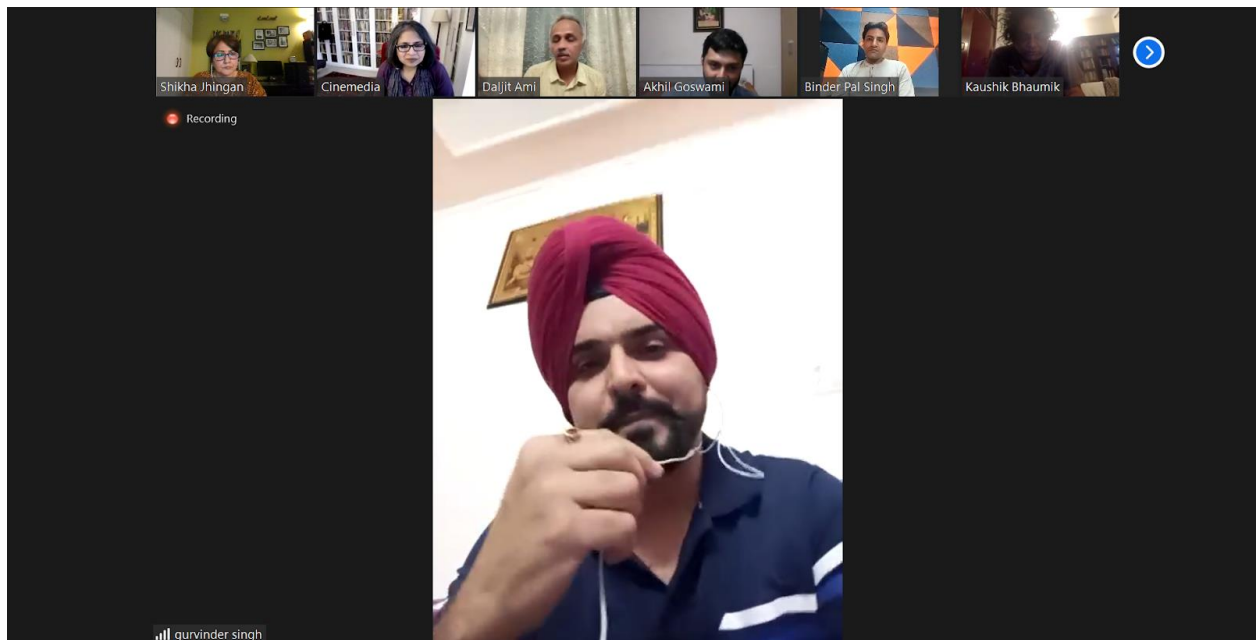


Focus Group Report (2)
FilmInd Project: Audience Research
Punjab, May 2022
By
Akhil Goswami

Introduction

The focus group discussion in Punjab was organized over a Zoom call on May 16, 2022. It lasted a total of 120 minutes, from 6 to 8 p.m. IST. The discussion included six moderators from the School of Art and Aesthetics at Jawaharlal Nehru University and a total of nine respondents (3 female and six male). Among the respondents, Daljit Ami, a current PhD student at the School of Art and Aesthetics at Jawaharlal Nehru University, helped support the research endeavour by gathering the other respondents and translating Punjabi responses into English and Hindi during the course of the interaction. All the participants were of Indian origin and belonged to different regional districts within Punjab, primarily chosen from the cities of Chandigarh, Patiala, and Amritsar. The diverse range of participants was also highlighted through their differences in age groups: four of the total candidates were university students (between ages 22 and 24), while the remaining five respondents ranged in age from 35 to 50 years of age. 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 subsequent focus group discussion.





On DDLJ, Early Bollywood and Scenic Beauty of Europe

The group discussion began with a conversation about early cinematic portrayals of Europe and their visual impact on Indian audiences. The interactions provided a sense of the relationship between representations of Europe in the 1990s and an active and attentive audience that was increasingly coming to terms with the shifting geography of Bollywood films. Several older participants stressed the novelty of early Bollywood films and their use of European spaces, which not only gave viewers a graphic sense of the European continent but also opened up new avenues for Indian tourism in the region. Similarly, the questionnaire responses reflected a positive association between the romanticization of Europe, its viability as a place for adventure and travel, exploring European history and culture, and undertaking honeymoon vacations with their respective partners.

Most respondents attributed the emergence of such Euro-centric Bollywood films to Yash Chopra's productions and contributions in the late 80s and early 90s (*Silsila*, *Darr*, *Chandni*, *Lamhe*, etc.), with a particular emphasis on the lasting success of *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (DDLJ). Having watched the film during his school days, participant 3 noted that DDLJ's significance was particularly on account of its ability to narratively integrate European spaces within the romantic storyline. Commenting on the use of European spaces, he further added:

“DDLJ provided a complete package of story, screenplay, music and songs, along with beautiful locations. The locations were significant because they were a crucial part of the story... about the journey and adventure of going on a Euro trip. The

locations thus played a central character in the film. This is why you cannot take Europe out of DDLJ... the locations are strongly etched throughout the film.”

Agreeing with the suggestion, other participants also expressed how their memory of the film was strongly linked to the use of European locations in the song and dance sequences (participants 1 and 2). Notably, several of the participants also suggested that DDLJ helped them become more visually aware of European cities during their childhood years. Participants 5 and 6 spoke about how their initial encounter with such Bollywood productions (also including others such as *Dil Toh Pagal Hai*) enabled them to develop strong visual impressions of key European spaces and learn about the distinguishing features and attractions of different European countries and cities. The Bollywood representations of Europe thus underscored new kinds of spectatorial engagements where, in addition to entertainment purposes, the films served a pedagogical function of educating audiences on European clothing, architecture, and other cultural practices. Several participants added that the film-induced imaginations of Europe fuel new fantasies and desires to visit foreign places such as Switzerland, Paris, and London.

The Contemporary Cinematic Imagination of Europe

Following the interactions around DDLJ and its crucial role in facilitating a new relationship between Bollywood, European spaces, and the tourism sector, the conversation moved to contemporary representations of Europe. A majority of the participants observed that the recent depictions of Europe painted a celebratory image of the region with a greater level of interaction between the film characters and the use of European cities. Commenting on the glorified portrayal of European spaces, one respondent noted:

“The films portray Europe as a happy place that equals to a fairyland. The places are clean, decorated, disciplined, democratic, conserved flora & fauna, the natives seem educated and the best place you could possibly imagine” (Participant 2).

Another participant, commenting on the development of Europe as a space of romance, remarked:

“Every Indian couple wants to travel to Europe for their honeymoon because every romantic song is shot in Europe. So, it is very natural for Indians to think of Europe as a honeymoon destination” (Participant 1).

Other participants similarly emphasised the natural beauty and history of mountainous landscapes and European architecture, their associations with cleanliness and hygiene, and calm and stress-free environments where "people have an open mindset." On a few occasions, these questionnaire responses were also coupled with suggestions that such films were unrelatable and often produced feelings of cultural estrangement and alienation. Such opinions were also reflected in the questionnaire responses. One of the respondents wrote, "Songs shot in Europe are more lavish and glossier, while songs shot in Indian cities are more realistic." (Participant 1) Another respondent noted similarly that:

“Through these films we see a world which is beyond our imagination. When we see beautiful locations in these films, we cannot believe that such places even exist. However, looking at these beautiful locations also breeds discontent because we feel like we are 100 years behind these nations” (Participant 4).

Later, the same participant suggested that the development of Europe-centred Bollywood films hastened the push to Westernise Indian culture. He further added that Bollywood cinema helped a younger generation of audiences explore, understand, and adopt "foreign" cultural practices that have gradually corroded some of the traditional values and belief systems in the Punjabi region and the rest of the country. More generally, however, especially in the responses of the younger interviewees, the participants arrived at the consensus that the romanticised depictions of Europe in contemporary films fostered a greater level of interest in travelling to and migrating to European cities.

During the focus group discussion, the participants were shown three film clips to help them think about the changing representations of Europe in Bollywood films over the last three decades. All three clips were song and dance sequences from popular Bollywood films, namely, "Zara Sa Jhoom Loon Mai" from *DDLJ*, 'Matargashti' from *Tamasha*, and 'Phurrr' from *Jab Harry Met Sejal*. In contrast with *DDLJ*, the respondents noted that the latter sequences highlighted a more detailed involvement between the characters and their exploration of European spaces. In terms of visual framing, one of the participants (Participant 2) suggested that the characters in *DDLJ* are often set against vast and monumental backdrops (where they are foregrounded quite centrally), whereas more recent films feature congested frames involving the interplay of various elements from the location. Citing the character's clothing as a case in point, she further adds that while Kajol's red dress in the snowy mountainscape of Switzerland only brings the actor into sharper focus, Ranbir Kapoor and Deepika Padukone's more subtle clothing blends the characters in their European backdrop

and visually integrates them within the vibrant frames of Tamasha. Agreeing with this distinction, a couple of respondents (Participants 1 and 5) focused on the absence of crowds in DDLJ and the active interaction between characters and background crowds in contemporary Bollywood productions. In addition to this, Participant 7 also said:

“From DDLJ to the recent clips, other than production what I found interesting was the comfort level of the main characters. The Punjabi characters in these movies exercised a much greater degree of comfort in foreign locations. Moreover, they seemed quite integrated in the cosmopolitan space... including the soundscape. Music (in these recent clips) is not like it was in DDLJ. It has other local references from Europe. In that sense, it is quite cosmopolitan.”

Exploring the reasons for this transformation, Participant 1 suggested that the global star power of Bollywood personalities such as Shah Rukh Khan and music composers like A.R. Rahman has crucially helped raise the cinematic value of contemporary Bollywood productions shot in Europe. The global emergence of Bollywood in recent years has led to increased participation and industrial cooperation with both national and regional film and tourism agencies in Europe, which are now attracting Bollywood investments by helping recruit extras, scouting locations, providing logistics and equipment, providing travel support, and offering financial rebates on film production. Others similarly noted that the Indian tourism context is crucial to understanding Bollywood's contemporary romanticization of Europe, the increased cinematic penetration of the region, and the new streams of industrial participation and cooperation between Indian cinema and European governing bodies. In this regard, one of the older participants specifically spoke about how, as a response to the recent Euro-centric Bollywood films, the backpacker imagery of travel has started to infiltrate the Punjabi tourist imagination:

“This topic of Bollywood and tourism is of personal interest to me. I like to know how people travel, what are they thinking, and what kind of imageries Punjabi people take back with them after travelling to Europe... what kind of pictures they send back and what kind of conversations they hold. In this respect, I feel the idea of travelling to Europe with only a rucksack has quite potently entered the Punjabi mindset. You'll find a number of boys and girls going to European sites now with minimum luggage. Otherwise, traditionally we used to have two big bags, completely packed cases... almost as if you're going to go permanently settle down in Europe. Now these ideas of travelling with minimum baggage and an increased sense of comfort in travelling to Europe has become quite an attractive prospect for the younger generation of Punjabis over the last couple of decades.”

The Resurgence of Punjabi Films and its Draw Towards Europe

The discussion briefly turned to the film industry in Punjab and its growing links with Europe. In the last two decades, Punjabi cinema, among many other regional film industries in India (especially in south India), has expanded its production to Europe and Canada, following the trends and experiments of Bollywood films shot abroad. One participant noted that the Punjabi film industry has only recently been revived following the success of the Canada-based film *Jee Aayan Nu*, released in the early 2000s. Such early films, he added, emphasised the difficulty of migrating to foreign locations and thus narratively focused on returning to India. In the more recent years, however, particularly from 2013-14 onwards, the films have catered towards exploring the lives of non-resident Indian (NRI) characters and Punjabis living abroad. The participants generally noted that these changing narrative and stylistic conventions were primarily on account of the increasing migration of Punjabi residents to foreign countries and the expanding circuits of exhibition, distribution, and overseas spectatorship for contemporary Punjabi cinema. However, in the last decade, the growing focus on Punjabi diaspora audiences and foreign spaces has come at the expense of representations of Punjab itself. As one participant remarked, "Whenever Punjabi films want to show Punjab on screen, they narratively represent the region as it existed 50–60 years ago... as it existed traditionally, not as it exists today" (Participant 4). This was because, as several participants remarked, the poor living conditions in contemporary Punjab would make the region's romanticization on screens seem rather unrealistic and implausible to many audiences. Opting out of contemporary representations of the homeland, Punjabi filmmakers have therefore turned increasingly towards the west as the visual backdrop for their stories, characters, and songs.

Punjabi cinema shot in European spaces has the unique ability to access and penetrate both Indian and Pakistani markets. This has led to a proliferation of these networked connections between Punjab's film industry and Europe. During the focus group discussions, participants suggested that Europe serves as the central point for several Punjabi film productions that feature both Indian and Pakistani actors fluent in Punjabi. Speaking about the unique circulation of Punjabi language films, a participant said:

“There is an additional advantage for Punjabi filmmakers. So when we say Punjabi, it means Punjab right from Almora (in India) to Atak (in Pakistan). That's a big geographical landscape. And Europe provides an opportunity to reach out to all of it. So first, as an actor, you can work in a film – one coming from Ludhiana and

another coming from Lahore. Otherwise, it's quite difficult for a Lahori person to come to Ludhiana and work in the same film and simultaneously from Ludhiana to Lahore. But it's quite easy for both of them to go to London and work on the same project. And with this new facility of subsidies, and then the Pakistani market opening up, if you have a joint producer (one from Pakistan and another from India) then you can release the film in Ludhiana and Lahore simultaneously. So there are filmmakers who looking for that big audience. There are actors from both parts of Punjab and also characters from both parts of Punjab” (Participant 7).

Citing the recent release of the Punjabi trilogy, *Chal Mera Putt*, participant 5 further spoke about how the UK fostered cross-border collaborations among actors and other film professionals between Indian and Pakistani film groups during the filming of this particular project. The popularity and success of the film also resulted from its wider reach and access, involving exhibition and distribution circuits in both Indian and Pakistan-administered Punjabi-speaking regions.

The imagination of Europe in contemporary films of Punjab remains limited to the United Kingdom, specifically London, in contemporary Punjabi films. This is linked to migration flows and the active presence of the community in these regions (as noted by several participants). However, with the rise of new avenues of travel and migration from Punjab to east European nations, the participants predicted that Punjabi cinema’s exploration of film shooting in places such as Poland and Germany is likely to increase in the coming years.

Punjabi Tourism to Europe

Towards the end, the conversation turned explicitly to reflections on how Bollywood and Punjabi film representations of Europe have inspired new streams of Euro-centred tourism from the region. The participants suggested that of the various regions of Punjab, the Doaba region in particular has had a long history of international travel and migration. However, in the last few decades, several other areas within Punjab (Malwa and Powadh) have also registered a significant upsurge in travel and tourism to foreign countries, primarily to the UK and Canada.

A majority of the participants attributed the recent rise in international travel from Punjabi regions to the younger populations, many of whom are actively influenced by Bollywood film culture and visit foreign countries for study and internship programmes, work-related travel, and vacations. Speaking on her own generation's general travel preferences and ideal choices for holidays, Participant One suggests:

“My friends would choose to go to Paris for vacations. My parents and my grandparent's generation would have wanted to explore Kashmir but because of Bollywood's impact, people of my generation prefer to travel oversea” (Participant 2).

Older participants similarly suggested that while destinations such as Shimla, Dalhousie, and Darjeeling had motivated an earlier generation of Indian travellers, the current generations are increasingly drawn towards exotic foreign locations for vacations and leisure. In their observations, they further added that financial feasibility continues to be an important factor for travelling abroad. Simultaneously, the trend towards visiting foreign spaces has permeated the urban sectors of Punjab much more profoundly than their rural counterparts. However, speaking about the crowds that do not possess the financial capital to afford trips to Europe, the participants generally noted that they too are constantly learning about the region through Bollywood films, social media websites, travel blogs, and other resources on the internet and have recently become more fascinated with European tours and packages. Participant 1 further described a few recent stories on how parents from Punjabi villages are increasingly sending their children abroad for further studies, career opportunities, and holiday tours by selling off small portions of their ancestral land.

In addition to the tourism context, a significant proportion of international travel plans are related to the purpose of settling abroad. As one participant observes in the context of the increasing rates of Punjabi emigration:

“Youngsters are particularly keen on visiting foreign locations. As soon as they finish their 12th Board Exams, they give the IELTS (English Language) Exam and immediately leave. They complain that there's no lifestyle here as compared to foreign countries. In fact, many of them based abroad don't ever want to come back” (Participant 4).

Other participants similarly noted that the rising levels of migration in recent years had a lot to do with the lack of infrastructural development and poor standards of living in contemporary Punjab. The respondents briefly alluded to various issues such as unemployment, healthcare,

and so on to describe different forms of socio-political crises enveloping the current region that have convinced many residents to move abroad. Commenting on these internal factors, one of the respondents noted:

“For those who want to settle, Bollywood’s fairy-tale-like portrayal of foreign spaces fuels a desire to move away from the present living conditions of Punjab... With the kinds of difficulties and challenges currently plaguing the region, I don’t think people are able to deal with it very well. So, they prefer to migrate to a place where (for instance) someone’s dignity is not defined by their work or social status and class” (Participant 2).

The current conditions of social life in Punjab have created a general desire in the younger population of Punjab to temporarily visit or permanently shift to European countries. The lack of sufficient opportunities and avenues for growth in the region, coupled with the narrative and stylistic representations of Europe in Bollywood and Punjabi films, have mobilized the younger demographics to experiment with travel to European sites. "There are half a dozen people in my own circles," says one respondent, "whose primary identity is that of a traveller." "Whenever I see or speak with them, they are constantly on the go" (Participant 7).

In the last 20–25 years, the desire to move abroad has also yielded the growth of certain tertiary industries and activities. Drawing on his journalistic knowledge, participant 7 added that even if the data on the subject was scarce, he felt many contemporary students in Punjab are drawn to a profession in the tourism sector and international travel-based companies. "There are new entrepreneurial travel agencies," he observes, "which are transnational and have taxi agencies working simultaneously in Manali as well as in Switzerland." At the same time, this recent surge in travel abroad is also reflected in the kind of infrastructural coming together of specific businesses and organizations. Particularly significant here is the enveloping relationship between matrimonial websites, IELTS coaching centres, and foreign visa and immigration service agencies. Describing the interdependent growth of these organizations in recent years, the respondent suggested:

“Within the same building, one often encounters this combination of businesses often being pitched together in separate cabins. This is a common theme in many cities of Punjab and we did 7 case studies on this subject during my time as a reporter... One of them focused on how when you send your daughter to give the IELTS exam or apply for immigration, you also ask the matrimonial agent in the

next cabin whether he or she knows of any suitable boy who is also applying abroad! In billboard hoarding too you will often find immigration services, matrimonial agencies and coaching centres clustered together, along with a poster of some Euro-centric Punjabi film like *Chal Mera Putt*.”

These specific insights and interactions between cinema, businesses, architecture, and the overall boost in international travel from the state of Punjab reflect a growing awareness of and attraction to European cities. As previously stated in this section, the fascination with Europe is no longer confined to Punjab's urban-cosmopolitan context. The romanticised portrayals of Europe in films have also begun permeating the imaginations of lower to middle-income groups, including those located in rural sectors of Punjab, who are all now increasingly looking to the West for job opportunities and better living conditions. While the current outflow of Punjabi travellers remains strongly anchored to areas with a strong Punjabi community presence, the recent draw of eastern European regions as film locations will likely attract more Punjabi travellers in the coming years.