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INDIAN POPULAR CULTURE : IT'S ENGAGEMENT AND CONFRONTATION WITH THE  
'WEST'

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the influence of 'west' on the Indian popular culture namely, cinema, literature, food, music and media along with the *desi*-ness present in these popular cultures. The influence of the 'west' means, in terms of its products, western values, western job opportunities and western settings. Popular culture is the way of influencing people towards something. In marketing most of the products *desi*-ness is used along with the western setting or western products are endorsed using *desi* sentiments. The films are hailed to be more patriotic and appealing if these two aspects are present- attachment and urge to serve the mother land or 'selfishly' work for self-growth in the western countries. Besides, the *Desi* instincts coming out in the western world hung in the peg of money. Thus, the West and India are inseparable in the popular culture, whether they confront or indulge with each other. The popular cultures examined in this paper are: advertisements of Rajanigandha and Dominos, *Swades* -movie, *A Strange Case of Billy Biswas* a novel by Arun Joshi and the songs of Indian rappers.

Keywords: Popular culture, Engage, Confront, *Desi*-ness, West and India.

Introduction

Popular culture in the modern world is the one which directs, shapes, models the human tastes, opinions, dressing, relationships and even the perception about oneself. For example, if we see an ad of a fairness cream, it always leaves us a message being dark in color is a drawback. So, we specially Indians tend to believe that we are inferior to some white skin humans. Popular culture had its origin during 19<sup>th</sup> century Victorian era. At this time Britain experienced upheavals in its society: rise of educated class, capitalism, industries so people began to spend more money on entertainments. There was a mass production of cheap popular literature. Later, at the end of the World War II mass media had set its foot. Now United States was pioneering in this. It was now when popular culture came to be known as 'pop' culture. Critics like Adorno and Horkheimer have pointed out the nexus between popular cultural industry and commercial marketing. The ultimate aim of the culture industry is economic in nature. So no matter how local they look or have emotional contents they try to serve the economic ends. Accordingly, the popular culture has established its own foot holds in India. But all is not the same; it has assimilated some of the *desi* things into it. Thus making the Western popular culture to engage and confront with Indian culture. The influence of 'west' on the Indian popular culture namely, cinema, literature,

food, music and media along with the *desi-ness* present in these popular cultures is the main concern in this paper. As already mentioned popular culture is the way of influencing people towards something. But in this paper we shall see how popular culture as well as the 'west' influences people. The influence of the 'west' means, in terms of its products, western values, western job opportunities and western settings in contrast with Indian or engagement with the later. In marketing most of the products *desi-ness* is used along with the western setting or western products are endorsed using *desi* sentiments. The popular cultures examined in this paper are: advertisements of Rajanigandha and Dominos, *Swades* -movie, *A Strange Case of Billy Biswas* a novel by Arun Joshi and the songs of Indian rappers.

### India and the West in the movie- *Swadesh*

Indian cinema industry releases thousand cinemas each year. India is home to the world's largest film industry both in terms of numbers of films produced as well as tickets sold. Large parts of Indian films are masala films. It comprises melodrama, action, comedy and romance. One can also notice art films in Indian cinemas but box office hits are always the commercial movies. Many of the Indian cinemas deal with one famous storyline- that is of NRI coming back to India. *Namastey London*, *Pardesh*, *Swades* are few examples of NRI movies.

*Swades- We the People* is directed by Ashutosh Gowariker and starred by Shahrukh Khan. The protagonist of the movie Mohan (Shahrukh Khan) is a project manager in NASA, America. He has a well-paid job and sophisticated life in US. But one thought always ponders in his mind, which is of his grandmother who nurtured him when he was small. He thinks of getting her to US. In this direction he visits India after decades. Ramcharanpur is the village in Uttar Pradesh where he wants to go. This journey makes him discover himself as well as the purpose of his life. In this film we find the elements of confrontation of east and west and the *Desi* elements. The western and eastern elements which confront with each other are:

The train and the caravan: The train scene in the movie is the heart throbbing part, Mohan travels in the train when he finds a boy selling a glass of water. Mohan is shaken after seeing a boy who is deprived of education, proper food and cloth selling water for penny. This scene doesn't have any words only a background music plays which makes its appeal more powerful. Whereas his caravan depicts complete opposite life that we find in railway. It is owned by a single person who has got all the facility in it. This symbolizes the west and the train symbolizes India and its condition.

Haridas' debt and Mohan's NASA job: Another instance where east and west confront are Mohan goes to collect debt from a dalit man, but completely disturbed by the condition of Haridas, Mohan himself pays money for him and returns.

Technology: The part where we get to see India and west engaging are at the time when the people come forward to build power plant to generate electricity for the village fighting the caste stereotypes and discrimination.

*Desi-ness* in the movie: The parting gift given by Geeta which is a wooden box with all sorts of random seeds, twigs and spices. Each content in it represents the Indian culture, which finally draws him back to India.

In the movie *Lagaan* we get to see engagement and confrontation both. Indians playing the western game- cricket and fighting against the westerners by wining cricket. It also had *desi* elements like: celebration of monsoon '*Man dhadka ye wo bhadarava.. Kaale megha Kaale megha pani tho barasavo*' and the songs which relate Radha- Krishna stories '*Radha kese na jale.*' Thus, Indian cinemas too move around the subjects of confrontation or engagement with the west but not without the 'west'.

### Indian Advertisements- Western products and *desi-ness*; Indian products and the western settings.

Moving on to the Indian Ads, Indian Advertising industry is one of the most spiraling industries. It is estimated that by 2018 the share of ad spent in India's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) will be around 0.45 per cent. Emotions speak louder than words! That is the technique used by Indian Advertising industry. This emotional awareness from brands hasn't always been the same. In the 1990s and early 2000s advertisers were more concerned with humor and sarcasm. Now the advertisers are catching hold of problems that are 'Indian'

or emotions that are 'Indian' and associating the solution or the happiness with the brand. Many Western products are marketed using *desi* sentiments (Dominos) and western origin products manufactured in India sold in the name of patriotism, thereby linking capitalism and patriotism (Patanjali noodles or Patanjali jeans) or selling Indian products by confronting it with the west (Rajnigandha). The growing concern about old age people in India and its depiction in movies has created a stir in the society. Movies like *Lage Raho Muna Bhai* and *Bhagban* got critical acclaim for bringing out this problem. This is used in the Dominos ad too. A middle aged man comes and leaves his mother in an old age home. Though she is upset with him at the beginning later she keeps rationalizing why he left her and why he never calls her. He is so busy with his work he never gets time to call her. The old mother doesn't waste time, she starts stitching the clothes and sells them off. From the money she earned by selling she orders a PIZZA for her son. Finally, the pizza reminds him and draws him towards his mother. This ad also has a has tag #MaaNahiBhoolthi.

Similarly, the ad of Rajnigandha exploits the Indian emotions. *Pan* is a *desi* product usually eaten after food or whenever one feels like eating. But this is not considered as suave by the urban India. But this ad has a western setting, by this it flaunts the west but also the urban Indian attitude about pan. In this ad a man walks in a posh auction room where a hotel auction is going on, in a suit eating Rajnigandha which shows *desi-ness* present in the modern Indian. He bids the hotel for more money than it deserves. In the corner we notice we see another Indian standing. He looks old and shy. He is none other than the father of this man. He offers the hotel to his father who has worked for the hotel as a clerk lifelong.

So the 'west' is present in Indian ads either as a product or as setting to market Indian product. While these both are present the Advertisers uses *desi* emotions or *desi* problems to endorse their products.

### **The Strange Case of Billy Biswas – collision of India and West**

This is the novel written by Arun Joshi, published in the year 1971. This novel mainly deals with the existentialism and about the Indian society going materialistic. The confrontation with the West we find when Billy, the protagonist hates to live in the sophisticated areas of America. He feels 'west is hung in the peg of money' rather he chooses to live in Harlem slums. Again Billy witnesses the western materialistic life influencing Delhi people. He feels Indians too have become materialistic and no use of being with them. So he chooses to live in jungle with the primitive people. The engagement with the west we find in the novel is negatively portrayed. The irrational adaptation of western justice system in India is depicted ironically, the western life style, partying of Indians, Billy's wife's more concern about prestige and show off. All depict the Indians engagement with the west in a negative way.

### **Indian Rap Music**

These days there are no Bollywood songs without Badshah, Raftaar or Yo Yo Honey Singh. Rap music or Hip hop music is the music genre developed in United States by mainly African Americans; it spread its wings even into India. Rap music has gone Indian in terms of lyrics, language and the choreography adapted to it. There was sudden increase in the rap genre in India after 2011, with a large number of rappers emerging from all corners of the country *Bhangra* dance has suited the beats of rap music. Guru Randhawa stands example for this. In Yo Yo Honey Singh's songs we find the *desi* subjects like son-in-law would be talking about his father-in-law. Thus more and more numbers of rap songs are being produced while assimilating more and more with the Indian themes and dances.

### **Conclusion**

Indian popular culture never exists in the absence of the West. There is either confrontation, collision, resistance to the West by India or there is assimilation, absorption, imbibing the western culture with the Indian culture. The reason for this is more than two centuries of British rule in India and the LPG (Liberalization, Privatization and Globalization) policy adopted by the Indian government in 1991. This opened the doors for all the Multinational Companies thereby increasing the rate of globalization in India. Consequently, we find the Indian history and the India's present deeply interwoven with the west. But not that everything is westernized, here and there the *desi* emotions, problems and culture are made use for the product to look more local and

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appealing. Thus, west is always present either in a positive or a negative form in the Indian popular culture that is, sometimes confronting with it or engaging with it.

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