

# **COSTUME DESIGN IN THE INDIAN HINDI FILMS – A CHANGING SCENARIO**

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The film industry in India is one of the biggest and oldest in the world in terms of production and audiences. ‘Bollywood’, the industry based in Mumbai tops all the regional industries in its national profile and global appeal. This paper reviews the developments in one of the under looked areas in the Indian film making – costume design in the Indian Hindi films. It also focuses on the issues related to the changing interpretations and modalities of the costume design which may be seen as an influence of increasing foray of designers in this buzzing arena.

## **COSTUMES & CHARACTERS**

The term costume can refer to wardrobe and dress in general, or to the distinctive style of dress of a particular people, class, or period. When we talk about costumes, it has three P’s attached to it.

- People
- Place
- Period

One of the more prominent places people see costumes is in theatre, film and on television. In combination with other aspects, theatrical costumes help actors portray characters' age, gender role, profession, social class, personality, and even information about the historical period/era, geographic location and time of day, as well as the season or weather of the theatrical performance.

In the study, the term ‘Costume’ represents the performance costumes which are ‘fictitious’, ‘representational’ and falls in the category of ‘make believe clothing’. Costuming, thus, is the entire coordination of the activities related to the attire of the actors in the film/television/play etc to represent them in a way so that people can relate to the character they portray.

## **COSTUME DESIGN & ITS IMPORTANCE: HOLLYWOOD**

There have been tremendous research works done in Hollywood on the role of Costumes as an important part in portrayal of a character. According to Maeder (1987), costumes were the responsibilities of the director and actor until 1920s. Later, with the formation of large studios in Hollywood, costume design became a specialised task. Studios began to maintain large costume departments with skilled staff that worked exclusively on costume pictures. By the

end of the decade, every major studio had a research department and a library (Maeder, 1987).

According to Engelmeier (1997), the costume designer does much to characterise a film, for he decides what each individual figure in it look like. So, the success of a production depends to quite a large extent on his work. The costume designer has a great task and great responsibility: he has to be not only a creative artist but often a historian, a researcher and a craftsman all in one.

Unlike fashion, which is designed for the three-dimensional world, costumes are designed to appear in two-dimensions in film, which flattens and distorts the image. Costumes add essential information to the moment of a scene, of a story, to help achieve the visual and narrative goal of the film maker. The process of costume design as interpreted by Landis (2003) is that the costume designer meets with the filmmaker, reads the script, spend a great deal of time on research. The designer and the director share ideas, which may take the form of costume sketches, photographs or actual costumes, then meet with the production designer, cinematographer, actors and finally manufacture, rent and/or purchase the costumes. When a costume designer receives a script, the process of developing the visual shorthand for each character begins. Costume sketches, fashion research and actual garments are used to help costume designers, directors and actors develop a language to build each character (Landis, 2003).

Further, Landis (2007) adds to the importance of costume design in films as:

*“Costumes occupy prime real estate in nearly every frame of a film, worn by actors who dominate the foreground. Screenplay and director raise countless questions about the story, and each costume in a motion picture solves both a dramatic and design problem. The costume designer’s mantra is authentic characterisation.....”*

## **INDIAN FILM INDUSTRY**

The Indian film industry is one of the biggest and oldest in the world (Mazumdar, 2007). Of the various regional industries, the one based in Mumbai has the highest national profile and greatest global appeal (Dwyer and Patel, 2002). In the year 2000, in order to meet the challenges of the fast changing media scene a seismic shift took place in government economic policy to relax restrictions on private enterprise. One of the major policy initiatives has been the granting of the 'Industry Status' to the Entertainment Sector (which includes the Film Sector). Institutional finance and other facilities are now available to the Sector. The Industrial Development Bank of India has already started financing film and other entertainment projects. Apart from encouraging corporatisation, the industry status for the

Entertainment Sector will also help in providing clean credit for new projects. Recognizing the growth and employment generation potential, 100 per cent FDI has been permitted in the film and advertising sectors through the automatic approval route. It is envisaged that foreign participation would help in setting up of multiplexes, financing and production of films and in other related areas (Press Information Bureau, 2001).

### **INDIAN FILMS: GROWTH & INFLUENCE**

The filmed entertainment sector is clocked revenues of around INR 109.3 billion in size in 2008, a growth of 13.4 percent over 2007. The media and entertainment industry had gone through a tough time in the last two years as its mainstay advertising industry suffered due to the global financial slowdown. The industry as a whole registered a modest growth of around 1.3 percent in 2009 compared to 12 percent in 2008. Over the next 5 years, the industry is projected to grow at the CAGR of 9.1 percent and reach the size of INR 168.6 billion by 2013 – due to factors such as the expansion of multiplex screens, enhanced penetration of home video and an increase in the number of TV channels fuelling demand for film content (FICCI – KPMG Report on Entertainment Industry, 2009)

As stated by Kabir (2001), Indian films are the most viewed films in the world with about billions of audience in India and Diaspora in places like China, Russia, the Middle East, Turkey and Africa etc. Owing to the changing scenario in the film industry he states (p.6):

*“Hindi cinema has never enjoyed as much influence as it has today; it is at the heart of the popular culture in Indian big cities, influencing music, fashion and the world of entertainment. In fact, the appeal and success of bollywood movies has become a worldwide phenomena and in Britain, they now regularly entre the box office charts as never before.”*

### **COSTUME DESIGN IN THE HINDI FILMS: PAST & PRESENT**

#### **Costumes & Realism in Characters in the Past**

Sarkar (1975) has focussed on various components of film making in Bollywood. While stressing upon the use of costumes for creating realism on screen and analysing the styles of actors and actresses in the films of an early era (1940-1960), she states (p.113-121):

*“Costume in the Indian cinema has been much derided but little has been done to improve it; it has consequently remained one of the most consistently neglected aspects of our cinema. And yet the indirect influence of the cinema costume is more far-reaching in its socio-economic aspects than is generally suspected. ....There are also the hybrids of western and oriental dress, periodically introduces to shock an unsuspecting audience and that hover between a no-man’s-land fancy and lack of taste. ....Unlike Hollywood, where a glamour queen is built up slowly into a certain style of her own-by specially designed clothes and*

*hairstyles that enhance her personality, our actresses wear whatever is the rage of the moment, or whether it suits them or the demands of the script is of least consideration.....With period costumes, there is greater opportunity to go haywire. ....The problem is that this hybrid and unnecessarily fantastic attire increases the lack of realism in our cinema. And it remains a potential unused force both for creating greater artistic taste with the audience and generating more organised commercial enterprise.”*

### **Organisational Framework of Costuming**

Costuming in Hindi film is a fragmented process as Hindi films are made in a heterogeneous mode as compared to Hollywood films. The costumes are developed in parallel to other filmic components. The single costume designer is very rare; rather the stars retain their own personal designer or stylist for their films. There may also be a separate dance dress designer. This kind of hierarchy may be controlled only by directors who wish to hire designers. Costuming for a film is also affected by the absence of a systematic breakdown of scripts in terms of costume change. This may sometimes be seen in independent film making. The continuity maintenance tools like photographs, continuity books etc. are not used effectively.

### **Dresswala & Dressmen: Old is Gold?**

Costume production in Hindi film is embedded in a social world of independent tailors and menswear shops, designers, stylists and theatrical supply shops. Positioned between set and source are workers known as “dressmen” who take care of costumes (Weber, 2006; p. 582).

A study was conducted by Weber (2006) to explore the implications of a changing scenario of film making for the more lowly film costume workers - dressmen. Weber argues that with the onset of economic liberalization in India in the 1990s, the film industry is set to include more “professionalism” with increased financing and improved technical aids. It is creating a contemporary Bollywood with focus on film production process and skills.

The chief sources for ready-to-wear film costumes have historically been dresswalas (costume supply shops), each with their own tailoring staff, that keep on hand a large stock of items for rent, such as military uniforms and dance costumes. Enquiring through dressmen, Weber, 2006 states their responsibilities as taking care of the clothes used in a production from beginning to the end of the shooting; keeping them safe, cleaned, repaired and ready to be used as required in the shooting. They also fetch clothes and materials to the set from various sources like dresswalas (costume supply shops), laundry men, jewelers and tailors etc. The dressmen are invariably men. They work on a contractual basis, often working on 4 to 5 films together. This ensures a regular flow of money and allows them to widen their professional connections. Recruitment in dressmen’s line is not organized rather it is through

family relationships and contacts. The training for a dressmen is more like “situated learning” a highly characteristic of informal work situations, a term given by Lave and Wenger, 1991 as cited in Weber, 2006 as they work from one set to the other. Author argues that they are typically non-english speaking class as opposed to the film elites who prefer English as common language on sets these days. As Anant Sadashiv Tandel, dressman from bollywood puts it:

*“From the beginning to the end of a film’s production, we have to look after the costumes on the set. We do the laundry; we have to make sure the clothes are washed at the end of every day, and make them ready and available for shooting the next day.”*

Comparative research shows that in the North American industry, costume personnel come from a range of training backgrounds, whether theater, costume design or fashion design, but a precise division of labor and a well-developed consensus on ‘best practices’ socializes each one into the processes of both building and shopping (Calhoun, 2000). Weber, 2006 also compared the commercial Hindi production with U.S. Cinema as (p.586):

*“Dressman practices span several categories from a western film production unit; the elaboration of roles in, for example, American costume design and management, does not exist in commercial Hindi production. In U. S. cinema, the costume department should ideally be headed by the costume designer, and the department requires a supervisor, or an executive head, to carry out the designer’s or the director’s wishes. Under the supervisor, costumers of various ranks select fit, store and maintain costumes. In commercial Hindi cinema, by tradition there is no-one who can be identified as a “wardrobe supervisor” (organizing procurement of costumes and managing wardrobe staff) as opposed to a “costumer,” (handling costumes on set), or any other, lesser member of the costume department. Instead there is a plain hierarchy of a head dressman (often referred to both respectfully and fictively as *dada*, or “grandfather”), and two assistants, with the addition of dressmen hired on a daily basis for crowd and dance scenes. Dressmen generally do not have a habitual, working relationship with the dress designer: they only take responsibility for costumes made by the designer directly the designer has them delivered to the set.”*

### **Designers’ Influx: Changing Scenario**

Instead of having dressmen work on an ad-hoc basis, with costumes sourced from a range of theatrical shops, independent tailors, menswear stores and designers, directors now opt to recruit fashion designers. Even with their extensive experience in caring for costumes or getting them made, dressmen fell short in this regard; assistants who worked closely with dressmen were unable to say more than that dressmen simply did not ‘know’. Their

deficiency was not simply lack of ‘understandings’ or procedural knowledge of fashion consumption. This is what sets the costume designer apart from the dressman. Despite the downgrading of their roles and responsibilities and the shift in the power centre, costume designers are unanimous that dressmen, who are heavily unionized, remain an indispensable fixture on film sets.

The old designers, active from the 1950s until the beginning of the 1990s, are more likely to come from what Dwyer (2000) terms ‘old middle classes. They are English-speaking, but educated in the humanities or arts, and heavily influenced by post-Independence ideals of a distinct Indian identity rooted in self-reliance and an autonomous artistic tradition (Wilkinson-Weber, 2005).

One of them is Bhanu R. Athaiya. She began her career in costume design in 1953. Over the next 56 years, she built an extraordinary body of work that defined the aesthetics of costume design in Hindi Cinema. She was the first Indian to be awarded the Oscar for her work in Lord Richard Attenborough’s Gandhi. She has also received many other accolades for her work in costume design (Athaiya, 2010). In her recently released book ‘The Art of Costume Design’ (2010), she shared her eventful journey of designing the costumes in the Indian Film like Jab Pyar Kisi Se Hota Hai (1961), Satyam Shivam Sundaram (1978), Lagaan (2001) and Swades (2004) etc.

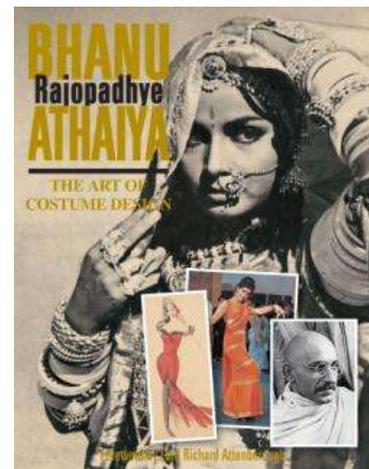


Figure 1: Stills from the Book “ The Art of Costume Design” by Bhanu R. Athiya, a winner of Oscar for her film ‘Gandhi’

(Source: Athaiya, Rajopadhye, Bhanu, Lord Attenborough, Richard (frwd. by), 2010, The Art of Costume Design, HarperCollins Publishers, India © HaperCollins Publishers)

Dwyer (2000) and Weber (2010) examined the profile of contemporary designers and Dwyer terms them as ‘Bombay’s ‘new middle classes’ – English-speaking, comfortable with

Western lifestyles, university-trained in business or commercial subjects, and entirely supportive of the economic and social changes wrought by neo-liberalism. They include both women and men, and almost all are under the age of 40. Recent additions to costume personnel are costume assistants who work for the designer, and assistant directors who are part of the production team but take on special responsibilities for costume.

Both costume assistants and assistant directors in charge of costume are likely to be women, solidly middle-class, well educated and under 30 years old. Present-day dress designers are frequently as active in the field of fashion as they are in film, in keeping with the general tendency for the two fields to overlap. Designers such as Rocky S. and Vikram Phadnis have their own shopfronts, Manish Malhotra sells his label out of several stores in the city on the foundation of his association with the Sheetal Design Studio. Neeta Lulla is a prolific dress designer for films, who also does a large amount of personal work for celebrity clients, while Anna Singh, with an even longer track record of film work, has designed numerous fashion collections over the past 15 years (Weber, 2010).



*Figure 2: Devdas (2001) by Sanjay Leela Bhansali*

*(Source: [www.devdas.indiatimes.com](http://www.devdas.indiatimes.com) © Times Internet Limited)*

According to the Weber (2006), all the designers as enquired agreed upon reforms in the existing systems related to costumes. They favoured the requirement of a single dress designer for a film and a clearly defined role of a costume supervisor from set to set. The main solution points towards the assistant directors on the sets specifically working on costume responsibilities. Also, there is an emergent possibility of assistants to the costume designer who act as designer's representative on set. This is also being followed in today's scenario wherein while emulating hierarchy in American film making like 1<sup>st</sup> assistant director, 2<sup>nd</sup> assistant director etc., costume responsibilities may lie with the most junior one. These assistant directors are also introducing more formal organisational tools. They may keep record of costume changes based on a costume breakdown and they are directly

involved in discussion with the designer (Weber, 2006; p. 598). Weber also puts forward that the directors and producers require professional costume departments especially in case of big budget films where they need not put continuous input and control to achieve their goals of realism in films.

Another important change as explored by Weber (2010) is the increased “commodity consumption” in the latest films. She undertakes examples of some big budget films of 2001-2010 like *Bunty Aur Babli* (2005), *Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gham* (2001), *Dhoom 2* (2006) and *Jodha Akbar* (2008) states that (p.11):

*“[These films]....demonstrate increasingly symbiotic relationships between film producers, advertising agencies, retailers and fashion houses, but, they by no means exhaust the ways in which commodity economy is plumbed for costume elements. In order to understand these other engagements, it is important to acknowledge the contemporary film ‘dress’ or ‘costume designer’, a figure that arose simultaneously with the growth of the commodity economy.”*

### **Conclusion**

Through review of literature, it is also seen that there is an emerging scenario of commodity consumption in costume in Indian Hindi films which includes use of brands and their products to add value to the scene and the characters. The authenticity of these commodities to create characters is still unexplored. It is also important to understand the influence / adoption of the commoditised costumes by the audience in terms of star identity and realism.

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