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It’s 101 years since the birth of Bollywood, the world’s largest and most vibrant movie industry and, of course, that’s more than enough time to mature and alter, to grow arms and legs. For some time, but since the 1990s particularly, the connections between Australia and Bollywood have really taken hold. So sit back and enjoy a cinematic journey that’s sure to entertain.

Bollywood (a portmanteau for Bombay and Hollywood), the informal term for the Hindi-language popular film industry based in Mumbai, often becomes the face of “Indian cinema” as a whole. As a genre it has grown and developed over a period of 100 years, coloured by India’s history, politics, socio-economic conditions, culture, sensibilities, dreams, fantasies, hopes and expectations.

In the 1990s Bollywood emerged, post-economic liberalisation of India, as a strong, globalised industry and India’s biggest cultural ambassador to the world.

Many films are accused of being copied or inspired from world cinemas but in the moment of “inspiration” Bollywood creates a unique cultural adaptation packaged with romance, melodrama, action, costumes, songs and dance extravaganzas that suit global Indian audiences’ desires and their understanding of the world around them.
Cultural diplomacy

The ever-increasing presence of the Indian diaspora in different parts of the world has helped to realise what we might think of as Bollywood’s cultural diplomacy project.

Switzerland, USA, UK, Mauritius, South Africa, Canada, Dubai, and Singapore have all been leaders in attracting Bollywood film-makers. The present day Indian-Australian co-productions are part of that larger continuum and ever-expanding cosmopolitan outlook of Bollywood and the Indian diaspora.

There are strong links between India and Australia, generated through our shared colonial history, Indian diaspora, cricket, tourism, and our governments’ strategic interest in the subcontinental region.

The 1996 film Indian has been credited for featuring the first appearance of kangaroos in Indian cinema. But I have noticed that as early as 1974, a Hindi film Majboor made first reference to Australia and its iconic boxing kangaroo. It featured Bollywood superstar Amitabh Bachchan with a poster captioned:

*Just hop, skip and jump every Thursday to Perth Sydney.*

Sealing the deal

Concrete partnerships and projects between the Indian and Australian film industries began in the late 1990s, and included films, music videos, and TV commercials being shot
Bollywood and Australia: worth making a song and dance about

Various Australian state tourism bodies have since supported Indian productions and used Bollywood stars as ambassadors to promote Australia as a welcoming nation. Australia is now a hot destination for Bollywood as well as regional language film-makers, with a successful foray of films from *Soldier* (1998) to *Bhaag Milkha Bhaag* (2013).

Indian-Australian Bollywood entrepreneur Anupam Sharma is credited with working on more than 200 co-production projects between the two countries.

Within Australia, in the late 1940s and 1950s, only development-based documentary films were showcased at the Indian High Commission. Post-1960s, Greek subtitled versions of some Indian classics such as *Mother India* (1957) were screened in Australian cinemas.

Today, most Australian multiplexes screen all big-banner Bollywood films. Many leading Australian directors of photography, stunt directors and post-production companies are working in India. There has even been some reciprocal interest in producing Australian films in India.

Over the past two decades, Australian films such as *Holy Smoke!* (1999), *The Waiting City* (2009), *Save Your Legs!* (2012), *My Cornerstone* (2013) and forthcoming films such as *Defiant* and *Color of Darkness* feature India, not just as a background location but as an integral part of the plot.

There was also an Indian classics and Bollywood-inspired moment in Baz Luhrmann’s *Moulin Rouge* (2001).

**Bollywood Aussies**

Bollywood’s influence on Australia can be gauged by the direction of Australian film careers.

In 2013, Indian-Australian actress Pallavi Sharda was seen romancing one of Bollywood’s biggest heartthrobs Ranbir Kapoor in *Besharam*). Before her, Australia’s bowling sensation Brett Lee was bowled over by the Bollywood bug and seen singing in the album *Asha and Friends* (2006) and showcasing his cricketing skills in *Victory* (2009).
Brett Lee sings in Asha and Friends.

Before them, in the 1940s and 50s, Mary Ann Evans – AKA Fearless Nadia – ruled the hearts of millions of Indians as a star of India’s booming Hindi film industry. She became a superstar of Indian cinema with her Hunterwali films and today is known as the “original stunt queen of Bollywood”.

Australian ballet dancer and stage manager Louise Lightfoot worked with filmmaker K. Subramanyam, and Australia’s leading cinematographer Tom Cowan shot films in South India.

In the 1980s, Bob Christo, a name synonymous with the evil face of an “angrez” (Englishman), had a very successful career as a villain.

Other Australian artists who had their tryst with Bollywood are: Tania Zaetta (Salaam Namaste), Nicholas Brown (Kites), Tabrett Bethell (Dhoom 3), Rebecca Breeds (Bhaag Milka Bhaag), Kristina Akheeva (Yamla Pagla Deewana 2), Emma Brown Garett (Yamala Pagla Deewana), Vimala Raman (Mumbai Mirror), Anusha Dandekar (Delhi Belly), and Maheep Sandhu (Shivam), Charles Thomson (Marathi) and Japji Khaira (Punjabi) have made a name in regional films and are all geared-up for their Bollywood debuts.

Indian-Australian identity

For many Australians, Bollywood is India and India is Bollywood, and both are inscrutable! Australian films such as Holy Smoke!, literature and travel narratives (see Wanderings in India) have frequently portrayed India as a perfect hippie escape, the land of sadhus, and batsmen (Save Your Legs!). Bollywood has presented Australia, in Prem Agan, Salaam Namaste, Crook, Bachna Ae Haseeno and many other films, as sexually liberating, visually romantic, and fantastical land of beaches and beauties.

A 2013 survey by the Lowy Institute for International Policy, the India-Australia Poll, found that Indians generally have a positive perception of Australia and regard Australians as welcoming people. The survey didn’t mention the degree to which this image may be a result of stories of Indian diaspora, media and Bollywood, which portrays Australia as a
popular tourist destination full of fun sports and easy-going people.

For Indian-Australians, Bollywood films are a test of identity, as in the unfolding narrative of a film in which they not only connect with their roots, culture and family values but also try to find a lost piece of their soul.

There always are and will be different perceptions about Australia in India and India in Australia but the artistic skill lies in emphasising the distinctiveness, highlighting multiple facets, telling a yarn and using cultural diplomacy in a positive way.

*The Bollywood 101 Film Festival takes place on February 20 in Newcastle, followed by an international conference on Bollywood and Its Other(s) on February 21. Both events are hosted by the University of Newcastle.*