

ISAS Brief

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Oscar-winning 'Slumdog Millionaire': A Boost for India's Global Image?

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Culture is difficult to define. This is more so in a large and heterogeneous country like India, where there is no common language and religion. There are sub-cultures within the country. Joseph Nye's 'soft power' expression draws on a country's cross-border cultural influences and is one enunciated with the American context in mind. Almost tautologically, soft power implies the existence of a relatively large country and the term is, therefore, now also being used for China and India. In the Indian case, most instances of practice of soft power are linked to language and literature (including Indians writing in English), music, dance, cuisine, fashion, entertainment and even sport, and there is no denying that this kind of cross-border influence has been increasing over time, with some trigger provided by the diaspora.

The film and television industry's influence is no less important. In the last few years, India has produced the largest number of feature films in the world, with 1,164 films produced in 2007. The United States came second with 453, Japan third with 407 and China fourth with 402. Ticket sales are higher for Bollywood than for Hollywood, though revenue figures are much higher for the latter. Indian film production is usually equated with Hindi-language Bollywood, often described as the largest film-producing centre in the world. Bollywood films are watched in South Asia (Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka), the Middle East (Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Oman, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, Palestine and Jordan), Africa (Somalia, Nigeria, Syria, Egypt, Mauritius, Kenya and Senegal), Eastern Europe (Russia), Western Europe (Britain, Germany, France and Scandinavia), the Americas (the United States, Canada and the Caribbean) and Oceania (Australia, New Zealand and Fiji). They are sometimes dubbed in local languages and viewership is not restricted to the diaspora.

One often tends to forget that several Bollywood-related awards (Bollywood Movie Awards, Global Indian Film Awards, International Indian Film Academy Awards and Zee Cine Awards) are held overseas, films are shot in overseas locations, technical work is outsourced, films are watched through cable television and digital video routes, and there is the occasional foreign actor or actress who has featured in Bollywood films. Similar effects exist for television serials, Bollywood songs and song-based contest programmes, and the odd Indian choreographer and music composer has now been hired for Broadway and Hollywood.

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While Bollywood stories and music have borrowed liberally from Hollywood, 'Munnabhai MBBS' is now being remade in Hollywood. However, one should not equate the Indian film industry with Bollywood alone. There is the Kannada (Sandalwood), Bengali (Tollywood), Assamese, Tamil (Kollywood), Malayalam, Marathi, Oriya (Ollywood) and Punjabi (Pollywood) film industries too. Ismail Merchant, who died in 2005, was a director many in North America and Western Europe would have identified with.

One should not make a big deal about the Academy Awards (known officially as the Oscars from 1939). No one can deny subjectivity. Nor can one deny preferences and biases of the 6,000-odd voters of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences (AMPACS). No one can deny the importance of lobbying and advertisement campaigns, and their use to influence votes. One reason why Oscars were moved from April to February was that the time for lobbying could be shortened. Membership of the AMPACS is not in the public domain. There are entry barriers. Unless a film has been released in Los Angeles County, California, in the preceding year, it does not qualify. Having said this, given the strengths of the Indian film industry, India should have done better at the Oscars and should have moved beyond the foreign-film category. Satyajit Ray's was a special award – life-time achievement. Other than this, in the contested category, India had a 'win' by Bhanu Athaiya (with John Mollo) for costume design in 'Gandhi' and nominations for 'Mother India', 'Lagaan', 'The Sixth Sense' and 'Elizabeth'.

The box office is not necessarily the best criterion of how good a film is. However, it does offer some indication of how the world at large judges a film. In contrast, the best picture award at the Oscars is based on voting by AMPACS members and their preferences do not necessarily mirror what the world at large thinks. In recent times, the world, at large, clearly endorsed 'Braveheart,' 'Titanic', 'Shakespeare in Love', 'Gladiator', 'A Beautiful Mind' and 'Lord of the Rings' for the Best Picture award but they were not that enthusiastic about 'Chicago', 'Crash' or 'No Country for Old Men'. If one takes a vote on the best English-language films ever, 'Citizen Kane', 'Psycho', 'The Shawshank Redemption', 'Pulp Fiction', 'Vertigo', '2001: A Space Odyssey', 'Star Wars', 'Apocalypse Now', ' Fargo', 'Philadelphia', 'Goodfellas', 'ET', 'Dog Day Afternoon', 'Bonnie and Clyde', 'The Graduate', 'Some Like It Hot' and 'Goodbye Mr Chips' will figure on many lists. However, these did not win the 'Best Picture' award. In some cases, they were not even nominated.

In that sense, one should not blow up the importance of 'Slumdog Millionaire', certain to win several Oscars after bagging four Golden Globes, 11 British Academy of Film and Television Arts awards and 10 Oscar nominations. Strictly speaking, there were nine Oscar nominations, since two different songs were nominated under the same category. 'Slumdog Millionaire' swept the 81st Academy Awards with 'Best Picture', 'Best Director', 'Best Song' (composer A. R. Rahman and lyricist Gulzar), 'Best Score' (A. R. Rahman), 'Best Adapted Screenplay', 'Best Cinematography', 'Best Sound Mixing' (Resul Pookutty) and 'Best Film Editing'. The documentary 'Smile Pinky' also won an Oscar.

India became the flavour of the month. However one should not overreact. This does not establish 'Slumdog Millionaire' as a great picture. It is not and most Indians will agree that 'Taare Zamin Par' was better. There have been several Indian films (in multiple languages) that are better than 'Slumdog Millionaire'. However, they were not as technically perfect, nor were they marketed and packaged that well, and sometimes they did not pass the test of being released in Los Angeles County. Once the nominations were in, 'Slumdog Millionaire' did

not have to be a great picture to win, it only had to be better than the competition, which, in the 'Best Picture' category, was the rather bizarre 'The Curious Case of Benjamin Button'.

In this age of gloom and doom, 'Slumdog Millionaire' winning an award is much more politically correct, especially because it fits a certain clichéd Indian stereotype in the minds of the AMPACS members. Of course, it is not an Indian-made film. It is a British-American-made film, set in India. Yes, it distorts quite a bit compared to the original novel by Vikas Swarup, now rechristened 'Slumdog Millionaire' from 'Q&A'. Yes, it is set in poverty, though contrary to what several people have said, it hardly glorifies poverty. The poverty and squalor of Dharavi were not created by 'Slumdog Millionaire' and there is no denying these exist. Films in other countries have also depicted poverty and one need not bristle simply because a film has been made by a foreigner. Maturity means taking things in one's stride. The British did not seem terribly upset when Shekhar Kapur depicted the virgin queen as less than a virgin. And yes, A. R. Rahman has done far better as a musician and composer. 'Slumdog Millionaire' is a poor sample.

However, on balance, is this good for India? It certainly is because positive externalities and multiplier benefits will be left behind for the future. Things tend to snowball and legacies remain. These are not important for the likes of Danny Boyle. However, they are important for film-makers, composers, musicians and technicians who work in India. In this age of globalisation and cross-border influences, their expertise has that much greater probability of being tapped, not very different from the legacy effects of 'Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon' in China, or perhaps even 'Kung Fu Panda'. There may well be a mirror image in the beauty business. Were there no beautiful women in India between 1966 (Reita Faria) and 1994 (Aishwarya Rai, Sushmita Sen)? After 1994, as with Venezuela, India learnt the packaging and marketing game. That can now happen for the Indian film industry.

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