



3 Idiots

Globalizing a Film Genre

Written by Niko Biros

Murgi kya jaane ande ka kya hoga - The chicken is clueless about the eggs
Arre life milegi ya tave pe fry hoga - Will it hatch or get fried in a pan
Koi nah jaane apna future kya hoga - No one knows what our future holds

Aal Izz Well – 3 Idiots

Introduction

In July of 2022, I was browsing Netflix to look for a film to watch. This process usually takes a long time for me as I have hundreds of films on my watchlist, and I want to pick something that I know will captivate my attention. After searching for about thirty minutes, I landed on the Hindi film *3 Idiots*, directed by Rajkumar Hirani in 2009. I had been recommended this film by a few close friends and I'd heard that at the time of its release, it was the highest grossing Indian film of all time, but I'd always been hesitant to watch it, or any Masala film. Masala films are defined as films that mix multiple genres into one work, and there are examples of any combination of these genres throughout the history of Indian cinema. For audiences outside of India, Masala films are often criticized as not being realistic and having predictable storylines with random dance sequences that interrupt the flow of the film. For me, the elaborate mix of genres and inclusion of song and dance sequences that I knew were frequent in these films never really interested me at this point, but I'm a big fan of taking risks with the films I watch so I decided to give it a chance. After the nearly 3-hour runtime had finished, I sat there with a huge grin on my face, truly amazed by what I had just witnessed. I felt connected with the characters, like I had been a part of their friendship and journey to discover themselves. And the music, something that I had questioned before watching *3 Idiots*, perfectly complimented the already very compelling story. I began researching more information about the film and found that this sense of enjoyment I felt towards the film was actually the case for many audiences around the world.

3 Idiots tells the story of two friends searching for their long-lost companion by recounting their college days together at the fictional Imperial College of Engineering in India. It illustrates how the pressures of parents and attitudes of teachers prevented these friends from achieving their potential in life, and how their close friendship and willingness to think creatively guides them to success. Many other films in the Masala genre have also similarly discussed topics like this in their films, but none had gained the nearly universal acclaim that *3 Idiots* had at this point. It released to critical and commercial success in many film markets around the world, and its themes continue to be relevant over a decade later. Through my further research on this film, I focused on answering the following questions:

1. What set *3 Idiots* apart from other films in the genre?
2. How did audiences perceive *3 Idiots* at the time of its release?
3. How did audiences perceive other Indian films at the time of its release?
4. What was the effect of *3 Idiots* success on the reception of other Indian films going forward?

From my research, I determined that by telling a story that can be applicable to education systems worldwide, *3 Idiots* successfully widened the appeal of Masala films and served as a starting point for the future popularity of Indian films on a global scale.



Literature Review

The Artistic Features of Indian Films – Taking “3 Idiots” as an Example

“The film does not directly point out the theme of ‘the purpose of education’, but instead comics and artisticizes the conflict between the characters, so that the audience can find social contradictions in the laughter and reflect on social problems”

The first source I used to support my argument of *3 Idiots*’ success in widening the Masala genre’s worldwide appeal is titled “The Artistic Features of Indian Films”. This article was written by a group of scholars at the School of Arts Chongqing University as a part of the E3S Web of Conferences. It uses *3 Idiots* as an example to illustrate the genre mix of Indian films and how it successfully uses comedy to point out social problems and reflect critical thinking from the audience. Specifically, it points out the effectiveness of the two-line narrative structure of time and space to criticize the education system and how forcing students in one educational direction can prevent fully achieving their potential in life.

The Impact of the Indian movie, Three Idiots (2009) on Attitudes to Education

“Movies like Three Idiots can be utilized to stimulate awareness of the need for an alternative conceptualization of education among parents and other community members”

The next source I used is titled “The Impact of the Indian Movie, Three Idiots on Attitudes to Education”. It was written by two scholars at the University of Swat in Pakistan. This article focuses on the main themes of parental expectations, the rigid attitude of teachers, the influence of peers, and students’ aptitudes and rote memorization by breaking down the main characters

motivations in the film as well as the people that influence those motivations. It describes the universal appeal of these topics and how it can help promote new approaches to learning.

Bollywood: A Guidebook to Popular Hindi Cinema

“The Bombay film industry is aesthetically and culturally distinct from Hollywood, but as prolific and ubiquitous in its production and circulation of narratives and images”

Because of my limited pre-existing knowledge of Indian films, I decided to also include one of the textbooks we used to study the Masala genre in class for one of my references. This textbook breaks down the history of the genre, as well as discusses in-depth the narrative styles, themes, and conflicts that are found in many of these films. This would give me a better understanding of what sets *3 Idiots* apart from similar films in the genre to fully grasp its global appeal.

Letterboxd Reviews

“This movie ... is primarily about chasing your dreams and jobs that you specifically want to pursue, which impacted me so much and gives me so much hope that one day I could say it out loud and actually pursue it”

When analyzing film, it's important to examine the audience and their perceptions of the film. Letterboxd is known worldwide as a movie database and opportunity for people to speak their minds after having watched a film. Reading the reviews of *3 Idiots* on Letterboxd allows me to fully understand what people took away from the film and how its themes were perceived by the audience.

Data and Analysis

Conventions of Masala Films in 3 Idiots

As mentioned previously, the defining quality of Masala films is the mix of genres. There are nearly endless combinations of genres throughout the history of these films and *3 Idiots* is no exception. From the outside, *3 Idiots* appears as a comedy. The cover features goofy looking young adults with their pants down and the frequent instances of slapstick humor and over reactions throughout the film very clearly adhere to the elements of a comedy. There's also a very apparent love plot between Rancho and Pia that isn't the focus of the film but helps to set up many of the conflicts between Rancho and her father, Virus. In addition to this, dramatic elements appear throughout the film. The two scenes of suicide work to show the gravity of these educational pressures and the extent that stress can lead to. There's also the baby's delivery near the end of the film that, although stressful to watch, eventually works to conclude the flashback sequence that takes up most of the film. But then there's also the musical moments.

When the characters break out into song and dance, these instances function as both a recap of the present thoughts and feelings of the characters, while also captivating the audience with pure entertainment. *3 Idiots* does this exceptionally, with the standout tracks *Aal Izz Well* and *Give Me Some Sunshine* serving as motifs throughout the film. *Aal Izz Well* serves as a regular reminder that although you don't know what the future holds, everything's going to be alright. It works as a catchphrase of Rancho's, eventually resulting in that quote saving the initially stillborn baby at the end of the film. One of the main themes of *3 Idiots* is the stress of parental and academic pressure's effect on students, but with this reminder, the characters can keep pushing on until the next day with optimism in their hearts. The first instance of *Give Me*

Some Sunshine occurs when Joey's graduation application is rejected, and he sits in the dark begging for another chance to prove himself. The final instance takes place during the final graduation ceremony near the end of the film, as the characters celebrate completing college. This functions as a conclusion to the flashback sequence, after the characters had achieved that second chance and are now all on the path to success in life.

Another common convention in Masala films is criticizing society, but with a positive force that usually works to inspire the audience rather than depress them. *3 Idiots*' critique of the educational system is very clear throughout the film, but the positive messages shown through the comedy and musical aspects of the film greatly lighten the mood. An early scene in the movie featuring the first real example of how Rancho's brain works, takes place in a classroom after the professor asks the class what a machine is. Rancho replies by pointing out that machines are all around us and that they help make life easier, as well as giving an example of a pants zipper working as a machine to tighten pants. The professor responds by criticizing Rancho and throwing a piece of chalk at him. Then another student, Chatur, provides the dictionary definition and the professor praises him for it. This scene functions as a summary of the many themes in the film. The professors who are supposed to be guiding a person's education instead prevent them from thinking creatively and achieving their potential. By combining this important message with comedic elements, *3 Idiots* is able to inspire audiences to think creatively and emphasize not letting others prevent them from their potential.

Key Themes

One of the main themes in *3 Idiots* is the effect of academic pressure on a student's wellbeing. Each of the three main characters face conflict from parental and societal pressures. Rancho knows he loves engineering, but his creativity is often criticized as distracting, preventing his potential in life. Farhan hates engineering and wants to become a wildlife photographer, but his parents want him to succeed financially and studying engineering gives him a greater chance. Raju wants to do well in engineering, but the pressures of coming from a very poor family lead him to struggle in school and, after Virus threatens to expel him, he attempts suicide. This film serves as a critique on educational systems and the "chew-them-up, spit-them-out" environment that is created from this pressure. It's clear that all three characters have great potential in their creativity but all these pressures from family and education make it difficult to achieve this potential. This is where the theme of friendship comes in. The support and motivation that the three friends provide for each other is what ultimately keeps them going. It allows them to realize their strengths and weaknesses and adapt to find their potential, while problem-solving as unexpected situations occur. This leads to the emphasis of following one's passion. With the right support systems and opportunity to fully express themselves, Rancho, Farhan, and Raju are able to find success in life and achieve what they love.

Actors/Actresses Associated

Aamir Khan: Plays Rancho. A very well-known leading actor in Hindi films, Khan is the son of Tahir Hussain, a film producer in India, and many of his other relatives are also members of the Hindi film industry, including his uncle Nasir Hussain who was a director. Aamir Khan has



acted and directed dozens of films throughout his career, including the 2007 film *Like Stars on Earth*, the 2014 film also directed by Hirani, *PK*, and the 2016 film *Dangal*.

Kareena Kapoor: Plays Pia, Rancho's love interest and daughter of Virus. Kapoor is the daughter of actors Randhir Kapoor and Babita. She has appeared in a number of Indian films including the 2003 film *Chameli*, the 2006 film *Omkara*, and the 2007 film *Jab We Met*.



R. Madhavan: Plays Farhan. Madhavan has appeared in several Hindi and Tamil films throughout his career. He has appeared in the 2007 film *Guru*, the 2016 film *Irudhi Suttru*, and the 2017 film *Vikram Vedha*.



Boman Irani: Plays Virus, the dean of the University. Irani has acted in over 100 films throughout his career, including the 2003 film *Munna Bhai M.B.B.S*, the 2004 film *Main Hoon Na*, and the 2014 film *PK* alongside Aamir Khan.



Release Reception

3 Idiots was released on December 25th, 2009, to 1,760 screens in India and 415 screens throughout 32 other countries around the world. In the following years, it also saw releases in the East Asia markets, finding success with the box-office results. Within weeks of its initial release, it became the most successful Bollywood ever in the North American box office and pulled in \$52 million in ticket sales worldwide. The estimated worldwide gross revenue of *3 Idiots* was

\$95.02 million. It surpassed the previous highest grossing film, *Ghajini*, also starring Aamir Khan, which raked in \$53.33 million worldwide.

3 Idiots gained widespread critical acclaim, praising the direction, relatable themes, humor, story, screenplay, soundtrack, as well as the performances by the actors. It won 58 accolades from Indian film awards including Best Picture and Best Director at the Filmfare Awards. It is currently ranked as the 85th highest rated film on IMDB with a rating of 8.4 stars out of 10. One reviewer on Letterboxd discusses the film's impact on his life, and how the relatability of the characters struggles in the film truly speak to his current position in life saying, "Failing once is not the end of the world, and it shouldn't be, and this movie reminded me to be kind to myself to reintroduce the fact that failing is okay and necessary in life". This among the many other reviews praising the film, truly show the impact and inspiration the film created on so many people facing similar situations in life and really speaks to the global success of the film.

Significance in Genre Lifecycle

Before the release of *3 Idiots*, the market for Indian films outside of the country was limited. There are a few cases of global success: *Caravan* (1971) grossed \$39 million outside of India, *Sholay* (1975) grossed \$28.2 million, and *Disco Dancer* (1982) grossed \$75.85 million. All three of these films featured some of India's biggest stars and featured similar Masala elements of criticizing society and parental expectations while still incorporating musical and comedic elements. But since the release of *3 Idiots*, eight films have surpassed its success in the global market, including *Dangal* (2016) that has an overseas net gross of \$260 million.

So what led to this? There had to be some correlation between the success of *3 Idiots* and the future success of other Masala films on a global scale. Throughout my research, many of the articles I read focused on the Indian education system and how the plot really emphasizes the struggles that students go through. But these systems happen around the world. *3 Idiots* was a film for younger audiences, so many of the reviews praising its longevity and applicable messages over a decade later are written by people who saw the film when they were young and can now relate to the characters struggles to find their passion despite external pressures. This helps to cement longevity in the film's lifecycle and the increase in popularity and interest in Masala films really showcases the impact the film had on audiences around the world.

Conclusion

Societal expectations can often completely stop a person from doing what they love and being true to themselves. Education systems around the world can force a person to study something they don't actually care about, and the strict curriculum enforced in high school really limits creative potential. Those in positions like these are who *3 Idiots* targets. The person that has unexplored passions but fears taking a risk to further discover themselves because of how others may respond. They're looking for that push of inspiration to put them on the path to success, and *3 Idiots* functions as that inspiration. By telling a story that can be applicable to students worldwide, *3 Idiots* successfully widened the appeal of Masala films and served as a starting point for the future popularity of Indian films on a global scale. This is clear by the worldwide gross records that several Indian films met in the decade following the release of *3 Idiots*. Audiences were suddenly interested in exploring the other societal criticisms that Masala

films explore and this greatly improved the perceptions of a genre that hadn't received the respect and appreciation before. If you're interested in further studying the Masala genre and how it's evolved both in style and appeal, I'd recommend starting by watching some of the films I've mentioned throughout this report. The recent release and widespread positive reception of *RRR* is a great example of how extreme the genre mix of Masala films can get while still relaying a critical analysis of societal norms in its extremely entertaining nature. I hope I've inspired an interest in exploring global film genres and specifically the wonderfully entertaining and important films that come out of India. And in the hardest parts of life, when pressures discourage you from living your fullest potential, just remember that **Aal Izz Well!**



Citations

- Hussain, S., & Ahmad, N. (2016). *The Impact of the Indian Movie, Three Idiots (2009) on Attitudes to Education*. *Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance*. Retrieved December 7, 2022, from <https://doi-org.ezproxy.library.wvu.edu/10.1080/13569783.2016.1155439>
- Tejaswini Ganti. (2013). *Bollywood: A Guidebook to Popular Hindi Cinema*. Taylor and Francis. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203834411>
- Qu, Liu, Y., & Mao, H. (2021). The Artistic Features of Indian Films-Taking “3 Idiots” as an Example. *E3S Web of Conferences*, 236, 4053–. <https://doi.org/10.1051/e3sconf/202123604053>
- Reviews of 3 idiots*. *Reviews of 3 Idiots • Letterboxd*. (n.d.). Retrieved December 7, 2022, from <https://letterboxd.com/film/3-idiots/reviews/by/activity/>
- Wikimedia Foundation. (2022, December 7). *List of highest-grossing Indian films*. Wikipedia. Retrieved December 7, 2022, from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_highest-grossing_Indian_films