

Chapter 13

Indian Cinema: Indian Diaspora's Culture Export to the Middle East

Brahmneet Kaur Narula

Research Analyst for London Political

Abstract

The Middle East accounts for one of the largest Indian diasporas abroad, mostly concentrated in the Gulf Region. This diaspora has been instrumental in establishing people-to-people contact between India and the Middle East. One of the ways in which the diaspora has been successful in bringing the cultural elements of India to the region is through the popularisation of Indian cinema. From the screening of Raj Kapoor's "Awaraz" as early as 1951, to releasing multiple Indian movies every week, be they from Bollywood or other regional cinemas like the Tamil and Malayalam film industry, the presence of Indian cinema in the region has come a long way. The Middle East has also transformed from simply being a consumer of Indian cinema to being a location where movies are directed and produced. Due to the presence of a large Indian diaspora, as well as an Arab audience which consumes Indian cinema just as enthusiastically, the movies and the film industry, particularly Bollywood, have moved beyond being a source of entertainment. For many, it is a representation of India and its culture. Due to the strong influence that Indian cinema has in the region, it also contributes significantly to the economy of Middle Eastern countries, including in the tourism, food and clothing sectors, and in the region's own filmmaking ecosystem. Indian cinema is thus a cultural export, strongly espoused by the Indian diaspora, which in current times has

become an integral part of the social and cultural landscape of Middle Eastern countries.

History of Cinema in the Middle East

The history of cinema in the Middle East dates back to the late 19th century and is a part of the colonial history of the region. The first time cinema entered the region was in 1896, when films by the Lumiere brothers were screened in Alexandria and Cairo for an exclusive Egyptian audience. After that, screening of films during theatre performances became a norm in Egypt, with the first regular cinema being constructed in 1906 in Cairo by the French company Pathe. By 1908, Cairo and Alexandria had five film theatres and by 1930 the construction of cinemas had expanded to nearly all Arab countries, with each of them having a dozen of their own. While cinema halls had popped up in various countries during the colonial period, the production and consumption of films were largely dominated by foreign and non-native people. Egypt was the only country in the region to have started developing its indigenous film industry during colonial rule (Viola Shafik, 2007).

As the Middle Eastern countries got their independence, the national filmmaking process started expanding beyond Egypt. By the end of the 20th century, while countries like Libya and Saudi Arabia had only produced a few short films, others such as Syria, Lebanon and Iraq had produced 150, 180 and 100 movies respectively. Egypt, however, continued to remain the cinema hub in the region, having produced 2500 films at that point. With the expansion and popularity of Egyptian cinema in the Arab world, and the lack of support in their own countries, various Syrian, Lebanese and Palestinian filmmakers migrated to Cairo and joined the Egyptian film industry (Priya, 2019). While the film industry in the region had made progress, the volatile environment present due to interstate wars, the intervention of extra-regional powers, and religious conservatism, hampered the growth of the industry in various countries. Saudi Arabia, where public cinema was made illegal in 1988, and the ban only removed in 2018, is one

such example. Similarly, countries like Syria and Iraq, while producing films, were not able to establish a flourishing film industry due to a lack of resources, government intervention and the absence of social, political and economic stability in the country.

On the one hand, some of the major film industries saw a decline in the late twentieth century, while on the other hand, countries like Qatar, the UAE and Oman started gaining attention, especially in the past two decades. The first Qatari movie, “Aqaribabzah” (Clockwise), produced by Khalifa al Muraikhi, was released in 2010. The Doha Film Institute was also launched in the same year to encourage filmmaking, and since then has co-produced films like “The Cruel Summer”, “The Reluctant Fundamentalist” and “Black Gold”. While Oman does not have a fully-fledged film industry, the country has been trying to build institutions to boost film production in the region. The creation of the Muscat International Film Festival and the Oman Film Society, and Oman’s entering into formal agreements with film organisations from across the Arab world, can be seen as significant steps to give an impetus to local film production. The UAE has represented one of the most successful stories of creating a film ecosystem in the region. The first Emirati film, “The Dream” was released in 2005, and since then multiple local productions have taken place. With the establishment of government organisations like the Abu Dhabi Film Commission (ADFC) and Dubai Film & TV Commission (DFTC) as well as some of the most significant film festivals such as the Abu Dhabi Film Festival, the Dubai International Film Festival, and the more recently established META Film Fest, the UAE has positioned itself as the media and cinema hub in the region. Saudi Arabia, since the removal of the ban on film screening in 2018, has been investing heavily in the entertainment industry. This thrust has come as a part of Saudi Arabia’s “Vision 2030”, with the goal of diversifying the economy. In March 2023, Saudi Arabia’s Cultural Development Fund (CDF) announced the launch of its Film Sector Financing Program, with a budget of SR879m (\$234m). The Kingdom in the past five years has thus taken some significant steps to

encourage film production in the country, as well as building a strong film ecosystem.

While the film industry continues to expand in most of the Middle Eastern countries, one of the most unique characteristics of the industry in the region is that Middle Eastern cinema, unlike cinema from other regions, is not limited to its geographic identity. This is primarily because of the history as well as the current demographic of the Middle East, particularly the Gulf. Historically the connections between the Middle East and other regions such as Central Asia, East Africa, East Asia, Europe, North Africa, South Asia and Southeast Asia have been established through maritime and terrestrial trade routes. Currently, “expatriates constitute between 40 and 88 per cent of Gulf populations” (Hudson & Yunis, 2021, p. 10). Such a demographic has led to the formation of a film industry that is highly diverse and actively engages with other prominent film industries such as Bollywood and Hollywood. Both the history and the current existence of the film industry in the Middle East are thus an amalgamation of a colonial past, changing regional dynamics and a cosmopolitan environment that is the future of various cities in the region.

Indian Diaspora and Its Connection with Indian Cinema in the Middle East

The Middle East accounts for the largest Indian diaspora in the world, with their numbers reaching up to 8 million. Out of these, approximately 3.4 million live in the UAE, followed by about 2.5 million in Saudi Arabia and nearly 1 million in Kuwait. These large diaspora communities of Indians in the region have led to the formation of transnational cultural connections, exporting festivals, music, films and other elements that connect migrants to their homeland.

One of India’s cultural exports that has flourished largely due to the Indian diaspora is the Indian cinema. While various countries in the Middle East showcase films from across

India, the most dominant ones include films from the Hindi (Bollywood), Malayalam, and Tamil Film Industries. While Bollywood is the largest film industry in India and thus has a larger reach, the strong presence of regional cinema is due to the prominent migration from certain states of Southern India. According to the Tamil Nadu Migration Survey of 2015, countries like the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Bahrain, Oman and Kuwait account for 1.1 Tamil emigrants, with the largest populations being in the UAE (400 000) and Saudi Arabia (350 000). Similarly, according to the Kerala Migration Survey of 2018, 1.8 million Malayali emigrants live in the Middle East, with the UAE (830 000) and Saudi Arabia (480 000) having the highest concentrations. These significant numbers of the diaspora population have acted as facilitators for the popularisation of Indian cinema in the Middle East.

Another contributing factor is the large number of Hindi and Urdu speakers that reside in various parts of the Middle East, coming not just from India but from other South Asian countries as well. Bollywood has thus seen a huge amount of success in the region. Bollywood's popularity, themes and language have a transnational character which has allowed it to become deeply immersed in the Arab world. Hindi cinema made its way to the Middle East as early as the 1950s, with some of the initial and widely successful films being Raj Kapoor's "Awara" (1951), Mehboob Khan's "Aan" (1952) and "Mother India" (1957) and Satyen Bose's "Dosti" (1964). The movie "Awara" was also dubbed into three Middle Eastern languages, namely Persian, Turkish and Arabic. "Until the 1980s, one-third of all film exports from India were for the diasporic and local populations in the Arab Gulf states" (Thussu, 2013, p. 139). One of the oldest overseas distributors of Bollywood films was the Hinduja group. It was started by Parmanand Deepchand Hinduja, who moved to Iran in 1919 with his family, and is said to have had good relations with the Shah of Iran. They "distributed Indian cinema in Iran and the Middle East from the 1950s to 1970s" (Dwyer, 2013, p. 410), the first being Raj Kapoor's "Shree 420" in 1957. However, it was in 1964, with the distribution of the movie "Sangam"

that the Hinduja group earned its first million through the film distribution business. The Hinduja family is one of the examples of Indian diaspora members in the Middle East being not just a consumer of Indian cinema but also a facilitator of it.

Over the decades, the diaspora population in the region has surged and so has Bollywood's popularity. With the increase in demand and growth of the entertainment industry, the number of Hindi films being released in the region has also exponentially increased. While the UAE, with the largest Indian diaspora in the region, has been a consistent consumer of Bollywood, it was only in 2018 that Saudi Arabia, home to the second largest Indian diaspora in the Middle East, lifted its 35-year-old ban on cinema. "Gold" became the first Bollywood film to be released in the country. Currently, the GCC market accounts for about 20 to 35 per cent of the total overseas box office collections of Bollywood movies. The region has also hosted various award shows related to Bollywood, such as IIFA and Filmfare. Three IIFA Awards have been hosted in the UAE, particularly in Dubai and Abu Dhabi, in the years 2006, 2022 and 2023, while the Filmfare Middle East Achievers Night was hosted in Dubai in 2022. The constant interaction between India and the Middle East through Bollywood caters to the tastes of the people living there. From releasing movies a day before they get released in India to hosting award shows, the Gulf, especially the UAE, has seen an influx of Bollywood stars, bringing the Hindi Film Industry closer to the Indian diaspora in the region.

Another facet of this inclination towards Bollywood also emerges from the actors working in the movies. More often than not, the movie plot is secondary to the hero of the film. From the Raj Kapoor craze in Iran, to the Big B Amitabh Bachchan's popularity in Egypt and the immense fame that Shahrukh Khan and Salman Khan enjoy in the Gulf countries, this adoration of Bollywood actors over the decades indicates the consistent demand for Hindi cinema in the Middle East. The fame of Bollywood actors has also made them an integral part of the social, cultural and economic spheres in the Middle East. Amitabh Bachchan was granted an honorary doctorate

by the Egyptian Academy of Arts in Cairo in April 2015. It was also the first time that the academy granted an international actor an honorary doctorate. He also received the Lifetime Achievement Award in Saudi Arabia in January 2023. A similar kind of reception was accorded Shahrukh Khan, who received Morocco's prestigious Medal of Honour in 2012 as well as the Global Icon of Cinema and Cultural Narrative award at the Sharjah International Book Fair (SIBF) in 2022, among many other awards. Various Bollywood celebrities such as Shah Rukh Khan, Urvashi Rautela, Sanjay Dutt and Sunil Shetty have received the UAE Golden Visa as well.

The fame of Bollywood celebrities can be further deduced from the various brands that have chosen them as their brand ambassadors and promoters. Some prominent examples include the selection of Shah Rukh Khan as the tourism ambassador of Dubai, Ranveer Singh as that of Abu Dhabi, and Salman Khan and Katrina Kaif for Splash, the largest high fashion retailer in the Middle East. It is thus the popularity of Bollywood in the region which makes these actors a suitable option for marketing campaigns, as they allow companies and brands to target the Indian diaspora, as well as the Arab local population who are familiar with them.

While the Hindi film industry has a strong presence in the Middle East, it is not the only one, with multiple Tamil and Malayalam movies being released and viewed in the region. When Saudi Arabia re-opened its theatres, "Kaala", a Tamil film starring Rajinikanth, became the first Indian movie to be released there. South Indian actors like Mohanlal, Mammooty, Tovino Thomas and Prithviraj Sukumaran are among the few Indian celebrities to have received the UAE's Golden Visa. The region has also hosted the South Indian International Movie Awards multiple times since its inception in 2012, with the most commonly used location being the UAE, followed by Qatar where the award show was held in 2019. The Middle East has thus formed a strong connection with not just the Hindi film industry but also other regional cinemas from India.

Reception of Indian Cinema in the Arab World

The Indian diaspora in the region has played a significant role in increasing Indian cinema's popularity and reach in the Middle East. However, over the decades, Indian films have moved far beyond just catering to the interests of the diasporic imagination and have additionally built a loyal audience within the local Arab population. This acceptance of Indian cinema by the local population emerges from a long history of cultural connections between India and the Middle East. In the case of Bollywood in particular, "the melodrama of Hindi film, which is about love and often about the family, along with the music and the 'magic' of the movies, is usually mentioned as the main attraction" (Dwyer, 2013, p. 413). Another facet of the region's inclination towards Indian cinema and its community-oriented themes emerges from a lack of similarity that the Arab population often feels between their culture and the Western individualism that is depicted in Hollywood movies.

One of the oldest examples of the receptiveness of Indian cinema, especially Bollywood in the Middle East, can be seen through the fame that actors like Dilip Kumar and Amitabh Bachchan have gained in the region. Mohd Ahmad Abdel Rahman, a professor at Al-Azhar University, Cairo in an interview with Times of India said: "If any Indian is spotted on the streets, the first welcoming words people often utter are "Hello, Amitabh Bachchan". Bachchan's film "The Great Gambler" (1979) was shot in Egypt, and his 1985-released film 'Mard' is said to have been screened for months in the country's theatres. Egypt's then-President Gamal Abdel Nasser attended the 7th Filmfare Award in the year 1960, further showcasing the strong influence that Bollywood had in the region. This immense popularity of Bollywood, however, was seen as a threat to the Egyptian film industry, as a result of which a ban on Indian films was imposed in 1987. It was only in 2013 that this ban was lifted, with the release of "Chennai Express" starring Shah Rukh Khan and Deepika Padukone. A similar reception was seen in other countries as well. According

to Aftab Ahmed, Oman started screening Indian movies in the 1970s, broadcast every Friday by Omani television (Priya, 2019). By the 1990s, the Khan triumvirate of Bollywood Shah Rukh Khan, Aamir Khan and Salman Khan had garnered immense popularity in the Middle East, especially in the UAE. Various Bollywood actors thus became household names in Middle Eastern countries. According to Asad Khan, the cinema manager of Grand Cineplex Dubai, nearly forty per cent of the Indian cinema audience is comprised of Gulf nationals. In the past few decades, the number of movies released in Arabic has also increased. More than 35 television channels, such as Sana TV, B4U Aflam, Zee Alwan, Zee Aflam and MBC Bollywood have been launched in the region, showing Indian content in the Arabic language to cater to the demand of Arab audiences (Priya, 2019).

The presence of a huge Indian diaspora in the region and their intermingling with the local Arab population over the years has also led to the sharing of cultural elements. The elevation of India's position in the international environment and the increase in its soft power, coupled with the growing presence of influential Indians in the region, has further made Indian cinema and its themes an integral part of the lives of the local population. Indian cinema has thus branched out from cinema halls to the regular lives of people, for example, in Diwali and Holi-themed parties, Bollywood-inspired wedding festivities or birthday celebrations. The UAE acts as an example of such absorption of Indian cultural elements as portrayed through Bollywood into the lives of the Emiratis. Emirati children come to attend Bollywood dance classes and Henna celebrations before weddings, and often take inspiration from Bollywood-style music, decoration and dresses. Indian cinema in this context moves beyond its existence as simply being a source of entertainment. It becomes synonymous with India's culture for those who are not familiar with the region and derive all their knowledge of India from that shown in Bollywood and other regional films. For the Arab audience, Indian cinema has thus become both an integral part of the

region's entertainment industry and a representation of India and its culture.

Indian Cinema and the Middle Eastern Economy

The Middle East as a region is not just a consumer of Indian cinema but is also a place where various movies are directed and produced. The region acts as an attractive option for various filmmakers due to its proximity to India, picturesque landscapes, and discounts on major hotels, airlines and locations. The governments of Middle Eastern countries such as the UAE, Egypt, Oman, Turkey and Saudi Arabia have made it easier to shoot films in the region, providing easy access to resources such as cars, wardrobes and glamorous locations.

One of the earliest films shot in the region was “The Great Gambler”, starring Amitabh Bachchan and Zeenat Aman and released in 1979. The movie was partly shot in Cairo, Egypt, with the pyramids forming the backdrop as Amitabh Bachchan gets surrounded by people pointing guns at him in one of the scenes. Since then, Egyptian landscapes have graced Indian movies multiple times, as in the song “Ajooba” from the movie “Jeans” (1998), “Suraj hua madham” from “Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gham” (2001) or “Teri ore” from “Singh is King” (2008), all shot at the Pyramids in Giza, Egypt. Another commonly used location in the Middle East is the UAE, with some of India's top-grossing movies being shot there. Between 2015 and 2017 alone, about 12 Bollywood movies were shot in the country. Some prominent ones include “Welcome” (2007), “Happy New Year” (2014) and “Welcome Back” (2017) in Dubai; “Bang Bang” (2014) in Abu Dhabi; and “Airlift” (2016) in Ras Al Khaimah. Some other locations that have been used include Oman (Once Upon a Time in Mumbai, Dobaara and Velli Vechathil), Lebanon (Phantom), Turkey (Guru and Dil Dhadakne Do) and Jordan (Kajraare and Krrish 3). With Saudi Arabia removing the ban on films and opening itself up to filmmakers from around the world, this Kingdom with its vast resources is slowly gaining attention as a shooting location. The country hosted approximately 26 productions in 2021

and 2022 and amongst these is the upcoming Bollywood film “Dunki”. Directed by Rajkumar Hirani with Shah Rukh Khan as the lead actor, “Dunki” is the first Bollywood movie to have been shot in Neom, Saudi Arabia. The region thus continues to remain an attractive option for Indian filmmakers to invest in.

The shooting of these movies also boosts employment opportunities in the region, with crew members being hired from the shooting locations itself. “Happy New Year” and “Airlift” are two prominent examples where local casting was done from across the UAE, with around 1600 extra casts being hired for the former. According to Selena Randhawa, in 2016 and 2017, US\$ 1.7 million worth of investments were made by Bollywood into the Dubai economy. Indian film celebrities’ familiarity with the UAE has also made them some of the top real estate investors. Some Indian celebrities who own properties in Dubai include Bollywood actors Abhishek and Aishwarya Rai Bachchan, Sanjay Dutt, Shah Rukh Khan, Salman Khan, Boney Kapoor, and South Indian celebrities Mohanlal and Mammooty.

The Middle East has been using the stardom of Indian celebrities and their influence in both India and beyond to further provide an impetus to their economy. Indian actors have been acting as promoters for various brands in the Middle East, from fashion and healthcare to the travel and tourism industry. In the position of brand ambassadors, they play two roles based on where the brand is located; first to appeal to South Asians living in their home countries, and second to use the popularity of these Indian actors in the Middle East and globally to achieve the objectives. Shah Rukh Khan and Ranveer Singh being signed as tourism ambassadors for Dubai and Abu Dhabi respectively, as well as Amitabh Bachchan partnering with Saudi Arabia’s Omara Dates to launch them in Indian markets, act as an example of the first role. Meanwhile, Katrina Kaif and Salman Khan for Splash, and Deepika Padukone for Qatar Airways, are examples of the second role. The impact of this strategy can be seen in Salman Khan’s appointment as the brand ambassador of the fashion brand ‘Splash’ in 2013. In an interview with CNN, Raza Beig, CEO of Splash, remarks

that when they did the market research for their campaign, it was found that about 97% of Arab consumers were familiar with who Salman Khan is. He further states that the brand saw a nearly 28% boost in its sales during Khan's first year as brand ambassador. Beig also says that while competing with international brands, having Bollywood celebrities as promoters, with their faces gracing billboards and campaign videos, makes the brand stand out as a regional retailer.

Indian cinema, in particular Bollywood, has also worked to boost the tourism industry in the Middle East, especially in cities of the UAE. According to Jamal Al Sharif, chairperson of the Dubai Film and TV Commission, the shooting of films in Dubai has positively impacted the tourist footfall in the Emirate. He further states "Films have contributed to the positive image of Dubai, and the storyline, themes and characters of a film can elicit associations and emotions towards a place, thereby enhancing its potential as a travel destination." According to the Tourism Performance Report, January–April 2023 published by Dubai's Department of Economy and Tourism, the city received the highest number of international guests from India, with their numbers reaching up to 806 000. The numbers of Indian tourists visiting Dubai saw a 46 per cent increase from the year 2022 and an 11 per cent increase from the year 2019. While it is difficult to draw a direct correlation between Indian movie shootings and tourist visits, the constant use of locations in Middle Eastern countries for filming, showcasing their glamorous architecture, picturesque landscapes such as deserts or beaches, and a luxurious lifestyle, has over the years elevated its potential as a travel destination, evidenced by the increasing number of Indian tourists to the region. Another attempt to expand the popularity of Bollywood among South Asians and other tourists is the establishment of the Bollywood Theme Park by Dubai Parks and Resorts, which first opened in 2016. While the theme park, after seven years of operation, announced its closure in April 2023, it was one of the top tourist attractions during the initial years of its operation. The park was divided into five zones: Bollywood

Boulevard, Rustic Ravine, Mumbai Chowk, Royal Plaza and Bollywood Film Studios, along with six themed restaurants showcasing cuisine from different parts of India, and eight retail stores selling Bollywood-related merchandise. The park also displayed scenes from nine Bollywood films, along with 20 live shows and dance sequences.

The presence of a theme park dedicated solely to the film industry from India highlights the popularity of Bollywood in the region, and how Dubai has utilised it to add another reason for tourists to spend more days in the city thus boosting its tourism industry.

Middle East and Indian cinema's strong connection has thus led to a mutually beneficial economic relationship, where the region accounts for some of the largest overseas box office collections and at the same time, the popularity of Indian cinema, particularly Bollywood, is being utilised by Middle Eastern countries to positively impact various industries in the region, from tourism, fashion and real estate to the regional entertainment industry as well.

Government Policies Towards Indian Film Industry

The Middle East's emergence as a favourable filming and production location has been made possible by the initiatives taken up by the governments of the countries in the region, and the policies framed to make them suitable for filmmakers all around the world. Constant efforts have been made in the form of creating incentives and business-friendly regulations, e.g., providing production facilities and trained crew to encourage collaboration between the region and the film industries of other countries.

Amongst all Middle Eastern Countries, the UAE in the past two decades has established itself as one of the regional cinema hubs, with a number of movies being shot across the country, from Dubai and Abu Dhabi to Ras Al Khaimah. Multiple factors have led to the UAE's position as one of the

most favourable shooting locations. The country provides a 30 per cent cash-back rebate on production spend, including travel and accommodation, along with professional crew and supplier bases. Over the years, the UAE has been successful in building infrastructure that can accommodate productions of all sizes. It has also created institutions like the Emirates Short Film Festival, the Dubai International Film Festival (DIFF), and the Dubai Studio City production hub, to encourage and assist film production. Dr. Abdunnasser Jamal Alshaali, the Ambassador of the UAE to India, when asked about the support provided to filmmakers in the UAE, stated: “Armed forces supply hardware such as trucks, choppers, and military vehicles, and government agencies help with logistics such as filming permits, road closures, etc.” (2013).

Indian filmmakers have thus enjoyed easy access to production facilities, efficient logistical support, and multiple incentives provided by the government to produce some of the top-grossing Indian movies. “Happy New Year”, starring Shah Rukh Khan and Deepika Padukone, the majority of which was shot in Dubai, is one such example. Jamal Al Sharif, the Chairman of the Dubai Film and TV Commission (DFTC), stated that the entire crew of the film received free access to the Atlantis Hotel to shoot, as well as discounts on Emirates Airlines’ flights and travel visas (2017). Similarly, for the shooting of the film “Baby”, producer Vikram Malhotra remarks how the Abu Dhabi Film Commission efficiently made arrangements for the required shooting backdrops and locations (2014). Apart from the shooting of movies, the government has also been instrumental in organising and hosting film festivals and award shows related to the Indian film industry. The 2022 IIFA Awards held at Yas Island, Abu Dhabi, in collaboration with the Department of Culture and Tourism of Abu Dhabi, is one such example.

While the UAE has been one of the most favoured locations for shooting films in the Middle East, Saudi Arabia is a rising competitor in the region. The Kingdom under its “Vision 2030” is investing heavily in the entertainment industry in order to establish a strong filmmaking ecosystem

in the country. Saudi Arabia is currently offering a 40 per cent cash rebate on production spend, the highest of all other Middle Eastern countries, along with other production facilities. While only one Bollywood film, “Dunki”, has been shot in Saudi Arabia to date, the country’s connection with the Indian film industry is growing stronger due to government-initiated collaborations. In 2022, Saudi Arabia’s Minister of Culture, Badr bin Abdullah bin Mohammad bin Farhan Al Saud, along with Film Commission CEO Abdullah Al Qahtani and executives from NEOM, the Red Sea International Film Festival, Film AIUla and the MBC Group, made a 3-day visit to India. They met with some of the leading Bollywood actors and producers such as Shah Rukh Khan, Salman Khan, Akshay Kumar and Saif Ali Khan to explore partnership opportunities between the Indian and Saudi film industries. Of the partnership between the two countries, Prince Badr stated: “From talent, through to production, distribution, and technical know-how across the value chain, there are plenty of areas for both countries to collaborate and create content that is suitable not just in their respective countries, but also for a global audience” (2022). The visit of Saudi Arabia’s minister to India, particularly to meet the actors of the Indian film industry, thus shows the latter’s importance in the Kingdom.

Apart from the UAE and Saudi Arabia, countries like Jordan and Turkey also provide rebates of 15–25 per cent and 30 per cent respectively. The regulations regarding film production, as well as the facilities and resources provided by the Middle Eastern countries, have continued to facilitate a smooth collaboration between the Indian Film Industry and the country where the shoot is taking place.

Conclusion

The connection between India and the Middle East, while centuries old, continues to strengthen through modes of social, economic and cultural cooperation. While agreements and collaborations hinging on economic and geopolitical significance between the two regions have gained the utmost

importance in recent times, it is the people-to-people contact that has sustained the relationship between the two for decades. The Middle East accounts for one of the largest Indian diasporas in the world, acting as a natural bridge between the two regions. The diaspora also works as a medium for the export of cultural elements such as food, clothing and belief systems. One of the most successful cultural exports of India to the Middle East is the Indian cinema. From being watched by both South Asian expatriates and Arab audiences, to being a source and partner in the economy and film industry of the Middle East, Indian cinema in the region has expanded its sphere of influence and continues to do so. It not only acts as a reflection of India as a whole but also plays a significant role in increasing India's soft power in the region. While Indian cinema faces tough competition from other film and media industries, such as Hollywood and the Korean entertainment industry, it continues to hold importance in the region particularly because it is not simply a form of entertainment, but surpasses that to act as a cultural element that is fondly perceived by both South Asian and other diasporas, as well as the local Arab population in the Middle East.

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