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Cinema as A Cultural Bridge: On-Screen Dialogue Between East and West

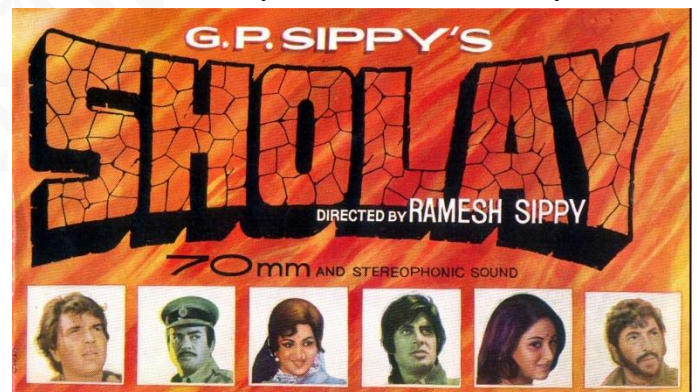
At the beginning of 2024, I embarked on a unique journey to India. Usually, I travel for film festivals: thanks to the film critic's profession, I've been able to discover places I'd never have travelled to otherwise. Learning about new cultures within the context of films was always the most rewarding experience: even before setting foot on the soil of a certain area, even without leaving home, through the magical blue screen and stories unfolding on it, one starts being a part of the place, knowing people dwelling there, and thus understanding them better. When serving on the jury, I always prefer to watch a national competition to get an intense and complex exposure to the local culture, society, and even politics.

However, that trip of mine was not related to a film festival that would usually embrace me with a thought-through, carefully curated program that would have become a portal for my first encounter with the country. That made me think about what image of India I had within the context of mainstream cinema. With the pictures swarming in my head, I immediately started reflecting on the fact that cinema can be the perfect entry point to culture and a dangerous tool to produce clichés and stereotypes.

With no doubt, India is a country with a strong identity; wherever you go around the world, people will have no trouble evoking images and associations related to it. Yet, at the same time, its culture is so diverse that many details are omitted in the cinematic representation, and philosophy is so intricately that many relate to it superficially without delving deeper and gaining a proper understanding. From the plethora of colours, sounds, and beliefs, only the most garish ones make it to the European screens, shaping the distorted image of Indian country and culture. In this text, I invite you to travel back in time and see how the image of India was shaped in my (and millions of people coming from the same part of the

world) head. Let's also discuss how it is relevant for India.

It's worth mentioning that my mission in India was related to the yoga teacher's course that I was taking. This might be one of the most common reasons young people visit India in post-Soviet countries. On my way, I was wondering if it could be related to the political and social unrest that prompts spiritual search and thus depicts India as an ultimate, idealized answer to all the troubles, an image with no doubt supported by cinema. As I thought of it, the memories from early childhood came to my mind...



I was born in Eastern Europe just after the Soviet Union collapsed. When it comes to India, what we saw on screen back then were two types of content. The first one would be older Indian movies that used to be widely popular in the Soviet Union (*Seeta Aur Geeta* and *Sholay* by Ramesh Sippy, 1972 and 1975, respectively; *Alibaba Aur 40 Chor* by Umesh Mehra and Latif Faiziyev, 1980; *Disco Dancer* by Babbar Subhash, 1982). As engaging as they were, these films created an extremely one-sided picture of India, being a perfect source for shaping stereotypes about it.

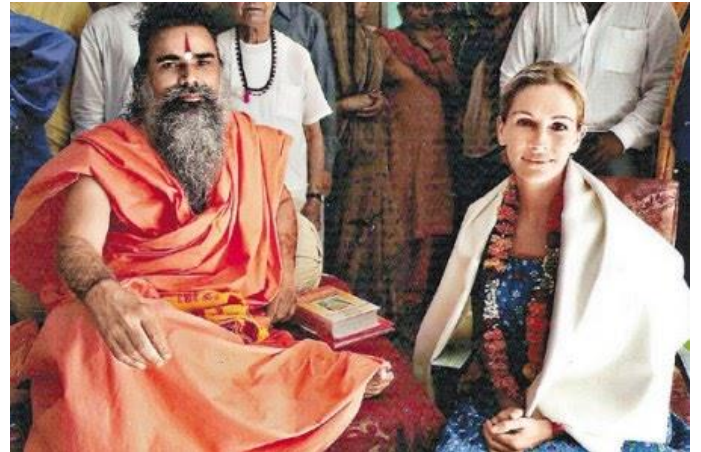
The second type of content would be related to a completely different side of India or, rather, the post-Soviet interpretation of it. With the social and economic turmoil swelling on the ruins of the former empire, people found themselves in a state of

profound misery. Together with political and spiritual waymarks, they were disrupted severely, and amidst the economic crisis, the population was desperately seeking some magical answer to rescue the situation and to experience the feeling of belonging again. Such an answer arrived from the East, proclaimed by false messiahs, or “gurus”, as they would call themselves. Dozens of destructive cults popped up, most of them claiming to be based on ancient tantric lore that was supposed to bring eventual liberation. Their founders were using snatches of Indian philosophies to enslave the minds of the followers; the exotic form, bright and mysterious, seemed attractive to many people living in a grey, highly criminalised reality. They would start various “ashrams” to spread synthetic teachings. There, they would practice dubious rituals that were torn out of context and mixed in an inconsequent way. Eventually, multiple “gurus” inflicted both physical and mental damage to gullible worshippers, as well as ripped them of savings; as they were using Hindu vocabulary and decorations and citing sacred Hindu texts, soon enough, the majority of people would start associating India with barbaric and perverted cults that should be judged and condemned, and all those interested in disciplines like yoga or alike would be laughed at as best, bullied and shunned at most.

As criminal investigations became public, TV channels got flooded with documentaries exposing the scale of the damage done by “gurus”. Watching them, viewers would get essentially convinced that Indian equals barbaric and alien, and since the dawn of times, the alien was perceived as wrong, dangerous, and subjected to cancellation. It took a couple of decades until the alternative point of view became available; it was even more complicated as the continuity of Indian culture studies in the Russian Empire was severed by the communistic destructions of many valuable scientific and literary works related to Oriental disciplines. Time, effort, and resources were required to try and restore the succession and for new academic and popular works related to India to be published.

Yet as time passed by and the post-Soviet world was getting more stable economically and, at the same time, more and more influenced by Western culture, gradually, a different, diametrically opposed image of India started shaping up for a new generation. From fear and aversion, society moved to

unquestioned fascination with the spirituality of the mysterious Bharat. In a way, it was as far from reality as the previous frightening reputation.



Eat, Pray, Love

In films like *Eat, Pray, Love* by Ryan Murphy, 2010, India was represented as a magical pill to overcome consumeristic Western consciousness attacked by demons of lack of sense and burnout. Now, instead of dealing with mental issues or even just regular grownup problems, desperately longing for something more meaningful than what capitalistic society has to offer, the young generation flew to India drawn by infantile hope of easy transformation. This trend is not only applicable to youth. The same tune continues in *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* by John Madden, 2011. This charming yet naïve fairy tale focuses on British seniors escaping to India to achieve self-renewal spurred by the unfamiliar surroundings; despite each character's personal evolution, the film supports a lot of established stereotypes about India. Many similar films of the sort contributed to a false perception of Indian culture and the way it should be treated by foreigners, reducing it to crowd-pleasing characters played almost exclusively by Dev Patel.

In post-Soviet countries, this tendency to romanticize India as a place to run away from problems and acquire new self became known as Goa Syndrome. Goa is a part of the world that prides eternal summer, the most beautiful sunsets, and freedom! People came for the spirit of Goa, and many stayed there for a very long time.

Cinematically, it culminated in the feature film *Motherland* by Peter Buslov in 2015. Here's how the description of India goes: “Here, the nights are blinding with the lights of raves, the days are lulling

with the sound of waves, the sand is like gold, money is but a paper, you just live with no worries, and if you're lucky, you'll meet God. This is India, where people from all over the world come to find or lose themselves”.

Clearly, this description could hardly be applicable to the diverse India, yet for many post-soviet people, this is the only side they are familiar with. The characters are based on types that usually travel to Goa. They all come to India for quick and cheap enlightenment, perceiving the country as something of a summer camp for spoiled grownups, no more than exotic decoration for their personal shallow dramas.

The source of Indian wisdom seems to be inexhaustible and enough for all of them, yet it's hard not to notice the utter consumeristic attitude to the local culture and dehumanising and generalising treatment of local people. The character's arrogant and superior behaviour is possible only here; they would never allow such an attitude back in their home countries.

So, while in the US or UK film industry, it might be topical to talk rather about cultural appropriation trends as an extension of racism and colonial oppression, in the post-Soviet media world, the approach tends to focus primarily on the idealistic vision of India as a mean of escapism. It's a place to go and pay for transformation with no effort. Upon their first arrival to India, many dreamers find themselves taken aback by the reality: enlightenment comes along not only with the distilled scent of flowers and colourful garments but with all the contrasts of India and the hard work required to reach a true shift in consciousness. Not everyone is able to stand the reality check of the land of wonders, and rejected by India, they retreat in confusion. However, by that time, mutual harm was done: in my talks with locals, I discovered a lot of aversion towards common demanding touristic behaviour, unrealistic expectations, and complete ignorance regarding local traditions and ways of living.

However, some manage to adapt and decide to stay, as happens in *City of Joy* by Roland Joffé, 1992, a film based on the book of the same title by Dominique Lapierre. Compared to the tremendous success of the director's previous film, *The Killing Fields*, 1984, which realistically depicted the Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia through the interaction of

two journalists, Cambodian Dith Pran and American Sydney Schanberg, *City of Joy*, though following somewhat the same narrative, was not received as warmly. It tells us the story of an American doctor, Max Lowe, and an Indian former rural farmer, present rickshaw-puller Hazari Pal, trying to get their lives together with an overwhelming Kolkata with its richness and cruelty unfolding in the background.



City of Joy

The devastating amount of criticism that film received could be summarized in Roger Ebert's opinion: "*There's so much interesting stuff in the movie we are prepared to forgive that, but still, thinking back on the film, it wouldn't have suffered if the entire plot involving Swayze and Collins had been dropped, and Joffe had simply told the story of the rickshaw man*". Yet for me, especially keeping in mind numerous examples of latter films done by Western directors, this story possesses the valuable case of truthful depiction of ever so common clashes of cultures: East and West, so different in appearance and essence, are forced to coexist. Sometimes, they fail, but once in a while, they succeed, and there are no clear-cut ethical choices that could be made from both sides. These unmatching views on the world model and social justice make the story interesting; the unresolved complexity of intertwined decisions and beliefs, even if clad in Hollywoodish dialogues and sugar-coated happy end, come as close to reality as possible.

The diverse response from the press and audience (that embraced the scale from thrilled fascination to ultimate criticism) by itself proves that even if the movie is not perfect in ideological, dramaturgical, or cultural aspects, it has value so rare in the modern cinema overwhelmed with fast food content: the power to start a discussion.

Though it is worth standing for cultural authenticity and national input in cinema, we cannot deny the reality: whether we approve of it or not, Western ideas affect the way people in India behave just as Indian ideas make Westerners reformulate their ideas and concepts about life. Whether we turn it for good or bad is our common responsibility.

With the voices of Indians defending their culture and fighting against appropriative cultural trends, it's important to keep in mind that often, the longing for something more authentic and the desire to immerse in a new culture born in the hearts of Westerners of post-Soviet people come from a good place. Genuinely fascinated and eager to study Indian heritage, we can't help but be influenced by the media that creates a contorted image of reality and suggests a false prompt for those looking to make the first tentative steps towards India. It is worth mentioning that while talking about offensive clichés, critics would naturally tend to defend indigenous people exclusively, omitting the fact that little foreign films set as obnoxious stereotypes about Western (or post-Soviet) people as national productions do. Characters from the aforementioned films, *Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* or *Motherland*, are based on minimal types that are, however, fitting familiar narratives most effortlessly. The insult of Indian culture backfires to British, American, or Russian characters with a powerful blast.

That's where cinema can play a crucial role in educating those seeking transformation, nurturing the respect and humble curiosity of a disciple, and providing an understanding of how and where to look for a source of knowledge. To promote strong film selection for the wider audience should be a joint effort between the two sides involved in this interaction.

There are some disturbing tendencies here. Because of growing budget restrictions, festivals tend to focus more and more on regional cinema and invite guests within the affordable travelling range. Naturally, in such circumstances, every country and region finds themselves at risk of creating cultural and social echo chambers, choosing affordability over diversity. And though, naturally, historically, every region has its interest and focus, in today's globalised world where everything has become so intertwined and mutually influenced, it seems crucial for us to maintain the precious opportunity to communicate through cinema on the broadest scale possible.

Let this dialogue be complex, painful or frustrating; let us take a sincere interest in each other and maybe make mistakes in our ways. With mutual respect at the core of the discussion and with the omnipotent transformative and educative power of true art, it will always turn out to be beneficial in the end.

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