



BOOK REVIEW

Salaam Bollywood

The Pain and the Passion

By
Bhawana Somaaya

Spantech and Lancer, 1999, pp 250, \$14.95

○Anurima Banerji

Bhawana Somaaya announces in the opening pages of her book, *Salaam Bollywood*: “There are more emotional wrecks here than in any other place.” The book is a reflective retrospective on her years as a prominent journalist in the Mumbai film industry. “I have heard so many secrets, read so many scandals, that my soul feels soaked to the skin...From a participant, I become a spectator. But the feeling doesn’t last. Despite the shame and the scandal, the deprivation and the degradation, the exhibitionism and eccentricity, there is an energy, a fatal attraction, about the world of cinema that is obsessive.”

This obsession with the obsession has paid off for Somaaya, who has risen to the top of her vocation as a columnist for various Indian dailies, and most notably, as a reporter and editor for several film magazines, including *G*, *Movie*, and *Super*. In addition to releasing this book of memoirs, she has authored *Amitabh Bacchan — The Legend and Take 55*. It is amazing that for such an accomplished professional, her original entry into the world of glitz and glamour was totally accidental — while still a college student, she

rejected her first job offer as a film journalist! But since that time in the late seventies, there has been no looking back.

Salaam Bollywood traces the ups and downs of being part of a narcissistic and image-obsessed industry, which nevertheless rewards its members with unimaginable wealth, fame and power. The main reason for reading the book would perhaps lie in understanding the other side of stardom — for insights offered about popular actors, who are generally inaccessible, or who become larger than life, hyped or trashed by a hungry media trafficking in sensationalism. However, Somaaya doesn’t probe very deeply behind the scenes, nor does she offer a profound analysis of the motives and psyches of the celebrities she profiles. She gracefully skims the surface of the film world, unusually diplomatic about her revelations, keen to steer clear of gossip-mongering or cutting up well-known personalities.

She recounts some interesting relationships: how Shabana Azmi became a good friend after teaching her that journalist-star relations should be grounded in trust, not

manipulation; how Sarika and Kamal Hassan made a commitment to each other after having an affair that also produced a “love child”; how Dimple and Rajesh Khanna endured their stormy marriage before finally breaking up. Somaaya also draws an intimate portrait of Jaya and Amitabh Bacchan’s playful interactions with their children, and makes moving observations about the difficulties Rekha faced when she became the target of a vicious media campaign which sought to brand her as a malevolent Madam X.

Overall, the anecdotes are entertaining, but one wishes Somaaya would stay away from aphorisms and moralising {“Devotion to a job, to the point where it comes in conflict with your ideology, isn’t the right answer. Loyalty shouldn’t be more important than the truth”). One would prefer that she had concentrated more closely on the details of the colourful incidents she found herself involved in over the years. As it is, her stories often appear incomplete and truncated, ending abruptly before the reader has a full appreciation of the significance — or even the actual sequence — of events. She mixes together lists of observations and

encounters which make no sense as they are jumbled together. Undoubtedly, *Salaam Bollywood* would have benefitted from a good dose of editing. Thankfully, Somaaya's sense of humour and her energetic writing style rescue the book from becoming bland. Describing the ordeal of trying to keep up an image of self-control in front of actors, she describes, tongue and cheek, how "fasting and bladder control were my two major lessons as a struggling journalist. After all, one cannot walk into a star's make-up room and say, 'Can I use your toilet please?'"

Somaaya makes it clear that she is seriously engaged with her profession. In a film industry notorious for its nasty power games, she has managed to avoid being used as a mere puppet, neither has she participated in the elaborate exchanges of bribes or experienced the blackmail that lesser journalists are prey to. How she managed to earn the trust of her sources remains a mystery.

As a reporter, what was the process by which she established friendly relationships with superstars? The question remain unanswered. Also missing in the book, strangely enough, is any substantial comment about the difficulties of being a female journalist in the sometimes seedy world of films, and the equally competitive world of commercial publishing. Exploring these angles of experience could have lent a special dimension to *Salaam Bollywood*.

The book reveals strikingly how most film journalism has been reduced to mere gossip about the lives of the *glitterati*. Instead of exploring the power of cinema as an art form, film journalism has hit an all-time low. Film magazines endlessly peddle rumours and slander about stars, or function as instruments of publicity and hype for the newest, hippest kid on the block. 'Reports' are usually confined to exposing all kinds of sordid trysts and liaisons, pointing fingers at those who enter into backhand deals with the movie mafia, or gleefully detailing

the latest fights that have erupted in the latest hot spot in town. Excepting journals like *Cinemaya*, there are few intelligent publications that feature film reviews, or try to assess the quality of the products Bollywood routinely churns out in its hackneyed way.

Why do *industrywallahs* shy away from dealing with themes beyond the tried-and-tested boy-meets-girl formula? Why is there no experimental format outside of the song-and-dance routine? Is there really space for alternative cinema? What is the problem with Indian cinema today, and why has it sunk to such crass depths to attract its audience? These are, unfortunately, questions deemed outside the purview of the author's ponderings. With its mixing of personal commentary, on the lives of various stars, with reviews of the state of the industry, and throwing of light on various scandals and controversies, *Salaam Bollywood* is an easy, breezy read. □

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Auspicious the five coloured necklace, made of flowers and buds,

Beautiful armlets and bracelets, vermilion in my hair parting,

The tray of remembrance in my hand - a beauty more true.

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