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Small Town Stories and Big Box-Office Returns

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Small Town Stories and Big Box-Office Returns

Abstract

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

I. INTRODUCTION

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

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

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Changing Trends in the Hindi Film Industry (Bollywood)

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

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

Bollywood and the Box Office

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

Concept of 'Small-Town' Cinema

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

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

III. METHODOLOGY

Data Collection

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

Primary Data

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

Secondary Data

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

Methods Adopted

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

Qualitative Methods

1. **Expert Interviews**

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

2. **Content Analysis**

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

Research Process

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

Research Theory

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

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

IV. CONTENT ANALYSIS

Luka Chuppi (2019)

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

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

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

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

Stree (2018)

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

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

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

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

Bala (2019)

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

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

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

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

V. EXPERT INTERVIEW

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

The 'Now' of New-Age Cinema

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

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

The Rise of 'Not So Unheard' Names

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

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

The Impact of Digital Streaming Platforms

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

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

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

VI. CONCLUSION

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

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

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

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

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

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