

The Politics of Re-Presentation: Distribution and Exhibition of Indian Cinema in Turkey

FOCUS

The first Indian films arrived in Turkey in 1947, immediately after India gained Independence. These films had a limited run, as they could not compete with the highly popular Egyptian films. With ten new titles, a second roll of Indian films arrived between 1952 and 1954; these too were screened in second-run movie theatres showing Turkish as well as non-Hollywood films, and had only limited success.¹ But this trend would soon intensify with the release of *Awaraz* on February 15, 1955 in Istanbul, which attracted a large number of viewers and also appears to have contributed to the success of other Indian films in Turkey.² The movie was the box-office hit of the season and was watched by several generations of Turkish filmgoers. Since there are no statistics available from the 1950s for annual admissions, it is difficult to estimate the number of viewers. However, newspaper advertisements reported that the film was watched by some 100,000 in the first week of its run. *Awaraz* was voted as the best movie of 1955 by the readers of the popular daily *Milliyet*, beating such Hollywood films as *Roman Holiday* (William Wyler, 1953) and *Limelight* (Charlie Chaplin, 1952) which had come to Turkey that year. The film's director and star Raj Kapoor ranked third on the list of best actors and its heroine Nargis was seventh on the list of the ten best actresses of a newspaper survey (*Milliyet*, September 12, 1955, p. 3).³ Thanks to this unprecedented success, many films from India were imported in the next few years, constituting 10 per cent of total film imports in 1959 and 1960. Between 1952 and 1962, 101 Indian movies were screened in Turkey (see table).

Although Turkish distributors claim to have had no specific strategy for their purchases from India,⁴ it is highly possible that across-the-border deals might have been made between small distribution companies.

For example, in 1954 and 1955 Indian films began to circulate between the neighbouring Soviet Union and Turkey and later between Turkey and Greece. In the autumn of 1954 a festival of Indian films was held in a number of cities in the Soviet Union, at which were screened *Awaraz*, *Aandhiyan* (Chetan Anand, 1952), *Do Bigha Zamin* (Bimal Roy, 1953) and *Rahi* (K. Ahmad Abbas, 1953). Among these, *Awaraz* broke box-office records with 63.7 million viewers.⁵ Earlier the same year, on January 17, Greece had screened its first Indian film, *Aan* (Mehboob Khan, 1952).⁶ *Aan* was released in Turkey in October 20, 1954 and a few months later *Awaraz* opened in Turkey, running successfully for several weeks. The similar forms of film titles and the close proximity of their release dates suggest that distributors in these countries may have cooperated in the international distribution of these films. This heretofore unstudied international traffic of films is notable in that it rendered possible the cross-border mobilizing of an international repertoire of films -- not only Hollywood, European or Indian films, but also those from Egypt, Mexico and Hong Kong.

[Re-Presenting Indian Films](#)

It is important to note that these films went through significant modifications throughout this journey. Indian films were often adapted to the local context by the importing country's distributors, exhibitors or censorship bodies. These modifications took the form of various programming and translation methods, from trimming to dubbing. Furthermore, certain scenes were removed or in some cases performances or acts featuring local stars were inserted into the original prints. Here, I would like to focus on special marketing, programming and exhibition practices, as well as translation strategies, dubbing and censorship. In the following section I will discuss the phenomenon of remakes.

Adapting film titles

Film titles were often not translated literally, but modified to emphasize an aspect of the film presumably more interesting or suitable to Turkish sensibilities. Most given titles had melodramatic connotations such as *Innocent Children* (Bhagyavaan [Datta Dharmadhikari, 1953]), *Flares of Love* (Amar [Mehboob Khan, 1954]), *Love and Mirage* (Sassi Punnu [J.P. Advani, 1946]) or *Love Wound* (Barsaat [Raj Kapoor, 1949]). There were also interesting instances of "parasitic translations"⁸ of movie titles strictly motivated by commercial concerns. For example, after the box-office success of *Awara*, a number of films by Raj Kapoor were screened with titles referring to this film: *Barsaat* was screened under the title *Awara's Lover* -- and later retitled *Love Wound*-- and films titled *Awara's Children* and *Raj Kapoor's Love* were also released.⁹ In the 1970s, *Bobby* (Raj Kapoor, 1973), a film featuring Raj Kapoor's son, was screened with the title *Awara's Son*.

Posters and advertisements

Newspaper advertisements for Indian films included a variety of information, from the plot to the film's box-office success. For example, Raj Kapoor's *Barsaat* was promoted as "the greatest and most genuine Indian film of the year, able to warm even the coldest of hearts and bring the pleasures of love to everyone in the audience". Besides highlighting the names of Raj Kapoor and Nargis, the advertisement emphasized that the movie was "dubbed in Turkish with the original music and songs", implying perhaps that while the film could be understood by local audiences, its distinctive cultural traits remained intact. The advertisement also publicized that the movie was "attended by 125,678 people during its first four days in the four movie theatres in which it was shown" (*Milliyet*, June 19, 1955).

Similarly, an advertisement for the film *Aan* (Turkish title: *Mangola: The Daughter of the Jungle*) describes it (or perhaps India, as the subject of the sentence is not clear) as "a miracle of world film industry". The advertisement focused on the exoticness of the film: "A subject which you have never come across, together with fantastic Oriental music and amazing scenes. In colour, and dubbed in Turkish throughout" (*Hurriyet*, October 3, 1954).

Sometimes short plot summaries are given for Indian films, as with the advertisements for Hollywood films. In an advertisement for *Awara*, the film's themes were presented thus: "A father who sacrifices his love for his duty / The exemplary sacrifice of the woman who lost her heart to *Awara* / A self-sacrificing mother who stands up against all odds for her son / The feeling of revenge that turns a wretch into a sinner." The advertisement mentioned that spectators

would "delight in watching these scenes interwoven with the intricately patterned and enchanting melodies of Indian music" (Zafer, March 27, 1955).

As opposed to these newspaper and magazine advertisements, less information was presented on posters. In most cases, the posters would emphasize that the particular film was Indian and dubbed in Turkish. They also mentioned the music featured in the film.

Dubbing

All Indian films were dubbed and in most cases characters were given Turkish names. Until the 1960s, it was quite common for distributors and exhibitors to modify film soundtracks and dialogues. Some even inserted locally produced scenes into dubbed movies, which featured local singers and performers. Alim Şerif Onaran, a film scholar and former member of the Turkish censorship body, states that most of the dubbed movies were "not just re-titled, but altered in order to give the impression that the movie was set in Turkey". As a result, "the movies were virtually presented like they were Turkish movies".¹⁰

Remaking Indian Films: The Case of Mother India

The remaking and adaptation of foreign films was a widespread strategy for the Turkish film industry in the 1960s. According to a film critic, almost 90 per cent of Turkish films of the period were remakes, adaptations or spin-offs." In other words, they were based on novels, plays, films and even film reviews or publicity materials of foreign origin. Furthermore, in most cases the source material for these adaptations and remakes was not credited. The common sources for remakes were Hollywood classics of the 1940s. However, there were remakes of European films as well as Indian films such as *Aah* (Raj Kapoor, 1953) [*Ah Bu Dünya* (Nuri Ergün, 1965)], *Sangam* (Raj Kapoor, 1964) [*Arkadaşımın Aşkısın* (Türker İnanoğlu, 1968)], *Mother India* (Mehboob Khan, 1957) [*Toprak Ana* (Mother Earth) (Memduh Ün, 1973)]. The popular *Awara* had more than one remake: *Berduş* (Osman Seden, 1957); *Berduş* (Hulki Saner, 1969); *Avare* (Semih Evin, 1964); *Avare* (1970); *Avare Aşık* (1970); *Gençlik Hülyalan* (Youth Dreams) (Halit Refiğ, 1962); *Ağla Gözlerim* (Mehmet Dinler, 1968); *KaderBu* (Fate) (Çetin İnanç, 1976); *Avare* (Remzi Jöntürk, 1978) are only the titles I could locate.

In order to discuss the cross-cultural reception of Indian films, I would like to focus on the example of Mehboob Khan's *Mother India* which was brought to Turkey in 1960. The film could not be released immediately as the Turkish censors reviewing the film decided to ban it. Upon objection by the distributor, the censorship committee approved the release of the film, pending the removal of the following scenes: Shamoo breaking the cooking pot in order to prevent his family eating the food provided by Sukhilala, and the children eating rice spilt on the floor; Radha massaging her husband's feet and sleeping over his feet; Radha and her children pulling the plough after their oxen; all scenes showing Radha pulling the plough (except the one following the flood scene); the scene where the ox is dying; close-up of wounds, hands, faces and heads covered with blood; Birjoo stealing wedding bangles and giving them to Radha.

The committee also requested the shortening of the following scenes: Radha and Birjoo searching for each other amidst blazing haystacks; Birjoo chasing Sukhilala, and Sukhilala

"shouting like a trapped animal" (sic); Birjoo lying on bundles of wheat, arguing with Sukhilala up until the scene of discussion over the account book; Birjoo being beaten and "tortured" (sic) after allegedly threatening the community's izzat.

The censors demanded that the film should be submitted to the commission once these changes were made and it was dubbed. It seems like the censorship committee was mostly concerned with some violent/painful scenes and "immoral behavior". In this sense, they seem to have had an agenda of protecting spectators from non-exemplary depictions. *Mother India* was released the following year in Turkey under the title *For My Children* (Çocuklanm İçin) and in subsequent years successfully ran in many parts of the country.

The film's Turkish remake *Toprak Ana* (*Mother Earth*) (1973) was directed by Memduh Üand starred his life-long partner Fatma Girik. Although unacknowledged, the film is a scene-by-scene remake of *Mother India*.¹² Despite the fact that the film does not signal its identity overtly, it is highly possible that it was recognized as an adaptation¹³ by most viewers, since reviewers often compared *Mother Earth* to the original film. Like every adaptation, while repeating certain features of *Mother India*, the film varies significantly. As the film is framed in a different time/place, and society/ culture, it can be considered a transcultural adaptation.

Firstly, the film's setting was moved from rural India to a small village in central Anatolia. *Mother Earth* transposed almost all the characters from *Mother India* into this familiar setting. Furthermore the film's genre and narrative form shifted significantly. *Mother Earth* was labelled as a "village film". Defined as films on rural life and peasants, village films presented aspects of folk culture, traditions and customs. Some common scenarios observed in the genre were "land or blood feud, conflict between the landowner and peasants, revenge in the name of honor, smuggling, and social bandits".¹⁴ This is obviously different from the category of "social film" with which *Mother India* is associated.

Mother Earth is 90 minutes long -- the standard length for most Turkish films of the period, and almost an hour shorter than *Mother India*. Most of the musical sequences are missing and there are no narrational songs in the film. This is also a significant shift in terms of the film's narrative mode. *Mother Earth* has a much faster pace. For example, while the accident where the husband loses both arms takes place 40 minutes into the original film, the same scene starts at 22.30 in *Mother Earth*. Often the scenes are much shorter in length, or sometimes two scenes are combined in one.

The basic story is almost identical in both versions: A peasant woman married at an early age struggles against a series of misfortunes. She has four sons. The family work extremely hard to pay off the village moneylender. Zelis's (Radha's) husband, losing both arms in an accident, leaves the family. Years later one of her sons becomes a rebel, while the other remains dutiful. Finally, she can only put an end to her rebellious son's activities by killing him....

There are some significant differences, though. The story is not framed by the inauguration of a dam built for the mechanized irrigation of the villagers' fields. This lack erases the modernist message of the original story (images of tractors and machines are also missing). In *Mother Earth*, the mise-en-scene is much simpler, hence the motives of the characters are overt and clear.

For example, the humiliation of Kazim Aga (Sukhilala) by Ali (Shamoo) leads to Kazim Aga promising to take revenge on Ali.

There are also some extra dialogues aimed at explaining certain situations and motives. For example, when his father leaves home, Murat (Birjoo) says: "My father doesn't have arms. How will he eat now? Who would look after him?" In another instance, when Zelis decides to pawn her wedding bangles in order to feed her children, the children warn intuitively: "Don't sell your bangles to that thief. Our father will be upset!"

The morality and gender politics of the original was left pretty much intact in *Mother Earth*. Perhaps the filmmakers thought the cultural values regarding female chastity were similar in both countries, as the word "izzat" is also used in Turkish. However, the issue of modern nationalism is represented by different symbols in these two films. In *Mother India*, modern agricultural techniques (and perhaps lifestyle) arrive only after Sukhilala's death. However, in *Mother Earth*, the modern values and ideas are symbolized through the school teacher who is an urban intellectual. She is aware of the local politics and tries to warn Murat against the errors of his ways. In this sense, feudal relationships and exploitation in the village are emphasized by her.

Mother Earth was not received warmly by the critics in Turkey. It was condemned for being inconsistent, contradictory and melodramatic. Perhaps the most controversial issue was the morality of the film. Although the mother's struggle against the advances of the moneylender was praised, her "shooting her own son in order to protect the honor of a moneylender who destroyed her life" was considered problematic. At least two critics said this wasn't convincing -- neither in terms of individual psychology nor as in keeping with Turkish customs.

Critics thought that *Mother Earth's* narrative was highly familiar and its dramatic tension was based on the binary opposition between "good" and "evil". The film was also condemned for moving its spectators by way of affect. The reason for the film's poor reception was the highly politicized environment of the 1970s. The genre of "village film" was transforming itself, as can be seen in Yilmaz Güney's *Hope* (1971), a film criticizing traditional beliefs. It was a time of social change -- in the 1973 elections, the social-democrat Republican People's Party won a majority.

I have tried to offer a brief glimpse of Indian cinema's adventure in Turkey which started with screenings in the 1950s and continued with remakes in the 1970s. With the crisis in the local movie industry, Indian cinema disappeared altogether from Turkey in the 1980s. Today, although the market is saturated with popular Hollywood and Turkish films, Indian cinema is resurfacing with bootleg DVD copies. Copies of recent Indian hits have sold in their thousands in the pirate market, and there are many Bollywood fan pages created by Turkish viewers. But that is a topic for another article.

NOTES

1 *The two Indian movies screened in Istanbul in 1954 were *Aan* (Mehboob Khan, 1952) with the Turkish title *Mangola: Ormann Kızı*, released on October 20, 1954 for one week with two copies*

(one in Turkish and the other in French) and *Shahjehan* (Abdul Rashid Kardar, 1946) with the Turkish title *Şah-ı Cihan*, released on December 30, 1954 for one week.

2 For example, *Bhagyavaan* (Datta Dharmadhikari, 1953) with the Turkish title *Günahsız Çocuklar/Innocent Children*, which was released a week before *Awara* on February 8, 1955, successfully ran for three weeks in Istanbul and was re-released throughout Turkey several times during the next ten years.

3 The poll was based on a postal voting system and attracted 16,679 viewers' votes.

4 Awards Turkish distributor Toros Şenel, owner of the small distribution company Toros Films, told reporters that he had gone to India to market some Turkish films. While he had heard about *Awara* long before he sought the rights for Turkish distribution, his intention in going to India had not been to buy films, and it was only when his bid to sell Turkish films in the Indian market fell through that he decided to purchase a small number of Indian films (*Milliyet*, June 2, 1955).

5 Rajagopalan 2006, pp. 84-85.

6 Helen Abatzi and Emmanuel Tasoulas cited by Eleftheriotis, 2006, p. 101.

7 Notably, the film was screened as *Mangala the Rose of India* in Greece and *Mangola the Daughter of the Jungle* in Turkey.

8 Stam 1989, p. 74.

9 The original titles of these two films could not be identified. For similar strategies of translation and adaptation in Greece and India, see Eleftheriotis 2006 and Srinivas 2003.

10 Onaran 1968, p. 179.

11 Scognamillo 1973, p. 68.

12 It is worth noting that *Mother India* itself is a remake of Mehboob's own *Aurat* (1940). The film's plot and characters became models for many subsequent films, including *Ganga Jumna* (1961) and *Deewar* (1975).

13 Here I use "adaptation" in a much larger sense, as defined by Linda Hutcheon (2006), including parodies and remakes.

14 Özgüç 2005, pp. 125-26.

[Table. Number of long films imported from India, 1952-62 \(approved, conditionally approved or rejected by censors in the year stated\). Source: Tikvej 1968](#)

Year	Approved	Conditionally Approved	Rejected	% of Total Import
1952	4	-	-	2
1953	1	-	-	0
1954	5	-	-	2
1955	*	-	-	-
1956	19	2	1	7
1957	6	-	2	1
1958	16	1	2	7
1959	19	4	-	10
1960	15	1	1	10
1961	4	3	1	2
1962	1	-	-	0

1 Cartoons in the Turkish press of the 1950s, lampooning Awara.

- 2 Turkish audiences queuing for Raj Kapoors Awara in 1955.
- 3 Poster for Bobby (Raj Kapoor, 1973), titled Awara's Son in Turkish.
- 4 Poster for a 1957 Turkish remake of Awara.
- 5 Turkish star Fatma Girik as Mother Earth in the 1973 remake of Mother India.

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