

Switzerland In Indian Popular Culture: The Cultural Imprint, Retrospect And Prospect

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Abstract

In this article, we will discuss how Switzerland, a popular European country to Indians, managed to enter and consolidate its permanent place into the culture of India. Here, we have tried to show how an individual's favourite country became so much popular that it eventually became a dreamland for an entire nation, India. At the same time, our effort to trace the history of Indo-Swiss relations, its popular foods, sports, literature, and so on, will be highlighted here. Above all, this article also shows the Indian cultural imprint, retrospect and prospect in Switzerland by keeping in mind the prospects of Indian popular culture.

Keywords: Popular Culture, Cultural Imprint, Retrospect, Prospect, Bollywood, Non-place.

Introduction

'Culture is', as the famous critic Raymond Williams said, 'one of the two or three most complicated words in the English Language' ¹. Having the complexity, we can describe the culture as the works, practices and especially artistic activity of an intellectual. The most widespread use of culture is music, literature, painting and sculpture, theatre and film. Basically, culture represents a particular way of life of a community or a nation.

Aim of the Study

This study aims to explore the harmony of two countries India and Switzerland with their completely different geographical locations, climate, tastes and culture. We've tried to combine those links to find some popular cultural elements in it. This will help in understanding the context of popular culture and the bilateral relations between these two countries in the future.

Review of Literature

Schmid Rolf H conducted a study and wrote a book named *Cultural Specification and Diversity in India – View of Switzerland: A Comparison of the Cultural Specification and Diversity of Cross-Border Business Activities in India and Switzerland* in 2011, which led to the idea to identify the main elements of their management relations on a cultural basis. Many guidebooks and concise history books were written about Switzerland. One of the important books among them is Kendall Hunter's *Switzerland – Culture Smart! The Essential Guide to Customs & Culture*, published in 2016. But we have not seen any book written on the popular culture and bilateral relations of India and Switzerland yet. Only small discussions and some articles are available on the internet. They are not so significant at all. So, initially, we tried to discuss the overall issues here.

Although, India and Switzerland, being two very different and unique terrains from two discordant continents, Asia and Europe, and having ancient cultures with diverse religious beliefs, philosophies, many unique attributes, there is a communal harmony between these two countries, which is possible only because of their cultural influence upon one another. But when we talk about Cultural imprinting, we should keep it in our mind that it relies on the principle of common knowledge. Cultural imprint, according to me, would mean the impact that a particular culture has on a country or its population. So, here I would like to delve deep into a common perspective of these two culturally rich countries.

In retrospect, one of the most insightful aspects of a cultural exchange is Rabindranath Tagore's journey to the West. Tagore was the first Indian as well as the first Asian individual who won the Nobel Prize in literature. Needless to say, Tagore was well known for his romantic poems, patriotic hymns, short stories, and his ballads; but it was interesting that what attracted the attention of many in the West was his new mysticism. His poems were enriched with the message of new yearnings, as a fact of which those poems could easily reach many people of the West. Tagore had become a 'myth'! In 1914-18, when World War I took place, Tagore took interest in it, and we find many traces of it in his works. Tagore's strong and courageous denunciation of nationalism, expressed in his lectures which he delivered



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in 1916 in Japan, reached Romain Rolland¹ in Switzerland. That was the beginning. Soon after the war, Tagore, the 'Spiritual leader' of the West at that point of time, revisited Switzerland. He received immense admiration there, and his 61st birthday was celebrated triumphantly. This is not the end; this is just the end of the beginning. In May 1926, it was his eighth foreign tour and Tagore visited Switzerland once more. He paid a visit to Romain Rolland and that time he addressed a letter to the Manchester Guardian on 5th August 1926, in which he protested against the Italian press reports about the rumors regarding the relationship between Mussolini and Rabindranath Tagore.² Thus, the relationship between India and Switzerland became exclusively historical



Romain Rolland and Rabindranath in Switzerland



Rolland's house, Villa Olga, in Villeneuve, Switzerland. Source: Chinmoy Guha

The history of bilateral relations is even older. In 1851, the Swiss trading company Volkart was established in both Basel and Mumbai. The company was immensely successful in doing business with India; later this company became the backbone of Switzerland's economy. Switzerland was the first country in the world to sign a friendship treaty with independent India in 1947. Additionally, Switzerland represented India's interests in the dispute between Bangladesh and Pakistan from 1971 to 1976. This broad-based cooperation between the two countries has a great influence on its population.

'Unus pro omnibus, omnes pro uno' is the traditional motto of the landlocked country Switzerland which helped Indian diasporas to nurture their own culture. The physical cultural imprint of India in Switzerland is the statue of Mohandas K Gandhi in Geneva, the Gandhi bust in Villeneuve, and many others.



Gandhi spent five days in Switzerland at the home of his friend Romain Rolland (December 6-11, 1931).



The statue of Mohandas K Gandhi in Geneva, Switzerland.

Moreover, 0.38 percent of the population of Switzerland described themselves as Hindu in 2000, and most of them are Indian Tamils. There are several temples like Sri Sivasubramaniam temple, Krishna temple, Murugan temple, etc in Switzerland. These reprint a multitude of physical manifestations of culture.



Sri Sivasubramaniam temple in Adliswil, Switzerland

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Many artists and researchers have been actively travelling throughout the years between these two countries. Charles-Edouard Jeannerette-Gris, commonly known as Le Corbusier who is a famous architect from Switzerland, is one of them.

'Each day my eyes are opening a little more', said a Swiss painter, sculptor, historian and Indologist, Alice Boner during her first trip to India, who contributed immensely to the promotion of Indian culture across Switzerland as well as Europe in the 20th century. On April 7, 1926, Alice Boner saw a performance at Krusaal, Zurich by an Indian dancer Uday Shankar. Alice was so intrigued by his elegant dance that she took the role of ambassador promoting Indian culture to the Swiss audience. Her book *Principles of Composition in Hindu Sculpture* continues to bear that witness. She was awarded the 'Padma Bhushan', the third-highest civilian award in India. The opening of the office of the Swiss Art Council, named Pro Helvetia liaison, in New Delhi in 2007, gave additional impetus to cultural relations between Switzerland and India.



Alice Boner and Pundit Uday Shankar

Since the invention of film, it has become one of the most significant tools of ideas that have been known to the modern era. There is hardly a doubt that watching movies can help us escape the mundane hullabaloo of our everyday life. However, all kinds of films impact our society and popular culture. The popular culture of any society is defined by the common values and themes that any society seeks to build. By the end of the first decade of the twentieth century, the film was a global phenomenon, offering public stories that were deeply embedded in the cultures from which they belong. Films, for long, had a deep impact on the psyche of Indian people. Indian culture can be called vibrant, and one that thrives on family and kinship. The people of the 1960s and '70s saw new hopes in politics through films. The phenomenon of an angry young man was perfectly portrayed by Amitabh Bacchan, the then rising star of Bollywood; he was found out on the streets protesting against the corruption and topsy-turvydom of the society. Slowly, India began to prosper economically, and thus films too grabbed new themes to work on. However, these films began to move away from popular culture and concentrated on love and family. Switzerland and its natural privilege played a key role behind the enormous success of those romantic films.

'Ich Liebe, Dich I love you'— this classic song gave Indian film-lovers a taste of romance amidst snow-covered Swiss Alpine peaks. 'Sangam', the first-ever feature-length colour film by the Indian filmmaker Raj Kapoor, was released in 1964. For the first time, shooting an Indian film had gone beyond its border. The film was a 'magnum opus' in many ways. Nobody can imagine that this non-English speaking country, in the heartland of Europe, would be synonymous with Indian film's fascination for romantic songs and dreamy destinations. Later the films like 'An Evening in Paris' (1967) and 'Prem Pujari' (1970) followed the same trend. Indian filmmakers became passionate about its Alpine panoramas, medieval castles and traditional villages. Switzerland became the land of dream and romance to the common Indians. The new era of Indian film was commenced by a great filmmaker Yash Chopra. Romantic stories became the new norm in the '80s and the '90s. It is said that Yash was the first to love Switzerland, and then whole India followed him. He single-handedly promoted Switzerland to Indians, which was his honeymoon destination with his wife Pamela, later to the Indian honeymooners. For many Indians, the Europe tour is incomplete without Switzerland.

Dancing in the tops of the snow-capped mountains, wearing a Western skinny outfit or in a Chiffon sari and the other one who has fully covered with a double-breasted suit or jacket – it's something of a Bollywood cliché of a couple's images that reminds

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us of Switzerland. The trend was particularly celebrated after 'DDLJ' (Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge) in 1995, the most blockbuster film of Indian cinema ever. The famous tearful farewell scene of this film was shot on the bridge of Saanen which connects all cinema-lover Indians with emotions.



A poster from the famous cinema DDLJ on the bridge of Saanen

Also, the image of the train of Switzerland has profusely been used in the cinema. They made it a visiting place. The bridge of Saanen seems to be a symbol of a bridge between two lovebirds for the Indians. In the film 'Yes Boss' the hero Rahul (featured by Shahrukh Khan) tries to entertain his boss's wife and they ride in an elite compartment and what the audience get is the natural beauties of the villages of Switzerland. Interestingly, Ankur Konar wrote about the use of this 'non-place' in his essay 'Of Cinematic Space: Train, Station and Shahrukh Khan' that, 'what is striking is that Rahul leaves many things in the clean station and thus unclean the platform. Indians are habituated not to put unnecessary things in dustbin'³. This is how the culture of India has been presented to the people in a humorous manner. Following those, the films like 'Chandni', 'Darr', 'Khoobsurat', 'Vastav', 'Laga Chunri Mein Daag', 'Dhai Akshar Prem Ke' and so many others explored the beauty of Interlaken, Geneva, Zurich, Bern, Gruyere, the Rhine Falls, Jungfrau, Schiltorn, Titlis, Montreux, Zytglogge Tower, Schadau Castle, Thun, Lucerne and many Alpine passes, that became popular tourist spots to the Indians because of their repetitive presentation over a hundred Indian films along with regional films. They feel really touched when they see these places, re-enacting some of the poses, dances or dialogues from the films and of course filming some scenes for themselves. This may be the reason behind a number of tourist agencies that have been offering Indian travellers Bollywood packaged trips with almost 59 Indian restaurants in this tiny landlocked country. Being the Bollywood hotspot, only Interlaken has almost 10 Indian restaurants.

The practices of Indian tourists as well as Diasporas who are frequenting Switzerland didn't go unnoticed by the Swiss tourism authorities. Yash Chopra was mentioned as the ambassador for Interlaken, a lake where Chopra shot many of his scenes, now famously known as Yash Chopra Lake. After his death, a statue of him holding his camera was unveiled there in 2016.



Statue of Yash Chopra at Interlaken, Switzerland

He was also awarded by Swiss government for rediscovering Switzerland. Later a Jungfrau railways' train named Yash Chopra which is an honorable gesture by the Swiss government.



That Yash Chopra train of Jungfrau railway

Not only in big-budget Bollywood movies but also in Tollywood's low-cost commercial movies, this small luxurious country took its place. Even an individual movie named 'Switzerland' is made by filmmaker Sauvik Kundu to portray the dream of middle-class Bengalis to travel Switzerland through a Bengali family. In this way, cinema has brought these two countries together which has had a long-lasting effect on the popular minds of common Indians as well as on the tourism industry.



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The poster of the Sauvik Kundu's film which was released on November 13, 2020

Food is also an important part of this cultural imprinting. Swiss chocolate has already earned an international reputation for its quality and taste with many famous international chocolate brands. 'Nestle' is one of the trendy brands in India. Through the greatest ever filmmaker of Indian cinema Satyajit Rayⁱⁱ, Swiss chocolate is nostalgically ingrained in Bengalis' hearts. His wife Bijaya Ray mentioned how much they loved Swiss chocolate in her well-known book named *Amader Katha*⁴. Besides, 'Maggie' is also a popular food among Indians. They made it their own. Unfortunately, it is not possible to relish the beauty of that dreamy land for all the Indians. So, they discovered their own Switzerland at Khajjiar, a small hill station in the north Indian state of Himachal Pradesh which is famous as the 'Mini Switzerland of India'. These are very important to understand the most inert behind cultural imprinting.



Khajjiar, Mini Switzerland of India in Himachal Pradesh

Too many aspects will be left behind if we start talking about cultural relationships. There is a relation in the Indo-Swiss tennis pair of Leander Peas and Martina Hingis who has completed a Career Grand Slam in the Mixed Doubles category. Swiss people of Indian descent like Melanie Winiger, Neel Jani, Ankita Makwana, Suneil Anand, Sarah-Jane, and Marcel Vaid shined their name in heterogeneous fields like modelling, singing, film, sports, etc. India is a priority country for Swiss government excellence scholarships for foreign scholars and artists, which are aimed at young researchers to carry their research in Switzerland. Currently almost 24,567 Indians are living in Switzerland engaging themselves in various works.⁵

The cultural community of Indians often organise the cultural program and take part in Swiss carnival exchanging their views to others living there as well.

However, the aura of showcasing Switzerland in Indian films was gradually fading. So, for the year 2017-18 Switzerland Tourism has chosen Ranveer Singh as their brand ambassador apart from their country, a new generation Bollywood star known as a charming guy more than a romantic hero. Currently, an opposite trend was observed. They are now promoting winter in Switzerland rather than in the summer. Paragliding, water skiing, Chaplin's World, and various outdoor pursuits in the promotional video prove that they have taken a different approach from a romantic honeymoon to a solo adventure holiday trip in Switzerland.



Matterhorn Mountain, Switzerland, Source: Zermatt.ch

On 18th April of 2020, Switzerland has expressed solidarity with India in its fight against the Coronavirus pandemic by projecting the tricolour on the famous Matterhorn Mountain in the Swiss Alps to give 'hope and strength' to all Indians.⁶ This act of kindness in the situation of utmost crisis clearly proves the healthy relationship between the two countries

Conclusion

Culture in itself is a fluid concept that is never static. Culture thrives on give and take policy. In prospect, we can say that today's generation or Gen Y is going to determine the cultural relations between India and Switzerland. This is how this small landlocked country of Europe has become a part of popular culture in the minds of common people of India.

Acknowledgements

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Footnote

1. Romain Rolland is a French dramatist, novelist and essayist. He was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1915.
2. First Indian won an Oscar for his 'Lifetime Achievement' in 1992.