

Indian Films – Strengthening Cultural Ties Between Japan & India



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In recent decades, Indian films have contributed to strengthening cultural ties between Japan and India even further. Nowadays, it is quite common for young Japanese women to travel to India to learn Bollywood dances. Many young women find the prodigious dance scenes in Indian films quite appealing; it is such dance scenes that draw most of them towards Indian films. After learning a few Bollywood dance moves as a hobby, some young women have even become professional dance performers. Young women in Japan have also been greatly influenced by visiting artistes from India; and as they regard dancing as a skill that can be acquired within a few days, they feel that they can return and begin performing. When people watch their performances, they too are inspired to learn.

Japanese Cultural Worldview Fascinates Young People in India

In Nagaland, India, many adolescent boys and girls and young adults are enamoured of Japanese culture. Recently, filmmaker Hemant Gaba released a documentary called *Japan in Nagaland*. Centred on a “cosfest” (cosplay event) in Kohima, this documentary explores Nagaland’s obsession with Japan. In his documentary, Hemant gives the viewer a slice of Japanese culture, which is held in high esteem in Nagaland. The filmmaker follows a group of devotees of Japanese anime, who are members of a Facebook group called *Nagaland Anime Junkies*. Before the film was made, they held the second edition of the anime-themed cosfest in Kohima. Many teenagers and young adults gathered there dressed as their favorite anime characters. Among the characters featured in the documentary is a pair of sisters who have travelled from Itanagar, Arunachal Pradesh, dressed as Sasha Braus and Hange Zoe from the cartoon series titled *Attack on Titan*.

Interestingly, the Japanese social and cultural worldview inspired a man from India to make a Japanese film. Anshul Chauhan’s *Bad Poetry Tokyo* (2018) had a good run in Tokyo. The film was later moved to Yokohama, with English-subbed screenings each day for a week. Anshul, an Indian-raised, Tokyo-based director, won quite a few awards for his debut film. Anshul’s talented lead, Shuna Iijima, also drew many plaudits, including Best Actress Award at the Osaka

Asian Film Festival.

Speaking about the award, she said, “I didn’t expect to win the award. It was a big surprise for me because I’m not a confident actor yet. But I’m truly honored and happy to know my acting moved someone’s heart. I couldn’t have achieved what I did without support from everyone in the team. They are all talented and great people. Being involved in this film sort of made clear to me what kind of path I want to take as an actress. So it may take time but hopefully I can keep going.”

Another film with a Japan connection is *The Japanese Wife* (2010). Directed by Bengali filmmaker Aparna Sen, this film is an Indian-Japanese romantic drama film. It stars Rahul Bose, Raima Sen, Moushumi Chatterjee and Japanese actress Chigusa Takaku. The film is in English, Bengali and Japanese. The story is about a young Bengali village school teacher (Bose) who marries his Japanese pen friend (Takaku) over letters. Although he never actually meets her, he remains true and loyal to her throughout his life. The film received positive reviews from many Indian critics. Takaku has appeared in a number of Japanese TV dramas and films.

The film *Hotel Salvation* (2016), which is known in India as *Mukti Bhawan*, is an Indian film written and directed by Shubhashish Bhutiani and produced by Sanjay Bhutiani. It is a comedy-drama about a man who sets his job aside to accompany his elderly father to the holy city of Varanasi. The film has been a box-office success overseas, particularly in Japan, where it ran in theatres for 100 days. Released as *Ganges Ni Kaeru*, this is the second film in recent times to attract a large audience in Japan – a country that is not a traditional market for Indian films.

Satyajit Ray & Akira Kurosawa

It was in the mid-1950s that the cinematic connection between Japan and India was established, thanks to the artistic friendship between two legendary filmmakers – Satyajit Ray and Akira Kurosawa. Ray was a great admirer of Japanese films, especially those made by his friend and contemporary Kurosawa, whom he considered a cinematic giant. He had mentioned in detail about his meeting with the Japanese director in his book titled *Our Films, Their*

Films. When Kurosawa was asked by Ray if he had any Samurai films in mind, Kurosawa said, “No, because there is such a dearth of horses now.”

Ray was posthumously awarded the *Akira Kurosawa Award for Lifetime Achievement in Directing* at the San Francisco International Film Festival in 1992. He had said earlier of *Rashomon*:

“The effect of the film on me [upon first seeing it in Calcutta in 1952] was electric. I saw it three times on consecutive days, and wondered each time if there was another film anywhere which gave such sustained and dazzling proof of a director’s command over every aspect of filmmaking.”

Likewise, Kurosawa was a huge fan of the Bengali director. Here is what he said about Ray in 1975:

“The quiet but deep observation, understanding, and love of the human race, which are characteristic of all his films, have impressed me greatly... I feel that he is a “giant” of the movie industry. Not to have seen the cinema of Ray means existing in the world without seeing the sun or the moon. I can never forget the excitement in my mind after seeing it [*Pather Panchali*]. It is the kind of cinema that flows with the serenity and nobility of a big river. People are born, live out their lives, and then accept their deaths. Without the least effort and without any sudden jerks, Ray paints his picture, but its effect on the audience is to stir up deep passions. How does he achieve this? There is nothing irrelevant or haphazard in his cinematographic technique. In that lies the secret of its excellence.”

Kashiko Kawakita (1908-1993), a Japanese film producer and film curator, who was influential in the development of the postwar Japanese film industry and in promoting Japanese cinema to overseas audiences, was also a great admirer of the films made by Ray. She said:

“When I first saw *Pather Panchali* in 1956 at Cannes, it struck me like thunder. When I met Satyajit Ray in 1956 in Brussels, he looked like Krishna, the mighty God. Since then, he has been my great master; through him and through his works I learned how to live and how to love.”

During the pandemic lockdown Kannada filmmaker Girish Kasaravalli revisited five of his favorite world cinema classics, namely the *Apu Trilogy* by Ray, *Rashomon* by Kurosawa, *An Autumn Afternoon* by Yasujiro Ozu, *Wild Strawberries* by Ingmar Bergman and *La Notte* by Michelangelo Antonioni. Commenting on his favorite films, the filmmaker says:

“*Pather Panchali* is on the top of my list. But I like all the films from the *Apu Trilogy* for reasons that are obvious now. I saw all three films after going to the Film and Television Institute of India in 1975. They brought a new vision to films not just in India but all over the world. The lyricism and humanism in the movies weren’t seen in world cinema before. Despite showing a poor protagonist, the films don’t become sob stories. They were full of enthusiasm... They showed life.

“There are many reasons why I like *Rashomon*. Primarily, the craft

of Kurosawa. The way he captures movements, the way he captures emotions... it’s just mesmerising. He’s a master of mounting drama. I also like the eastern philosophy the movie talks about – you know, about how there’s no such thing as an absolute truth. But Kurosawa doesn’t sermonise; he does it very subtly. But like I said, you can watch *Rashomon* just to appreciate several aspects of his filmmaking.”

Bollywood’s First Connection with Japan

The first Bollywood film that has a connection with Japan is *Love in Tokyo* (1966). Directed and produced by Pramod Chakravorty, it is a romantic comedy and was a hit at the box office. It was shot primarily in Japan at locations including Tokyo, Ueno, Ginza, Tokyo Tower, Tokyo International Airport and Hiroshima.

The song titled *Sayonara* was a big hit in India. This song introduced the word *sayonara*, which is the Japanese word for farewell, to many Indians. Even today this song is played at parties and restaurants in many parts of the country. In fact, almost all the songs featured in this film were super hits. Here are the lyrics of the chorus of *Sayonara*:

Sayonara

Waada nibhaaongi, sayonara

Ithlati aur balkhaati

Kal phir aaongi, sayonara

(Farewell

I promise to come back tomorrow, Farewell

Frolicking and swaying

I will come back tomorrow, Farewell)

Another hit song from this movie is *Jaapaan Love in Tokyo*. Many Indians pronounce “Japan” as “Jaapaan”. Here are the lyrics of the chorus:

Jaapaan love in Tokyo

Jaapaan love in Tokyo

Le gayi dil kudiya Japaan ki

Le gayi dil kudiya Japaan ki

Pagal mujhe kar diya

Pagal mujhe kar diya

Jaapaan love in Tokyo

(Japan, love in Tokyo

Japan, love in Tokyo

The girl from Japan has stolen my heart

The girl from Japan has stolen my heart

Driving me crazy

Driving me crazy

Japan, love in Tokyo)



A poster advertising the Bollywood film "Love In Tokyo" (1966)

A year after the release of *Love in Tokyo* another Bollywood film, called *Aman*, with a connection with Japan was released. *Aman* is an Indian anti-war movie directed by Mohan Kumar. The film starred Rajendra Kumar, Saira Banu, Balraj Sahani and Chetan Anand in lead roles. Many scenes in this film were shot in Japan. The film has an interesting storyline: Dr. Gautam (Kumar), a UK-trained doctor, decides to work in Japan to help find a cure for atomic-bomb survivors and to spread the message of world peace – much like the Buddha had done in the past. While working in Japan, he falls in love with a Japanese girl named Meloda (Banu) but also endangers his life by going on a dangerous mission to rescue fishermen who have been exposed to nuclear radiation.

Rising Popularity of Indian Films in Japan

The Indian film industry has created a niche market for itself in many cities of Japan. Slowly and steadily, the film market in Japan is turning into a new haven for Indian filmmakers. Gone are the days when only Hollywood films – and to some extent Chinese and Korean films – had a huge fan following. Indian movies, including regional films from the South Indian film market, are on a roll.

In the recent years, especially during 2018-2019, the popularity of Indian mainstream films in Japan rose by leaps and bounds. Bollywood films *Padman* (2018) and *Bajrangi Bhaijaan* (2015) made a place for themselves in the hearts of many Japanese moviegoers.

The five highest-grossing Indian films in Japan are *Baahubali 2: The Conclusion* (2017), *English Vinglish* (2012), *Enthiran*

(translated as *Robot*) (2010), *3 Idiots* (2009) and *Muthu – The Dancing Maharaja* (1995). *Muthu* went on to collect \$1.6 million in Japan. *English Vinglish* is the only woman-centric movie to figure on the list of the five highest-grossing Indian films in Japan. Interestingly, *Baahubali 2* completed 100 days after its release in Japan. Japanese audiences also found Indian films such as *Saaho* (2019), *Dangal* (2016), *PK* (2014), *Dhoom 3* (2013), *Ra.One* (2011), *Magadheera* (2009) and *Om Shanti Om* (2007) very entertaining.

Commenting on the Japanese market for Indian films, Pranab Kapadia, president of marketing and distribution for UK, Europe and Africa Operations of Eros International Plc, said, "Japan, like any other non-traditional market, is important as it opens new avenues for monetisation of content that has already been exploited amongst core Bollywood audiences... Already we have seen Rajinikanth films have a good following amongst mainstream Japanese audiences; now that is translating to select Bollywood films as well. This is a good sign for the industry."

It may be mentioned that it was with the release of Rajinikanth's *Muthu* that Indian films began to catch the attention of Japanese audiences. The film received an overwhelming response from Japanese moviegoers and paved the way for other Indian films.

Indian actor Rajinikanth was one of the most popular foreign movie stars in Japan in the 1990s. He appeared in films made for India's Tamil-speaking southern region. His films were an entertaining mix of action, comedy, romance, melodrama and music; and his hyperbolic acting style, the dozens of dancers, multiple locations, and numerous costume changes that characterized his films delighted Japanese audiences. He was perhaps the first Indian actor to discover a market for regional films in Japan. Says Kyoko Dan, a Kobe-based movie publicist who works with Asian producers, "In Japan, Rajinikanth's 1995 film *Muthu – The Dancing Maharajah* was a big phenomenon. So when Japanese people hear about Indian films many think of *Muthu*."

Bollywood Films: Content that Works in Japan

Many movie enthusiasts in Japan claim that for a long time Bollywood films were considered rather kitschy, with characters suddenly breaking into song and dance for no particular reason. However, they say this image gradually underwent a change and today's Bollywood films have much better storylines. Bollywood also holds a fascination for some Japanese ad-makers, who are trying to take advantage of this growing trend. It is quite common for boys and girls to use images of some Indian superstars on curry-flavored rice crackers and other products for sales promotion. Also, packaging for spicy food is often decorated with cartoons or photos related to Indian films and dance.

Speaking about the kind of movies that Japanese viewers want to see, Akifumi Sugihara, executive vice president of Japan's oldest film production and distribution firm, Nikkatsu Corporation, said, "There

Indian Films on the Japanese Market: Promising Future

seems to be a polarisation in the audience's tastes – tremendously energetic action-oriented movies or mentally healing, heart-moving movies with a message.” Sugihara first came to India in 2011 to attend the Mumbai Film Mart, an annual business-to-business platform at the Mumbai Film Festival. His company has released quite a few Indian films in Japan, including *3 Idiots*, *Don 2*, *Ek Tha Tiger* and *Jab Tak Hai Jaan*. He believes that increased co-productions between Japan and India can provide “a big stimulus for Asia to form a new highly potential entertainment market”. He also claims that Japanese filmmakers are a “great deal” interested in collaborating with Indian filmmakers and shooting in India.

Focusing on the content that works in Japan, Pranab Kapadia said, “It is very nascent to establish genre-specific preferences but the common thread that has emerged as far as the content connect is concerned is human, emotional stories with some kind of message. Of course, the song and dance format has always created intrigue, interest and differentiation for Bollywood when compared to films from other countries or languages.”

According to Sanjay Bhutiani, producer of *Mukti Bhawan*, “Japan watches a really wide spectrum of film genres, from the larger-than-life, action dramas and thrillers to quiet art-house cinema from the UK and France. Anything that is emotionally engaging has a chance of running in Japan, including small films.”

Indian Cinema: Massive & Diverse Output

However, moviegoers in Japan get few opportunities to visit the massive and diverse output of the Indian film industry. Almost 2,000 feature titles were released by 20 regional film industries in 2014.

To surmount this challenge, Tokyo Talkies, a new community organization, has been trying to present Indian film screenings with English subtitles in Tokyo. Tokyo Talkies was launched by three Indian men: Shailesh Nair, Alok Kogekar and Hemant Vishal. Recently, it screened Subodh Bhave's *Katyar Kaljat Ghusali* (A Dagger Through the Heart), a musical based on a play about two rival schools of Indian classical singing. This film is a major hit of Marathi cinema – India's oldest regional film industry. According to Shailesh, “Many people [in Japan] had come after watching *Katyar* for the sixth or seventh time.” He said, “We are also looking for movies of other Indian languages that would be exciting for the larger community.”

What is the level of interest in Indian cinema in Japan? Answering this question, Akifumi Sugihara says, “I feel *3 Idiots* made a kind of foothold for Indian films in the Japan market. I think the number of Indian films which are (currently) being released in Japan will be more than doubled immediately. What we will have to do as a distributor is to see how we can keep the trend growing.”

The Covid-19 lockdown had a devastating impact on the Indian film industry. Big releases were postponed, shootings were halted, theaters were unable to screen films and daily-wage employees associated with the industry struggled for their next meal. The 183 billion Indian rupee film industry is still getting ready for the new normal. Japan also felt the negative impact of the coronavirus pandemic. A majority of the Japanese people had to stay put, and not a single Indian film has been released in Japan since the pandemic broke out across the world.

As soon as Japan and India start recording fewer new Covid-19 cases and deaths, things will start looking up for the Japanese and Indian film industries. The Indian Over-the-Top (OTT) media space is waiting to launch a large number of films and shows. Priyanka Chopra Jonas along with Rajkumar Rao have been focusing on presenting an interesting retelling of Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*. Indian actor Saif Ali Khan is also waiting to star in a new exciting series called *Tandav*. Bollywood films such as *Bhuj: The Pride of India* and *The Big Bull* may be released as soon as the situation improves. But exactly when enthusiasts of Indian films in Japan can start looking forward to having a wonderful time at some of the select film theatres across the country is anyone's guess.

Conclusion

Relations between Japan and India have traditionally been strong. Buddhism is one of the great cultural ties that bind the two countries together. Since the 1990s, there has been a renaissance in relations between Japan and India. New Delhi's post-Cold War economic liberalization policies have turned India into a new market for Japan. In addition, the rise of China has led the two countries to regard each other as potential strategic partners.

Ever since the mid-1950s, Japanese and Indian films have been quite successful in strengthening the cultural partnership between the two countries. In the future, this partnership would grow further as people in both countries get to know each other much better through films.

The cultural and social worldviews of India and Japan have a close similarity. The larger-than-life Indian films are much appreciated by Japanese audiences. Indian film directors are often inspired by Japanese themes just as Japanese audiences find the energy of Indian movies quite exciting. A co-production of Indian and Japanese films in the near future has the potential for capturing a growing market both in India and Japan.

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