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2 **Small Town Stories and Big Box-Office Returns**

3

4 **Abstract**

5 This paper examines the current trend in Hindi cinema, where films set in small towns and featuring
6 lesser-known actors are capturing mass attention and achieving significant box-office success.
7 Focusing on the transformation of Bollywood—often referred to as Bombay’s Hindi film industry—
8 this study explores how narratives centered on small-town India have gained prominence and
9 reshaped the cinematic landscape in a dynamic and engaging way. Though initially delayed due to the
10 high failure rate of such films in connecting with audiences accustomed to big-city settings and star-
11 driven narratives, this shift is now clear. Audiences are increasingly distancing themselves from
12 urban-centric portrayals and expressing a stronger desire for localized relatable cinematic experiences.
13 The paper also highlights the rise of relatively unknown actors who are bringing authenticity and
14 relatability to their roles, often portraying grounded characters that resonate deeply with viewers. With
15 modest budgets, films like *Stree*, *Bala*, and *Luka Chuppi* have proven successful with both critics and
16 audiences. This paper aims to trace the evolution of Bollywood’s storytelling trends and analyse how
17 these small-town narratives are influencing box-office performance and audience preferences.

18 **I. INTRODUCTION**

19 The Hindi film industry, widely known as Bollywood, has played a crucial role in shaping the
20 sociocultural landscape of India and its global image. From the pre-independence era, where films
21 fostered a sense of unity and patriotism, to the present day, where Bollywood continues to address
22 social issues while providing entertainment, the industry has evolved significantly. Despite numerous
23 changes in storytelling techniques and cinematic styles, certain core elements have remained constant.
24 Cinema has always sought to capture grandeur, with beautiful and larger-than-life visuals that often
25 serve as metaphors for the stories being told. Locations and settings play a pivotal role in establishing
26 the mood and identity of a film, with iconic cityscapes such as Mumbai, often referred to as the heart
27 of "Bombay Cinema," dominating the screen. As globalization took hold, films began to cater more to
28 the Non-Resident Indian (NRI) audience, ushering in the era of multiplex culture.

29 However, over time, there arose a growing demand for films that depicted more grounded, relatable
30 stories—particularly those reflecting the lives of the middle and lower classes, who continued to be a
31 major audience for theatre-based cinema. Similar to the post-independence era, which saw films
32 reflecting rural India’s realities, the focus gradually shifted back to small-town narratives. This shift
33 was facilitated by filmmakers from smaller cities like Lucknow, Patna, and Agra, who brought their
34 regional stories to the forefront. Small-town films, which cater to local sensibilities while appealing to
35 national and global audiences, have gained prominence in contemporary Bollywood. Despite its
36 traditionally rigid structure, the industry has become more inclusive, with fresh talent from these
37 previously unrecognized regions breaking into the mainstream. These new faces are now competing
38 with established stars, contributing significantly to the box office success. This paper explores the
39 transition from formulaic cinema to the rise of small-town stories, highlighting how talent from these
40 lesser-known cities is reshaping the industry and making a remarkable impact at the box office.

41 **II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

42 **Changing Trends in the Hindi Film Industry (Bollywood)**

43 The Hindi film industry, commonly known as Bollywood, has undergone significant evolution over
44 the past century. From its humble beginnings with primitive screenings on makeshift screens to
45 becoming a vast cultural and economic empire, Bollywood has come a long way. In nearly nine
46 decades, the industry has grown into the world’s largest film producer, churning out approximately
47 27,000 feature films annually. This does not even account for the many short films and documentaries

48 that also contribute to the industry's impact. As Naresh and Prakash (2015) note, "From the very first
49 mythological *Raja Harishchandra* to the contemporary city-centric *Wake Up Sid*, Hindi cinema has
50 explored various facets of Indian society." Over the years, Bollywood transformed from being a raw,
51 unstructured entity to a highly organized industry. Despite these changes, one constant remains: the
52 filmmaker's drive to tell compelling stories and the Indian audience's enthusiasm for these narratives.
53 While Bollywood's global popularity, especially in regions with significant Indian diasporas like the
54 UK, Canada, the Middle East, and South Africa, has soared, its share of the global market remains
55 small. Pillania (2008) observes, "Bollywood's share in the global movie market is still relatively
56 insignificant, and the industry needs substantial investment in distribution and marketing to compete
57 effectively with global rivals."

58 **Bollywood and the Box Office**

59 In contemporary cinema, box-office numbers serve as a primary measure of success. In the early days
60 of Indian cinema, films were created more out of passion than profit, with box-office returns being
61 secondary. However, post-globalization in the late 1990s, India's economy became more open, which
62 benefited the Bollywood industry. The influx of investors and producers, eager to tap into the growing
63 film market, led to a surge in commercial movie production. The sheer volume of film sales was
64 evident, with India selling 3.6 billion tickets in 2002, surpassing the 2.6 billion sold in the US.
65 However, this did not translate into revenue, with Bollywood earning only \$2 billion compared to the
66 US film industry's \$55 billion. This discrepancy was largely due to low ticket prices and rampant
67 piracy. Fetscherin (2010) notes that "The Indian film industry grew 17% on average between 2004
68 and 2007, representing about 20% of the revenue of the entire Indian media and entertainment sector."
69 These challenges called for a more accountable distribution, marketing, and screening system, leading
70 to the rise of the 'multiplex culture' in Bollywood.

71 **Concept of 'Small-Town' Cinema**

72 Bollywood has long been enamored with showcasing grand visuals and larger-than-life landscapes,
73 aiming to present a world that is idealized, beautiful, and free from life's struggles. This approach
74 resonated with moviegoers, who flocked to theaters to escape into the enchanting world of cinema.
75 From the 1960s to the 1990s, many films showcased scenic locations such as the grassy plains of
76 Switzerland and the snow-covered mountains of Kashmir. However, with the success of films like
77 *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (DDLJ), which catered to the NRI market, Bollywood began to
78 increasingly focus on city-centric, glamorous narratives. As Rao (2007) suggests, "Indian identity is
79 being shaped by the new globalizing Bollywood, and non-elite audiences from rural India are
80 beginning to distance themselves from the images that mainstream cinema constructs." This shift
81 marked the beginning of a movement away from the urban-centric stories of Bombay Cinema, as
82 regional stories began to gain traction.

83 The rise of regional cinema, especially in languages such as Bhojpuri, Marathi, and Bengali, was a
84 crucial moment in challenging the dominance of Bombay Cinema. Films from small-town settings
85 started resonating more deeply with audiences. As Navdeep Singh aptly puts it, "Small towns just
86 have more colour. Most big cities look like each other" (as quoted in Susan, 2008). This sentiment
87 gave rise to films like *Ishqiya* and *Tanu Weds Manu*, both set in Uttar Pradesh, which performed well
88 at the box office. Similarly, the gritty, raw crime dramas like *Gangs of Wasseypur I & II*, based in
89 Bihar, struck a chord with audiences by authentically portraying the region's culture. Other films,
90 such as *Swades* and *Peepli Live*, which highlighted social issues from a rural or small-town
91 perspective, were also highly acclaimed. Kumar (2013) remarks, "The small-town may have gradually
92 become more form than content, but it has also become the anchor of a cinema located elsewhere—
93 representing a body of films that reject the label 'Bombay Cinema.'"

94 **III. METHODOLOGY**

95 **Data Collection**

96 The process of data collection is essential to ensure the credibility and relevance of the research. Both
97 primary and secondary data are gathered to address the specific research questions and objectives.
98 This collection not only aids in solving the research questions but also provides valuable
99 documentation for future researchers exploring similar topics. The goal is to gather pertinent
100 information that adds depth and relevance to the research and supports the overarching analysis.

101 **Primary Data**

102 Primary data refers to information collected firsthand through qualitative and quantitative methods.
103 This data is gathered from direct sources, including individuals who are willing to contribute their
104 insights to the research. It is vital for establishing the authenticity of the research and validating the
105 research topic. Primary data provides direct evidence for the study and plays a crucial role in
106 strengthening the overall research.

107 **Secondary Data**

108 Secondary data is information that has been previously collected and published by other sources, such
109 as books, academic articles, journals, and other relevant literature. This data serves to support and
110 validate the research topic by referencing established works in the field. Using secondary data helps
111 contextualize the study within existing scholarship and provides a foundation for further analysis and
112 interpretation.

113 **Methods Adopted**

114 This research employs multiple data collection methods under a unified framework, focusing on
115 qualitative techniques to analyze and understand the evolution of small-town stories in Bollywood.

116 **Qualitative Methods**

117 1. **Expert Interviews**

118 Expert interviews involve collecting data through structured yet open-ended conversations
119 with professionals who have expertise in areas relevant to the research topic. These interviews
120 provide qualitative insights into the subject matter, offering expert perspectives on the
121 influence of small towns in Bollywood storytelling. The data gathered is not quantitative but
122 rather reflective of the expert's opinions, judgments, and critiques, providing deeper insight
123 into the dynamics of small-town narratives in Hindi cinema.

124 2. **Content Analysis**

125 Content analysis is a method used to evaluate and interpret the existing data, particularly
126 films, in the context of this research. Given that a vast amount of content already exists,
127 content analysis allows for the extraction of relevant elements to fit the research framework. It
128 involves analysing cinematic elements such as mise en scène, character portrayal, settings,
129 costumes, and camera work, to understand how small-town themes are represented and their
130 significance in the larger narrative of Bollywood cinema. This method is crucial for
131 identifying the recurring themes and patterns within small-town films, which contribute to
132 their success and appeal.

133 **Research Process**

134 The research process combines personal observations and an analysis of previous works relevant to
135 the research topic. Expert interviews and content analysis will be utilized to understand the
136 contributions of small towns to Bollywood storytelling. The research will focus on how these small-
137 town narratives, coupled with lesser-known actors, capture the audience's attention and achieve
138 significant box office success.

139 **Research Theory**

140 The **Agenda-Setting Theory** will be applied to explore how media, including films, influences public
141 opinion by focusing on specific issues. In the context of Bollywood, the theory will help understand
142 how films set in small towns shape the audience's perceptions of Indian society. The theory highlights
143 how the media (in this case, films) emphasizes certain themes, and through framing, directs the
144 audience's attention to these topics. This concept is vital for understanding how Bollywood's narrative
145 choices influence audience reactions, especially regarding the increasing popularity of small-town-
146 based stories.

147 Additionally, **Thematic Analysis** will be used to evaluate the data from previous film studies. This
148 analysis will focus on recurring elements such as script, location, setting, characters, and costumes to
149 assess how they contribute to the thematic depth and success of small-town films. The thematic
150 analysis will guide the research in identifying the key components that make these films resonate with
151 audiences.

152 **IV. CONTENT ANALYSIS**

153 **Luka Chuppi (2019)**

154 Addressing the still ambiguous concept of live-in relationships in Indian culture, *Luka Chuppi* (2019),
155 a romantic-comedy, succeeded in bringing a fresh perspective to Bollywood. The film not only
156 performed exceptionally well at the box office, grossing ₹128.86 crore (US\$18 million) worldwide,
157 but also made waves on the music charts with its catchy Hindi songs, covering various genres.

158 The male protagonist, Guddu, played by Kartik Aaryan, was already known for his commercial roles
159 in earlier hits like *Pyaar Ka Punchnama* and *Sonu Ke Titu Ki Sweety*. Although those films
160 contributed to his success and helped shape his career, they also pigeonholed him into a stereotypical
161 "hero" image, limiting his range. *Luka Chuppi* marked a turning point, as Kartik's portrayal of a
162 journalist based in the small town of Mathura offered a nuanced character that deviated from the usual
163 Bollywood lead.

164 Kartik, originally from Gwalior in Madhya Pradesh—an area not typically associated with Bollywood
165 stardom—found a unique opportunity to contribute to the rise of small-town cinema in India. The film
166 uses the setting of Mathura and Gwalior to explore the unaddressed concept of live-in relationships,
167 highlighting how this subject is still in its nascent stages in rural parts of India.

168 The movie emphasizes the architecture and cultural backdrop of these towns, which helped make the
169 setting more relatable for local audiences. Despite a modest production budget of ₹25 crore, *Luka
170 Chuppi* managed to succeed both commercially and critically, with minimal set design and location-
171 based shoots. This success demonstrated that films with small budgets could still resonate with
172 audiences and generate substantial revenue.

173 **Stree (2018)**

174 Another breakthrough in Indian cinema came with *Stree* (2018), a horror-comedy that defied genre
175 conventions. Directed by Amar Kaushik, the film received critical acclaim and won the 64th Filmfare
176 Award for Best Debut Director. *Stree* was unique in its fusion of comedy, horror, romance, and
177 suspense, marking a pioneering moment in Hindi cinema. The film featured rising stars like Pankaj
178 Tripathi, Rajkumar Rao, and Aparshakti Khurana, all of whom had previously earned respect for
179 their work in regional and independent films but hadn't seen significant commercial success in
180 mainstream cinema.

181 Set in Chanderi, a small town in Madhya Pradesh with a population of just 33,000, *Stree* taps into an
182 urban myth—'Nale Ba' (meaning "come tomorrow")—that originated from old Bangalore. The film's
183 premise revolves around the spirit of an angry woman haunting the town, and the residents' attempts
184 to save themselves from her wrath. The film's inventive approach to the horror genre, combined with

185 its strong performances and witty dialogue, captivated audiences and kept them on the edge of their
186 seats, something many big-budget films failed to do at the time.

187 Despite being a horror-comedy with a limited budget, *Stree* excelled in its music and score, with hits
188 like *Milegi Milegi* and *Kamariya* dominating the charts for an extended period. The film's success at
189 the box office, grossing ₹180.76 crore, was unprecedented for a horror-comedy, proving that small-
190 town narratives, combined with a fresh approach to genre blending, could thrive in mainstream
191 cinema.

192 **Bala (2019)**

193 Directed by Amar Kaushik, *Bala* (2019) is a film that examines deep-rooted societal standards,
194 particularly those related to beauty. Set in the city of Kanpur in Uttar Pradesh in 2005, the film
195 critiques the conventional ideals of beauty, which often revolve around fair skin and thick hair. In one
196 of the film's opening scenes, a young boy teases his teacher for being bald and comments on a
197 classmate's dark complexion, illustrating how ingrained these beauty standards are, even at a young
198 age.

199 Ayushmann Khurrana, Bhumi Pednekar, and Yami Gautam delivered powerful performances that
200 added depth to the film's exploration of societal issues. The actors, known for their work in smaller-
201 scale films, stepped outside their usual comfort zones in *Bala*, which proved to be a risky yet
202 successful move. The film addresses sensitive topics with humor, making its commentary on body
203 image both engaging and thought-provoking.

204 With a budget of ₹25 crore, *Bala* turned out to be a major success, grossing ₹172 crore globally. The
205 film's success reinforced Ayushmann Khurrana's reputation as a bankable star for smaller-budget
206 films that tackle significant social issues. *Bala* is an example of how films with meaningful content,
207 humor, and an engaging narrative can challenge societal norms and still achieve commercial success
208 in Bollywood.

209 Each of these films—*Luka Chuppi*, *Stree*, and *Bala*—demonstrates the power of small-town narratives
210 and the potential for Bollywood to break free from formulaic content. They prove that with strong
211 storytelling, relatable themes, and fresh approaches to genre, even films with limited budgets can
212 achieve significant commercial success.

213 **V. EXPERT INTERVIEW**

214 **Manish Gupta** is the editor for the Jabalpur division of *Dainik Bhaskar*, one of India's leading Hindi-
215 language newspapers. With a solid background in journalism, creative writing, storytelling, and the
216 newspaper industry, Manish brings valuable insights to this research. He holds a BSc and a BJC
217 degree in journalism from RDVV Jabalpur and has worked with various prestigious news and print
218 organizations, including *Nav Bharat*. A passionate movie enthusiast, Manish is known for his deep
219 analytical approach to films, often deconstructing them to uncover their underlying meanings. His
220 knowledge and opinions are crucial for this paper, as they delve into the intention and impact of films
221 on viewers and vice versa. Below are his views on several topics.

222

223 **The 'Now' of New-Age Cinema**

224 The evolution of filmmaking in India, especially in mainstream Hindi cinema (Bollywood), has long
225 been due for a shift towards unfamiliar themes, untold stories, and unexplored locations. While the
226 movement for this change has faced challenges, with some efforts failing to gain traction, certain
227 films like *Gangs of Wasseypur* (2012) succeeded in breaking away from the urban cinematic
228 framework. However, many others did not receive the recognition they deserved.

229 In the past five years, Bollywood has increasingly embraced rural settings and non-clichéd narratives,
230 venturing into smaller, less explored towns. It's important to note that the parallel cinema movement,
231 rooted in these smaller towns, has now merged with mainstream cinema. Directors and producers are
232 now more open to these fresh ideas than ever before. This shift is a direct response to the changing
233 dynamics of film viewership. As big-budget movies starring superstars like Salman Khan and Shah
234 Rukh Khan begin to underperform, there has been a notable shift in audience preferences. Viewers are
235 no longer satisfied with the repetitive formula of commercial romantic comedies; they now seek
236 experimental and diverse narratives. They are more aware of their choices and demand value for their
237 money. This new wave of cinema reflects these changing viewer preferences and marks a significant
238 shift in Bollywood's landscape.

239

240 **The Rise of 'Not So Unheard' Names**

241 While the Khans and Kapoors have long been the faces of Bollywood, recent trends reveal a decline
242 in their success rates, pointing to a growing void in their dominance. Actors like Rajkumar Rao and
243 Ayushmann Khurrana, though recognized for their work in both small and big films, have only
244 recently seen a surge in their box-office success. This shift can be attributed to a fundamental change
245 in scriptwriting and character development. In the past, many actors struggled to gain recognition due
246 to poorly written characters and weak narrative frames. The supporting characters, although essential,
247 could not overshadow the main hero, whose presence often determined the movie's outcome.

248 However, things began to change when these smaller, less-established actors found scripts that aligned
249 with both their strengths and the locations they portrayed. Films set in smaller towns like Kanpur,
250 Lucknow, and Patna, along with new genres like horror-comedy, enabled these actors to shine. Their
251 performances, combined with unique storylines and settings, led to significant box-office returns,
252 proving that small-town actors and unconventional stories can now thrive in the mainstream.

253

254 **The Impact of Digital Streaming Platforms**

255 The rise of digital streaming platforms such as Netflix, Prime Video, and Hotstar has forced
256 Bollywood to rethink its approach to content creation. Streaming services provided audiences with the
257 convenience of watching movies at home, disrupting the traditional cinema experience. This shift
258 posed a direct threat to Bollywood, as it allowed viewers to access the same content from the comfort
259 of their homes, challenging the exclusivity of theatrical releases.

260 In an interview with AIB (All India Bakchod), popular actor Ranbir Kapoor expressed his concerns,
261 stating that digital platforms were essentially competing with cinema by "stealing" his viewers. While
262 it's true that the communal experience of watching a film in a theatre remains unique, the convenience
263 and accessibility of streaming cannot be denied.

264 What makes digital platforms even more attractive is the diversity of content they offer. These
265 platforms have fewer restrictions when it comes to genres, language, and dialogue, providing a more
266 open and democratic space for content production and consumption. For small-town narratives and
267 lesser-known actors, the streaming sector has created vast opportunities. With the rise of binge-
268 watching culture, there is a growing demand for regular, high-quality content. This opens new doors
269 for films that may not have found a place in traditional cinema, offering a space for experimentation
270 and more diverse storytelling. Manish Gupta's insights shed light on how new-age cinema, the rise of
271 lesser-known actors, and the influence of digital streaming platforms are reshaping the landscape of
272 Bollywood, offering new opportunities and challenges for filmmakers and audiences alike.

273

274 VI. CONCLUSION

275 The films discussed above provide a compelling and credible argument for the rise of small-town
276 stories, settings, and fresh faces within Bollywood. While it is true that mainstream elements and big
277 names still dominate the Hindi film industry, the influence of small-town narratives has become
278 increasingly prominent in recent years. This shift has been driven by several factors: a more
279 discerning audience that is mindful of how they spend their money, the portrayal of national and
280 regional issues through small-town settings with regional actors, the emergence of online streaming
281 services, and the considerable success of small-town films compared to traditional formulaic films.

282 In contrast to the previous focus on urban locations such as Mumbai, Delhi, and international settings
283 like Switzerland and Amsterdam, there has been a clear shift towards regional towns and states like
284 Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, and Chhattisgarh. This mirrors a pre-independence era when
285 cinema aimed to connect with the masses and promote national unity. While there may never be
286 complete equilibrium in the industry due to the ease of doing business in urban areas, the growing
287 presence of small-town narratives is a significant step toward diversifying Bollywood.

288 As urban areas continue to become homogenized concrete jungles, it is possible that the appeal of
289 small-town and regional stories will only grow, as these locations remain inherently more colorful and
290 cinematic. However, it's important to acknowledge that a divide still exists between the loyal
291 viewership of big stars and the growing fan base for new faces. This divide plays a crucial role in box-
292 office success and the recognition of talent.

293 The analysis of the narratives, themes, cast, storylines, and business of the films discussed in this
294 paper highlights a key trend: while large-budget, star-studded films have underperformed in recent
295 years, smaller, more focused films with fresh talent have become major box-office successes. Many of
296 these smaller films have even managed to perform well despite premiering alongside big-budget
297 releases, further demonstrating the growing appeal of small-town narratives. The global box-office
298 success of these films is a testament to the increasing content awareness of viewers, who are no longer
299 satisfied with conventional themes.

300 Moreover, the rise of digital streaming platforms has played a pivotal role in amplifying the visibility
301 of small-town stories and actors. These platforms have provided a space for regional narratives to
302 thrive, allowing them to be recognized and celebrated by audiences worldwide. As a result, these
303 films and their creators have made significant contributions to the profitability of the industry, further
304 solidifying the shift toward more diverse and meaningful storytelling in Bollywood.

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UNDER PEER REVIEW