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How Hinduism Rooted Itself in Film

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World Religions

Dr. Barbra Pemberton

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How Hinduism Rooted Itself in Film

Movies are a universal language. Almost every person has seen a movie. Genres differ based on personality and interests. Romantic Comedies for the people who just want to watch happiness unfold. Horror for those who like to feel scared in their own home. Even documentaries for those who want to learn as much as they can. More than likely, your favorite movie will not be the same as the old man sitting next to you on the bus, or the student studying in the same coffee shop as you. The film industry is an integral part of human life, no matter where you live. So much of the world is influenced by film. Film, just like any other industry that is rooted deeply in culture, can be and is influenced by religion. In America, it is *usually* Christianity. However, Christianity is not the only religion that influences film. Hinduism is a religion that has slowly rooted itself into the film industry in both the Western and Eastern world. I would like to look at how Hinduism so easily lends itself to film, how it has affected the Western film industry, and how it has affected the Eastern film industry, specifically India's film industry known as Bollywood.

The Basics of Hinduism can be boiled down to the fact that we as inhabitants of planet Earth are all connected. We are a part of the oneness that is life and we are all working towards *Brahman*, meaning we have achieved *Moksha*, or we have excelled past the illusion of the world. The way that happens is through reincarnation where what you are reborn as is dictated by your *Karma* -- what penance you owe the world -- and whether or not you have payed enough of it off

to be born Human, or something lesser. This understanding of the world is a philosophy that many people live their entire lives by.

With the basics out of the way, let's discuss how Hindu philosophy lends itself to film so easily. Hinduism is easily malleable. You can pick and choose different parts of the religion to make a story of your own. Even if you do not consider yourself to be a storyteller, Hinduism is a religion where many of the known works are actually stories and not considered history so they can be taken and used as plots. Hindu philosophy in particular has a very specific understanding of the universe and the inhabitants of it that can help build an entire story from scratch. Because of this, the science fiction genre of film has taken hold of it. According to *The Guardian*, movies like *The Matrix* or *Interstellar* are examples of such instances. *The Matrix* takes its entire plot from the Hindu ideal of *Brahman* and *Moksha*. Neo spends the film having realized the world he lives in is a lie, and the plot comes from his trying to take down this lie from the inside. *Interstellar's* evil entity ends up being themselves, directly taken from the Hindu idea of the Ultimate reality (Dhaliwal). In general, though, since Hinduism is a belief system that has so many different interpretations and paths towards *Moksha*, and the fact that it is such a deeply rooted religion in the world, it lends itself quite easily to film of all sorts, including films like *Eat, Pray, Love*, known as the film that turned Julia Roberts Hindu.

Eat, Pray, Love details the adventure of a recently divorced woman named Elizabeth Gilbert. The movie is based on the bestselling book of the same name that chronicles Gilbert's real-life struggle of the aftermath of divorce. This movie does not take ideas from Hindu philosophy as a plot point, but rather uses Hinduism itself. The word *Pray* in the title indicates the spiritual Journey that Elizabeth goes on during her soul searching. She visits India in hopes

of learning about how to get in touch with her true voice and in that time, she discovers Hindu meditation.

While the movie does not focus entirely on Hinduism, enough of it does that it warranted a pre-screening from the Hindu American Foundation. Upon viewing, they had mixed feelings on the movie. The Hindu aspect of the film is, specifically Yoga. The problem was that while Hinduism was never misrepresented, it was not represented with enough detail for how much *yoga* the movie uses. The movie took the entire religion at face value and did not go any deeper.

The Executive Council Member of the Hindu American Foundation Sachi Lamb explains:

“Much of the movie focused on meditation, devotion, inward reflection and finding the divine within -- all integral aspects of Hindu philosophy and practice, but I only remember hearing the word ‘Hindu’ once, and I do not think it was very clear that the techniques Gilbert embraced on her spiritual journey were Hindu despite her being at an obviously Hindu ashram [or Hindu spiritual retreat] meeting Hindu spiritual guides” (HAF).

In other words, the movie used yoga and meditation without explaining just how the yoga and meditation helped Elizabeth get to her enlightened state or what she was even really doing. (HAF).

The Hindu American Foundation goes further to explain that yoga was a large part of Gilbert’s meditation, but because of the lack of detail presented, it is hard for American audiences to understand that. Many people who practice Hindu yoga, not the stuff done at a yoga studio in the city that doubles as a smoothie bar, would recognize the *Kirtan*, the meditative kind of yoga which was Gilbert's specific method of meditation. However, to unknowledgeable viewers who only know the *asanas*, which is what most people think of or the physical postures and movements of yoga, it meant nothing (HAF).

The film caught some backlash from other groups as well. Some complained that the movie took a large part of the spiritual aspects on the book out of the picture. The movie did not focus so much on the how, what, and the thoughts of Gilbert as she went through the process, just shows the process. This disappointed many viewers (Montenegro). Many people also criticized the film on the notion that it painted traveling to the East as the fix all for Western problems, a common trope among self-help stories. It was pointed out to be a very privileged take on the journey of self-discovery, not just for the thin use of Hinduism, but also for the expensive travels that Elizabeth went through. While the arguments have some basis in fact, it is also understood that this story is one of a real people, so who is to argue that it does not work? (Brazil)

While researching, I came across Ben Brazil's article "Eat, Pray, Trash: What the Critics Don't See" that goes into detail explaining the many points of view that critics have about the movie. Brazil also gives us his own perspective, explaining:

"even before the Beatles went to India, elite Westerners had begun juxtaposing the "spiritual" East to the "materialist" West, a move that (as post-colonial critics have pointed out) projected Western desires and fantasies onto people denied the space to define themselves. When Julia Roberts seeks wholeness in an Indian ashram or the homes of Balinese healers, critics argue she reinforces those cultural constructs" (Brazil).

Brazil goes on to explain that while this is the case, it is not the whole picture. *Eat, Pray, Love* does less to reinforce these cultural stereotypes and does more to explain the journey of a woman needing a new way of life.

As mentioned before, Julia Roberts who played Elizabeth Gilbert in *Eat, Pray, Love* converted to Hinduism, despite the fact that Hinduism does not really have converting as a

practice since it is believed everyone will be reincarnated anyway according to the ultimate reality or oneness of the universe. In the wake of filming *Eat, Pray, Love*, Roberts felt that she had found the spiritual truth after portraying Elizabeth Gilbert's journey. She was on her own journey at the time it seems. Roberts is quoted as saying that she is “definitely a practicing Hindu. Golly, I've been so spoiled with my friends and family in this life. Next time I want to be just something quiet and supporting” (Littlejohn). She goes on to explain that not only is she a practicing Hindu, but her husband and kids all take part in the traditions and culture of the religion.

Another movie that borrows from Hinduism is James Cameron's *Avatar*. In fact, the movie title itself is borrowed from Hinduism. Avatars are the human forms of the gods and goddesses of the Hindu religion, the most famous one being *Krishna* who is depicted as being blue skinned with long dark hair, just like the *Na'vi* in the film. The title comes into play once again through the plot, not just the visuals. The movie tells the story of a paraplegic Navy Seal by the name of Jake Sully. He uses advanced scientific technology to inhabit the mind and soul of a genetically bred *Na'vi* that the U.S. Government has created for this mission. Jake Sully is literally what the Hindus view an Avatar as. But the similarities do not stop there. Rudra Chatterjee, a Hindu journalist at Chakranews, describes just how much the film borrows from Hinduism in his article titled “The Movie Avatar from a Hindu's perspective.” He points to a scene in the film where the *Na'vi* are sitting and chanting a song to a large tree in their society called *Mother Tree* in a sort of worship to their goddess *Ewya*. This scene reminds Chatterjee of when he was a young boy and sat around a Danyin tree and prayed to “Mother Earth” (Chatterjee). He also points out how the chant sounds like the Hindu *Gayatri Mantra*, which is a *Vedic Mantra* of importance (Guru Talks).

While *Avatar* is a great movie to watch and seems to have great representation for Hinduism, it still falls short in correct representation due to its genre and mixing of traditions. While a large chunk of the movie pulls from Hinduism, other indigenous religions inspired parts of the movie. The clothing of the *Na'vi* are reminiscent of stereotypical Native American clothing, and the aesthetics of the world resemble that of the ocean. Because of the movie being a melting pot, it means the movie has a skewed portrayal of Hinduism, along with a skewed portrayal of other religions.

Film in the Western world has taken Hinduism and pulled chunks of it out to use and reuse for quite some time, but what about India's film industry? How has India used Hinduism in what is known as Bollywood?

Before we can understand the role of Hinduism in Bollywood, we have to understand where Bollywood came from. In the early 1800's, colonialism meant European travel in India. The Lumiere brothers, who invented the first video camera and were the inventors of film, took advantage of this fact and sent a man with a camera to India. From there, India's citizens started appreciating and making their own movies. However, this was not really a booming business until 1913 when photographer Dadasaheb Phalke came into the picture. Phalke was in a movie theater watching a movie about Jesus Christ when he suddenly realized that he too could make movies, but about the Hindu gods that most everyone in India knew. Phalke went right into the project, and in 1913 released the film *Raja Harishchandra*, which was then specifically marketed to Hindus. The Indian film industry grew substantially and exponentially after this film (Hutchinson).

Since the release of Phalke's *Raja Harishchandra*, Bollywood has become its own force to be reckoned with. Much like *Raja Harishchandra*, India's film industry uses Hinduism to

keep itself afloat. Many movies are about popular faces such as *Krishna*, or are about contemporary things, but they keep Hinduism as an integral part since it is already ingrained in Indian culture. Filmmakers will make movies visualizing the stories that have been told throughout generations or modernize adaptations of these stories to fit in with current audiences. An example of this is the movie *Krrish*, a science fiction film where *Krishna*, not the avatar but a boy with superhuman abilities, becomes a vigilante and takes down a mad scientist. The movie becomes a modern adaption of telling a story of *Krishna*, the most popular avatar in the Hinduism faith. If Hindu is not a large part of the movies, which is becoming more common in modern times, it is still shown either in visuals or through script. The movie *Hum Saath-Saath Hain* is a great example of both. This film is a modern romantic comedy where religion is not a part of any decision or plot point, and yet details of a *Vaishnavi* life come into play both in song and cinematography (A Brief Introduction to Hinduism).

Bollywood is a very boisterous industry. A lot of money goes in and comes out of it, all the while India's economy is not holding up. How is this possible? Bollywood gets its funding from outside of India. Many movies from India's film industry do not debut in India, or at least that is not where the main focus is. Advertisers and directors turn to places in Europe and America for their main investment for where they will get a lot of views. Movie tickets in India are also a whole lot cheaper, meaning that anyone who is in a good *Varna*, known as a caste, is able to come and see a movie all they want. And many people do, because while India has a much different philosophy than America, escapism is a human trait regardless of religious beliefs (Mandiker).

India's film industry does not just provide its citizens with an escape, it also provides much of India's current culture. Here in America, movie stars are only one of many kinds of

celebrities, and movie fashion is based off of how citizens choose to dress on their own. The reverse is true for India. Fashion is heavily influenced by whatever movie comes out, and the majority of celebrities in India are movie stars, especially since music and movies go hand in hand due to many different Hindu practices. Wedding fashion each year is based on whatever intricate dresses brides or heroines are wearing in movies. Men choose to wear certain types of suits after seeing famous men wear them on screen and become heroes. Girls attach themselves to specific actors much more deeply than in America, and actors have the ability to become political leaders much like Ronald Reagan and Arnold Schwarzenegger (Mandiker).

In a more important way, the Indian film industry has provided people in India with a voice. In 2000 the film industry was legitimized, meaning big businesses can sponsor movies and more movies can be made about troubling topics:

“For example, the film *Baabul* (2006) raised the issue of widow remarriage, while *Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gham* (2001) extolled the virtue of respecting elders. The widely acclaimed *Rang De Basanti* (2006) gave voice to youth angst about the nation’s corrupt politics and politicians,”

and anything that anyone has a problem within India can be voiced (Mandiker).

Hinduism has rooted itself into the film industry slowly, creeping into the daily lives of most every movie goer, but it is rarely ever talked about. Films from America, England and of course India can take into account a Hindu philosophy and paint it in just the right way that no one, except the Hindus, notice. As Christians, when films use other religions as a base for the story or their world building, we can be taken aback and use this as a reason to dislike the film, even if it is a good movie. Often if any movie touches on a subject that is “sinful” or “tempting”, radicals will demonize the film. The horror genre is a perfect example. The notion that Hinduism

has been such a strong force in film can cause a lot of uproar and discomfort, however the problem lies not within the movie, but the reason why these philosophies are so easily used in the western world. Many times, we want a religion that allows us to be ourselves, and many misunderstandings about just how Hinduism works means that people use new age philosophies to find the solution to their problems rather than looking towards the Bible. This is something that film could easily fix; however, we are complacent in how film has always been made. Rarely do we see something that takes a new direction succeed. Hinduism has succeeded in the film industry all around because people have grown complacent to the stories they are told and are willing to consume.

Hinduism is a religion considered the oldest religion to exist; it has kept itself alive through many traditions and an ever-growing population. It is no wonder that film has taken a liking to the religion, and I do not think we will see it go away any time soon.

Word Count: 2847.

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