Narrative of the Native
In the Time of Neoliberal Fundamentalism

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ABSTRACT

The Jungle Book has been screened several times since it was first written by Rudyard Kipling in 1894. Jon Favreau's 2016 film adaptation marks another moment in the text's commanding presence in the cinematic world. Produced by Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures, the film set unprecedented records world over, especially in the subcontinent.

Global media giants like Disney see a tremendous marketing opportunity in their theatrical re-releases of films based on folk tales set in the Third World. In their attempt to go local, they uniquely design the film's distribution and exhibition strategies around colonial narratives, mythological representations, and cultural practices entrenched in these texts so that the film resonates with the regional audiences and their primordial identities.

Taking *The Jungle Book* (2016) as an entry point, the paper looks at multiple global-local flows operative in the process of globalisation in developing countries like India, riding on which cultural industries like Disney reiterate their global dominance.

KEYWORDS

Disney, globalisation, Bollywood

INTRODUCTION: *THE JUNGLE BOOK*

It is the same old story of man's search for identity. It has been reproduced cinematically several times now. It will most likely continue to, given that it holds the promise of "showing nature, showing animals—and really getting into that deep, mythic imagery, that always marries well with technology", as shared by *The Jungle Book* (2016) director Jon Favreau (Faraci 2016).

Said to be based on Disney's 1967 film and Rudyard Kipling's 1894 book, Favreau's *The Jungle Book* (2016) had posters of "endangered" Bengal Tiger Shere Khan and Asian elephant Hathi, among others, as part of its social media marketing before the release (Adnews 2016).

The first poster that came out had a temple in the background, a snake climbing down from a banyan tree on the side, and monkeys herding around in the front of the temple causeway. Another poster had a python against the backdrop of surreal mist, and yet another had a herd of Bengal Elephants marching through sunlight falling on the jungle.

The tapestry created arouses subtle sensations of mysteriousness and ancientness of the jungles of India. These images revel in the colonial postulation of cultural essences about the land of snakes and temples, the land which is timeless, unchangeable and mythical—repeated themes that constitute the concept of orientalism as defined by Edward Said.

At the trailer launch of the film's Hindi version in India, the film was unanimously promoted on account of *The Jungle Book* being "an Indian story" (Bhushan 2016). This is obvious considering that the story is set in India and written by the India-born British author Rudyard Kipling. The allegories drawn by Kipling from the dominant languages, folklores, landscapes, wildlife, people and practices that popularly represent the Indo-Gangetic region of the country further add to the text's celebration of "Indianness".

Scholars of Kipling have pointed out that it is primarily through animals native to Indian subcontinent that the moral essence of the subcontinent was conveyed. The glorifying depiction of elephants as "the creators of the jungle", wolves as "the leaders of the pack", bears as "the

teachers of the law", made them appear like gods and kings, adding to the imagery of a living yet mythological jungle (see McClure 1981; Sullivan 1993).

Also present at the trailer launch, Vishal Bhardwaj, who composed the song with lyricist Gulzar for the 1993 TV serial *The Jungle Book*, recollected a success story of the popular track. "I remember on 26th January *Gantantra Diwas* (Republic Day) parade, there was a *jhanki* (tableau) which had *Chaddi pahan ke phool khila hai* (a flower has bloomed wearing underwear). So it became like a national anthem in those days," he said (Movie Talkies 2016).

With its themes of Indian family and forest, the Hindi song "*chaddi pahan ke phool khila hai*" resonated so well with the audiences that it became a paean of praise for India and its Indian roots.

The film opens with a culturally diverse land where animals of all colours, sizes and shapes get together peacefully, unlike in Disney's 1967 rendition of the text. The land, however, is climactically won over by a great leader, who is born with the gift of Red Flower (that helps him trace his bloodline and realise his full potential), and is bowed to as a god and adored as a brother (Kipling's idea of an ideal imperial ruler).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: DISNEY AND THE GLOBALISATION GAME

Time and again, Disney's idyllic world has been extensively studied as reeking of cultural privilege, class hierarchy, and one-man leadership, in both on-screen narratives and off-screen practices. Critical theorists have pointed out Disney's bigoted representation of cultural minorities and market monopoly as representative and reproductive of global capitalism and fascism (see Artz 2003; Dorfman & Mattelart 1975; Wasko 2001).

The Jungle Book has been explicitly critiqued for both Kipling's (1894) and Disney's (1967) imperialist propaganda. However, the effects and true dimensions of such cultural imperialism are nonetheless much more ambiguous and complex to ascertain than we might believe. One, the

consumption of these Euro-American cultural products in "the rest" of the world hardly entails a passive acceptance of the imperialist images "hidden" in them. Two, the reproduction of a certain kind of cinema in certain geographies is rooted in deeper social relationships than that revealed by textual analysis of films.

Culture, as we see, is very deeply connected to the historical construction of identity in relation to the state. Arjun Appadurai (1996) explains the cultural dimensions of globalisation by examining how transnational flows of capital, ideas, and people increasingly shape the cultural politics of the global modern nation states. According to him, globalisation, far from blurring boundaries of nation states, is increasingly elevating the concept of a nation as the treasury of a singular ancient culture. His understanding of the concepts of culture and cultural difference, and ethnicisation of identities and transnational globalisation informs the paper to take an inward and multidirectional gaze on the text rather than the mainstream unidirectional model of the Euro-American domination.

Taking on the discourse of globalisation on the national scale, Arvind Rajagopal (2004) points out the role of Indian media in facilitating the rise of cultural fundamentalism with the emergence of economic liberalisation at the turn of the twenty-first century. He argues that the commonality between the seemingly contradictory forces of nation state and free market lay in their technologies of transmission for expanding markets and audiences. The then rapid consumption of mediatised images of Hinduism gives historical context to the contemporary image reproduction of "the ancient India" by the dominant national media industries on a global scale.

Scholars like Yan and Santos (2009) call this reinforcement of the Western-created myths of the Orient by the Orient "self-Orientalism". Described as "a reconfiguration and, in many ways, an extension of Orientalism" (Yan and Santos 2009: 297) the theory of "self-Orientalism" proposes that Orientalism is not merely the autonomous construction of the West, but is one in which the unchanging, essential Orient itself engages in its own construction, reproduction, and perpetuation. The concept complicates the reading of cultural imperialism in the postcolonial

media flows and redirects attention to "regional" systems of domination that contribute to the increasingly economised "son of the soil" narrative.

The repeated reproductions of texts such as *The Jungle Book*, which have the narrative of the native at its core, explain and reinstate a popular culture of primordial sentiments, riding on which global media corporations increasingly sustain and strengthen their dominance at global-local levels. The resultant reproduction of a selective film form and content further elevates centralisation and metropolitan hegemony within cinema.

Borrowing on the above conceptual frameworks of cultural studies and political economy, the paper deals with the idea of self-determination outside the unidirectional model of Euro-American domination and argues for the complex nature of the postcolonial media flows. Using *The Jungle Book* (2016) as an entry point, it discusses the globalisation strategies of Hollywood and Bollywood across the cinematic practices of production, distribution, and exhibition.

HOLLYWOOD BLOCKBUSTER

The Jungle Book (2016) has been hailed for setting new marketing, localisation, and box office standards for Hollywood films in India, as shared by Amrita Pandey, vice president, Studios, Disney India (Ramachandran 2016). Before we look into the factors that contribute to making a Hollywood film a regional success, it is important to understand what makes a Hollywood film a global success.

Examining the global presence of Hollywood films such as *Jurassic Park*, *Planet of the Apes*, *The Lord of the Rings*, Steven Prince (2003) points out that Hollywood's ascendancy worldwide is created, sustained, and enhanced through a certain profile of films that is popularly called "Hollywood Blockbuster". Prominent characteristics of this profile are huge costs of film

production and marketing, appeal of spectacle and hyperbolic visual effects, and revenue maximisation from film-based product licensing and merchandising.

Companies like Disney and Time Warner are pioneers in Hollywood Blockbuster since its development in the 1970s when the big studios turned their focus from stand-alone hits to franchises, or what Thomas Schatz has called "calculated mega films designed to sustain a product line of similar films and an ever-expanding array of related entertainment products" (Claverie 2016: 2).

Two studios, Universal and Disney, controlled more than 41 per cent of US domestic box office and a third of global gross collections in 2015. Much like Paramount, Disney released 11 films in 2015, but what gave it an upper hand in revenues are its pre-branded blockbusters that include superhero, fantasy, action, and sci-fi themes. "Our titles this year were part of the movie going culture before they even came out", said Disney worldwide distribution chief Dave Hollis (McClintock 2016).

In 2019, Disney led the global box office with *Captain Marvel*, *Avengers: Endgame*, and *Aladdin*, each crossing $1 billion and together accounting for 50 per cent of the overall gross for the summer season (Lee 2019). What's important to note is that none of their successes come from original properties. It indicates how the conglomerate has grown in the last decade.

While *Avatar* (2009) marked the first big Hollywood hit at Indian box office (Box Office India 2019a), the record breaking businesses of *Avengers* and *Iron Man* franchises in India testify to the growing popularity of the blockbuster form in the country. For instance, the top five Hollywood earners of 2015 in India were *Furious 7*, *Jurassic World*, *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, *Mission: Impossible – Rogue Nation*, and *Terminator Genisys*, as reported by KPMG India– Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry's [FICCI's] (2017) Indian media and entertainment industry report.

Film trade analysts have pointed out that Hollywood's growth in India has been facilitated by their localisation strategies such as dubbing in regional languages and roping in regional stars for regional versions. In the last five years, about 40 per cent of English film releases are dubbed in at least one local language in India, and regional dubbed releases in Hindi, Tamil, and Telugu constitute up to 50–60 per cent of Hollywood revenue in India (Bhushan 2017).

With its acquisition of UTV Motion Pictures in 2012, Disney has its foot firmly set in India, so much so that the top four highest grossing Hollywood titles of all time in India belong to Disney and from the last four years alone: *Avengers: Endgame* (2019), *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018), *The Jungle Book* (2016), and *The Lion King* (2019).

The Disney–UTV combination today ranks in the top film studios of the country. It leads in local production capacities in Hindi, Tamil, Telugu, and Malayalam, as well as brand licensing business in India across merchandising, publishing, gaming, broadcasting, and streaming, among others.

In the recent past, they had Varun Dhawan dubbing for *Captain America: Civil War* (2016) in Hindi, Priyanka Chopra and Irrfan Khan for *The Jungle Book* (2016) in Hindi, Ranveer Singh for *Deadpool 2*'s (2018) Hindi trailer, South superstar Rana Daggubati for *Avengers: Infinity War's* (2018) Telugu dub, Shahrukh Khan for *The Lion King* (2019) in Hindi, and Aishwarya Rai Bachchan for *Maleficent: Mistress of Evil*(2019) in Hindi, among others.

Recent Disney releases have also had regional song compositions for promotion in India. Vishal Dadlani's Hindi remake of the song "Bare Necessities" into "*Yeh Zaruratein*", Gulzar and Vishal Bhardwaj's remake of their old rendition "*Chaddi Pehen Ke Phool Khila Hai*" for *The Jungle Book* (2016), Hindi disco king Bappi Lahiri's song "*Shona*" for *Moana* (2016), and Punjabi Hindi rapper-singer Badshah's song "*Sab Sahi Hai* Bro" for the Hindi version of *Aladdin* (2019) are some examples.

In terms of their collections, *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015) saw 45 per cent, *The Jungle Book*'s (2016) 58 per cent, and *Captain America: Civil War* (2016) 41 per cent of their Indian revenues from dubbed versions (Bhushan 2017). With such high returns on dubbing films that are high on budgets and special effects, investment in regional dubs is on the rise.

It is only such Hollywood films that are packed with fantasy narratives, action sequences, and visual effects that make a significant impact at the box office. Apart from its localised marketing strategies, the Hollywood Blockbuster's growth in India has also been attributed to the multiplex boom in the country.

BOLLYWOOD HERO

Hollywood spectacles have immensely benefited from newer exhibition spaces like multiplexes that have emerged in the post-liberalisation period (see Box Office India 2016a). For instance, it was heralded as a great move by Disney to not release *The Jungle Book* (2016) in non-2K cinemas in India, as reported by Box Office India (2016b). Similarly, a majority of the people who watched *The Lion King* (2019) went to the top four cinema chains of India: PVR, Inox, Carnival, and Cinepolis (Box Office India 2019b).

Backed with high-technology projection systems and quality infrastructure, these new spaces of exhibition offer the audiences "a fully immersive, larger than life, entertaining experience" of films that "the whole family can watch and enjoy together," posited Siddharth Roy Kapur, Managing Director, Disney India (Box Office India 2015).

For Disney's Hindi film productions in India such as *Khoobsurat* (2014), *Chennai Express* (2013) and *ABCD: Anybody Can Dance* (2013), Manish Hariprasad, one of the creative directors on the Disney UTV team, said, "I feel the biggest movies in the country are actually the ones that families watch together. That is our single-point agenda for Disney branded movies we produce—to make clean, beautiful, fun, family movies" (Box Office India 2013).

His statement reminds one of a similar film form that dominates the home turf— Bollywood: Hollywood Blockbuster's counterpart in the Hindi film industry. Scholars have pointed it out as a particular genre of Hindi film that enjoys global circulation. It emerged with the rise of the "family film" and the "mall-multiplex phenomenon" in the 1990s. It reimagined movie watching as the middle classes leisurely viewing "clean films" in "clean spaces" (see Athique 2009; Ganti 2012; Prasad 1998; Vasudevan 2008; Viswanath 2007)

This Hindi Blockbuster formula that went on to define "the consumable hero" of the "new" India—the *Rahuls* and *Prems* of *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (1995), *Dil to Pagal Hai* (1997), *Pardes* (1997), *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* (1998), *Kaho Na Pyar Hai* (2000), etc. (Athique 2009)—celebrated the "Hindu undivided family", playing out the aspirations of unbridled consumerism, religion and ritualism (Deshpande 2005: 197–201).

This increasing commercialisation and communalisation of the Hindi film and industry, as observed from the late 1980s, was systemically segmented both by the Indian state and the corporate sector in the next few decades in order to rebrand India as an economic superpower. So much so that the neoliberal obsession with the consumable hero does not only continue unabated but has over the last decade acquired an unprecedented legitimacy on the national and international stage.

Appreciating the coveted Rs 100 crore mark of *The Jungle Book* (2016) at the Indian box office success, Shah Rukh Khan said that Bollywood has the potential to produce films that would touch everyone across the world. "It is our old '*Jungle Book*' and you can remake it with new technology and that's why it's so enticing. We need to dress up our films in a particular fashion" (Sarkar 2016).

"Imagine a Mahabharat with the VFX of '*The Jungle Book*', '*Avatar*' or '*X-Men*'. It will be mind blowing! It's an international story. Technology can help us reach that. To make an Indian film universal like Mahabharat or Ramayan or Shiva or we can take our heroes like Krishna. The world knows about them," he added.

As special effects and fantasy narratives become the most significant ingredient for films to translate cross-culturally, it is the story cycles of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata and the character brands of Bheem, Krishna, Hanuman, and Ram that enjoy national and international appeal (Box Office India 2012).

The dressing up in the above comment is reflective of the domestic elite's neoliberal aspiration to emulate Hollywood's tentpole practices of production and distribution for international recognition. The global success of Indian fantasy epic *Bahubali 2* (2017)[1] perhaps best testifies to it. Beset with Hindu fantasy narrative, special effects, corporatised circulation and exhibition, franchise sequels and spin-offs, and brand product licensing, the film checks all the boxes of the contemporary Indian global film.

The effects of globalisation of such Indian films can be seen both inwards and outwards. On the domestic front, we see similar marketing and distribution practices ensuring the survival of the Marathi and other such film industries.

The preservation of a past narrative through the linguistically-oriented territorial notion of the "regional", the corporatised production and multiplex-centred exhibition, the IT-enabled urban middle class spectatorship, among other phenomena, have ensured a "regional" or "vernacular" version of globalisation (see Ingle 2015).

On the international front, we see Disney's *Aladdin* (2019) claiming a Bollywood production aesthetic for best possible economic returns globally. The longest running movie in 2019 in India, *Aladdin* (2019) is arguably known to have kept Bollywood as a reference point.

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[1] *Bahubali 2* (2017) is the highest grossing Indian film of all time in North America, and the highest ever opening in the IMAX format for a foreign-language film in the continent. Rendering a technologically marvellous experience of the epic, it has led to more big-budget projects of the story cycles of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata in the making (Ramachandran 2017).

"I was trying to do my best Bollywood version in this movie and there is a Prince Ali sequence in the film and I kept telling Guy Ritchie you got to go full Bollywood, you have to give them full Bollywood flavour," actor Will Smith said at one of the film's promotional events in Tokyo (NDTV 2019).

"Because how colourful it is, because of the music element … whether it's to do with the costumes or sets … I loved that fact that yes that kind of Bollywood how things just burst out of the screen, that joyousness that really comes through in our movie," added Naomi Scott, the female lead in the film (BBC Asian Network 2019).

On one level, we see the Marathi film industry subscribing to the urban middle-class aesthetic of the multiplex film, as predominantly represented by Bollywood. On the other, there is Bollywood aspiring to churning spectacles out of Indian mythological texts. On yet another, we see an *Aladdin* (2019) being given a Bollywood makeover in terms of sets, costumes, music, dance, and the overall aesthetic so that the film does well at the global box office.

The "postmodern" hype about a common globalised culture and the simultaneous marketing of cultural differences complicates the panorama of globalisation. The cycle of industry practices and visual representations, subsequently generated local cultures, and their reproductions not only accounts for the pressures of the global on the local but also positions such pressures at the centre of explanations of globalisation occurring at all levels. These phenomena prevailing on global-local levels explain the business activities and cultural attributes that contribute to the global functioning of the neoliberal economic order.

CONCLUSION: THE SPECTACLE OF THE MYTHICAL

The dominant domestic cultural producers' indulgence in what Yan and Santos state as "recollecting and, in some cases, reinventing traditions to recreate an ancient, historical, and

unchanging identity" is increasingly co-opted by the once-colonised for its own identification in the postcolonial world (Yan and Santos 2009: 298).

Indian films based on mythological stories such as the epics of the Mahabharata and the Ramayana have a tremendous potential for both the cinematic and the "essential" Indian grandeur on the global stage. As they aspire to claim their place in the world, they reinvent, reconstruct and renegotiate the national culture and the marketable national identities.

Meeting the ideals of Western modernity for the success of the project of globalisation, these domestic politico-economic agents, in their acts of marketing Indian culture, remain deeply influenced by Oriental scholarship. The Orientalist discourse, however, reflects power relations not only between the West and the Third World, but also within the Third World, where the indigenous dominant ideology played a crucial role in the construction and reinforcement of its early Orientalist representations (Ibid).

Richard King (1999) explains this nexus when he points out that the Western literary knowledge located the core of Indian spirituality and society in Sanskritic texts with a priestly elite (the Brahmin caste) and not with common Hindus. The growth of Orientalist discourse is, therefore, nothing but the domination of the Hindu values carried through right from the days of Kipling to Nehru to the present times.

The new global hero dabbles between technology and ethnicity, be it Black Panther, Aladdin, or Chota Bheem. The increasing status of the Blockbuster form and primordial content is not coincidental. This repeated creation of primordial sentiments, which has been a part of the project of the modern nation state, represents an even greater promise for the "regional" elite for "global" exchange in the postcolonial world.

Going by the contemporary rise of the right-wing fundamentalism the world over, it is no surprise that the cultural industries across the globe today ride on the popularity of primordialism. The coming-of-age stories of Disney's protagonists in their quest for

self-determination and power do not look much different from the fundamentalist political saviours that democratic countries have given rise to through the past four decades.

Scholars have pointed out how globalisation forces corporations to have a competitive advantage in the global market by aggressively propagating nations not as secular, socialist, or welfare states but as identity states. The neoliberal credo of the jungle law of "might is right" has centralised and polarised the societal spheres of economy, polity and culture more than ever today.

As politics based on Hindutva touches an unprecedented high, it is about time we reconsidered the formulation of the problem as "cultural effects" of "economic globalisation". The increasing incitement of economic forces to the primordial identities of people testifies to the intrinsic primordial core of globalisation, where Hollywood giants like Disney endlessly refashion its stories of Aladdin, Tarzan, Mowgli, Simba, and Mulan globally, and Bollywood giants increasingly aspire to reproduce Bheem, Krishna, Hanuman, and Ram to have an instant global advantage.

I, thereby, argue that the forces of globalisation repeatedly churn primordial sentiments privileging the indigenous elite on global-local levels. The neoliberal form of narrative engagement is rooted in the narrative of the native, reinforcing culture-specific valorisation and polarisation. Wrapped in technological innovations, texts such as *The Jungle Book* hold the promise of the bygone glory of the ancient past at every turn of the decade and through every new medium.

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