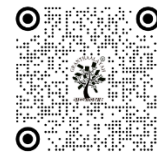


Original Article

POLITICS OF REPRESENTATION: EXOTICIZING DARJEELING IN SELECT POPULAR INDIAN CINEMA

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ABSTRACT

Popular cinema has a wide reach and hence has an impactful cultural influence too. The visual appeal of cinema ensures that it plays a defining role in shaping how an audience perceives different places and cultures resulting in a version of collective imagination. When it comes to settings and location the appeal of lush green landscapes and snowcapped mountains of hill stations have always remained paramount in Indian popular cinema and Darjeeling remains one such destination evoking a feeling of cinematic romance. This small hill station is often associated with unending tea gardens, colonial buildings and the view of the eastern Himalayan range. Together they form a picturesque view which creates a picture-perfect image.

In the past few decades Darjeeling has been the backdrop of many popular Bollywood films among which this paper will focus on *Main Hoon Na* and *Barfi!*. Both these films are set in Darjeeling and focus on the beauty of this region. However, the cinematic fascination presents an ideal which is far from the complex and harsher realities of this region. Hence this paper delves on the erasure of the challenges and struggles of the local community where the history, politics and even culture of the region remains unacknowledged. This romanticisation of Darjeeling has led to a reinforcing of stereotypes resulting in misrepresentation and distortion of a place which is in reality a place of conflict.

Keywords: Popular Cinema, Setting, Darjeeling, Representation

Why should we study Indian Cinema? In what ways does it help us to deepen our knowledge and broaden our understanding of the world?

— K. Moti Gokulsing and Wimal Dissanayake

The field is perhaps best understood as a set of engagements with an ongoing set of animating questions: questions about the social distribution of power, forms of social difference, theorizations about the relations between individuals (“subjects”) and their social networks, and [...] representations play in sustaining the social formations that have arisen in the expansion of the industries that produce popular culture and its ideologies.

--Matthew Tinkcom and Amy Villarejo

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INTRODUCTION

Cinema is one of the most visual forms of storytelling and has the power to shape societal values and individual perspectives. Through the creation of a multisensory experience for the audience, cinema has the ability to inspire as well as challenge prevailing ideologies be it social or political. It can provoke deep thoughts as well as intense emotions. Within this cinematic universe, popular cinema has further impact since it is connected with enduring mass appeal. Popular cinema can offer a unique insight into society since it actively engages with human concerns while catering to the needs of contemporary society. Within the Indian context—"Popular films are the films seen and appreciated by the vast mass of Indian movie-goers. They are largely melodramatic, often musicals, conveying simple clear moral messages; they represent a distinctly Indian approach to cinema as a form of mass entertainment" [Gokulsing and Dissanayake \(1998\)](#). Consequently, a critical eye towards the array of films that comprise popular Indian cinema can reveal multiple perspectives on issues which go beyond mere entertainment as popular cinema not only shapes society but is shaped by it as well.

One important element of popular Indian cinema is the location or setting of the film which acts as a crucial backdrop to the story and its characters. Location has an important role to play in creating a visual experience for the audience and adds to the directors' vision as well. They create the necessary atmosphere and create a tone for the story to unfold, be it a bustling cityscape or remote empty spaces. Many a times the setting can serve as a symbol within the narrative and contributes to overall storytelling. It often adds to realism and reflects the relevant context that the filmmaker wants to achieve.

THE RELEVANCE OF LOCATION IN CINEMA

Location in Indian popular cinema has an added role to play beyond being a backdrop of the storytelling—"Landscape is at once a cultural form and a space for life and living. It is in and through landscape that cinema constructs its ideas of place, location, and human agency, drawing on *longue-durée* memories of identity and community that are embedded in topography" [Mukherjee \(2022\)](#). These lines reflect how the representation of landscape have the power to shape the way a place is perceived where place encompasses its people, culture, literature and beyond. There are times that the locale becomes a character in its own right—"which provides a level of emotional attachment for the viewer, especially when the setting is integral to the story and, in effect, a star in its own right" [Beeton \(2010\)](#). Hence the attraction of the viewers to a place in cinema can go beyond an aesthetic experience where the landscape becomes symbolic of the characters and their psychological and metaphorical journeys in the narrative. Therefore, the viewers of cinema are definitely not a passive participant in the cinematic landscape. In fact, they actively participate in creation of the location in popular imagination.

In a country of over a billion people popular Indian cinema is a major form of entertainment. It was noted that people spend huge amount of money to partake in this form of entertainment. One of the reasons for these films enduring mass appeal is that these films with their grand and lavish sets, stars along with exotic locations can be a form of respite for the common man. Popular Indian cinema can be seen as escapist in nature though it has its foundation in reality. This element of fantasy and escapism is achieved through grand narratives but location plays a crucial role in adding to this escapism. Likewise, exotic locations create a form of arm-chair tourism where a person is able to visually experience a place he may never visit in his lifetime.

The choice of location is hence, deliberate on the part of the film maker. The visual narrative in cinema actively engages in creation of meaning—"their function extends into various obscure areas that shape identity, power relations and cultural understanding of spaces" [Mishra \(2018\)](#). Hence, in popular Indian cinema we see how certain places are automatically ascribed with meaning which extends to popular imagination for example the Swiss alps automatically denote love and romance connected to the idea of a honeymoon destination. This in turn means that cinema has a huge role to play in this process of the creation of collective imagination and hence shape the way a place is 'seen' and represented in mediums beyond cinema.

Among the many beautiful and scenic locations snow-clad countryside have often been a favourite which can be a perfect backdrop to the romantic songs that have remained a quintessential feature of popular Indian films. A popular hill station in eastern Himalaya which has remained in popular imagination is Darjeeling.

DARJEELING AS A LOCATION IN POPULAR INDIAN CINEMA

Darjeeling has been placed on the global map due to the famous tea produced in this region. but it is equally famous as the backdrop to many movies from the 1962 film *Kanchenjunga* directed by Satyajit Ray to the legendary drama *Aradhana* (1969) which immortalised the Darjeeling toy train. Likewise, Darjeeling has been a sought-after destination for Bollywood films like *Main Hoon Na* (2004), *Barfi!!* (2012), *Yaariyan* (2014), and *Jagga Jasoos* (2017). Similarly, Darjeeling has been a backdrop for many Bengali movies due to its close proximity to the state capital. It has also served as an ideal location for Telugu films and its scenic view has been part of actor-turned politician Rajinikanth's films too. These example serves as a reflection of how Darjeeling has enchanted the popular imagination when it comes to popular Indian cinema.

However, one crucial element which has often been overlooked in the representation of Darjeeling is the dichotomy between appearance and reality. In order to highlight this gap in the representation of Darjeeling this paper will look into two popular films

from Indian cinema, *Main Hoon Na* and *Barfi!*. These two films have been chosen specifically due to the fact that Darjeeling as a background figure prominently in both these movies.

DARJEELING: AN IDYLIC CANVAS IN FILMS

Main Hoon Na is an action and comedy film directed by Farah Khan. An army officer by the name of Major Ram played by Shah Rukh Khan is assigned a mission which takes him to St. Paul's college in Darjeeling where he joins as a student. This means that Darjeeling was an important part of the film. Similarly, *Barfi!* is a 2012 film directed by Anurag Basu. It is a romantic comedy set in 1970's following the life of the central protagonist Barfi who lives in Darjeeling. The common thread that ties these two separate genre films is the depiction of the hill station. Both these films hinges on the romanticised depiction of the location. Hill stations have often held a promise of tranquillity as well as excitement for a lay person. It has been seen as a place that offers a respite from the oppressive summers. Hence, the depiction of the location in both films follow a similar line.

Main Hoon Na places an educational institution at the centre of its plot and narration. This is an important detail in terms of representation of the place since hill stations in India has been home to many premier schools. Likewise, Darjeeling is also known as an educational hub with schools which have a rich history. St. Paul's school where *Main Hoon Na* is shot is one such school which caters to students from all over the country. This school has been a popular location for the shooting of many films as well as Television series and this popularity can be attributed to the aesthetics of the school. The colonial past of Darjeeling is reflected in the buildings of the school and the overall architecture of the place which includes charming English style cottages and quaint little chapels. Since, the school is on a higher altitude in a place which has a rich forest cover, it can boast of the clear view of the eastern Himalayan range. Together these aspects increase the overall aesthetic appeal of the place.

In *Main Hoon Na*, the school is depicted as a college which is colourful and vibrant. The large open spaces in front of the school building becomes a perfect location for a memorable song and dance sequence which remains a hallmark of the popular Indian cinema. The iconic red roofs of the school building also form an apt backdrop for the gripping sequence for the lead actor to play the saviour. Likewise, the iconic Darjeeling Himalayan railway becomes the chosen form of conveyance for the hero when he arrives in Darjeeling to complete his given assignment. The iconic engine blowing steam creates a perfect moment for the dramatic entry of the hero. The lush green landscape, the narrow lanes and the quiet neighbourhood of Darjeeling all add to the creation of the required atmosphere in the narrative.

While *Main Hoon Na* focuses on St Paul's School as a backdrop to the film *Barfi!* presents a more panoramic view of Darjeeling. The train station and the steam engines figure prominently in the depiction of the popular hill station. Since the story of *Barfi!* centres around the protagonist who is an inhabitant of Darjeeling, the viewers are given a glimpse of the by lanes of the town, the winding roads and the tea gardens. *Barfi!* was shot in many iconic locations in Darjeeling, for example the Ghoom railway station which becomes the backdrop of the first meeting of the romantic pair the film which naturally highlighted the train as well which becomes a site for many playful pranks of the lead protagonists. Keventers, a breakfast restaurant is also highlighted in this film as well as the iconic Capitol Hall with its clock which lies at the centre of the town. Windamere hotel which has its own rich history was well-suited to be presented as the home of one of the characters played by Priyanka Chopra. Barfi, played by Ranbir Kapoor is the lead character who is presented on a cycle whistling away in front of St. Andrew's church.

What ties all these locations together be it Keventers or St. Andrew's church is that it is all a reflection of the colonial past of Darjeeling and hence, are places which attract the largest number of tourists flocking to the hills. These are places which are pleasing to the eyes and form a beautiful backdrop to the story that is unfolding in the film. Similarly the tea gardens and the tea gardens workers are also referred to in the film as Illeana D'cruz dons the traditional Nepali dress complete with a 'Doko'(a locally made bamboo basket) and poses in front of the teagardens for a portrait.

Hence, the focus on the landscape is based on the visual appeal. One integral aspect of the film is that Barfi, the character is born to a Nepali family. Hence, the introductory song gives an insight into the life of the common person living in the hills as Barfi! is presented dancing with a group of musicians playing the local 'Panchey Baja' wearing a 'Dhaka Topi' which is a traditional Nepali cap. However, this version of Darjeeling is only presented as a glimpse to the viewers as the scene soon shifts to focus on the undulating lush green landscape of the hills. This beauty of nature is further enhanced by the fog present in the background which adds to the overall beauty of the location.

DARJEELING: A REALITY OF CONFLICTED HISTORY

Darjeeling has a chequered history since like most hill stations in India it was set up by the British—'as part of the British imperialistic project. From the historical perspective these hill stations were the products of British Colonialism' Mukherjee (2023). The cool climate played a role in the establishment of these hill stations as reiterated by Mukherjee—'during the colonial period Darjeeling was beautified by the British to save them from the hot and humid climatic conditions of deltaic Bengal'. This also led to the establishment of a number of educational institutions modelled on the public school system of Eton and Harrow. Based on model many schools like St. Pauls school (1964) were established which popularised western education. The British presence also led to establishment of the tea gardens and an overall beautification process of Darjeeling town. This is the beauty that is represented in

cinema as well where the story as well as the 'history' of the people who live there is conveniently left out. Beyond tourism and beauty which is reflected in movies is the movement for a separate state in this region due to the "institutional discrimination and prejudices against the Gorkha community leading the oppression and exploitation of the people and the space, which in turn is fuelled the movement for the quest for identity through formation of a state within the union of India" Ray and Chowdhury (2023). The history of systematic oppression of the people living in these region marks this region as a conflict zone where the region experienced a mass agitation as recent as 2017 which saw a 104 day-long shutdown in the hills—'on 8 June, protesting Gorkhas we teargassed and lathi charged, setting the stage for the violence that has followed since' Gupta (2023). Similarly, violence and rage also simmer in the tea-gardens which sees the economic exploitation of the workers in its worst forms—'Darjeeling known as the champagne of teas, has the breathtaking tea garden in the world, but behind its beauty lies the harsh reality of the tea plantation industry' Borar (2023).

Hence, what is significant in these visual representations in popular Indian cinema is how it is so distant from reality. Like in the two movies discussed above the representation is not only completely divorced from reality but it deliberately ignores the actual inhabitants who live in these regions. By doing so the popular cinema continues to exoticize these regions which leads to real-life problems like over tourism which has worsened over the years which could mean an ecological disaster for these rugged landscapes. Similarly, by continuing to focus on the aesthetic and beauty of the region these representations do a huge disservice to the places as it conveniently puts a blanket over the growing discontent about the people.

CONCLUSION

While it can be argued that popular Indian cinema especially ones which are formulaic in nature are meant to escapist in nature yet the perils of misrepresentation cannot be ignored. By highlighting the picturesque tea gardens of Darjeeling hills both these films choose to showcase a selective side of the story of tea gardens which conveniently forget the blood and sweat of the workers, similarly by focusing on the aesthetics of colonial architecture and British style schools these films ignore the fact that these places were inaccessible to the common people for most of history. Likewise, the visual treat of the lush green landscape forgets about the looming environmental concerns plaguing these regions.

Darjeeling is a melting pot of various culture but by presenting a certain class in the films like *Barfi!*, the rich traditions and local lifestyle of the hills are overlooked and hence leave the viewers with a false image of these regions. This distortion proves to be a challenge for the local communities living in Darjeeling. it further leads to a reduction of the complex histories of the regions to a mere visual spectacle feeding the viewers with an unrealistic and romanticised version of Darjeeling.

Indian popular cinema has the highest reach in mass market and hence, it cannot be ignored that it has the highest ability to shape perspectives too. Hence, it is time for the film makers to explore narratives beyond the stereotypes associated with hills stations like Darjeeling. the focus should shift from the outsiders view to centre on a more nuanced and aesthetic portrayal of these regions which chooses to address the challenges that these places face in order to add depth to these narratives and visual storytelling. By exploring the rich history as well as the nuanced everyday reality, Indian popular cinema can move beyond the superficiality of representation and contribute to a more rounded portrayal of Darjeeling among its viewers and not do it a disservice by continuously idealising it.

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