

Whither "Bollywood"?



Articulating Bollywood as a Network and Celebrity as the Industry's Global Node

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Lately, New York City buses are plastered with the face of Priyanka Chopra, one of Bollywood's biggest stars and the lead of American network ABC's FBI drama, *Quantico*. While her global success can be read as an individual success story, Chopra represents more than herself in the transnational space; her success both in

India and America has facilitated global industry synergies, like India's leading film distributor signing a deal with ABC to screen *Quantico* trailers.

Amir Khan, yet another Bollywood celebrity, has become a sensation in China. His most recent film, *PK* (Hirani, 2014) was among the top five foreign films at the Chinese box office. Like Priyanka, his popularity in China gestures to more than individual success. His celebrity has been leveraged for public diplomacy by the Indian state (Press Trust of India). Within Bollywood, celebrity is at the helm of global networks, whether anchored by the state or industry. A study of global Bollywood therefore warrants a closer look at the institutions and individual actors that constitute this complex industry, and how this agglomerate of ac-

tors and networks operates to enable its expansion.

Using Manuel Castell's theorization of network society, communication power, and ways in which power is constituted through networks, this paper argues that Bollywood is a network of a variety of nodes that include various individual and institutional actors (Castells). The three primary nodes in the Bollywood Network that work together to produce this complex system are the state, industry and celebrity. These nodes have historically been key to the globalization of Indian films. Of these predominant nodes, the celebrity node is most unique to Bollywood. Unlike other regions, Bollywood star is at the helm of all industrial and political networks. They are economically embedded in the indus-

try as stakeholders, and mired in political networks as politicians. While, in America, Reagan and Schwarzenegger’s forays into politics were considered anomalies, politics is a well-accepted second career for Bollywood celebrities. As such, celebrities in Bollywood function both as transnational bridges, with “switching power” that connect key institutional nodes within and outside Bollywood, thereby enabling its global presence, and as “network effects,” internally influencing networks’ function, and, by extension, Bollywood’s conception and image both domestically and internationally.

Within Castell’s theoretical frame, “switching power” is the ability to connect one network cluster to another, or rather interconnect a diverse range of networks. Switches thus become pivotal bridging nodes because they possess the ability to diversify and configure a network (Castells, 2004). “Network effect,” or positive network externality, on the other hand is a concept from economics that refers to the effect or influence a user of goods or services has on the others. In other words it defines the idea of celebrity users as trendsetting nodes within the Bollywood network. They influence and create a network effect. This paper articulates how the above concepts are integral to Bollywood’s globalization and documents the celebrity’s historical influence on the global flow of Indian cinema. The following sections highlight how celebrity interacts with other primary nodes, like the state and industry, and the mechanism through which this interaction enables Bollywood’s global presence and transnational appeal.

The Pre-Globalization Era (1950s-1960s): State, Industry, & Celebrity

In the early years after independence, the Indian film industry

was not supported by the state. It was a dubious mass attraction to be taxed and regulated (Vasudevan). However, cinema created a sense of nationhood and an integrated imagined community (Vasudevan; Ganti). However, it remained outside the purview of industries promoted by the government. Entertainment was not a necessity in a country dealing with a food crisis and over a million refugees (Ganti). Even so, India’s first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru’s, vision of modernization, industrialization and self-sufficiency was taken up by the film industry.



India’s early post-independence films, according to prolific Bollywood filmmaker Yash Chopra, were heavily influenced by Nehru: “Nehru and his policies were always part of our subconsciousness. He used to say that big dams and industries are the temples of modern India. We had internalized his words” (Ghosh1). Nehru was, in many ways, the charismatic celebrity leader who inspired India’s film industry. He can arguably be positioned as a bridging node, that brought the state and industry nodes together. The films created during the first decade after independence aligned themselves with the “Nehruvian vision,” lauding the virtues of socialism, equality, and industrialized modernity.

Many of these films circulated through film festival circuits to communist and socialist countries like Russia, Turkey and Eastern Europe. Three notable films from

this period, Awara, Rahi, and Gunga Jumna, quite successfully propagated and represented the Nehru creed, becoming very popular in nations like the Soviet Union. As a statesman and diplomat, Nehru understood the potential of celebrity diplomacy and wanted to leverage the popularity of Bollywood stars to further diplomatic ties with the USSR. Raj Kapoor, Dev Anand, and Dilip Kumar, the lead actors from Awara, Rahi, and Gunga Jumna, respectively, the most popular films from the 1954 Indian film festival in Russia, became part of Nehru’s official delegation to the Soviet Union the following year. Nehru’s 1955 visit to Russia is considered a geo-political turning point for Indo-Soviet relationship when India’s allegiance clearly shifted away from America and towards the Soviet Union. The visit laid the foundation for India’s industrialization (Haider). Moscow offered New Delhi affordable loans and unconditionally backed India on Kashmir in International forums (Sanchez and Bruhwiler). Upon his return from the USSR Nehru reportedly called Raj Kapoor’s father Prithviraj and asked him who was the most popular Indian in the USSR. Prithviraj said it had to be Nehru to which Nehru responded that it was Raj Kapoor⁹ (Mohanty). Assisted by the soft power of Bollywood celebrities, Nehru was able to foster an era of lasting friendship between India and USSR. These three Bollywood stars, in addition to Nehru’s celebrity charisma, managed to create cultural and political bonhomie with the Soviet Union, gesturing to the political potential for Bollywood stars that continues even today.

Meanwhile, Raj Kapoor’s continued stardom in Russia encouraged film collaboration. As a popular celebrity among the Soviets, Kapoor had the wherewithal to enable film collaboration in later decades. His film, Mera

Naam Joker (Kapoor, 1970), was a co-production venture between him and Sovexsportfilm. Based on his personal connections and stardom, he was able to persuade the Soviet government to purchase and distribute his film in the USSR¹⁰ (Rajagopalan). In this instance, the state was supportive of Indian film exchange with the Soviet Union—however, it was Kapoor's celebrity that became the key node enabling industry collaboration. The “network effect” of the Kapoor initiative led to other collaborative ventures over the years with celebrities like Amitabh Bachchan and Mithun Chakravarty. Having experienced the influence of films and film stars, Nehru set up the Film Institute of India (now FTII) in 1960, with the overt aim to encourage art house cinema. It became the launching pad for many Bollywood personalities, thereby emerging as a key institution within the Bollywood network. However, the state's relationship with the mainstream industry remained distant.

Pre-Globalization Era: Later Years (1970s-1980s) — Criminal Economy Networks and Celebrity

The decades after Nehru were a time of political unrest, with the country placed under a state of emergency for almost two years, from 1975 to 1977. One of the biggest changes/challenges facing the industry in these decades was its involvement in mafia networks. In *End of the Millennium*, Castells explicates the global criminal economy as an organized network that has flexible connections to other international networks. In the case of Bollywood, the industry was struggling to find financiers in a sluggish economy. India's economy was growing at a rate of less than three percent a year, often mocked as the Hindu rate of growth 12 (Williamson). The mafia stepped in as financiers for

Bollywood films. Celebrity actors and directors were at the helm of those networks. Various accounts attest to the relationship between the mafia and celebrity in this period (Chopra).



“It was quite common for stars to openly flaunt their mafia connections. Some of the biggest names of Bollywood were regularly seen in the company of underworld figures at cricket matches and parties” (Srivastava 1). The criminal economy networks not only financed films, but they also established extortion networks to extract money from individual industry actors whose ventures were funded by other sources. Two important incidents exposed Bollywood's mafia networks: first, the Mumbai bomb blasts in 1993 and the involvement of Bollywood star Sanjay Dutt in the incident, and second, the murder of prominent Bollywood music producer Gulshan Kumar in 1997. The two incidents opened a Pandora's box of criminal economy networks and nodes all pointing to Bollywood's entanglement in illegal activity. The investigation of film financier, Bharat Shah, led to audio recordings that revealed close celebrity connections to mafia networks. Financing Bollywood films had become an active front for laundering black money. The state recognized the turmoil and accorded the film industry an official industry status on May 10th, 1998. Indian information and broadcasting minister, Sushma Swaraj, acknowledged that, “by according the status of industry, we have given pictures the much-needed eligibility to seek

funds from legitimate places” (The Hindu 1).

Apart from other motivations, celebrity involvement appears as an important factor that brought the criminal economy networks to the fore and necessitated eventual state intervention. The state recognition of cinema production as industry was an effort to thwart the informal criminal economy networks. The important point to underscore here is the way celebrity operates in the Bollywood network. In the earlier instance, celebrities like Raj Kapoor were able to influence diplomatic relations and create personal networks that enabled Hindi cinema's global flow. In the latter phase, celebrities like Khan and Dutt were able to negotiate and configure networks that enabled their association or disassociation with the criminal economy. In Shah Rukh Khan's biography, he alludes to his celebrity appeal that prevented the mafia from harming him despite his disinterest in being part of mafia-financed films. Dutt, on the other hand, became closely associated with the network and his high profile celebrity persona got the needed attention from the state to oust the mafia. It can be said that in both the early and later pre-globalization eras, the celebrity figure does emerge as a central node with the power to configure and reconfigure networks.

The Globalization Era (1990s—Present): Global Bollywood and Celebrity

Several factors changed for the industry in the early nineties. The Indian economy was liberalized and the state now allowed foreign direct investment in various industry sectors. For the Bollywood industry, this change did not just lead to state legitimacy—it enabled the possibility of a formal corporate structure and, most importantly, the financing of films/media projects through banks and

other institutional investors. The following years saw a different pattern emerging within the Bollywood network. Two important nodes emerged in the early 2000s that enabled a global Bollywood in this era: 1) international film award shows, like IIFA (International Indian Film Academy) awards and 2) the rise of globally networked organizations like Reliance Entertainment. The celebrity nodes, however, remained at the helm of these emergent networks and served to connect them together, making Indian films visible on global platforms. The IIFA awards were instituted in the year 2000, and the first awards show was held at the millennium dome in London. The symbolic significance of the dome as a statement of “optimism for the future” and its literal significance as Britain’s newest and largest enclosed space were important (Mitchell). IIFA was a statement by the Bollywood network that Indian Industry is ready and willing to expand globally. The event was attended by global celebrities, including Angelina Jolie, Thora Birch, and Jackie Chan. Amitabh Bachchan, one of Bollywood’s most popular stars, was the ambassador for IIFA. The first IIFA sought to represent a post-colonial iconic cultural and business moment for Indian films. The figure of Bachchan, his personhood as a globally popular star, was symbolic of Bollywood’s arrival on the world stage.

Bachchan also functioned as a positive network externality within the Bollywood network during this defining phase for the industry (Easley and Kleinberg). Immediately after the accordance of industry status, Bachchan was the first to incorporate a company. ABCL (Amitabh Bachchan Corporation Limited) was set up as a diversified corporate conglomerate. The company portfolio included the essential film verticals in addition to event management, book publishing, music and so

forth. The Disney-style mammoth conglomerate that Bachchan envisioned is often touted as an idea ahead of its time. The failure of this corporate experiment, led by a key celebrity node, presented the industry with both an extensive corporate dream-vision and the pitfalls that such a venture often affords. In the years to follow, many family-led production houses corporatized, and other corporate entities outside Bollywood invested in the industry. Yash Raj Studios, led by Yash Chopra, Bachchan’s close friend, was one of the earliest production studios to adopt vertical integration and adopt a corporate model. Unlike ABCL, which spread itself thin with event management and



publishing under its aegis, Yash Raj focused on their core competency as a production studio and ventured only into related vertical functions. There were other corporate conglomerates, like Reliance (also closely associated with Bachchan), that appeared as key nodes in the industry. Their corporate strategy was “networked,” which meant that they acquired stakes in already established companies. This ensured expertise in core areas. In 2001, Bachchan re-launched his company as AB Corp, limiting its operations to its core areas of expertise: film production and distribution. The network effect of celebrity production and distribution houses was further intensified when Shah Rukh Khan set up his film production

entity Red Chillies Entertainment the following year. Today, Khan is Bollywood’s richest actor with a net worth of approximately USD 600 million (Sinha). His last film co-produced by Red Chillies collected USD 62 million worldwide (Ramachandran).

Khan, Bachchan’s successor as one of the most globally popular and successful Bollywood celebrities, functioned as a positive network externality for celebrity-owned film production houses. He started a new industry business model where the star ‘as commodity and labor’ (Dyer and McDonald) was being reconstituted and redefined. The celebrity in this instance, Khan, had the power to define the terms of his labor so that he benefitted directly. The celebrity node, therefore, merged seamlessly with industry. With Khan, most of his subsequent films and Television shows were produced in-house. As a positive network externality, this led to most other top Bollywood celebrities (actors and directors) to set up their independent production companies and produce their own films. Khan’s initiative is an instance where the celebrity and industry node come together and the celebrity figure, because of their charisma, influence, and network connections, creates a new industry business model. Khan further expanded his business enterprise by investing in the Indian Premier cricket league. His company, Red Chillies Entertainment, owns the Kolkata Knight Riders franchise in the Indian premier cricket league. This instance also anchored a new type of business model that incorporated both sports and films in this emergent cultural form of entertainment.

A business model originally inspired by European premier soccer leagues, the Indian premier league was set up as international, and included players from all cricket playing nations. With Bollywood stars as owners and anchors for

the league franchises, the networked model brought together two of India's most popular entertainment forms: films and cricket. As argued earlier, the celebrity figure possesses switching power to configure and reconfigure networks and functions as a positive network externality. This scenario is an evidence of the same effect where several Bollywood stars, including Shilpa Shetty and Preity Zinta, acquired franchises in the Indian Premier league. The network effect spread to other sports, and two franchises for Kabaddi (an indigenous Indian sport) and Kushti (wrestling) have been instituted with Bollywood stars owning teams and participating in this emerging business model for entertainment.

While the above instances speak to the centrality of the celebrity node and its overlapping interactions with the industry, celebrity has also been at the helm of political interaction where soft power becomes a key element for diplomacy. As evidenced in the case of Raj Kapoor and Russia in the pre-

globalization era, Aamir Khan has emerged as a key node in furthering diplomatic ties between India and China. India and China have had a tumultuous relationship since India's independence. India went to war with China in 1962 and there were not any cultural or film exchanges between the two countries. Aamir Khan's academy award nominated *Lagaan* was one of the first Indian films to be released in China. The next Bollywood film, starring Khan, made its way to China through the film festival circuit. The industry and celebrity nodes came together to release Khan's film, *3 Idiots* (Hirani, 2009), that had gained word-of-mouth publicity and was formally released in China in 2011. Khan's most recent venture, *PK* (Hirani, 2014), was among the top five foreign films at the Chinese box office 14 (Cain). Khan's popularity became an anchor for the state to leverage Khan's celebrity appeal for diplomacy. The Chinese promotion tour for *PK* was strategically timed just before Indian prime minister Narendra Modi's visit to China. Despite appearances at

forums like BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) and promises of bilateral trade, China and India have a large trade deficit. Khan's celebrity appeal resulted in the decision to address the deficit through Bollywood 15 (DNA Webdesk). The expanded Chinese foreign film export quota will now include more Indian films. A public diplomacy endeavour, led by Khan, resulted in gains for the industry node as well as the state.

In the post-globalization era when the state is more aligned with the industry and the celebrity figure is closely intertwined and interchangeable with industry, the power of the celebrity node as a switching agent with the ability to configure new networks becomes evident. The Bollywood network may consist of multiple nodes; however, of all its components, the celebrity figure possesses the ability to anchor networks and reconfigure them to enable new flows for Indian cinema and media.

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