

Bollywood Film Posters: A Study of Changing Trends

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ABSTRACT

A film poster is not merely a collage of images or piece of information or any colourful design. Once the mainstay of publicity tools, if not today, the film poster have been playing a significant role along with the other outdoor publicity tools like hoarding, cutouts, stickers, banner, etc. in different decades. From 7th July 1896, the first day of screening films in India, the uses of film posters for the first instance for the publicity of Lumiere's films in Bombay to till today, film posters have been the reflection of changing time, technology, techniques and array of ideas and designs of different decades. Starting from *Raja Harishchandra*, the first Indian film, to till today, the posters of Bollywood films have come a long way from broad visible brush strokes with a striking array of colors and typography to modern day digital prints on glossy sheets. From serving as the prime medium of publicity to subject of study for art lovers, historians and antique collectors in the present day, the Bollywood celluloid posters have been a fascinating journey over more than a century. In a vast country like India, where there exists inherent linguistic, religious and regional differences, the Bollywood industry plays a noteworthy role to unite the people of the country. The skillfully designed Bollywood film posters, as a tool of key film publicity tool in the past and as part of one of the outdoor publicity tools at the present, play a pivotal role to bridge communication, cultural and language barrier across the people of different regions of the country. In fact, the film posters respond to the audience's unique cultural needs and reflect periodic changes of design, ideas, techniques, technology among others of different decades. The growing popularity of the study of films in the recent times, researchers, film historians and antique collectors also have been finding film posters as an important tool to understand the prevailing art, culture, tradition and technology of different decades. This paper aims to study and understand the changing trends of Bollywood film posters as means of publicity tool of Hindi films across India and abroad. .

Key words: Poster, Bollywood, Film, Publicity, changing trends.

INTRODUCTION

A poster is any piece of printed paper designed to be attached to a wall or vertical surface.(Gosling, 1999). Although, in general, a poster consists of both textual and graphic elements, but posters only containing either graphics or wholly text are not rare. Both eye-catching and dispense information to the target audience are the main objectives of posters. One of the purposes of a poster is to give publicity to a film.

Starting with the screening of the first reel in India on 7th July in 1896, the poster has been a part and parcel of the publicity of films. Even in the age of digital film promotion, film poster has not lost importance, only perhaps the dependency of its may have gone down in the publicity of films.

Film poster, if not a main tool of publicity, still one among the other tools of outdoor publicity like hoarding, cutouts, stickers, banner, etc. posters play a considerable role. Even today in busy world, the posters pasted outside or inside carriages such as trams, rickshaws, auto-

rickshaws, delivery-vans, buses, railway carriages, toilet, wall of cinema hall and busy chowk, etc. pull attention of public very easily.

A film Poster

A film poster normally contains images of the main actors or a scene or a collage of several scenes of the film with text. The textual information on film posters usually contains the title of the film in large lettering, names of the main actors, director, producer, music director, story writer, etc. with date of releases.

Film Poster: The Beginning

Like the advertisements of the early periods, rather than advertising any name or scene of the film, *i.e.* giving less importance to content, the earliest posters on cinema tried to introduce potential audiences to the act of film screening and the experience associated with it in a pictorial way.

Two famous available posters of Lumière Brothers and Edison were showing rapturous audiences in front of giant screens. The earliest posters emphasize the act of movie-going itself, showing rapturous audiences in front of giant screens. "The actual content of the films mattered

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little: in France, the Lumière Brothers advertised their Cinématographe Lumière while in the United States, posters promoted Edison's Greatest Marvel: The Vitascope" (Kehr, 2011)

In the context of Indian film, although Dadasaheb Phalke promoted his film *Raja Harishchandra*, the first Indian film, through his hand-painted film poster, but according to film experts it was technically far away from being called as film poster. The handwritten poster of *Raja Harishchandra* included the title of the film and names of the director, producer, writer and the star cast.

Limca Book of Records credits Baburao Painter's hand painted poster of his film *Maya Bazaar*, also known as *Vatsala Haran* (1923), as the first poster of an Indian film. The earliest surviving Indian movie poster is *Kalyan Khajina* (1924). Baburao Painter, who was the director of the film, also designed the poster.

The vintage hand painted posters remained in vogue until the 1980s and later glossy digital print replaced them. Now, hand painted posters which offer a wonderful sense of nostalgia about a film industry and tool that helped to portray as larger than life are available with private collectors, museums and auction houses in India and abroad.

This paper aims to mainly discuss the changing trends of Bollywood film posters from the films early decades to till modern era from different perspectives.

Statement of the Research Problem

The film posters, once the mainstay of publicity of Bollywood films, may not enjoy the same importance in the modern era of film publicity. At the same time, we cannot ignore them as the things of the past. A Bollywood film poster is not just a collage of images or piece of information or any colourful design, it is more than a useful resource to study and understand the changing trends of publicity of films of different times.

These posters are supposed to provide the viewer with a basic sense of the narrative through a frozen image whose form is derived from different traditions of popular, traditional and modernist art cultures. (Mazumdar, 2003)

In this research, the statement of the research problem is **to study and understand the changing trends of the publicity poster of Bollywood cinema.**

Significance of Film Poster

Starting from the first Indian film *Raja Harishchandra* to till today, the posters of

Bollywood films have come a long way from extensively noticeable brush strokes with a striking colors and typography to modern day digital prints on glossy sheets. From serving as main medium for publicity to subject of study for art lovers, historians and antique collectors in the present day, Bollywood movie posters have already completed more than 100 glorious years.

With an array of colours mixed with linseed oil, a community of painters have created hundreds and thousands of Bollywood movie posters of larger than life designs and depicted stories of the films to lure audiences to the theatres.

A film poster is not just any other poster, it's a reflection of changing times. In reality, a careful study of the posters of Bollywood films can help to understand some important and interesting information of different times. For an instant-the posters of the early decades, for films like *Raja Harishchandra*, *Pundalik*, *Alam Ara*, were mainly text based. Those posters were visual less or poor processing of visuals. But the posters of the later decades started keeping minimum text, more visuals and colours even to lure mass audience with low level of literacy.

Several renowned designers like M.F. Hussain, who made his humble beginnings as Bollywood movie poster artists and later became a famous painter, Diwakar Karkare, a student of Bombay School of Art gave the poster design a new look with their experiments, formal knowledge and creative ideas. C Mohan, who designed the powerful poster of *Sholay* and many other poster designers made Bollywood film posters an undetectable part of Indian film industry for more 100 years of its on-going journey.

In a country as vast as India, with its inherent linguistic, religious and regional differences, the Hindi film industry is a significant unifying thread where the film poster acts as a tool to cut across cultural barriers. In every decade, the film posters respond to the audience's unique cultural and social needs.

With the growing popularity of the film studies, researchers, film historians and antique collectors also have been finding film posters as an important source of understanding the prevailing art, culture, tradition and technology of different decades.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

As mentioned earlier, a film poster is not just a poster. A film poster can be a useful tool to understand the several changing trends of different decades. This paper is an attempt to study and comprehend the visible and hidden

information associated with film posters of different times. The objective of the current study includes the following:

1. study the role and importance of poster as tool of film publicity
2. Comprehend the art of depicting film theme and luring audience through film posters.
3. Understand reflection the changing trends of art, culture, tradition and techniques and technology of different times from Bollywood film posters.

HYPOTHESIS FOR THE STUDY

On the basis of the review of literature, preliminary studies, personal observations, interaction with film experts, the following hypotheses have been made for the current study.

1. Even in the presence of enormous tools of film publicity, poster has not lost its importance completely. It still plays a definite role in the publicity of a film.
2. The Bollywood posters of every decade represent significant and distinguished style of designing and presentation.
3. The Bollywood film posters are the flag bearers of socio-economic reflection of different times. Similarly, the Bollywood film posters reflect the art, culture, techniques and technology of different decades.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The book titled-Cinema India (2002), authored by Rachel Dwyer and Divia Patel and published Oxford University Press, New Delhi, traces the historical roots of Bombay's Bollywood film industry. The systematically arranged chapters of the book describe more than 100 years old Indian Cinema with apt visual and several interesting incidents.

The book concentrates on the analysis of the reflections of national and cultural identities in Mumbai based Bollywood film industry. The author's focus on the development of Bombay based commercial cinema since 1913 on the periodical changes of the key elements of Bollywood films such as settings, costumes, music, makeup, beauty, drama, cinematography, advertising etc. get reflected in the informative and analytical content of each chapter.

The highly research and extensively described contents of the book establishes the fact that Indian film industry has a distinctive art form that permeates into the daily life of every country where it goes and contributes in shaping a distinct global culture.

The role and importance of publicity tools in the success of Bollywood films as discussed in the book were found to be useful for the current study. The significance of posters, from the days *Raja Harishchandra* to modern era of digital publicity, discussed and interpreted with several examples of remarkable films such as *Sholay*, *Mother India*, *Zanjeer*, etc in the book justifies reflection of times in the publicity materials of Bollywood films.

The explorations of the authors in digging out the development of Bollywood's film publicity tools and their aesthetic influence from different indigenous sources like Ajanta cave painting to foreign Deco style documented in the book help to understand on how the art and the publicity of go parallel to create Bollywood as a distinct global brand. The book also examines on how the art of publicity of cinema conveys socio-economic and political milieu of the existing society and the influence of modernization and commercialization in the art and business of Bollywood film industry from time to time. The author's systematic and in-depth investigation of the art and business of developing film promotional materials that communicated to the potential audiences in the book is commendable.

This book makes an important contribution in the research process to understand the evolution and development of different film publicity materials as an undetectable field associated with Indian cinema and their impact on the culture at large.

Bollywood Nation (2013), authored by Vamsee Juluri and published by Penguin Books, New Delhi, describes Bollywood from the early decade of mythological films to the films on the gangster and terrorist of the present decade. The book highlights the changing trends of Bollywood films from time to time.

This book investigates why and how Bollywood films become an integral part of the socio-economic and political lives of billions of India. While depicting several instances of social, political, economic and technical changes that influenced the theme and business of Bollywood, Vamsee Juluri could explain about how Bollywood films become a mass national culture and tool for integrating diverse pluralistic Indian society.

The author's examination in finding the reasons for the tremendous growth in the business of Bollywood beyond the geographical borders of the country is another aspect that found to be a source of important analytical input for the current study. In a nutshell, the book acts as an easy and accessible guide for the study of insights

on how Bollywood films have been entertaining the mass for last 100 years.

Ashish Rajadhyaksha, who is well-known for his Encyclopaedia of Indian Cinema, in the book - Indian Cinema in the Time of Celluloid: From Bollywood to the Emergency, published Indian University Press in 2009, brings together his writings of early 1980s to 2000s. Divided into three sections, the first section, 'The Argument,' consists of the Introduction. The second section- 'The Evidence', is divided into four parts: 'Bollywood' and the Performing Citizen', 'The Cinema-Effect and the State', '1970s Questions: The 'Cinema Effect,' 'the National-Symbolic and the Avant-Garde', and 'The Practice: Two Films and a Painting.' The third section- 'Afterword,' consists of one chapter titled "The Cinema-Effect: A Concluding Note."

The book is richly illustrated with images, providing important visual references to many old and new films. The illustrated images of posters, photographs and publicity materials depict a lot about the changing trends of Bollywood over last 100 years.

The author puts forward many of the insightful arguments on issues like Bollywoodisation, the relationship between cinema and the state, on the avant-garde etc. For film study on Bollywood, the book is definitely a valuable resource material. The visual references, the author included in the book, speak a lot about the glorious 100 years of Indian Cinema.

The book titled, Silent Cinema in India: A Pictorial Journey (2009), published by Harper Collins, authored by B.D. Garga, arguably India's finest film historian, has documented a glorious phase of cinema in India- the silent cinema era. Of the approximately 1,300 silent films produced between 1913 and 1931, barely a few have survived. The book traces the stories of its earliest practitioners, who went through many obstacles to established film industry, which is now one of the largest in the world.

Illustrated with rare publicity materials of the era- brochure, stills, posters, press book and other invaluable memorabilia brings alive the story of the birth of cinema in India that is now the largest producer of films in the world. The book provides a lot of useful information for the study of poster as tool of publicity from the early days of Bollywood films.

METHODOLOGY

For the current study of the research, case study method of analysis has been chosen. From the huge pool of some of the greatest films of Hindi

cinema, five films which made significant contribution from the perspectives of setting new trends, reflecting changes of time, communicating impactful message and produced with superior quality of materials and techniques, have been selected. The analysis of cases will be made on the basis of their presentation of the theme, designing, quality of printing and reflection of time.

It is believed that the analysis of some famous posters of Hindi cinema, reflecting distinguished features of different times would help to draw a meaning conclusion of the study.

CASE STUDY

Film: *Kalyan Khajina*

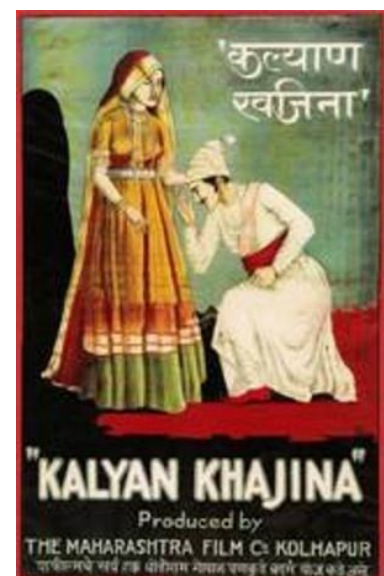
Year of Release: 1924

Director of the film: Baburao Painter

Theme of the poster: The film *Kalyan Khajina* (1924), directed by Baburao Krishnarao Mestri, popularly known as Baburao Painter, was one of the masterpieces of the early Indian film. In the poster of *Kalyan Khajina*, designed by Painter himself, depicted the heroic and noble side of Shivaji.

Analysis: Away from the posters of the 1920s, the posters of Painter were more artistic and messaging-conveying. During the decade, Baburao painter and his Maharashtra Film Company at Kolhapur made an immense contribution to the growth of film as a visual art. Posters were usually hand painted on canvas and then used as the design source for printing on cheap paper.

(Mishra, 2012). For his extraordinary set design and tricks applied in the storytelling, *Kalyan Khajina* won a medal at the Wembley Exhibition, London. One newspaper, Daily Express, described the films as full of strangely wistful beauty, and acted with extraordinary grace. (Garga, 1996).



Film: *Do Bigha Zamin*

Year of Release: 1953

Director of the film: Bimol Roy

Theme of the poster: *Do Bigha Zamin* was a realist drama about a small landowner. The film was directed by Bimol Roy, who was the precursor of the neo-realism. Influenced by Vittorio De Sica's *Bicycle Thieves*, he expressed his creative instinct and influence of neo-realism in his movie *Do Bigha Zamin* in a brilliant manner.

His land mark film *Do Bigha Zamin* stirred the social conscience with the heart-rending tale of a poor illiterate farmer, who got to grips with a cruel zaminder as well as the fate and struggling to collect the required amount within the legally prescribed time to save his two acres of land. The posters of the film were found in three different language formats-Hindi, English and Hindi-English (bilingual) together.

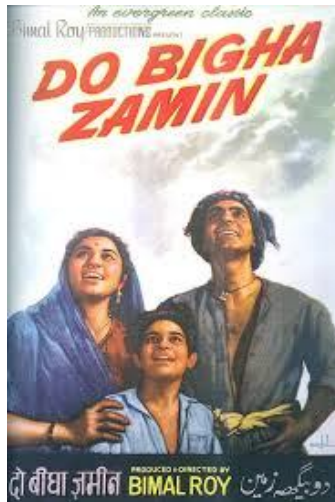


Image no. 3
Trilingual Poster of
Do Bigha Zamin
Image Courtesy: pinterest.com

Analysis: All the posters of the film leave indelible impressions in the minds, especially the innocent smiles of the members of a farmer family looking at the cloud and hoping for rain to get good harvesting. In poster, smiling Balraj Sahani wearing a typical farmer's hat in the role of a farmer Shambu Mahato and Nirupa Roy as wife Parvati with the sun and crops, somewhat leaves an impression of being influenced by the leftist movement of the decade.

The reason behind using three different formats (Hindi, English and bilingual) in the posters was probably to draw the attention of the intellectual, middle class and semiliterate classes of the society for the poster.

As the theme of the film was based on the struggling life a farmer, therefore, in all the posters minimum shades of bright colours were used. Even, the colour of black hovering over the head of Balraj Sahani, the protagonist of the film, could convey the theme of the struggling life of the farmer.

Two different designs of poster- one with a lot of brush work for the figures and other with real pictures reflect the experimentation with designing.



The quality of printing looked better than some of the posters of previous decades.

Film: *Mother India*

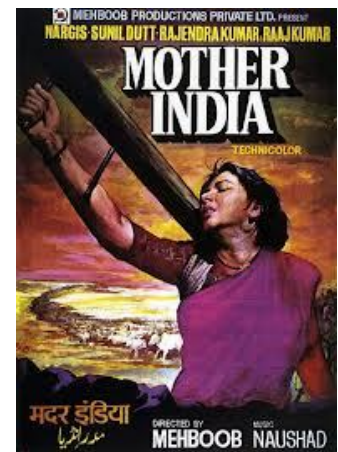
Year of Release: 1957

Director of the film: Mehboob Khan

Theme of the poster: Of the different posters of the film, the iconic scene of the film-Radha, pulling the plough through the field, with uses of red and orange colour for the oil painted poster of the film make the poster unforgettable.

The popular newspaper Hindustan Times states on the iconic role of mother in the film *Mother India*, "Representing both motherhood and Mother Earth, who also nurtures and occasionally punishes, Nargis immortalised the Indian mother on celluloid." (Khanna, 2006)

Analysis: The poster of *Mother India* reflects the hardship of a woman while ploughing land or driving a bullock cart, made with extensive brush strokes. The uses of red and orange colours to enhance Radha's facial expression, reflecting the struggling life of Radha, is strongly attention grabbing. The poster emphasizes the central theme of the film-hardship, with intensified emotion and passion of the storyline of the film.



Like, the posters of *Do Bigha Zamin* three different formats of language (Hindi, English and bilingual) were used for *Mother India* too. It was perhaps deliberately done to target all sections of the society. The design of the posters reflects the great artistic senses of the designer and ability to convey the theme of the film in a meaningful way.

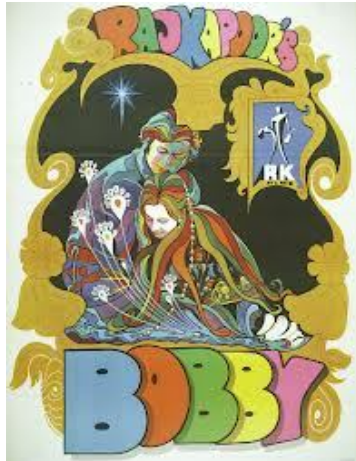
Film: *Bobby*

Year of Release: 1973

Director of the film: Raj Kapoor

Theme of the poster: The story of Raj Kapoor's film-*Bobby* was focused on youth culture. The film describes the newly born fashion, liberal culture and increased sexual freedom of the west in the Indian cosmopolitan lifestyle. The posters of the film epitomized the youth culture of and fashion trend of the west in a glamourized manner.

Analysis: As the film was targeted to young, energetic, fashion conscious, educated moviegoers of cities, therefore, posters were mainly found in English only. Besides the popular poster of young Dimple Kapadia in semi-



nude dress with Rishi Kapoor, one of the posters of Bobby "rendered in the style of American psychedelic poster of the 1960s and characterised by swirling bands of bright colour set against a black background, rounded 'bubble' lettering and fluid floral forms." (Dwyer & Patel, 2002)

The reason behind designing western psychedelic posters for Bobby could be to symbolize the prevailing youth culture of 1960s. The psychedelic poster represented a new liberalism that manifested itself through the growth of folk-protest music, radical student activism, civil rights and anti-Vietnam moments, hippy fashions and Lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD) drug.

The different posters of the film Bobby could reflect the theme of the film effectively. The poster of the film, especially depicting Dimple in semi-nude dress and the poster influenced by American psychedelic poster style could mirror many features of the 1970s like fashion, radical activism, liberal culture and sexual freedom.

The designs of the posters were far superior than some of the other contemporary films. The colours, design, uses of different calligraphy and the message of the poster could draw the attention of the film-goers easily.

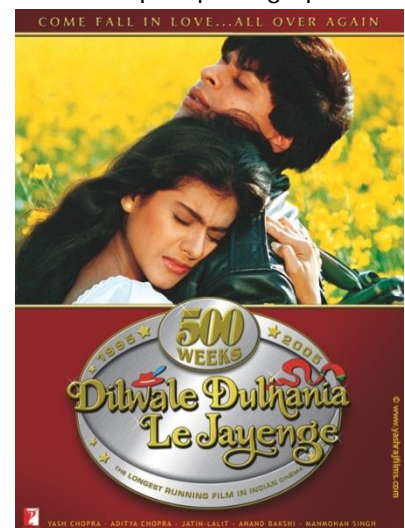
Film: *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (DDLJ)

Year of Release: 1995

Director of the film: Aditya Chopra

Theme of the poster: Several posters of *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (DDLJ), focusing on the romantic theme of the film and featuring different strands and locations of the romance, were printed for publicity of the film. Some poster depicted the romantic couple- Shah Rukh Khan and Kajol dancing in western outfit and the other featured them in traditional Indian attire.

One of the posters of DDLJ illustrates how posters are modified in accordance with a film's post-release publicity strategy. The later poster replaces the original stylized image of the fun-loving couple with a simple photograph to emphasise the film's central theme of romance. The image is taken from DDLJ's most popular song, 'Tujhe Dekha To Yeh Jaana Sanam', which was famously filmed in the mustard fields of Indian Punjab. The copy of the poster highlights the film's runaway success a record breaking 500 weeks in the same cinema in Mumbai.



Targeting the urban dwellers, some posters featured the title in English and some in Hindi only, suggesting the film was made for mass entertainment.

Analysis: Almost all posters of DDLJ depicted certain important aspects of the film and the time. Firstly, the colourful romantic images of the posters in different locations express theme of the film easily.

Secondly, away from featuring several situations of the film in one poster, which was a key feature of the 1970s and 80s, the technique of featuring one situation in one poster, not many together, could convey the meaning of different situations of the film easily.

Thirdly, designer clothes, expensive brand of attire, vibrant colours of the dresses could reflect the changes in the lifestyle of Indians in the wake of globalization of Indian economy.

Fourthly, with better quality of printing on glossy sheet and uses of computer software for designing made the posters more appealing than the previous decades.

CONCLUSION

Every film poster has a story to tell. In the act of storytelling and bring people to theatre, posters make an attempt to reflect the socio-economic, political and cultural scenario of different times.

In the current study, except the poster of historic film-*Kalyan Khajina*, other four posters made successful attempts to mirror the scenarios of different times. The poster of Bimol Roy's *Do Bigha Zamin* depicted the plight of a peasant, who lost his land to the rise of industrialism in the newly independent India. The iconic poster of *Mother India*, which showed the hardship of a woman, reflected the story of the downtrodden class being exploited by moneylender and other influential sections of the society. The posters of the film *Bobby* were successful in conveying growing young radical activism and rebellious nature of the youth of the 1970s. On the other hand, the poster of *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (DDLJ) could express the changing lifestyle and fashion consciousness among Indians in the wake of economic liberalization in the country.

From Baburao Painter's hand painted posters to computer designed poster of DDLJ, the art of designing poster accepted the changing trends of designing and printing of poster of different times. The changing looks of posters are not only the result of advancement in technology, but also the result of several factors like emergence of modern lifestyles, culture, fashion, literature etc. With the release of digital poster of *Sudh Desi Romance* (2013), Bollywood publicity poster made a paradigm shift from glossy printed poster to

online digital poster. It is the technology that makes Bollywood poster available not to a limited audience, but also to Bollywood fans spread across the globe. The idea of digital poster establishes the fact that even in the presence of enormous tools of film publicity; poster has not lost its importance completely. In order to remain in vogue, it has the transition from paper to digital.

The study establishes the fact that Bollywood posters of every decade represent significant and distinguished style of designing and presentation of different times. It also indicates that the posters reflect the socio-economic situations, art, culture, techniques and technology of different times.

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