonesia

The symbolic and historic nature of India-Indonesia friendship is perhaps most evident from India's very first Republic Day celebration in 1950 when President Sukarno was invited as the Chief Guest. The relationship between the two countries has remained strong even as recently as 2011 when President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono was invited as the Chief Guest for the celebrations in New Delhi that year. The strong foundation for these friendly relations is in many ways attributed to the influence that India exercised during the early-1940s when Indonesia was struggling to secure independence. Apart from Jawaharlal Nehru, whose empathy for the Indonesian demand for independence is well documented, other forces in the Indian polity, such as the Indian National Congress, were "roused by Indonesia's sufferings and its struggle for survival".[25] As a result, India played an important part in the story of Indonesia. It used its influence "in the capital cities of Europe, America as well as in international forums" to "champion the cause of Indonesia in her fight against the Dutch" in

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[22] Ibid
[23] Ibid
[24] Ibid
[25] Ghoshal, Baladas. 1999. India and the Struggle for Indonesian Independence. *AKADEMIKA*. **54**, p.108

various ways, including "through diplomatic support by mobilising world public opinion against the Dutch".[26]

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.

Whether the religious and linguistic influences of India can truly be considered aspects of India's current cultural influence in Indonesia, however, remains questionable, considering that they have been claimed by Indonesians as their own. The extent to which these influences have become deeply embedded in Indonesian culture has meant that their historical origins, traced back to India, have been largely forgotten, leaving many Indonesians unaware of the ties between India's culture and theirs. There is little feeling of being consciously connected to, or heavily influenced by, India in this regard, However, they may well have helped to create the cultural conditions that have allowed for another aspect of Indian culture to take root in Indonesia – specifically, Bollywood. Since the early-2000s, there have even been dedicated fan clubs in Indonesia for specific Indian film personalities, such as Shahrukh Khan, Rani Mukherji and Kareena Kapoor, which meet to "organize Indian dance events"[28] and watch movies together.

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[26] Ibid
[27] S.A.P. 2013. Indian Historical Linguistics: Setting the record straight. *The Economist* [online]. Available from World Wide Web: <http://www.economist.com/blogs/johnson/2013/05/indian-historical-linguistics>.
[28] Thee, Marcel. 2011. Bollywood Fever Hits Indonesia. *Jakarta Globe* [online]. Available from World Wide Web: <http://www.thejakartaglobe.com/archive/bollywood-fever-hits-indonesia/>.

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 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.

The characters in these films were no longer the socially or politically oppressed characters of the 1980s who resorted to violence as a means of getting by – rather they came from affluent families whose modernity, projected through the clothes they wore, the houses they lived in and the lifestyles they led, resonated with the similarly upward-looking middle class Indonesians. With an absence of violence and an emphasis on "family and religious values within settings of wealth and the elite transnational consumer culture",[31] the new wave of Hindi films contained all the features that made them suited for family entertainment. Furthermore, these films could not have arrived at a better time as "there was a wide spread of television in Indonesia" in the 1990s "and close to 90 percent of the total population had at

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[29] Tambunan, Shuri Mariasih Gietty. 2012. Bollywood's defining moment in Indonesia. *The Weekend Leader* [online]. Available from World Wide Web: <http://www.theweekendleader.com/Culture/1468/bollywood-ripples.html>.

[30] Kaur, Raminder and Ajay J. Sinha. 2005. *Bollyworld: Popular Indian Cinema through a Transnational Lens*. London: Sage Publications, p.27

[31] Gopal, Sangita and Moorti, Sujata. 2008. *Global Bollywood: Travels of Hindi Song and Dance*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, p.184

least one television set in their living rooms".[32] With the 1970s marking the period in which consumption of Hindi films in Indonesia "moved from the theatres to the DVD stores, and from an elite to a working-class audience",[33] the 1990s brought about another shift in the pattern of consumption. The popular place to view Hindi films moved once again, this time into the living rooms of Indonesian families. With 'Kuch Kuch Hota Hai' being the first among many to renew public interest in Bollywood, the genre's audience base expanded "far beyond the Javanese community (an ethnic group that has historical links to India)"[34] as well as outside the working classes, thereby redefining Bollywood's role as a widely-accepted form of family entertainment in the everyday life of Indonesians.

Tourism and Human Capital

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 well-to-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.

Southeast Asia has also proven to be a popular choice for the ceremonies that celebrate the best of Indian cinema. Apart from Macau, Singapore has been the only city to host the award

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[32] Tambunan, Shuri Mariasih Gietty, above n 29
[33] Roy, Anjali Gera. 2013. Bollywood at large: Who is watching Bollywood films? In: Schaefer, David J. and Kavita Karan (eds.) *Bollywood and Globalization: the global power of popular Hindi cinema*. New York: Routledge, p.36
[34] Gopal, Sangita and Moorti, Sujata, above n 31, p.35

presentation such as the Indian International Film Academy Awards (IIFA) more than once – first in 2004, and then again in 2012. The 12th annual Zee Cine Awards, another Hindi cinema awards show, was held in 2011 at Singapore's Marina Bay Sands, while the 3 International Tamil Film Awards was held at the Singapore Expo Convention and Exhibition Centre in 2012. Malaysia too has been host to several Indian film awards ceremonies, including IIFA in 2002 which was held in the Gentings Highland Resort, a popular tourist destination, and the Global Indian Film Awards in 2006, held in the nation's capital. These awards ceremonies are reflective of the two-way partnership between India and Southeast Asia. Not only have they provided the Hindi film industry and its stars with the opportunity to raise their global profile and connect with fans in Southeast Asia, but they have also strongly impacted upon the tourism industries of Southeast Asian countries. For example, Singapore, "according to the numbers provided by Wizcraft, saw an increase of 31% in its tourism revenues in the week of IIFA 2004, which was held in the city-state. The 2004 event generated tourism receipts totalling SG\$ 17 million".[35]

Conclusion

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 middle-class households in Southeast Asia. As a result, such films became both culturally accessible

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[35] Yadav, Surekha A. 2012. Singapore set to be a regular stop for the roving International Indian Film Academy Awards. *Forbes* [online]. Available from World Wide Web: <http://www.forbes.com/sites/surekhaayadav/2012/06/18/singapore-set-to-be-a-regular-stop-for-the-roving-international-indian-film-academy-awards/>.

to the expanding middle-class population who shared the same desires as the films' characters to claim for themselves a new modernised Asian identity, as well as physically accessible through home television for viewing by families. This enabled Indian popular entertainment to attract new and much larger audiences than before, causing it to take on new meanings within the Southeast Asian context.

Other Indian art forms such as music and dance, which have long influenced the indigenous music and dance of many Southeast Asian countries, have re-arrived in the region, but this time as entirely separate entities. In being labelled as 'direct from India' or forming part of the increasing number of Indian arts festivals in Southeast Asia, it is the Indian authenticity of these dance productions and music concerts that has provided them with a captive Southeast Asian audience. As cities in the region are undergoing rapid development, part of this process has included the fostering of a rich arts culture that can rival the arts scenes of world-class cities in the West. Consequently, classical Hindustani music, and classical Carnatic music concerts featuring Telugu, Tamil and other South Indian languages, as well as dance productions from India are able to attract those who seek to consume forms of overseas entertainment they consider 'high-brow' in their quest to develop an international outlook as well as locate themselves within the modernising and increasingly artistic identities of their respective capital cities. As 'products' of India, these art forms have played a critical role in providing Southeast Asians with new points of reference for India as a country and as a culture. The broader consequences of this include how India has come to be perceived within Southeast Asia, as well as the far-less-measurable but equally important effect of how India, through its cultural influence, is able to project its political and economic status in Southeast Asia. While it may be difficult to measure the causal link between India's cultural influence and its power as a player in global politics, it is certain that India has managed, through its art, to find in Southeast Asia a non-Indian audience eager to embrace Indian culture just as much as their own.

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