

**Focus Group Report (1)**  
**FilmInd Project, WP4: Audience research**  
**New Delhi, April 2022**  
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**Introduction**

The focus group discussion in New Delhi was organized over a Zoom call on April 16, 2022. It went on for a total of 90 minutes, from 5 to 6:30 p.m. IST. The discussion included six moderators from the School of Art and Aesthetics at Jawaharlal Nehru University and 10 respondents (8 females and 2 males). All the participants were of Indian origin and belonged to the age group of 20–35 years. Three of the participants were currently working in Europe, while the others were based in India. Before participating in the focus group discussion, the respondents were asked to complete a short research questionnaire on the cinematic representation of Europe and the socio-economic links between Bollywood and the tourism industry. The following report is based on the observations and responses to the research questionnaire and the focus group discussion.

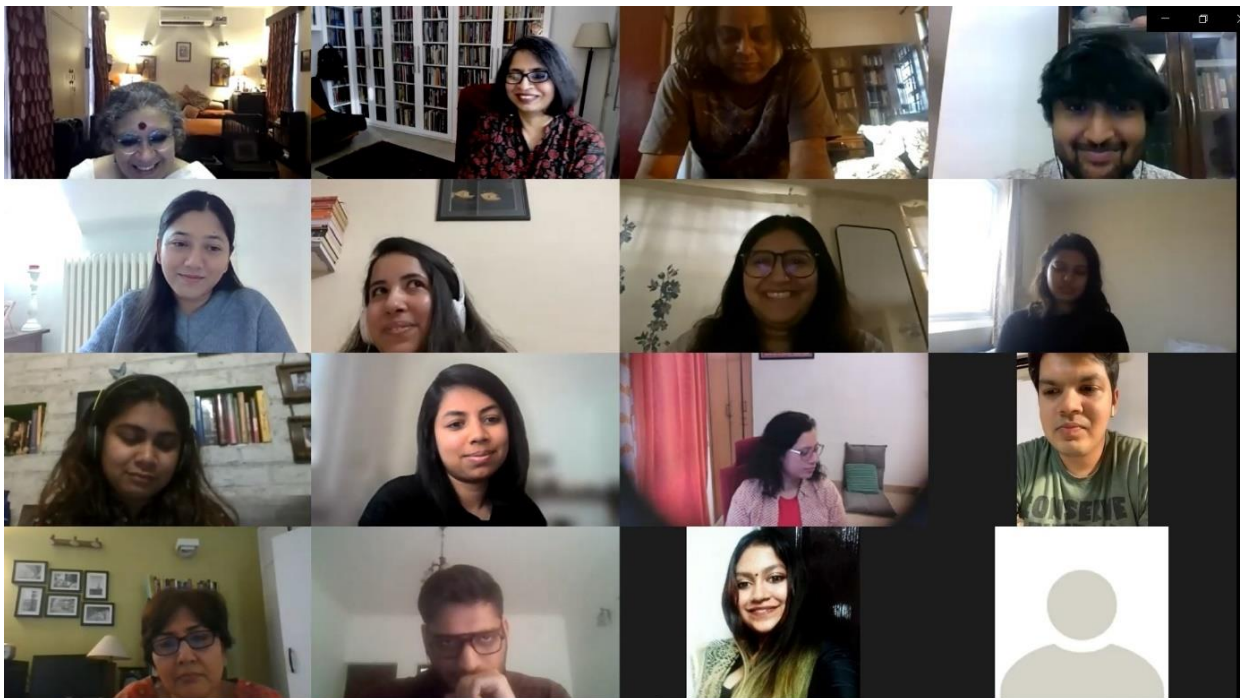


Fig. 1: Participants of the focus group discussion in New Delhi (organized on Zoom).

## Early Cinematic Influences

The focus group discussions generated productive and nuanced reflections on the relationship between Bollywood films, European spaces, and the tourism industry. Participants demonstrated a keen awareness and understanding of how the use of European space in Bollywood films impacts the socio-cultural and economic logic of Europe's tourism sector. Nine out of the ten respondents identified scenic locations as an important element of such Europe-centred Bollywood films, suggesting that Bollywood representations of Europe generally maintain a tone of celebration and an overall aspirational quality. The responses to the research questionnaire supported many of these views. While one respondent used the terms "*dreamy, romantic, aspirational, fun, and freedom*" (Participant 1) to describe the Bollywood depictions of Europe, another participant (Shivani Puri) similarly noted that the Bollywood imagination underscored the "*natural/historic beauty and cleanliness*" (Participant 2) of European locations.

Several of these aspirational characteristics of Europe-centred Bollywood films were also discussed in connection with the film *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (DDLJ). Since its release in 1995, the film has steadily accumulated an iconic afterlife. Discussing the reasons for the film's continued iconic value, a majority of the participants attributed its success to the use of picturesque locations and song sequences. In this regard, one interviewee noted:

This was the first idea of a Euro trip where you could take a trip around an entire continent across various countries, with your friends, your parents saying yes... This was also the first brush of knowing this is how people become adults. We go on trips with our friends, apparently. And we get to go to pretty places, you drink a lot of nice alcohol, and you get to wear dresses and roll down hills in the snow! (Participant 3)

Another participant, who had recently rewatched the film, similarly remarked:

"Oh my god, the dialogue and writing is just something that would not work in this day and time, and so yeah the only thing that I really like about DDLJ is the location, the songs, and the clothes." (Participant 1)

Despite the film's problematic and dated narrative elements, most participants agreed that the use of picturesque locations and scenic song sequences was effective in giving the film its enduring legacy.

The conversation around DDLJ also brought up the film's afterlife and its economic impact on the tourism industry in Switzerland. Several of the younger participants, who only encountered the film as teenagers and adults, marked DDLJ as an important reference point for contemporary Bollywood films like *Bachna Ae Haseeno* and *Dil Dhadakne Do*. While one participant (Participant 4), who currently lives in Switzerland, noted how she took her visiting friends on 'DDLJ tours' across the city, another respondent spoke about her own journey to Switzerland to visit the locations where DDLJ had been shot. The latter also shared an Instagram image from her visit to Switzerland, where she and her partner can be seen posing against a cut-out poster of DDLJ. (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2: Participant 1 and her partner posing in front of a cut-out poster of DDLJ in Switzerland.

### **The Cinematic Imagination of Europe**

Following the discussion on DDLJ, the participants responded to the continuities and shifts in the cinematic representation of Europe over the last few decades. In the questionnaire responses, it is clear that the respondents mainly identified the Bollywood representations of Europe as having a celebratory tone and an overall aspirational quality. The participants noted that the recent Bollywood depictions of Europe mainly highlighted the continent as a space of romance, sight-seeing, and adventure. The films inspire fantasies to undertake solo

backpacking trips, be more relaxed and carefree, travel to exotic locations, and meet new people. Several of the female interlocutors particularly noted that recent Bollywood depictions of Europe also highlighted it as a "*licentious space*" (Participant 3), where one could experience "*freedom from Indian culture and values*" (Participant 5). The latter further added: "*Bollywood gives a sense of a no judgement zone if you are in European cities,*" a space where one need not be always conscious of their surroundings. Another participant wrote about her experience of watching DDLJ:

“I enjoyed how Switzerland was depicted in DDLJ. The difference in Kajol’s demeanour in Switzerland vs India was very interesting. Her freedom being associated with her time in Switzerland appeals to a part of me which believes that living there could be more liberating.” (Participant 2)

Many of the participants, however, also noted that Bollywood films now produce a more detailed and realistic account of Europe than before. While 20 years ago, Bollywood films were the most important reference to understanding a city’s culture, they are now only one of the many screens through which Indian consumers encounter Europe. As one respondent put it: "*The world is a more connected place, and filmmakers don’t have that liberty anymore. Films are therefore more realistic now as compared to before.*" (Participant 6) Many of the views were supported in the questionnaire, where the respondents noted that the films now not only portray Europe through the lens of spectacle and celebration but also often induce moments and feelings of estrangement in a foreign country. "*Movies like Namaste London and Dhan Dhan Goal depict feelings of alienation as well as racism.*" (Participant 6) He further added:

“I have not experienced any of the above since I haven’t travelled to Europe but these movies certainly influence my view about Europe. So, I might visit Europe on a short-term basis for travel or studies and experience the culture, but won’t see it as a location where I would like to permanently move as I don’t want to experience the feeling of staying so far away from family and friends.” (Participant 6)

Another participant similarly wrote:

“For the most part the key aspect is pleasure, since they’re always holidays and not necessarily lived experiences. But in some cases, they can bring about alienation and magnify loneliness, but that is soon overcome by mirth and joy and party, and

celebrating the here and now. The negative or grey emotions can exist, but never for too long.” (Participant 3)

The participants were shown two film clips during the session to help further the conversation on Bollywood representations of Europe. The first clip was a song sequence titled ‘Khwabon Ke Parindey’ from the film *Zindagi Na Milegi Dobara* (ZNMD), while the latter was a bike chase sequence from the film *WAR*. Noting their perceptions about the film clips and the broader representational changes in the portrayal of Europe, two continuous themes ran throughout the discussion—namely, the association of European locations with celebration and/or aspiration and a more nuanced and detailed interaction between the characters and European locations. A few participants noted that they enjoyed the song sequence because of how the character’s emotions and gestures complemented the ways in which the filmic landscape was shot. One participant described her preference for the first clip by suggesting that:

“The use of location in terms of the song, the expression, the gestures of the characters, the way they were looking at things, and even the colour palette somewhere... the whole thing, the whole package itself, generated a very good feeling... plus the whole thing made me focus on the lyrics as well... you know it’s a journey, you’re looking at the open sky, you’re looking at the road, and it’s a song about the journey and what’s there. Creates a very optimistic feeling... and also something I could relate to.” (Participant 7)

Similarly, another respondent (Participant 8) noted how the use of open spaces and a newfound sense of freedom and joy in the *Zindagi* sequence went well with the experiences of the character Hritikh Roshan was playing. On the whole, more participants seemed to prefer the second clip to the first, suggesting that the chase sequence offered a more interactive and detailed encounter with the city and its locations. Marking the use of urban architecture, one of the respondents (Participant 5) suggested that the chase took us on an intimate tour of the city, moving from narrow, tight lanes to wider spaces and ultimately culminating in the bridge scene. Many others similarly spoke about how the narration of the chase was closely connected to the use of location, which, albeit ‘unrealistic’ and ‘fantastical’ in moments, mapped out a more dynamic interaction between the space of the city and the action of the film characters.

The focus group discussion highlighted that the shifting representation of cinematic Europe is generally framed through a greater degree of intimacy, detail, and interaction with the various spaces of the city. Similar responses were also noted among the participants as they described the changing aesthetic form of song and dance sequences shot in Europe.

As one respondent (Participant 1) remarked:

“Back in the day there was a location and then the Bollywood songs were shot there... they were showing you the beautiful sceneries and things like that. But now, I want to give the example of the movie Rockstar. If you watch the song Hawa Hawa, which is shot in Prague, they are using the elements of the city in the song... they are communicating, and there’s a level of interaction with what the city has to offer. And that is what is depicted with the mingling of the characters with those elements of the city.”

In her questionnaire response, the same participant also noted how the song ‘Aur Ho’ from Rockstar used a different aesthetic composition of the city to bring out a more gloomy and depressing mood that the character is experiencing. This is what she, along with several other respondents, identify as the newness of contemporary Euro-centric representations in Bollywood, where a greater level of attention to detail and realism informs the depictions of European spaces.

## **Bollywood and Tourism**

Finally, the group also discussed how the aspirational quality of such European-cantered Bollywood films mediated the everyday lives of the participants (and Indian audiences more generally). One of the points of discussion was Bollywood’s aesthetic influence on social media platforms, especially Instagram. Comparing the aesthetic sensibilities and image compositions across both platforms, most of the participants observed similarities and affinities in the portrayal of Europe. Noting one such example, a participant said:

“I recently witnessed an Instagram influencer’s post, ThatBohoGirl, wearing a white dress, just like the one Katrina Kaif wore in Bang Bang, at Santorini in Greece and in the same location (Fig. 3). The aesthetic, style and technique is similar to the original movie... Sometimes, these places are too cold, there are too many people, it’s raining and the weather is unbearable, but you’d still see people going that extra mile just to recreate a Bollywood scene.” (Participant 1)



Fig.3: An Instagram image that recreates the cinematic aesthetic of the film *Bang Bang*.

Agreeing to the above, another participant similarly added:

“Movies are the new postcards... Today people don’t necessarily send postcards anymore. Movies become the exact frameshot of this is what I’m looking and you should come look at it too.” (Participant 3)

She further noted a more interdependent relationship between films and Instagram, suggesting that as much as Instagram borrows its aesthetic grammar from popular cinema, new media techniques are also remediated within several contemporary Bollywood films (such as the use of the boomerang effect in the film *When Harry Met Sejal*).

A similar set of opinions was also shared when discussing the influence of fashion and clothing in the context of Bollywood films set in Europe. For instance, a couple of participants who are currently based in Europe noted how they’ve seen Indian tourists wear saris in extremely cold weather in an effort to recreate Bollywood scenes and images. Other respondents also commented on the aesthetic palette of films being recreated on Instagram images and reels, suggesting that "*it’s a strong statement and "flex" from people in that they’ve lived a movie moment and captured it to share with the world, in some way*" (Participant 3). On Bollywood’s

representation of European cuisine, however, there was a degree of ambivalence in responses. While some interviewees suggested that Bollywood films do not focus enough on food cultures, others observed that the cinematically mediated perception of European cuisine (as seen in *Queen*) was that it is "*too bland or slightly undercooked*" (Participant 6).

On the whole, the conversations around Bollywood and its relation to social media, fashion, and food cultures in Europe demonstrate an enhanced awareness about European countries and locations. The sensitivity towards perceiving location has generated a double movement. On the one hand, these cinematic depictions of Europe guide new fantasies and craft a new touristic imagination of Europe. At the same time, these Euro-centric Bollywood films generate a host of critical responses and opinions constantly scrutinising the depictions of Europe via arguments anchored in cinematic realism. In addition to the crucial role of Bollywood films here, the participants also noted a broader intermedial relay of screens that have helped foster an intimate understanding of European spaces. Furthermore, these connections to Europe are also built in many tangible ways and from many different sources: 8 out of the 10 participants are either currently working in Europe or have close friends and family based in European cities.

As one participant put it:

“Europe is now more accessible, reachable and affordable. You can still plan a trip, internships, scholarships, going abroad to study, ways of travelling which were not possible back in the day.” (Participant 4)

The increased attention to on-screen foreign locations has also produced a new touristic imagination, an aspiration to travel to European countries. Commenting on this link between Bollywood and the European tourism industry, the respondents noted that the significance of the location becomes especially important when it is included in the film trailer and the subsequent marketing of the film. In their questionnaire responses, a couple of participants described how films like *ZNMD* inspired them to travel to Spain and attend the Tomatina festival. Other written and oral responses included films such as *Tamasha*, *Queen*, *War*, and *When Harry Met Sejal*, which the interviewees suggested had the same touristic appeal. During the focus group, a participant similarly spoke about her experience watching the film *Befikre*. She said that while she "*hated the film and could not tolerate it*" (Participant 1), she chose to rewatch the film before her trip to Paris simply because of the film's beautiful locations. "*There was this place called Montmartre that I particularly visited because I saw that in the film and*



*it looked really beautiful,"* she further added. A few participants in the discussion, however, remained unsure of their personal interest in visiting a location "*just because they saw it in a film*" (Participant 2), noting that affordability, timing, and convenience were important factors while planning a trip. Building on the touristic relationship between film and location, several participants further expressed a sense of recognition and joy when they happened to visit locations they had previously seen on screen. The detailed and articulate responses mapped out an active spectatorial body that closely attends to the geographies of films and has a nuanced understanding of the relationship between cinema, location, and tourism.