

India may be loved or hated, may be an object of devotion or derision. But there is hardly anyone Indian who is indifferent or lukewarm about this country. “You can take Indians out of India, but you can’t take India out of Indians” – so goes a popular saying. Most people of Indian origin settled in foreign countries stay obsessed with India, no matter how far they move away. This engagement takes many forms – some express it through anger and outrage at the raging corruption, inefficiency and lack of will to set things right. Some others make a profession of critiquing its many real and imagined ills. Still others turn rabid apologists. Most quietly sustain their faith in “The Wonder that was India”.

Dil Hai Hindustani

Not just a nation, India represents a distinct civilisation and universe of values. It defies definition, containing an incredible diversity of peoples, religions, belief systems, languages, social structures, topographies, weather conditions and knowledge systems. India is not very easy to know and understand. Yet Indians are very direct and open, they wear their hearts on their sleeves. You can recognise ‘Indianness’ by tuning into people’s hearts rather than by their external trappings. Raj Kapoor expressed it very aptly in the famous song from the film *Shree 420*, challenging the “Be Indian, Buy Indian” variety of nationalism promoted by the government in the 1950’s:

*Mera Joota hai Japani,
Yeh patloon Englishtani,
Sar par lal topi Russi
Phir bhi dil hai Hindustani.*

(My shoes are Japanese, these pants are English; on my head I wear a red Russian cap and yet my heart remains Indian.)

The Idea of India

Bollywood as India’s Cultural Ambassador

○ Madhu Kishwar

Four decades later, Alisha Chinai echoed the same sentiment in her tantalising popular song *Made in India*. In the music video to the song, Alisha wears a skin-tight western outfit with a plunging neckline and bare shoulders. She looks like a nightclub dancer from a Hollywood film but she croons soulfully for a “Made in India” heart:

*Dekhi hai saari duniya, Japan se lekar Russia,
Australia se lekar America.
Dekha hai pyar ka sapna,
Dil chahe jo ho apna,
Mil jayega ek sathiya, ek deshiya.
Made in India, made in India,
Dil chahiye bas made in India.*

The ‘Real India’ can only be understood by tuning into the hearts of its people, rather than by their external trappings.

The message is clear – you may dress and dance like Madonna or Michael Jackson, you may wear jeans or mini-skirts, you may look like a vamp or a call girl – all those are just externals. What really matters is that your heart stays Indian. Any time our NRIs get deeply nostalgic or sentimental, they proclaim their deep attachment to their Indian roots not by showing you their investment portfolios or listing the number of times they visit India every year, but by proclaiming that if they could tear

open their chests like Hanuman did for Ram and Sita, people would find the map of India inscribed within.

India indeed defies comprehension, especially for those who try to understand it through books, research studies and as an intellectual exercise. The ‘Real India’ can only be understood by connecting to the emotions of its people (as did Mahatma Gandhi), by understanding what touches their hearts, what makes them perform miraculous feats or what makes them indulge in the most brutal violations of human rights; what makes Indians accept corruption as a way of life and what makes them rise against it in rage and indignation. The ‘Real India’ can only be known by coming to understand what triggers off large-heartedness and tolerance for others, no matter how different their values and appearances, and what evokes vicious and mean responses. Under what circumstances do Indian men worship and revere women as Saraswatis, Lakshmis and Durgas incarnate, and what makes some of them turn so woman-hating that they kill their own daughters as unwanted burdens and torture their daughters-in-law to death?

Despite large doses of low-level vulgarity and mushy melodrama, Bollywood films are perhaps the best contemporary guide to understanding what moves the Indian heart, what values Indians of today endorse as quintessentially their own.

Forced to a Reappraisal

Those among MANUSHI's readers who are familiar with the unflatteringly critical film reviews I wrote in the magazine's early issues are likely to be surprised by such a radical change in my evaluation of the role played by Bollywood films. I wish to clarify at the outset that this is a re-evaluation that has been forced on me. Whenever my own views seem contrary to popular opinion, as someone who believes in respecting people's choices, I believe it is my duty to try and understand things from their perspective and to be willing to modify my own views accordingly, especially if popular opinion does not seem to be harmful to others. Treating other people's choices with disdain when they do not conform to one's own values and tastes invariably strengthens authoritarian tendencies. This is why I have revised many of my positions on important social and political issues and it is what has compelled me to review my attitude to Bollywood films.

I began taking Bollywood films seriously and looking at them in a new way only after I experienced their popularity abroad and saw how this industry had positioned itself as India's most powerful cultural ambassador; that too without any official encouragement or patronage. Bollywood films are exported to more than a hundred countries, which is extraordinary given that these films have hardly been allowed to avail themselves of any legitimate funding. Denied industry status, Bollywood could not raise finances legally, leaving even the best of its directors to rely on black money and finance from the underworld. Our unimaginative and bureaucratic censor boards have a history of needless harassment and creating hurdles in clearing films for screening. Until recently, India's closed-door economy necessitated

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the export of films through illegal channels. Dubai became the centre of distribution for Indian films, cementing Bollywood's ties with the underworld even further. Ironically, it is this underworld-dominated industry that has chosen to churn out sentimental morality tales as entertainers and has assumed the mantle of inculcating what are commonly believed to be Indian *sanskars*.

The New Moral Custodians

Yet, it is this moral mantle that is key to understanding Bollywood's appeal for its audiences, despite the low-brow



**The romantic icons of the 50s:
Raj Kapoor and Nargis in *Shree 420*.**

melodrama and predictability of its stories. An important reason for this enduring resonance is that the two great epics of India, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, which are also the two foundational texts of the Indic civilisation, have provided a very widely acceptable base for the artistic development of Indian commercial cinema. They are often critiqued, their values challenged, even parodied – but the stories within stories of these great epics remain the foundational discourse of Bombay cinema. They function as meta-texts of Indian tradition and *dharmic* values. The worldview they propagate and the values they uphold have proved remarkably resilient despite pressures for change.

As Dhirubhai Sheth aptly puts it: “Bollywood films have come to play the same role as *pauranic kathas* (tales) and the *bhakti* movement did in the medieval period when Vedic knowledge went into decline and the original sources of the civilisational moral code began drying up. At such a time the *pauranic kathas* took on the task of preaching morality and giving people a spiritual anchor through narrative accounts of mythical heroes and heroines whose lives demonstrated through personal example the desired social and moral code.”

This is the same epoch in which Tulsidas rewrote the Valmiki *Ramayana* as the *Ramcharit Manas* in the *bhakti* idiom, and presented the mythic hero Ram as the *Maryada Purushottam* (the best of men, the upholder of the moral code) as opposed to the very humanly flawed Ram of Valmiki's *Ramayana*. This is the period when India faced repeated invasions and the polytheistic Indic civilisation faced ideological, theological and social onslaughts from monotheistic Islam. This historic clash was very creatively ameliorated through powerful socio-religious movements – the *bhakti* movement

within the Hindu fold and Sufism within Islam – which built bridges of communication between the two contrary worldviews. The shrines of Sufi *pirs* became common centres of worship for Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims.

The affirmation of a distinct moral code, just as the *paورانic kathas* once did, was a task that befell Indian cinema, given its birth at a time when India faced a major ideological onslaught from the imperialist West. Indian cinema was in its infancy when the Mahatma Gandhi-led national movement was at its peak; unsurprisingly, most of our Bollywood directors and screenplay writers were deeply influenced by the Gandhian worldview. Many of them consciously and deliberately made their films a vehicle for carrying messages of social reform. Film upon film, then and since, has dealt obsessively with several key components of Gandhi's social concerns, including (to name just a few): the oppression of women in family and society (*Dil Ek Mandir, Astha, Mrityudand, Nikaah*); caste-based inequalities (*Sujata, Achhut Kanya, Haasil*); the sad plight of farmers (*Do Bigha Zameen, Mother India, Ganga Jamuna*); communal prejudice (*Dharmaputra, Chhalia, Zakhm, Krantiveer*) and the divide between the rich and the poor (*Pyasa, Lawaaris, Namak Haram, Jaagte Raho, Ameer-Gharib*).

India Through Other Eyes

Among Bollywood's most important cultural contributions are the emotional bridges it has built with India for people of diverse races, nationalities and languages and the manner in which it has made them feel deeply connected with the Indian worldview and way of life, albeit often in rather caricatured form. Much of what I am going to say is gathered from informal interviews and chats with people in diverse countries who go to see our films with devotion and

enthusiasm. I would like to emphasise that these responses are based mostly on Bollywood hits which became a rage internationally as well. (This is not to overlook the fact that Bollywood also makes many crude, vulgar and violent melodramas. However, it is significant that most of these are commercial flops.)

When one travels to Europe, North America or Australia, India (for those few who are at all interested in its existence) is synonymous with poverty, disease,

countries are their newspapers, TV channels and select intellectuals from India who act as native informants, "interpreting" to the white world our many social evils and problems.

Western media have made India's dowry murders and *satis* far more wondrous, exotic and famous than the Taj Mahal, the Konarak Temple, the Qutab Minar, the *ghats* of Varanasi and other such renowned symbols of India's heritage. Not surprisingly, before India produced the great information technology success stories, it evoked mainly derision and contempt among most Europeans, Americans or Australians.

Connecting across Cultures

However, whenever one travels to any of the non-European countries – from the Middle East to the Far East, from the backwaters of Africa to the troubled shores of Russia – people know India mainly through Bollywood *masalas*. These are not primarily made for the benefit of the outside world. Bollywood films are about Indians sharing with other Indians their hopes, fears and romantic aspirations, their critique of their own society, their anger against what they perceive as unjust and unacceptable, the kind of transformations and social reforms they aspire to see take place, their notions of the good life and of fair-play. Bollywood has synthesised the emotional life of NRIs living in distant and diverse cultures and has made them feel "Indian" by making them feel connected to their cultural values. From Kashmir to Kanyakumari, from California to Kuala Lumpur, from Trinidad to Tokyo and from Dubai to Dublin, these films are the heartbeat of the Hindustani *dil*, both of the resident and the non-resident variety. Indians of all ages have overcome linguistic barriers and made Hindi film songs the vehicle for expressing their most heartfelt sentiments.



Film as *katha*:
stills from *Kaliya Mardan*, 1919.

wife murders, dowry torture, burning of widows, killing of baby girls, communal riots, caste atrocities and pervasive human rights abuses. This is because the basic sources of information about India in these

Astonishing Outreach

The Bombay film industry produces around 900 films a year – more popular entertainment than any other film centre in the world. And yet, unlike Hollywood, Bollywood did not start off with global aspirations. Hollywood spends a good deal of money and energy capturing world markets. Bollywood could never afford that kind of international publicity, yet its films have travelled far and wide on little more than word-of-mouth. Ours is the only film industry in the world which has offered American films any real competition. Hollywood's share in many other film markets is up at 60 to 90 per cent, but it has failed to make a dent on the enormous Indian market where it averages a mere 5 per cent. Internationally as well, the entire non-European world has found a much greater emotional appeal and fascination in Bollywood *masalas* than in American films. Their popularity is particularly astonishing, given their overwhelmingly Hindu/Indic worldview. TV networks in Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, Egypt, Algeria, Morocco and many other Afro-Asian countries provide a staple diet of Indian cinema, often half-a-dozen films in a day. On the theatre circuits, audiences come to see the same films again and again and in many of these countries, one hears people of all ages singing the songs of *Kuchh Kuchh Hota Hai* or *Kal Ho Na Ho*, even if they do not know a word of Hindi. In many countries of Africa and the Middle East and in small towns, even villages, of Indonesia and Malaysia, I have seen children break into Hindi film songs to greet one as a visitor from India, to communicate a sense of bonding, despite language and other barriers. Amitabh Bachhan, Madhuri Dixit, Shah Rukh Khan, Kajol and Aamir Khan are far more popular than any Hollywood star has ever been or



One of the many roops of the Indian woman: Madhuri Dixit, the '90s rage.

could ever hope to be in non-western countries. They are not just cult figures; among film aficionados they are also perceived as role models and moral exemplars on the strength of the oversimplified but warm-hearted values they propagate as characters in various runaway hits. Films like *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge*, *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun*, *Mission Kashmir*, *Amar Akbar Anthony* and *Zanjeer* don't just tell entertaining stories. They are treated as moral fables which propagate a consistent set of what are seen as "quintessential" Indian values – despite all the *dhishum dhishum* scenes and the sexy *latka jhatka* dance numbers.

Bollywood has conquered the hearts and minds of people even in

those countries whose governments have long been hostile to India. When the Pakistan government recently banned the telecast of Bombay films to Pakistani homes, Pakistan's cable operators went on strike and forced their government to withdraw the ban. This, at a time when the Indian and Pakistani governments were locked in serious conflict over the issue of cross-border terrorism and had severed even normal diplomatic ties. Even at the height of Indo-Pak hostilities, Bollywood films were still being smuggled into Pakistan and were playing in the homes of army generals as well as government ministers. Bombay film songs can be heard booming loudly out of the jeeps of police officers as well as from ordinary buses, taxis and auto-rickshaws. At the time of the Lahore Bus Yatra, Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee was reported to have been received by a group of young Pakistanis with the following chant: "*Madhuri de do, Kashmir le lo.*" (Take Kashmir, but give us Madhuri.)

In Afghanistan, after the fall of the Taliban, one of the first acts of celebration noticed was the sight of

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people queuing up outside cinema halls to see Bombay films. In almost all the Islamic countries, including those whose ruling regimes have imposed very oppressive forms of religious fundamentalism that mandate keeping women veiled and in seclusion, people are addicted to Bollywood films where skimpily dressed heroines dance in parks, in nightclubs and in the streets. The depiction of the free lifestyles of women in Hollywood evokes sharp, fearful responses in many conservative Muslim countries but Bollywood films are embraced warmly.

Traditional Yet Modern

Bombay films have become the staple emotional diet of people in many societies that are getting “westernised” and “modernised” without being comfortable about it. They are popular because they don’t just play on those anxieties. They always attempt to resolve these conflicts and present a world where a happy balance is possible and even desirable – provided certain “eternal” core values are kept intact, values that allow for maintaining a healthy, creative relationship with tradition while adopting modernity in appropriate doses. The success of Bollywood lies in its offering what appears like a viable alternative to a narcissistic variety of individualism that often seems to come with westernisation. People in non-western cultures feel threatened by this kind of individualism because it undermines traditional institutions, especially the institution of the family.

Bollywood frowns upon mindless modernity even as it vigorously endorses an appropriate dose of it if we are not to end up as misfits in today’s world. Likewise, respect for tradition is applauded while slavish adherence to it is disapproved of and even ridiculed. This echoes Mahatma Gandhi’s advice: “To swim in the waters of tradition is healthy but to sink in them is suicide.” Bollywood

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tries to show how to swim in the waters of both tradition and modernity.

Let me describe how Bollywood performs this role by recounting a small but revealing incident. About two years ago, I was sitting at a neighbour’s house with an entire joint family, including an 80 year-old grandmother and a couple of grand-aunts, all watching some film award function. For one of the awards, Karishma Kapoor was invited to act as the ceremonial host. Her job was to announce the winner of a particular award and call upon an ageing Sunil Dutt to do the honours. She appeared on the stage in a sexy skin-tight mini-



**Jhatka thumka trendsetter
Karishma Kapoor.**

dress with a revealing neckline. When Sunil Dutt, in visibly poor health, came up on the stage, she not only rushed to assist him, but bent down to touch his feet. The entire family, from grandmother to grandchildren, spontaneously burst into appreciative remarks such as, “See how Indian she remains despite all the westernisation and stardom.” Thereafter, the mother in this family gave her own little speech to her children on the importance of respecting elders and remaining humble, no matter how successful one becomes. It was revealing to me that even the old grandmother showed no disapproval of Karishma’s seductive and revealing outfit. That one gesture of spontaneous respect for an elder (given that Karishma was not on stage acting the role of a Hindi film *bahu*, but was being herself) endeared her so much to everyone in the room that it did not matter whether she wore a bikini or a *burqa*.

Bridging the Age Divide

While Bollywood has been obsessively propagandising the value of stable and harmonious families as a hallmark of Indian culture, it has been as steadfast in dealing with inter-generational conflicts in values and aspirations. Our filmmakers are obsessed with resolving such conflicts in a way that leads to greater understanding and harmony in the larger family rather than a breakdown or nuclearisation of it. Young people are encouraged to revolt against parental tyranny but not to disown responsibility for the care and respect due their parents and other elders.

A large majority of Bollywood films since the 1940s depict the hero and heroine asserting their right to choose their marital partner while their parents resist this choice on grounds of economic and social status, caste or religion. However, this clash is, by and large, never allowed to lead to a permanent rift or estrangement. Even

while rebelling against the authoritarian mindset of their parents, children are expected to win parents over to their point of view with patience and love.

Dilwale Dulhaniya Le Jayenge provides the most well worked-out role model of a healthy inter-generational equation. The NRI patriarch of the family is outraged at discovering that his daughter has fallen in love with a young and boisterous NRI, played by Shah Rukh Khan. He forcibly takes her to his native village in Punjab so that he can marry her off to a real *desi* Indian who, in his view, can only be found back home. The rest of the film is a charming, fun-filled story of how Shah Rukh Khan works hard to earn the love and respect of his authoritarian father-in-law. He does domestic chores and wins over the hearts of each member of the family with love, cheerful service and good humour. He is so effective that Kajol's mother offers to help them elope because she fears her husband's wrath and believes he can never be made to change his mind. But Shah Rukh Khan refuses to elope, for that would mean humiliating his beloved's family and causing a permanent hurt to a father-figure, which would rule out a mutually respectful and trusting relationship between them for the rest of their lives.

Sure enough, these Gandhian methods of winning over the ostensibly hard-hearted and tyrannical man through love and uncomplaining suffering result in a happy and voluntary change of heart. However, he achieves this result only by undergoing a whole series of self-imposed trials to demonstrate that he may have been raised in England and, from the outside, may look and behave like a boisterous London teenager, but in his heart he is far more Indian and

far more committed to family values than the Punjab born-and-raised groom selected by Amrish Puri for his daughter. The Punjabi groom is finally rejected because he proves that he is actually a "non-Indian resident" (a term commonly used to refer to some one who lives in India without behaving like an Indian), has adopted a very decadent life style and was merely interested in using his NRI bride as a means to get a British visa and a passport to a licentious life-style.

By contrast, our Indian-hearted hero, though living in Europe, is so



Winning hearts: Shah Rukh Khan and Kajol in *Dilwale Dulhaniya Le Jayenge*, 1995.

steeped in "Indian values" that he does not stoop to pre-marital sex with his beloved, even when she is in an inebriated condition and they accidentally end up in the same bed. He knows that a sexual encounter against her wishes would make her lose trust in him and get her into deep trouble with her parents. He also has a very special and close bond with his father who gives him full support and becomes an active partner in the young lover's attempt to endear himself to his beloved's family. The film clearly holds up this father-son relationship as ideal between parents and children. Similarly, Kajol's relationship with her mother is projected as a positive one where a daughter can take her mother

into complete confidence and a mother can be willing to risk the family's social humiliation and her husband's wrath rather than force her daughter to marry a man she does not love. The film gives a clear message that a good parent is one who is sensitive to his/her child's emotional needs and that an authoritarian parent, no matter how good-hearted and well-meaning, is in need of reform.

Bollywood has conveyed this message with untiring zeal and consistency: a happy and stable family is the bedrock of our civilisation, a family cannot be stable if it is a site of oppression and injustice. While our films have been obsessive in teaching young people the value of sacrifice, commitment to family well-being and respect for elders, they have been no less steadfast in telling parents and other elders that they have to earn the respect of young people by understanding their aspirations and the demands of changing times. *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun* projects precisely such a happy balance between parents and children. Film after film reminds audiences that to command slavish obedience from children is to destroy family well-being.

Breaking Role Restrictions

Bollywood depicts Indian families in all permutations and combinations. There are those in which some women are the domineering matriarchs (for example, Deena Pathak in *Khubsurat*) and those where women have little or no say and are brutally oppressed (as with Raveena Tandon's character in *Daman*). We see wronged daughters-in-law as well as those who become tyrants for the whole family; there are domineering mothers-in-law who ruin the lives of their daughters-in-law, and also those who protect their *bahus* even against

their own sons' tyranny or caprice, as in *Biwi No.1*.

What we have here is a whole range of Mother Indias – women who are strong and resilient in the face of the greatest adversity while retaining the nurturing qualities and compassion associated with Parvati; Sita-like mother-goddesses who can, at a minute's notice, also turn into real Durgas. These multifaceted *roops*, or incarnations, of femininity, derived from mythology, history and legend and given contemporary coinage through our films, have enthralled audiences in many parts of the world, including those that have come to impose very oppressive and restrictive norms of behaviour on women. In each of these varied incarnations a woman is reverence-worthy. It is Bollywood that gets the world to see that Indian culture allows for a whole diversity of roles and personae for a woman: a much larger range than is available in the writings of social historians and journalists. A woman can choose to be a steadfast spouse like Sita, or a besotted lover like Radha, who throws all social restraints to the winds, or a fearless, awe-inspiring Durga. She could be a Rani Roopmati or a Rani Jhansi. She could be a Mirabai or an Indira Gandhi. It is through our films that the message is communicated that an Indian woman's role in life is not to suffer indignities and tolerate injustice, that it is in her to rise like Durga and destroy evil, that such a Durga-like woman is not despised for her strength but revered, even by men. Even if she chooses to be a devoted and long-suffering wife, Bollywood is often at pains to point out that this is not because suffering is a woman's fate, but because she wishes to be the instrument of reform of unreasonable and tyrannical members of her family. We see Sita-like wives assume Chandi *roop* and

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stand up against wrong doers, even if that involves challenging their own husbands – as does Madhuri Dikshit in *Mrityudand* in a memorable confrontation with her husband, when she deals him the stunning verbal blow: “*Aap pati hain, parmashwar banne ki koshish mat kijiye!*” (You are a husband, please don't try to play God)

Undoing Stock Perceptions

Bollywood keeps transmitting this message with perseverance: a woman need not be frozen into a stereotype. The ease with which Indian film heroines switch from jeans to miniskirts to traditional *saris*, *ghagra cholis*, tennis shorts and on to bikinis, all as part of normal, daily routine, is an indication of the role diversity allowed to them. The same woman who is crooning away in a

The same woman who is crooning away in a *jhatka thumka* number in a nightclub one hour will be shown singing a melodious *bhajan* with her family in the next, only perhaps to move on to becoming an efficient manager of her family business a few scenes later.

jhatka thumka number in a nightclub one hour will be shown singing a melodious *bhajan* with her family in the next, only perhaps to move on to becoming an efficient manager of her family business a few scenes later. It is through Bollywood films that people are told that Indian women are able to assert their rights without leading to a breakdown of families; that every woman desirous of the recognition of her selfhood does not have to walk out of her home in order to win freedom; that a woman can win everyone over to her point of view rather than be despised for her assertiveness. In the few cases where a woman feels that her well-being lies in walking out of her home like Ibsen's Nora, Bollywood invariably puts a firm stamp of approval on her choice, rather than condemn her (for instance, *Astitva* and *Arth*).

In most academic tracts and studies, Indian men are projected as cruel patriarchs who are insensitive to the needs of women and subject them to all kinds of oppression and misery. In recent decades Indian men have gained international notoriety for committing atrocities on women and for denying women their basic human rights. Bollywood goes beyond this simplistic stereotype and shows the soft and sentimental side of the Indian male as well. It sends a clear message to the world: in India even men are expected to value family ties and happiness more than wealth and careers.

In the worldview reiterated in our films time and time again, you cannot be a good human being without being a devoted son, a doting brother, a caring husband and a good father who puts the happiness and interests of his children above his own. The Bollywood hero may be a great doctor or a feared dacoit, a gangster or an upright police officer, a Gandhian social reformer or a feudal aristocrat – but he is qualified as a hero by his family values, particularly

with regard to his female relatives. Our *filmi* hero may be a don on the streets, but at home he becomes a gooey-gooey, sentimental son who will defy heaven and earth to fulfill his mother's wishes. The status of a mother is higher than that of God; you may defy God, but you do not act against the wishes of your mother. Even if a mother slaps her grown-up son in righteous rage, a good son never holds a grudge, leave alone retaliates against or abuses his mother.

This unquestioning reverence extends even to a stepmother, who may, like Kaikeyi, suddenly turn vicious. In *Hum Saath Saath Hain*, for instance, the stepmother is goaded into breaking the close bonding of the three brothers in favour of her own biological son, so that her eldest stepson is not made the head of the family's business empire. But the three sons remain steadfast in their mutual devotion, just like Ram, Lakshman and Bharat of the *Ramayana*. More importantly, the eldest son, in the footsteps of the hero of the *Ramayana*, willingly undergoes all kinds of privations and adversities in the interest of family well-being and unity. Never for a minute does he hold a grudge against his stepmother for her injustice towards him. Finally, like Valmiki's Ram, he too, through love, generosity and patient suffering, is able to make his stepmother realise her mistake and accept the superiority of a well-bonded joint family over an individualistic nuclear family.

The hero also has to be a devoted and fond brother who will shed blood and sweat to put together the required money for the marriage of his sister, who will pamper her like a little princess if she is younger and be a Hanuman-like devotee if she is older. The unique emphasis given to the brother-sister bond, as symbolised by *raksha bandhan*, is

celebrated in numerous Bombay films. In the worldview of Bollywood, a man who respects and cherishes this bond can never be evil even if he makes a living in criminal activities.

An Affectionate Pluralism

For newspaper-reading intellectuals across the world, India is often closely associated with recurring communal riots and ethnic strife between Hindus and Muslims, Christians and Sikhs. However, in the minds of ordinary people in societies, usually non-European, where the



The quintessential oneness of Amar Akbar Anthony, 1975.

idea of India has been shaped by Bollywood hits, India is seen as a place where an incredibly large spectrum of diverse religious, linguistic and ethnic castes and communities coexist, bonded by a deep affection and making a respectful space for each other's unique cultural and religious identities. Film after film has obsessively emphasised the quintessential oneness of people of diverse faiths – be they Hindus,

Muslims, Christians or Sikhs – and has shown them as cherishing their close ties as neighbours, friends, colleagues and fellow citizens.

The positive and often romantic portrayal of non-Hindu religious minorities in Indian films is another major reason for their international popularity. Bollywood has shown the world how people of different faiths join joyfully in each other's festivals, lay down their lives protecting each other and share in each other's joys, griefs and family secrets. The theme song of the film *Dhool ka Phool* made in the late 1950s: *Na tu Hindu banega na Musalman banega, insaan ki aulad hai, insaan banega* (You should grow up to be neither Hindu nor Musalman, you are the child of a human being and should remain a human being), echoes the sentiment of *bhakt* Kabir. This sentiment has been repeated in film after film, strengthening the message that all are sons and daughters of Mother India and are therefore inseparable, no matter how hard the politicians try to break their unity and sense of oneness.

The Sikhs are invariably depicted as generous, large-hearted, jovial, sincere friends, neighbours and colleagues – always ready to help. They are portrayed as men of raw courage and willingness to take great risks for their friends and neighbours. Indian Christians are presented as God-fearing, simple people. If they are Goan, they are also shown as fun loving. Christian priests are invariably depicted as kind-hearted providers of charity, help and shelter to those in need. Churches are always shown as places that provide spiritual and emotional succour to anyone in distress. Hindi films are replete with scenes of Hindus walking into a church at a time of crisis to seek Mother Mary's blessings. Similarly,

true believers in Islam, the *mazhabi* Muslims, are invariably depicted as pious human beings whose faith teaches them to treat all human beings as equals and who are steadfast in their loyalties and commitments, including their loyalty to the land of their birth.

Portraits of Patriotism

A repeated popular device for portraying Muslims as no less, if not in fact more, patriotic than Hindus, is to depict them in roles of great responsibility, taking on anti-national elements and defending village, ethnic or national solidarity. For example, a film made to honour the martyrs of the Kargil war – *Ma Tujhe Salaam* – opens with a young Muslim army officer being put in charge of the most sensitive border post along the Indo-Pak border. In the very first scene, his village-based mother sends him a letter saying, “Always remember you have two mothers – me and *Bharat Ma* (Mother India). Your duty to *Bharat Ma* comes before your duty to me.” In the same film, a reformed terrorist, hand-in-hand with a Hindu army officer, defends Kashmir from invaders from across the border when he realises that foreign *jehadis* want to destroy mosques and promote internal strife among the people of Kashmir. To convey the idea that religion does not divide them he proclaims: “Our *mazhab* may be different, but our *mulk* is the same.”

In *Mission Kashmir*, the man in-charge of anti-insurgency operations in Kashmir is a Muslim Inspector-General of Police, married to a Hindu woman. Their relationship is portrayed as an idyllic romance. The wife keeps her Hindu identity intact; she goes to the temple and retains her Hindu name. However she also adopts a Muslim orphan whose parents were

inadvertently killed by her own husband. When her adopted son becomes a terrorist to avenge the death of his parents, she does not stop loving him. She is killed by a bomb meant for her husband and planted by her adopted son, underscoring the theme that terrorism is not the right path for redressing political wrongs, that the politics of hate destroys not just the targets of hate but also those who act out of hate. The boy finally joins hands with his adoptive father to save his homeland Kashmir when he realises that his terrorist colleagues were planning to blow up an important



Mission Kashmir, 2000: Discontents return to the fold in a sympathetic portrayal of terrorism.

mosque in order to foment communal trouble.

Driving Home a Message

Compare those portrayals to the demonised stereotypical ones of Muslims in Hollywood *masalas* which deal with such themes and one cannot help but be impressed by the instinctive wisdom shown by Bollywood directors, script-writers and producers in not using a powerful medium like cinema to generate feelings of hatred and phobic mistrust. It is also proof that the average citizen of India endorses this view. Otherwise Bollywood could not afford to sink crores of rupees in such films.

Bollywood has shown enormous wisdom in driving home the message that Pakistan may be playing evil games and may have to be dealt with as an enemy, but Muslims, as Muslims, are not to be blamed or scapegoated for the political mischief of the government of Pakistan. *Bombay, Mission Kashmir, Sarhad* and a host of such films dealing with cross-border terrorism take pains to distinguish between ordinary Muslims and ideological *jehadis* who are shown as misguided youth rather than as demons. When Indian Muslims (or Sikhs) take to political violence, they are almost always shown as reluctant terrorists who are pushed into the arms of external *jehadis* (who remain anonymous as the forces of evil), after witnessing human rights violations and abuse of power by security forces, resulting in the torture or death of close family members or friends (as happens in *Maachis, Mission Kashmir, Roja and Sarhad*). And since they too have an “Indian heart”, it does not take long for them to be reformed and return to the fold of Indian nationalism. Thus, even Muslim terrorists are not denied their humanity, if they are Indian.

This gives the average Muslim outside India an image of a country where Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs and Christians not only cherish their friendship, social and civilisational bonds but also demonstrate their ability to work out very sophisticated norms of co-living. In how many other countries do you see people of different religious faiths worship at common shrines? Which other cinema of the world would very matter-of-factly show a Hindu girl child kneel before the Quran with due respect and appropriate rituals

and pray for a boon to Allah, as happens in *Kuchh Kuchh Hota Hai*. Allah even gracefully answers the call of this *kafir* child. Which other non-Islamic country would project an underworld Muslim don, as in *Ghulam-E-Mustafa*, as an essentially good-hearted and god-fearing person, trapped in the world of crime due to force of circumstance? The cinematic device used for establishing the genuine piety of this underworld don is to show him in the introductory shot in solitary prayer in an ancient mosque.

Not surprisingly, Muslims (even of those societies where religious fundamentalism of a very intolerant variety is pushed down people's throats by very authoritarian regimes) rejoice in the India that Bollywood brings to them. They rejoice in the liberal Islam that took roots in the Indic civilisation. The portrayal of Muslims does not offend their sensibilities and self-view. India appears as a land of freedom, of love and romance, of mutual respect and tolerance, of celebration of diversity, a land of song and dance.

If an average Indonesian, Malaysian, Saudi or Kuwaiti is asked to list two or three prominent things associated with India, she or he is unlikely to name the demolition of the Babri Masjid, Hindu-Muslim riots or the Gujarat carnage. Her/his idea of India is informed by Bombay films depicting the quintessential oneness of *Amar Akbar Anthony* – their unbreakable friendship and love. They are shown a world where Rehman *chacha* is an invariably loved and respected elder of whichever *mohalla* he is living in, even when it is mainly inhabited by Hindus and Sikhs. They see India as a land where people of different religions join in celebrating each other's

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festivals. They see Hindu actresses Aishwarya Rai and Preity Zinta playing hot love-scenes opposite the Muslim super stars of Bollywood – Shah Rukh and Aamir Khan – without evoking any hysterical negative responses.

Of Deities and Devotees

Bollywood as the most effective cultural ambassador of India has also kept people reminded that in the Indic worldview there is no sharp dividing line between the human and the divine. God is not a distant entity who sits somewhere above in Heaven, giving orders and commandments, expecting unconditional obedience, doling out rewards for obedience and punishments for those who dare work

out their own code of ethics. In the Indic civilisation, gods and goddesses assume their human *avatars* and descend to earth. They come and live in the world of ordinary men and women – sharing their joys, sorrows, trials and tribulations. And, in their human incarnations, the very same yardstick is used to judge them that human beings apply to each other. If Krishna, as the *avatar* of Vishnu, plays naughty pranks as a child, his mother has the right to give him a good thrashing. If, as an adolescent, he harasses young *gopis* and village women, they too take him to task in their own ways. *Bhagwan* Ram is worshipped as the *Maryada Purushottam* – the best among men – for observing his *dharmic* duties as a son, a brother, a king and a friend. But when this *avatar* of Vishnu treats his devoted wife Sita unjustly, ordinary people have the right to criticise his unfair actions and the freedom to script their own versions of the *Ramayana* which depict him acting more honourably than he did in the original *Ramayana* created by sage Valmiki.

In other words, it is Bollywood, more than any other cultural source, which has resisted the attempts of some of our inferiority-complex ridden *netas* to make our gods and goddesses above criticism and reinterpretation, outdoing Christian and Muslim fundamentalists in making Hindu gods jealous and intolerant. Bollywood keeps reminding people that even the gods are not to be credited with perfection. They too have flaws and they too make mistakes. It is for devotees to demand and ensure improved behaviour every time gods make errors of judgement or act too whimsically. In film after film, we are shown a devotee who chastises a favoured deity for allowing evil people an upper hand



A very human deity: Jai Santoshi Ma, 1975.

in life or permitting injustice to thrive. And the *isht dev* or *devi* is expected to respond to the chastisement and come to the aid of the devotee in times of need. This aid might come through the agency of a human, an animal or even a reptile. Dogs, horses, birds and even snakes are depicted in our films as active players coming to the aid of human beings who, like Draupadi, appeal for divine intervention. Such an interplay should not be dismissed as mere gimmicks. It carries the important message that Indic gods are not distant creatures. They are willing to be at the beck and call of devotees who reach out for their deities as they would for close relatives in times of stress. This happens not only in popular mythologicals like *Jai Bhawani* or *Shiv Puran*, but in countless other films with more secular themes, where the personal deity constantly comes to the aid of the supplicant devotee and defeats the evil designs of all those who seek to harass him/her.

This constant interplay of the human and the divine takes many forms. On the one hand it shows gods and goddesses can display very human failings. In *Jai Santoshi Ma*, for example, Lakshmi and Parvati are shown as being jealous of Santoshi Ma, a new upstart goddess. They harass her devotees till they both realise their mistake and make peace with Santoshi Ma, making space for her in the pantheon of goddesses.

Films also depict ordinary mortals playing and having fun with divinities. Scenes of the *raaslila*, of Krishna playing Holi with *gopis*, or those depicting Radha and Krishna in love or the Shiva-Parvati romance (with Parvati enjoying the right to veto and change any number of decisions of the all-powerful Shiva) are a source of immense fascination for people brought up to view God as a distant

figure to be feared and obeyed unconditionally. Bollywood has no hesitation in showing people who make fun of gods, crack jokes about them or even treat them as a nuisance, as in the film *Swarag Narak*. The hero, played by Sanjeev Kumar, is very proud of the fact that he is a self-made man – a typical rags-to-riches story. The film portrays a very charming relationship between him and Lord Krishna, who keeps appearing to mock him for his arrogance in thinking that he alone shapes his destiny and that of his family. Sanjeev Kumar, as the hero, treats Krishna as an unwelcome pest and keeps shooing him off

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through most of the film until the life choices his children make brings across to him the hard realisation that Krishna's message about the need for humility should have been heeded. (His pampered daughter, for instance, chooses to marry her horse-riding instructor while Sanjeev Kumar nursed the ambition to marry her to a wealthy high-status man.) Even in this film, the purpose is not to show the victory of the divine will over the human, but the need for humility and graceful acceptance of how each person's destiny unfolds for him/her, rather than believe that you can play god with either your own fate or your children's.

Many people in several Islamic countries told me they were fascinated by the freedom with which Hindus

poke fun at their gods, quarrel with their favourite deities and provoke the gods to prove their worth to their devotees by actually coming to the aid of good over evil. In societies where power-wielders project Allah as someone remote, to be feared and held in total awe, where Islam or the Quran cannot be criticised openly from public platforms, let alone through films, the ease with which Hindu gods and goddesses are openly depicted allowing liberties to their devotees appears very attractive.

To Sum Up

Bollywood is much more complex and a far greater agent for positive social change than is commonly acknowledged by those who claim to represent the high culture of India. Reviews of Hindi cinema in avant-gard intellectual journals like the *Economic and Political Weekly* accuse our filmmakers of spreading religious obscurantism, Hindu fundamentalism, anti-women attitudes, animosity towards minorities. They are attacked as conservative defenders of an anachronistic status quo. I myself belonged to this category in some measure, as several of my early film reviews testify.

The new Brahmins of India are embarrassed by the worldview of Bollywood as well as aggressive in their disapproval of its value system. Is it not a case of a repeat of the hostility of the Brahminical orthodoxy towards the popular upsurge of *bhakti* in the medieval period – with just this one difference: the new Brahmins of today are not rooted in Sanskrit learning. They are the products of elite English medium schools and colleges. Consequently, their manners and tastes resemble those of their intellectual tutors in the West.

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