Bombay Films: The Cinema as Metaphor for Indian Society and Politics

AKBAR S. AHMED

University of Cambridge

I. Introduction

It is difficult to distinguish between art and life in South Asian society; they no longer imitate each other but appear to have merged. Political philosophies, social values, group behaviour, speech and dress in society are reflected in the cinema and, like a true mirror, reflect back in society. Furthermore, film stars cross over from their fantasy world into politics to emerge as powerful figures guiding the destiny of millions. It is thus possible to view the cinema as a legitimate metaphor for society; this perception helps us to understand society better.

The understanding will help us to observe (a) how Indians perceive themselves (in terms of 'role models', values, behaviour, dress and speech etc.) and how they perceive the significant features of their society (religious revivalism; law and order; the emergence of the 'south' and its stars; the fortunes of the Indian minorities, in particular the Muslims) and (b) how current Indian films mirror India's role and perception of itself as a 'big brother' or regional power in South Asia and what impact this has on neighbouring countries like Pakistan, in particular their cinema and society.

In spite of the vulgarity and extravagance of the popular Indian film we will be allowed important insights into the social milieu within which people live, what their popular beliefs and practices are and the cultural nuances differentiating groups. While articulating for us the ethos, dreams and dilemmas of society the popular cinema will also point to their changing nature.

We will simplify issues and draw broad categories to make sense of
our arguments. Otherwise the plural societies, complex customs, dif-
ferent religions and races of South Asia will overwhelm our task. For
simplification I will refer to Indian society, but this is in reality a
paradigm for other societies in South Asia. Take the language of the
films, a hybrid Hindi and Urdu. It is the lingua franca of an area the
size of a continent, stretching over many nations from Peshawar to
Chittagong, with a population of a billion people. Our arguments are
based on popular or 'hit' films, stars and songs irrespective of their
artistic merits. These films have become part of contemporary Indian
folklore. The songs in them are sung by generations, the idiom used
by millions. Art or experimental cinema thus does not directly con-
cern us.

The Bombay film is our subject. Bombay has been the largest film
centre in the world, although Calcutta and Madras in India compete
vigorously. It is easy to be dazzled by Bombay but it is well to
remember that half the cinemas of India are in the south. The cinema
is one of the most popular, varied and successful industries in the
world. Although Indian films are now almost one hundred years old
and were well established by Independence, we will concentrate on
the period after 1947 (Burra, 1981; Ramachandran, 1985).

Bombay was appropriate as the centre of gravity for the Indian
cinema industry. It was a modern port; a city with European
influences and pretensions quite peripheral to Indian history and
society. Above all, it appeared neutral to the religious passions of
South Asia, the great Hindu–Muslim clashes. All races and religions
lived here in relative harmony. Here flourished English drama and
poetry (most of the 'Ten twentieth century Indian poets', edited by
Parthasarathy, 1981, are from Bombay). Outside ideas—'Western',
English—stimulated and synthesized with Indian ones. Thus the
demons, avatars, gods and spirits of three thousand years of Indian
mythology mingled and jostled with contemporary—Western, Marx-
ist, etc.—ideas and icons (Akbar, 1985, 1988; Brass, 1989; Madan,
1987; Nandy, 1983; O'Flaherty, 1985, 1986; Robinson, 1989; Rudolph
and Rudolph, 1987). Eclecticism and syncretism are the dynamics of
the Indian cinema. Like life, the cinema suggests, societies are part
real and part false. In particular, 'The West is now everywhere'
(Nandy, 1983: xi).

In our case, the Hollywood and London studios inspire imitation.
From the use of high technology to explicit scenes of gang rape and
disco dancing they are present. The sincerest form of flattery began

early. One of the most popular early films, *Chori Chori* with Raj Kapoor and Nargis, was plagiarized with great success from *It happened one night*. Nadira's princess in *Aan*, India' first major technicolour film, is inspired by Marlene Dietrich in *Kismet* (1944); as are the sets and costumes in *Aan*. 'The West', as Nandy writes, is 'the second colonization' (1983: xi, Madan, 1987). Nonetheless a ritual deriding of Western ways, especially the stereotype of promiscuous Western women, appears to be part and parcel of the popular philosophy of Indian films.

There has been considerable interest in the Indian cinema recently (Armes, 1987; Dhondy, 1985; Rangoonwalla, 1979; Burra, 1981; Cunha, 1981; Dissanayake and Sahai, 1988; Gupta, 1981; Husain, 1989; India Int. Centre 1983, 1986; Murthy, 1988; Nandy, 1986, n.d.; Ramachandran, 1985; Ray, 1976; Reuben, 1988; Valicha, 1988; Vasudev and Lenglet, 1983). The aim is laudable: 'a greater understanding of Indian society and culture in general' (Dissanayake and Sahai, 1988: 7). The film magazines, which have grown saucier over the years, also provide interesting insights (see bibliography under Film Periodicals).

Although we are looking at South Asia, India, because of the number of cinemas, vast film-seeing population and the number of films it makes, is placed in the centre of our discussion (about 750 films are made yearly in 72 studios and shown in about 12,000 cinema houses to weekly audiences estimated at almost 70 million; not unnaturally records abound, Lata in the *Guinness Book* as the world's most recorded artist; Helen has danced in a thousand films and so on).

II. South Asian Society

South Asian society may be characterized by two interconnected features: rapid changes (urbanization, rise of communalism, growth of new classes) and breakdown of older structures (law and order, feudal, caste and class). Considering the rapidity and complexity of change it is not easy to categorize South Asia into historical phases or compartments. But 1947, the year of the Independence of India and the creation of Pakistan, and 1971 when Pakistan broke into two, are appropriate to use as dividing lines. In many ways society changed fundamentally after both these years.

After 1971 India emerged as the dominant power in South Asia, Pakistan was split into two and Bangladesh emerged on the map.

Pakistan's military might and political structure lay smashed. The
Economist in London acknowledged Indira Gandhi as the 'Empress of
India' on its covers. The international media reflected the changes.
Where it had projected Nehru in non-aligned, Third World initiatives
(with Chou en Lai or Sukarno), or Indian stars in foreign capitals
with their popular films (like Raj Kapoor with *Awaara* in Moscow), it
now discussed Indian troops invading Sikh temples or disembarking
from military planes in neighbouring countries. Where once critics
resented India's posture of moral superiority, they now apprehended
her growing military might and willingness to use it. The new Indian
assertiveness is a reflection of the new middle class. This class num-
bers over one hundred million, is spread throughout India, and domi-
nates its cultural and political life. How it thinks and behaves have an
influence on India's relations with its neighbours. For purposes of our
discussion we may thus divide South Asia into pre-1971 and post-
1971 phases, the first category A, the second category B.

   Nehru's idealistic optimism and woolly romanticism, his almost
detached, dream-like approach to politics, laid the foundations for the
ethos prevailing in the first decade after Independence. The euphoria
induced talk of sacrifice and noble ideals. Nehru was something of a
cult figure himself, a super-star among stars (*The Gentle Colossus: A
Study of Jawaharlal Nehru* is a typical biographical title, Mukerjee 1964;
part of 'Nehru-ana'). Indeed, the cinema industry basked under
Nehru's patronage. He publicly encouraged and supported the stars
(attending award-giving ceremonies, photographic sessions, etc.).
Like the Indian film stars, he stayed on in his role long after his prime
(dying in office in 1964).

   In the early years the ideas and values of Nehru were used and
parodied by Bombay. Heroes self-consciously, bravely, spoke of *naia
zamana*, *nai roshani*, new era, new light. They spoke of *pyar*, love, the
struggle against *zulm*, oppression, injustice, *satyagraha*, non-violence,
shanti, peace and *dharma*, duty. These were the key words and concepts
of the new nation, *Bharat mata*, Mother India, and they ran through
the dialogue in the films. The dignity of labour and that of the
individual were underlined (*Aan, Mother India*). Raj Kapoor sang for
the nation:

> *honto pey sachai rehti hai*
> *jahan dil mein safai rehti hai,*
> *thorey mein gozara hota hey*

('we speak truth, our hearts are pure and we can survive on little'; in

the voice of Mukesh, in *Jis desh mein Ganga behti hey*). He requested his countrymen: *mil jol key reho aur piar karo* ('live peacefully together and love each other'). He was reflecting, indeed, as we shall see below, imposing, the popular political philosophy of Delhi. It was at once an ideal and an image of the national self. The message aided the politicians. In the next phase, category B, the actor would become the politician (see section seven below).

The widely heard and endlessly popular songs were quite different; they were still melancholy and sorrowful. For there was no escaping the stagnant, superstitious, unchanging society: isolated villages, mud huts, depressing poverty. Men singing of death, women accepting injustice and unhappiness. Gloom and fatalism hung in the air. The rebellion and anger were to come later.

It is precisely the personal and close relationship between the popular, vulgar film with broad themes and appeal and the larger South Asian audiences that precludes more serious cinema. Although art, or serious, films of high quality go back to the mid-fifties with Satyajit Ray's *Pather Panchali*, which collected international awards, they have never quite caught the popular imagination in South Asia.[1] The same fate has met some of the excellent 'English' medium—or sub-titled—films made in India, from *The Householder*, 1963, with the young Shashi Kapoor as hero, to *Heat and Dust*, with a mature Shashi, to the more recent *Ustav: Festival of Love* with an even older and noticeably more corpulent Shashi. It was clearly understood that 'arty' or intellectual films were all very well for those who wished to see them; the cinema-going public insisted on the tried and tested formula. In time it was an understanding of this division that allowed actors, like Shashi, to come upon a workable solution. They would continue giving excellent performances in serious films with limited appeal while also starring in the popular, multi-star films. It was as if there were two, distinct Shashis: more important, as if there were two distinct Indian societies. It was the Indian solution, based on divisions in society.

Yet there was little synthesis between the two. The Indian capacity either to adapt seriously or plagiarize effectively is weak. The concentration span of the Indian audience is brief and its interest cannot be sustained for long. It vulgarizes what it touches. History is reduced to *bazaar* stereotypes (as in *Anarkali*, *Mughal-e-Azam*, *Taj Mahal*) and

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[1] *Manthaan*, excellently directed and acted, was about the serious affairs of cooperative societies. It was shown as study material in the World Bank in 1984 when I attended a Seminar there. But in India it was not a commercial success.

English literary classics to Indian tear-jerkers with convoluted plots and sub-plots through which the outlines of the original are barely visible (*Sangdil* from *Jane Eyre*, *Dil dya dard lya* from *Wuthering Heights*).

But this was not brainless cinema either. Underneath the schlock ran simple, contrasting themes, especially notable in the earlier films, between good and evil, tradition and modernity. These eternal themes ensured a universal response. Audiences of different religious and ethnic backgrounds identified with the hero, representing good, and condemned the villain, who was evil or misguided.

For all their vulgarity, glitter and eclecticism, one important message came through the early films loud and clear: love and tolerance. The message was important for an India riven with caste and religious differences. The message of brotherhood was especially relevant in the days after Partition and the frenzied Hindu–Muslim killings.

Technically, the painted moon or mountain peaks in the background or the village fields in the early films reminded us of the make-believe quality of the cinema. Mistakes like Shakespeare's clock were easily spotted. In addition, language was hyperbolic and emotions exaggerated, but this was a world of its own, however make-believe. For the hundreds of millions who repeatedly saw these films this was an authentic and legitimate expression of 'life'.

And let us not be too critical. In the first decade after Independence there was little electricity or entertainment in the villages. Television was still to come. For the millions the moving picture, the talking figures, were fantasy and illusions, nothing short of oneiric magic. People saw their favourite films over and over again, learning the dialogues by heart.[2] The hours in the cinema house were an escape from the social and political realities of life, the depressing poverty, political instability and communal problems. At worst they created a disorientation, a fantasy world, at best, they provided a few hours of escape when time was suspended in magic. Even today the VCR cannot completely supplant the cinema in India.

South Asian stars imitated Western ones. They often followed the high style of living. What they did not learn was the discipline the art requires. Charlton Heston and Paul Newman, their bodies lean, appear not to have aged over the last thirty years. The Indian stars surrendered to the good life—Dilip, Raj, Pradeep, Shammi,

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[2] In the early 1950s films, like *Aan*, were seen three or four dozen times by people who told me so in Karachi. These films played in the same cinema house for a couple of years.

Premnath—the list is long. Their bloated bodies and puffed faces are a cruel commentary on the beauty they once possessed.

The stars, like Nehru, had stayed too long. By the late sixties their ideas were exhausted, their roles repetitive. They lost whatever sense of the ridiculous they may have once possessed. Mature men, fat overflowing their trouser belts, cheeks shaking like jelly, pranced as college students singing of first love. Portly matrons with bows in their hair danced in frocks like young girls. Dilip and Raj were now obese. A life of indulgence was apparent. They looked neither romantic, nor innocent, nor heroic. More important, society was changing: a different kind of hero and film was demanded.

The conduct of India's early wars (with Pakistan, 1947–48 and 1965, and China, 1962) reflected both Nehru's style and India's self-perception: while their conduct was muddled and indecisive, a moral position was suggested. The Pakistan wars were almost 'home' affairs. They were fratricidal, as the Indian Army had been cut into two, its battalions recently divided. The famed martial races of the British Army clashed among themselves (often the same martial race, the Indian and Pakistan Punjabis). The muddle, inefficiency and individual heroics reflected on both sides like mirror images. The war with China was different. It was an international affair, India's first full-blown entry into world conflict. It was also an unmitigated disaster: guns ran out of bullets, soldiers ran out of mountain boots and the generals ran out of military ideas. A Chinese thrust to Calcutta seemed imminent. There was vague talk in Delhi of checking the Chinese advances with the moral superiority of India. Understandably, the merchants in Calcutta were engaged in discreet enquiries about the clothing and dietary preferences of the Chinese. It was the perception of the Indian film hero, the theme of countless films: he would lose the heroine and through the defeat express his moral superiority (see section three, 'The hero').

The Indian conduct of the 1971 war with Pakistan showed how Indian leadership, planning, military organization and political strategy had changed. The propaganda build-up before the actual fighting was effective, the battle itself was swift and surgical and the political objectives fully realized. This was text-book material. India had turned a corner, had qualitatively changed.

The war in 1971, the complete Indian victory, had far-reaching implications, both for India and the countries of South Asia. It was a turning point in South Asian history. The gentle, idealistic, liberal

amorphism that was the Nehru philosophy now gave way to the hard
pragmatism of Nehru's daughter, Indira. She herself dismissed his
philosophy. He was a saint who strayed into politics, she remarked
with disdain. She would not allow smaller neighbours to step out of
line talking to her like equals (Pakistan was taught its lesson in 1971);
she would not tolerate opposition at home (an Emergency was pro-
claimed in 1975) and would not deal with minorities like pampered
children (invading the Golden Temple in Amritsar to quell the Sikhs).
India now acquired sophisticated tanks, planes and ships in
abundance. It began converting to concepts of technological and
nuclear war. The nuclear tests sent alarm bells ringing in neighbour-
ing capitals. Pakistan launched a drive to acquire similar nuclear
technology.

No longer living under the threat of a militant Muslim Pakistan,
complex and hidden forces were released in India which were reli-
gious, atavistic and psychological. Stripped of binding ideologies and
false pretensions, the tensions removed, Indian society could be itself,
declare itself, play and parade as itself. It became more relaxed, more
anarchic, more fragmented. The emergent middle class, noisy and
demanding, asserted themselves, to enjoy the good life. The under-
class would remain firmly suppressed in ghetto-like favelas.

Materialism was triggered in society. Renunciation of materialism,
never a dominant theme of Hindu culture, gave way to the notion of
the householder (Madan, 1987). It was a society unabashedly 'In
pursuit of Lakshmi', the goddess of wealth (Rudolph and Rudolph,
1987; also see Bonner 1990; Hardgrave, Jr. 1984). The drive to
acquire VCRs, TVs, fridges, was hard and sustained. The arrival of
the VCR put the cinema on the defensive. It now had to be even more
attractive and glamorous. Free enterprise flourished and the spirit of
entrepreneurship thrived. Genuine pockets of prosperity grew in the
land (for example, in Punjab). Little more than lip-service was given
to the official policy of socialism and austerity. The spirit of free
enterprise illustrated new possibilities, opened new avenues, provoked
high expectations and unlimited ambition. The ends, not the means,
mattered.

A population explosion coincided with one of high expectations.
Life in the small, overcrowded, urban flats was, at its worst, smelly
and unpleasant. It generated neurosis. It is the theme of *Musafir*, with
Naseerudin Shah. The main characters were near breakdown, with
their minds on rents, jobs and collapse of services in their flats. Life on

the streets was uncertain and demanding. Suicide or senseless action were the choices.

Smuggling (of guns and drugs) increased. The pursuit of pleasure and materialism reached obsessive heights. Raj Kapoor's films openly exploited, and set the trend for, explicitly sexual and hedonistic films: *Bobby*, the biggest box office hit of the mid-1970s, *Satyam, Shivam, Sundaram* etc. Gone was his earlier ragamuffin, pauper hero (as in *Awaara*). It tied in with the larger, materialist milieu. In his interviews he defended himself. He was reviving a legitimate, ancient strain of erotica in Indian society (Bharati, 1965; Chand, 1972; Desai, 1976; Kumar, 1959; O'Flaherty, 1985, 1986).

The unabashed materialism has precipitated a moral and social crisis in society. Wives who brought little dowry were burnt, children sold in prostitution. Materialism burned in the land like a fever. Suffering, frugality, morality were rejected as philosophy. Anger and violence helped fill the vacuum. One consequence was disorder in society. A general decline in and respect for law and order has combined with a sharp increase in ethnic movements. The two feed each other. Bangladesh was the most significant example of successfully challenging the authority of central government.

'Communalism' (religious and ethnic riots) took lives and property on an alarmingly increasing scale (Akbar, 1985, 1988). The *disjecta membra* became a recurrent nightmare, a threat to social life. Religious revivalism in South Asia rapidly translated into fanaticism and intolerance. The BJP won 88 seats in 1989; this was a sign of the times. Earlier it had 2 seats. The religious culture is pervasive. When *Mahabharata* is shown on Indian TV the nation virtually comes to a standstill, and TV sets are garlanded. But we must not read too deeply into this. In India there has been a tradition of reverence for religious images which goes back to the early cinema. Audiences prostrated themselves before the screen for Phalke's *Raja Harishchandra* (1913) and *Krishna Janma* (1918), seeing the visit as a 'pilgrimage'.

Mrs Gandhi had set the tone and pace for the new era: successful and ruthlessly conducted elections in 1971, a swift, crushing military victory over Pakistan in 1971, successful provincial elections in 1972, the controversial imposition of Emergency in 1975. A personalized and centralized form of administration was created. Her heir-apparent, Sanjay, exercised authority on her behalf often in an arrogant and capricious manner. The violent death of the mother is a comment on the society she helped to form.

The dream-like romanticism and idealism of Nehru were already
things of the past. So were passive, gentle, honourable role models in
the cinema, heroes who sang philosophically of life, love and death. A
new kind of role model was required: tough, physical, ruthless, one
inured to violence. And it was not long in forming.

Indian society was changing, as was its perception of its heroes and
heroines. 'Foreign'—especially   Western—influences   are   more
apparent than ever. 'Brute Power! Glamour goes gory!' the cover of
the *Annual* number of *Stardust* (1987) proclaimed. The accompanying
colour photographs show a male and female star scantily dressed in
black leather and gold chains, both bleeding and bruised. The cover
story inside concludes 'violence is the order of the day' (p. 17).

Another important factor which helped to cut the stars down to size
was the rise of investigative, spitfire journalism in the last decades.
The film journals were no longer interested in harmless, adulatory
reporting, in the clothes the stars wore or the diets they ate, as in
earlier days. They had sex and scandal on their mind. And they
possessed sharp ears and sharper pens. Dilip's reputation was
severely damaged by the revelation of a second wife and his attempts
to deny the marriage. Younger stars are constantly exposed for drink
or drugs related problems. In politics similar journalism exposed the
doings of Sanjay. The public learned that even Nehru had a weakness
for pretty faces. Lady Mountbatten was just one of his admirers. No
hero was left untouched. It contributed to the demotic, anarchic,
fragmented nature of society.

The gentler, romantic period was over. 'Romance is a trend of a
forgotten era. They are no more . . . the tender soft-spoken heroes, the
Dilip Kumars and the Rajendra Kumars' (*ibid.*). *Khamosh*, with top
stars Naseerudin Shah and Shabana Azmi, featured a villain who
liked killing, a psycho-killer in the Rambo and Kung Fu mould. The
public wanted violence and action. 'The stupendous success of vio-
lence-oriented films like *Pratighaat*, *Hukumat* and *Karma* proves the
fact' (*ibid.*).

Once the film depended entirely on the hero and heroine (one of
each or perhaps another character to provide the love triangle). The
hero dominated the film and its mood. The films reflected unclut-
tered, simple, but universal themes: love thwarted, purity trium-
phant, moral authority; slow climaxes, languid movements, the still
life of traditional, rural India. *Devdas*, a classic of the genre, was made
more than once (films, like *Kaghez key Phool*, being made about it). The
'multi-starrer', as it is called, is now a preferred and tried formula at

the box office. As many as six or seven top stars act in one film (*Sholay*) or even more (*Kaala Pathar*). A successful film must have numerous fights (with heroes flying over the villains or somersaulting over high buildings), some tragedy, some comedy, fast action, a few indifferent songs, and a happy ending usually with all the stars lined up. It is the number of the stars that makes for success. The costs have naturally escalated (from *Alam Ara*, the first Indian 'talkie' made in the early 1930s for Rs 40,000, to an average multi-starrer in the 1980s costing about 25 crore rupees). It has a name, *masala*, spices.

The dialogue in the contemporary films, as in *Mashaal*, is no longer of *shanti*, *pyar* and *mohabbat*. It is thick with *dhanda* (business— generally shady), *adda* (meeting place—generally for illegal transactions), *lapra* (problem, bother) and *dada* (bad character). There is no place for violins, flowers and pretty princesses. Nonetheless, Dilip extracts a few moments of tragedy in *Mashaal*. One of the most poignant scenes is with a heroine of his youth, Waheeda Rehman. He is taking her, his dying wife, to a hospital in Bombay on foot. It is late at night and the streets wet with the rains. As she collapses he runs about the streets trying to stop the infrequent traffic. *Bhai gari roko*— 'brother stop the car'—he cries again and again. Neither the drivers nor those living in the flats pay attention. His wife dies on the footpath, among the garbage and filth of Bombay. Maddened with anger, he stones the dark buildings to no avail. At the end of the film he, too, dies. But compare this swift, 'working' death to vintage Dilip deaths (*Devdas*, *Ganga Jumna*, etc.) which took an agonizingly long time, bringing the audience to tears.

Another changing trend is the emergence of the 'southern stars'. 'Northern' stars, like Dilip Kumar and Raj Kapoor, once dominated the cinema because of their fair colour and larger size. They were often Muslims from the north (from Peshawar, like Dilip and Madhubala). It was an extension of the British martial races thesis—that the northern races of India (like Pathans and Punjabis) were superior to other Indian groups (like Bengalis or Tamils). But in category B there is a shift. More 'national', more Indian, more indigenous stars emerge. They are from the Indian heartlands, the Gangetic plains (Amitabh from Allahabad), Bengal (Mithun) or the south. The 'south' emerges most notably: Sri Devi, Rekha, Meenakshi, Bhanupriya, Mandikni, Madhavi, Kader Khan, Jeetendra. Although we must not forget the earlier southern stars like Vijanthimala and Hema Malini. Mithun and Jeetendra are as muscular as the Khannas and Dharmendar, Sri Devi and Rekha as tall (although perhaps not

as fair) as the northern heroines. The British martial races idea is
finally laid to rest. Here, too, the politics of South Asia suggests,
indeed, anticipates the cinema. In 1971 Bengalis successfully chal-
lenged the Pakistan army consisting of Pathans and Punjabis. Their
victory buried the martial races thesis.

  We are arguing that political life and the cinema mirror each other.
The dynastic principle, established in South Asian politics—the
Gandhis in India, the Bhuttos in Pakistan, the Mujibs in Bangladesh,
the Bandaranaikes in Sri Lanka—is also reflected in the cinema. The
sons of Rajendra Kumar, Dharmendar and Sunil Dutt star in films.
The Kapoors, always extravagant, provided an entire tribe, spread
over four generations, to the cinema.

  The ineffable sorrow of life, the irresistible power of fate, the need to
sacrifice, to placate the gods, action ending in resignation were repla-
ced in category B. An aggressive belief in self, in youth, health and
bursts of energy now took their place as social philosophy. 'Perhaps',
as Salim, the filmscript writer, observed, 'romance has gone out of our
lives' (*Stardust Annual*, 1987: 19). Both perception of self and society
had changed fundamentally.

III. The Hero

The hero embodies nobility and moral superiority in the early films.
There is an innocence and simplicity, a gentleness and diffidence,
about him. Like Peter Pan he never grows up. His language is ambi-
guous, with nuances sometimes expressed innocently. He still bears
the marks of the British colonial era. The ambiguity was a deliberate
shield, a defence. The colonizer seeing himself as vigorous, masculine
and aggressive saw the colonized as simple, child-like and effeminate.
He thus reflected an image of himself, partly created by himself and
partly by the colonizer. The Indian hero thus became a parody of a
parody.

  The argument served the colonial era. It was an admission of
defeat, of inferiority. But in the Indian idiom the masochism,
ataraxia, ambiguity and passivity translated into a position of moral
superiority. They said: 'I can be bullied and beaten but victory is
mine as my soul is pure; if you inflict pain on me I can double the pain
myself'. Krishnamurti explains the importance of suffering (*dukha*):
'As you would not like to change something very beautiful . . . so do
not put obstacles in the way of suffering. Allow it to ripen, for with its
flowering understanding comes.' It was a false argument, but in the

face of the omnipotent colonial power it was an argument. It survived after Independence among the other competing ideologies and ideas.

Death awaited our hero and he embraced it with a passion which rivalled only that for his heroine. Thus in the most popular films Dilip Kumar has his head smashed, loses the heroine and provokes her to shoot him (*Andaz*); or he loses the heroine and then blinds himself (*Deedar*); or, as he cannot marry the heroine because of caste differences, he drinks himself to death (*Devdas*); or he provokes his brother to shoot him to end a wild, destructive spree (*Ganga Jumna*). In these 'tragedies' the message is explicit: human life is sorrowful and that sorrow is predestined. Try as they may, human beings cannot escape the webs of fatalism spun around them. It is a gloomy message but one understood in the villages of South Asia.

The physical beauty of the hero in category A was androgynous. He looked fragile, his narrow shoulders tapering to a thin waist. His large soulful eyes set in a melancholy face were often pensive. His hair fell on his forehead. Like a peacock he was the centre of the stage.

The hero's position was an amalgam of various ideas dominating Indian thought. Non-violence and universal brotherhood came from Gandhian philosophy, romantic idealism from Nehru, the sapient posture from the idealized, traditional pictures of wisdom. The film hero thus embodied a moral position. His was the age-old struggle against oppression and injustice, as symbolized by Gandhi and Nehru in 'real' life. It was an eternal theme and formed the main focus of the early cinema.

'I am', our hero would say in countless films, in action if not in words, 'a nice guy, simple and sincere but also vulnerable and easily injured'. He adopted the strategy of *satyagraha*, non-violence, passivity. It often led to defeat and self-destruction. It was corrupt Gandhianism and corrupt Hinduism, but it touched people.

Another popular theme was the binary set of opposites the hero faced and the moral choices and dilemmas they presented him. Raj Kapoor, underneath the comical character he so effectively borrowed from Charlie Chaplin, portrayed the trials and tribulations of the common man confronting these choices: truth versus falsehood, rural life versus city, love versus lust, innocence versus knowledge, traditional values versus modernity, usually Western (Dissanayake and Sahai, 1988). These dualities appear in the popular Raj Kapoor films (*Aag, Awaara, Barsaat, Sangam, Satyam, Shivam, Sundaram*). These heroes were therefore not just men with pretty faces. But the popular theme, the successful formula, was played again and again.

In the West, new films advertised stars in roles 'never seen before'.

In Indian films, the stars seldom changed their style and roles. So popular were they in their screen identity that they often did not bother to change their screen names (in *Andaz*, Dilip remains Dilip and Raj is Raj; Raj, always more extravagant, keeps his name—or a derivative—in all his films). Their names became symbols of their cinema role: Dilip the tragedian, Raj the comedian, Dev the debonair.

The moral position is apparent in the prototype hero and the settings in typical 'hit' films. Dilip Kumar lived in abject poverty and utter simplicity (*Daag, Mela, Naya Daur, Deedar*). He wore only Indian village clothes (*dhoti* and *kurta*). He lived in a mud room and the only light came from a lantern. His village was small and isolated. But he represented moral authority, the hope of the triumph of good over evil. In *Daag*, in the last climatic scene, Dilip Kumar, a drunk, when offered a choice smashes the bottle to turn a new leaf.

Moral choices are also reflected in the hero in one of the most popular early adventure films, *Aan*. It is an adventure, a fantasy. The hero outshoots, outfences, outhorses the wicked prince and his hordes. He woos and wins the haughty princess. When they are in a jungle alone he sleeps separately from her. His dagger separates them as *sharafat ke dewar*, a wall of honour. Words like honour, code of conduct and respect are thick in the film. Even when he is whipped by the order of the princess in the palace, we do not sense pain or see the sweat. While being whipped he even manages a love song with a smile full of devotion and forgiveness. His behaviour is Errol Flynn but his moral authority is Gandhian.

The Dilip character is not always a saint, not always white to the black villain. As a well-off lawyer of the upper caste he rapes the poor village girl, Nimmi, in *Amar*. What is significant is his subsequent behaviour. He is troubled and the dilemma forms the theme of the story. In an unlikely ending he marries her, rejecting his fiancée and social equal, Madhubala. This dilemma or ambiguity is inconceivable in the present films. Indeed, today's hero would look on his predecessor with unabashed contempt as a sissy, a whimp, a softie. His own behaviour, in turn, would approximate to that of the villain in category A: boastful, épatant, violent and sadistic.

In certain profound ways, in their dress, behaviour and values, the older generation were genuinely indigenous, native Indian (*desi*). The present generation is more exposed to outside, non-Indian, ideas and influences. From middle class background (often with 'film' connections) or the public schools (like Amitabh) they are as comfortable abroad during their European holidays as they are at home. Their

grooming, clothes, behaviour and values speak of greater affluence and freedom. They wear elegant, Westernized, designer clothes and glasses, drive around in fast cars or on motorbikes, and dance and sing by swimming pools or location beaches. They are the new cosmopolitan Indian, a qualitative change from their predecessors.

The influence of Indian theatre made itself felt in the early films in the clearly delivered dialogue, the slow motion, and the stillness. Many actors had been appearing, or continued to appear, on stage. Of these K. L. Saigal, Yaqub, Motilal and Prithvi Raj were best known. Their styles left an impression on the actors in category A.

Dilip Kumar, Raj Kapoor and Dev Anand formed the star triumvirate. In particular Dilip Kumar, as the tragic hero, established himself as the 'king of tragedy'. Dilip became the most famous melodramatic expression of the tragic strain and fatalistic philosophy in South Asian society.[3] He was the model for his own and the following generation: for Rajendra Kumar, Manoj Kumar (note the conscious use of Kumar) and the biggest star in the next category, Amitabh Bachan in India and, in Pakistan, Santosh Kumar (Musa Raza), Nadeem and Hanif. Winning the prestigious awards—seven Filmfare Awards, etc.—he is still acknowledged as 'the original' or 'first copy' (*Cine Blitz*, October 1987: 14 and 99).

Yet Dilip's large head, thick eyebrows, full lips and cheeks and narrow shoulders do not suggest classical Greek—or Western—beauty. But this was South Asia. When pushed for sports he admitted to playing badminton; or perhaps cricket for a charity match. The hero's strength was moral not physical. Dilip spoke slowly, like a retarded man, in his serious films, behaved with exuberant abandon, like a retarded child, in his lighter ones. He did not make many films,

[3] In 1967–68 I saw his coloured portrait dominating the entrance of the main cinema house in Abbottabad, Pakistan, at one end of the subcontinent, and Mymensingh, Bangladesh (then East Pakistan), at the other. In London, in 1974, I accompanied a Pakistani family to an East End cinema to see Dilip Kumar's *Devdas*. When the tragic mood was at its height, the lady began to wail, crying, 'He's one *Devdas*, I'm the other. My life is as tragic'. Another example, this time from Quetta in Baluchistan, on the northern-most borders of South Asia and culturally at some distance from Bombay, will also support my point. As Commissioner, Quetta, I was officially asked to escort Dilip Kumar on his unscheduled visit to Quetta in 1988. Within hours of his arrival the streets of the *baᵤaar* were lined with clapping and cheering admirers. The rest of Pakistan was as enthusiastic. Articles and interviews flooded the media and he was accompanied by large, adulatory processions wherever he went. Hard-boiled editors, elderly matrons and ministers vied to meet him. He touched something in everyone. 'The superstar's visit to the country has been almost like that of a foreign head of state', noted the *Star*. ('King Kumar' by Aquarius in *Star Weekend*, 7 April, 1988.)

little more than fifty in a career stretching over forty years. But some remain as popular classics.[4]

The hero's innocence was unbounded and touched a wide range of subjects including the most complex, like race. In *Andaz*, when Dilip introduces himself as an 'African', to Nargis, she burst into a fit of laughter. 'Yes', he says, 'you no doubt will ask why I don't look like a gorilla?'.

The hero, leaning on walls or palm trees, sang the sad, sweet songs (see section five). These songs depicted a pure, unbroken tradition of pastoral and village India. Not a single outside or foreign item was visible. The hero, clad in *kurta* and *dhoti*, sang, accompanied by flute, sitting by trees or a river. And in the trees and rivers dwelled the Hindu mythological spirits. Man and nature were in harmony.

The songs were of private wounds of fate, death and destiny. Sometimes the feelings were too deep for words. The hero was dying of tuberculosis or rejection (social or romantic). He had ceased to struggle. Broken, he wished to leave the world he could no longer comprehend. Childhood love, a yearning for the past, provided a popular theme (Dilip in *Mela, Deedar, Sangdil, Devdas, Ganga Jumna*).[5] The past was village life, face-to-face relations, warm kinship and caste interaction. But the hero invariably lost the girl (Dilip in *Mela, Deedar, Andaz, Babul, Jogan* and Raj in *Aan*). And this was the point: losing the girl, he wins the audience.

Even the swashbuckling and victorious hero was essentially a good guy, a decent, if wronged, citizen (Dilip in *Aan,Azad*); his very goodness earned him the love of the heroine.

The contrast with the present hero is dramatic. The hero reaches for his '*battli*' (bottle) at every crisis. No moral restriction is suggested. The hero of category B is uncomplicated, macho man. He is angry and disillusioned with the corrupt social order which he knows he cannot correct. Unshaven (Anil Kapoor) and scruffy (Jackie Shroff) he is restless and bubbling with undirected energy. Brainless and muscular he relishes the role of the male chauvinist (which, like the Punjabis Dharmendar, Rajesh and Vinod, he is). He lives his private life to the full. Dharam is known as 'Garam Dharam', hot or sexy Dharam; Vinod is portrayed as a sex maniac: 'Vinod's wild ways! The sex-machine goes berserk' (*Stardust* cover, December 1987). The

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[4] *Andaz* was shown on Channel Four TV in England on Saturday afternoon, 5 February 1989; *Aan*, a week later. Channel Four has also published *Indian Cinema*.

[5] Not surprisingly Dilip answered *Devdas* when I asked him his favourite film in 1988. It was 'subtle', ambiguous, not *behoda*, vulgar, 'like those of today'.

younger ones spend a great deal of time with weights (Hemant Birje, Brando Bakshi, Govinda, Sunny Deol). Under the title 'Sex Sells', *Star and Style* revealed the muscular bodies of the younger stars (*Annual*, 1987: 148–59).

The way our hero sits on it, the motorbike is at the same time a phallic symbol and the technological violation of traditional India. The body of our category B hero displays hours in the gym. His sunglasses, leather jackets, boots and gold chains project a contemporary, tough, image of himself. He is into sadism and masochism. He also reflects the power and money which come with his status. Amitabh receives about Rs 75,00,000 per film (whereas a generation ago Madhubala received Rs 5,000 for the popular film *Mahal*, and Raj Kapoor began as an assistant earning Rs 10 a month). The hero reflects the crisis of contemporary society: violence, sex, drugs, drink, and the introduction of technology in society. It was Amitabh, the symbol of category B, with *Zanjeer*, *Deewar*, *Trishul* and *Sholay*, who helped set the trend for the angry and violent hero. *Hukumat* was so violent that it was banned twice in Bombay.

Many tricks of the trade were hard to unlearn. Heroes still attempted the dual or triple roles (Amitabh in *Mahaan*) established earlier (Dilip in *Azaad*) and died in moving, if lengthy, death scenes (Amitabh in *Deewar* in a scene reminiscent of Dilip in *Ganga Jumna* fifteen years earlier). Heroines, too, repeated themes (Sri Devi in *Nagina*, 1986, inspired by *Nagin*, 1954). Many of the stories were familiar: rags to riches to rags. Themes like good versus evil were broadly familiar, though expressed in different ways. Also repeated were the themes of 'brotherhood', as in Amitabh's *Amar, Akbar, Anthony* (1977). Anger itself was not new. Raj in *Awaara* was an angry young man. But the moral of his film was that love could overcome adversity and hate. He was part Charlie Chaplin, part Robin Hood.

Pumping iron, to stay fit, seeking cheap publicity, cutting corners, the heroes reflect the larger insecurity around them; they are 'antiheroes'. It is a very competitive world for them. Unlike their predecessors they cannot survive bad films. It is significant that youngsters in films are aware of these changing patterns. The comparisons are not favourable with the past: 'In those times real films were being made, stories were being made', reflected Rishi Kapoor, a star and son of Raj Kapoor (*Showtime*, October, 1987: 23). 'Today', he complained, 'they are making trash—hard porno, soft porno, kungfu films'.

The physical appearance and projection on the screen of the two

stars who best represent our categories are instructive. Dilip looked as
studied, serene and calm as a statue of Buddha; his fat cheeks and full
lips lent him an image of inner contentedness. *Shanti*, peace, *pyar*, love,
he intoned. Amitabh's furrowed brow, blazing eyes and flailing limbs
suggest anger. '*Haramzada*', 'bastard', he rails against blague and
fraud. One aspired to be a great soul, a *mahatama*, the other was a *dada*,
a rogue, a godfather.

What is important is that Dilip himself has abandoned the category
A hero he typified. In *Bairaag* he repeated the theme and acting of his
earlier triumphs, but the world had moved on. The film was not a
success. Dilip had to adopt a new strategy to change, too. His recent
films, *Dunya*, *Vidharta*, *Mashaal*, *Karma*, are successful. They contain
the contemporary box-office formula: half-a-dozen top stars, action,
violence, sex and drugs in an urban hell. *Karma* (1986), one of the
more successful of the recent Indian films, had four heroes, three
heroines and two male villains, each a star. Raj Kapoor, too, came up
on top. He provided a new direction to eroticism in the cinema,
remaining the supreme showman until his death. The third of the
triumvirate who dominated category A, Dev Anand, also succeeded in
making some popular films in the new mould. His *Hare Ram, Hare
Krishna* was well received. But the interest lay in the young heroines he
introduced (like Zeenat Aman in *Hare Ram, Hare Krishna*). Other
heroes could not make the transition. Bharat Bhooshan, star of hits
like *Mirza Ghalib* and *Baiju Bawra* in the 1950s, was one. Living in
penury he accepts bit-parts in films to make both ends meet. The
great music director Naushad, after working for almost sixty years,
has serious accommodation problems. 'Naushad homeless?' asked
Showtime (October 1987: 56). G. M. Durrani, who sang about 3,000
songs and acted in numerous films, died old, ill and poor. The
glamour and glitter of Bombay films obscures for us its insecurity and
the neurosis it creates.

But amidst the vulgar razzmatazz of contemporary Bombay films
are the rare gems. Stars like Naseerudin Shah and Om Puri have
turned in superb performances. These are not glamorous superstars.
They depict ordinary, vulnerable, often confused people. But they
cannot hope to achieve the status of the megastars like Amitabh.

IV. The Heroine

The heroine in category A rested on a pedestal. She was *gaon ki izzat*, her virtue symbolized the purity of the village. She embodied beauty and chastity. Her delicate movements, arched eyebrows, pouted lips and coy poses spoke of innocence and eternal purity. Indeed, like Geeta Bali and Nimmi, she appeared ungroomed and often scruffy. Her beauty was not physical or carnal. The heroine evoked literary response, comparison with moon and stars. Meena Kumari's walk was famous as *morni chaal*, the peacock's walk. A sweet innocence and ambiguity mark the heroine. In *Andaz*, Nargis leads on Dilip and Raj, in *Deedar* Dilip and Ashok. It is not clear what she is about. The heroine is an enigma, a mystery. In a famous scene from *Mughal-e-Azam* when Madhubala, as Anarkali, confronts Akbar, furious at her affair with his son, Salim, she passes out. Not a word is spoken in the encounter. The mystery remains.

The Madonna versus whore division of women was a popular theme. But the latter was often depicted as the person with the heart of gold (in Dilip's *Devdas*, Raj's *Shree 420*). The ideal woman was obedient and pious. It is a theme that recurs in category B: *Pakeezah* and *Umrao Jan*. Geeta Bali sang one of the most popular songs in an early Dev film (*Baazi*, 1951). In essence it summed up the ideal woman of category A:

> kia khak wo jina hey jo apney hiley ho
> khod mit key kisi aur ko mitney se bacha ley

('what sort of life is it if one lives for oneself—destroy yourself in order to save someone else from being destroyed').

Delicacy was the rule. Rape scenes were represented by a candle blown out. Rape was only hinted at (*Aan, Amar, Madhumati*). The heroine would rather die than face dishonour. In contrast *Kudrat ka kanoon* (1987) had a scene explicitly showing gang rape. The men puffed, panted and sweated through the scene. In *Shingora*, Persis Khambatta, the girl who shaved her head for *StarTrek*, is shown in explicit sex scenes. Heroines are violated, pushed and abused throughout the films. They are liberated in dress, behaviour and values.

Nargis and Madhubala wore clothes which rarely accentuated their breasts and bottoms, but in contrast, heroines in category B flaunt their anatomy and sex. It was Zeenat Aman —with her European

body—who almost single-handedly brought about the change with films like *Satyam, Shivam, Sundaram* and *Qurbani*. *Qurbani* (1981) was a turning point, a desperate bid to revive a flagging career which had begun with the hit *Hare Ram, Hari Krishna* ten years earlier.

The body was now an essential part of a heroine's success. Their bodies speak of time in the gym spent in working out. The leading lady of the 1980s, Sri Devi, is known as 'thunder thighs'.

Sri Devi, like other female stars, spends hours in the make-up room and in adorning herself. She must. Her fees are Rs 25,00,000 a film. She portrays the aggressive, dominating character. In *Himmatwala*, an earlier film, she out-danced and out-fought the men. She deals with the villains herself, thrashing and kicking them. In some films she needs two or three male stars to 'balance' her. In *Joshila* (1989) two of the top current male heroes barely hold their own against her. Little wonder cover stories ask: 'Is Sridevi a hero?' (*Showtime*, September, 1987).

The attitudes to and perception of women have changed. Sri Devi does not stimulate literary reactions but more basic, earthy ones. 'The last generation of stars treated their women like ladies, today's studs push them around like they were sluts in the flesh market', a noted, Indian film critic wrote (Cyrus Merchant, 'Careless whispers', *Stardust*, October 1987). Once affairs were discreet and longstanding. They suggested the agonies of romantic passion. The Raj Kapoor and Nargis affair, which gave the Kapoor studio its emblem, lasted ten years and eighteen films. The present heroes are expected to hop in and out of beds to embellish their macho reputation. 'There is after all a vast difference between the romantic heroes and the sexy studs. The difference you see, is dignity' (*ibid.*).

The camera has robbed the final vestiges of dignity from the heroine. It has shifted from expressive doe-like eyes to wriggling busts and bottoms, its sound-track no longer records shy sighs, instead it picks up ecstatic grunts and groans. Another film critic concluded: 'Today's heroines are blatant and brazen and the heroes tough and ruthless' (*Stardust*, Annual 1987: 17). No actress can now afford to say 'no' to 'baring all'. 'Today's demand is for actresses who are ready to be raped by three or more men, who are prepared to wet themselves and seduce the audience in film after film' (*ibid.*: 21). *Morni chaal* to 'thunder thighs' sums up the distance the heroine has travelled in the Indian cinema.

But there has also been a positive development in the strong and

often scintillating portrayals of the serious actresses like Smita Patel and Shabana Azmi. Feminist themes are emphasized by them and glamour is absent. Early signs of these themes are evident in films like *Razia Sultana* and *Mother India*. What is new is the assertive feminist voice. In *Arth* (1983) Shabana Azmi walks away from both her husband and lover; Mother India had come a long way.

V. Gods, Songs and Villains

Even the gods in the films have changed dramatically. Once the stone gods cried human tears as they sat among weeds and in the dense forests as in *Baiju Bawra* (1952). The film featured devotional songs, *bhajans*, which became very popular. It was also notable for the Muslim contribution: Rafi sang, Naushad directed and Shakeel wrote the songs. Religious themes fed into communal ones suggesting universal harmony. God belonged to all humanity, irrespective of the name of God. In essence we were one. The very gods now appear changed in marble and dazzling lights. In *Satyam, Shivam, Sundaram* Raj had combined sex, *bhajan* and religion in a tasteless extravaganza as only he was capable of doing. Zeenat Aman's body was pressed into the service of the gods. Raj's picture may have suggested lust but the characters still spoke of love. Other films depict gods demanding blood and revenge. Kali, and her images of death, dominates. The values of society change with the concepts of the gods. Gods and humans fuse into one; the screen hero becoming god (see also section seven). If the key words were once *shanti*, peace, and *pyar*, love, today it is *shakti*, power. Where once the hero spoke of universal love and brotherhood he now talks of vengeance and power.

The very songs sung by the hero and heroine have changed in meaning. They once contained deep meaning, nuances, small but sometimes significant insights into the human condition—love, life, death. They were crafted with care and possessed an oneiric quality. Among much of the vulgarity there were nuggets. The songwriter was often an acknowledged Hindi or Urdu poet of stature.

The songs were sung and heard endlessly. And they came like a flood: the top singers sang up to 20,000 songs in a lifetime; Lata has recorded around 30,000. In the high palaces or in isolated villages they were heard again and again. A flute, a violin or a piano

accompanied them. They haunted the audience long after the film, the more melancholy, the better

> *Yeh jag lotera, lut na jai*
> *jewan ka dera moj ko hey ye gham*
> *ham akeley eyjag lotera*
> *bechray na mil key ham*

('this world is full of thieves, I fear it as we are alone, and may be forcibly parted') in *Mela*; *Gham ke dunya sey dil bhar gia* ('my heart is sick of sorrow') in *Daag*. *Be maut mar gaey ham, charo taraf lagey hain barbadion key meley* ('I died without death, all around me is a festival of destruction') in *Uran Khatola*. The duets were equally popular. *Do chaar qadam jab manzil thi kismat ney thokar khai hay* ('luck let me down just short of my destination') in *Tarana*. But there were no complaints, no arguments. Some more lines from the last song make this passivity clear: *na tojsey gila koi ham ko nakoi shikait dunya sey*. From another duet: *sun meri sanwari apna bana key chor na jana* ('listen my beloved don't ever leave me') sings the hero in a film appropriately called *Ansoo* (tears). Replies the heroine: *dekho mujh ko bhool na jana mujh se rooth na jana* ('look, don't forget me, don't turn your face away from me'). The duets were popular as they captured the helplessness of the lovers and were often sung in separation. The love triangle, the straight-forward theme, was thus easily conveyed. The voices of the singers were associated with specific actors. Thus Talat or Rafi usually sang for Dilip, Mukesh for Raj and Hemant Kumar for Dev. When Mukesh died Raj said: 'I have lost my voice'. Amitabh, to an extent, continued this tradition. Kishore Kumar, until his death, sang for him.

The permanence of the old songs may be gauged by the fact that they remain in vogue on popular cassettes. Their singers have gone. Rafi, Mukesh and Kishore Kumar are dead. Talat has faded. But their songs remain popular.

Sex was only hinted at. In contrast, sexually explicit words and symbols feature prominently nowadays. (For example, Nazia Hasan's *badan se badan*, body to body, in *Qurbani*, is almost a literal parody of the earlier *kabhi dil dil se takra ta to hoga*—'sometimes a heart clashes with a heart'—in *Anokhi Ada*.) They rely on overt sexual symbolism with suggestive and explicit motion: *bicho lar gia* ('the scorpion bit me') sang Amitabh with Sri Devi in *Inqilab*. *Jhatkey wali, terey nakhrey mein garam masala, toney nikala college key larkon ka diwala* ('shaker—of body—you are like hot spices and you have ruined the college boys—with lust') in *Aag aur Shola* (fire and embers).

One of Amitabh's hit songs comes closest to defining the current philosophy:

> *aap ka kia hoga apni to asey tesey*
> *apna to khoon pani jina marna bemani*
> *apni to jesey tesey*

('how will you cope? I can survive, my blood is like water, life and death meaningless') in *Lawaris*. The words do not really matter. A cacophony of electronic sounds drowns them. The songs are schlock and have little function except to provide a background to the juddering of the heroine's torso. The auditory violence hurts the ear and the dazzling colours blind the eyes as the song commences. Who, they imply, has time to talk about the philosophy of life and love? And, equally important, who has time to listen?

The villain is, like the world he lives in, also more complex. Once, like Pran, he was irredeemably wicked; now, like Kader Khan, he is not. He jokes and expresses his wicked intentions in ways the audience can understand, even sympathize with. He often ends up, like Kader, stealing scenes or audience interest from the hero. Another perennially popular villain is the stereotype colonial Britisher. He is depicted as a boozing, wenching, imperialist (not, some historians will say, far from the truth). Amitabh takes him on in *Mard* (1985). The *kala sahib*, 'black Englishman', is always a figure of caricature (Ahmed 1990b).

The local villain has undergone a fundamental change. From the lurking village menace he has changed into the megalomaniac Mogambo in *Mr. India*. Money and technology support the changed images. From limited ambitions of molesting the heroine on her way from the village well he now had grander dreams; in *Mr. India* to become the king of India. In this film he wore Napoleonic dress and hairstyle and required his private army to salute him Nazi-style, shouting 'heil'. From switch blades the villain was now employing rockets and private armies to aid his nefarious designs. He lived in marble palaces with swimming pools and moved in a helicopter.

There is also an important geo-political message in these films. The villain is associated with 'certain hostile, foreign powers'. At its most simplistic the 'foreign conspiracy' and 'invisible hand' are behind Indian disasters, whether crop failure or political rioting. For India this usually means Pakistan and for Pakistan it means India. In the biggest box-office hit in Pakistan in years, *International Guerillas* (1990), Salman Rushdie is shown as an Israeli and Indian agent paid to

subvert Islam. Notions such as Fortress India, surrounded and threatened by hostile powers, thus gain strength and urgency. The paranoia, insecurity and neurosis of contemporary life are reflected in this position.

VI. Minorities

The fortunes of the minorities in India appear to be tied to the larger Hindu revivalism in society (see Bonner, 1990 for the Indian under-class and minorities; Ahmed 1988: chs 4 and 8, 1990 c and d and Hasan, 1990 for Muslims; *Pacific Affairs* 1987 for Sikhs; and Brass 1974 for standard earlier references). With heightened communal feelings minorities appear vulnerable and insecure. Endemic riots are reported from widespread areas of India. Of the minorities it is the Muslims who play an important role in Indian cinema.

Muslim fortunes in India reflect their position in Indian films. The role and image of Muslims have therefore also undergone change. Once, Muslims were an issue in India. Their politics and social values mattered. After the creation of Pakistan their importance began to dwindle. But Bombay had groped towards a statement. If there was a philosophy in Bombay, it was a positive one suggesting harmony and synthesis.

Early 'Muslim' films were made with social and cultural themes outweighing religious ones (*Anarkali*, *Mughal-e-Azam*, *Taj Mahal*, *Chaudvi ka Chand*, *Merey Mehboob*). It was a tradition established with the very first Indian 'talkies', made almost two decades before Independence (*Alam Ara*, *Noor Jahan*, *Laila Majnu*). These films were costume dramas and extravagantly made. In them the harmonious interaction between Hindu and Muslim characters is emphasized (Akbar's loyal Rajput wife in *Mughal-e-Azam* and the gallant role of his brave Rajput soldiers, repeated in *Taj Mahal*, the best Hindu friends of the hero in *Chaudvi ka Chand* and *Merey Mehboob*).

A genuine cultural synthesis is noted. 'Allah' and 'Bismillah' are common idiomatic expressions in conversation and song, Hindi or Urdu. Muslims often took Hindu names: Dilip, Pran, Madhubala; or non-Muslim ones: Johnny Walker. Muslims had a high-profile presence, even dominating the cinema as major stars (Dilip, Mad-hubala, Nargis, Waheeda Rehman), singers (Rafi, Talat, Suraya, Noor Jehan), 'Jokers' (Johnny Walker), songwriters (Azmi, Lud-hianvi, Badayuni), and directors (Mehboob, Kardar, Kamal Amrohi).

Hindu–Muslim relations are no longer an issue in category B. 'Muslim' films focus on Muslim social themes, usually the prostitution and the plight of women (*Pakeezah, Nikah, Umrao Jan, Bazaar*). Their norms and mores are little more than an interesting anthropological comment, their society a relic of the past.

In category B there are still prominent Muslim stars like Shabana Azmi or Naseerudin Shah, but they are few and far between. A glance at the credits of Indian films will show their rapidly diminishing cinematic presence. They appear often only to uphold India's secular position. In *Awam* (1987) Colonel Zaidi loyally breaks up a spy ring and in court defends his position as a Muslim Indian: 'The Muslims of Pakistan are loyal Pakistanis, I am a loyal Indian', he says. The Muslim is the honest policeman or the loyal side-kick to the hero. Pran, the popular villain of category A, is honest uncle 'Aslam', the good Muslim who looks after Amitabh when all fail him in *Shahinshah*. In other films, too, Amitabh attempts to show the essential unity of Hindu and Muslim by belonging to one religion but being brought up in the household of the other(*Coolie, Lawaris*). But as a presence the Muslim is now marginal.

VII. India as Super-Star: From Mahatama to Dada

Screen life and private life, reality and fantasy, it is difficult to tell where one stops and the other begins in contemporary India. The hero is invincible, irresistible, superman. His presence pervades life, touching everything with good. He is divine. The hero now was confident, aggressive, aware. Frugality, humility and poverty, the virtues he once paraded, were relics of the past. Through him we are able to understand Indian society and politics.

Many stars in category B would cross the line from fantasy to reality by joining politics: N. T. Rama Rao, Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh, M. G. Ramachandran of Tamil Nadu, and MPs Vijanthimala and Amitabh (from Allahabad, the heir to Nehru). Sunil Dutt, Rajesh Khanna and Raj Babbar wait in line. Hindu mythology and revivalism from the 1970s onwards assisted in this process.

Hindu mythology and symbolism pervade films. Sri Devi in *Nagina* is, and keeps changing to, a snake. Another heroine, wearing the mythological crown and using the trident to spear the villain to his death, assisted by snakes who bite other villains, is cheered by audiences (*Pyar ke kabil*). Obeahs and revenants avenge the innocent. Art and life were fusing irretrievably. The public wanted and got

divine beings, invincible heroes and religious symbols in its films. When others had failed, the 'hero' would salvage the situation. N. T. Rama Rao and M. G. Ramachandran, playing divine characters, wearing saffron robes, were direct beneficiaries heading major state governments.[6]

The South Indian M. G. Ramachandran best symbolizes the megastar turned politician (Hardgrave Jr., 1970, 1971, 1973, 1979). In his roles he fused the great figures of history including Christ and Gandhi. He did not smoke or drink. But his divine habits did not prevent him from keeping a shrewd eye open for publicity: 'When you see the poor smiling, there is God' (ibid., 1979: 106), said while embracing a sick and poor supplicant. When he made The Life of Jesus Christ it was remarked, 'MGR finally played himself'. Surviving a shooting incident convinced people he was indeed god (ibid.: 108). Gandhi and Kennedy, they were quick to point out, did not survive.

The general deterioration in law and order in South Asia is also reflected in the films and feeds into the yearning for divine or superhuman leaders. Once the agencies of the state were taken for granted. The power and authority they inherited from the colonial era gave them a momentum that lasted for a decade or more. Officials were high and mighty, and the village folk addressed them as mai–baap, mother–father. But in the last years materialism in society and corruption in government agencies have eroded this authority; anarchy has resulted. Administration appears to have little idea of the disease or its prophylactic.

It is not surprising that Amitabh takes it upon himself to redress the grievances of the poor, the oppressed, the victims against the unscrupulous rich, blagueur and powerful. He beats to pulp a dozen villains at a time, promising the cheering audiences that his thrashing would 'make them remember their grannies' (nani yad ahjaigi). When he appears in the role of Shahinshah he is accompanied by special sound and visual effects. His extraordinary powers ward off bullets and he almost appears to fly; a kind of Indian superman. It is also significant that the second role he plays in the film is that of a cowardly and innocent 'Clark Kent'. The dual role of superman disguised as a bumbling hero is popular and repeated by Anil Kapoor in Mr. India. The message is clear. The normal law and order agencies

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[6] It is not surprising that the hero of the controversial The Satanic Verses (1988) by Bombay-born Salman Rushdie, Gibreel Farishta, is a flamboyant Bombay superstar who has portrayed Krishna, Buddha and Hanuman in the popular genre known as 'theologicals'.

have failed and people turn to the superman, to divine intervention, to gods, for salvation.

When Amitabh was injured in a fight scene while shooting *Coolie* the accident became a national event. It even found its way into *The Satanic Verses* (1988: 28–9). Indira Gandhi visited Amitabh in hospital and prayers were said for him across the country (both Hindus and Muslims joining in). *Coolie* stops at the spot where he is injured and announces the moment for posterity. If Amitabh could battle so effectively villains on the screen why not off it? Successful elections were a short step away. As an MP he became a key figure with Rajiv before his downfall in a financial scandal. Undeterred he was back as superman in *Shahinshah*. Amitabh recovered. But M. G. Ramachandran died at 70 in 1987. His fans could not accept the final exit of their hero. More than fifty committed suicide and more than 2.5 million came to his funeral in Madras. True to South Asian life, his widow and mistress inherit his political following.

Earlier stars, like Dilip and Nargis, had tried their hand at politics but made little general impact. They remained stars, a cultural attraction. In category B stars are a major and pervasive presence in politics.

It was easy to imagine film stars in power as an exclusively Indian phenomenon but other countries showed similar developments (Vijaya Kumaranatunga in Sri Lanka and Muhammad Ali in Pakistan, for examples). However, they did not represent a trend. It was across the world that similar developments took place. Ronald Reagan became President of the USA in the 1980s and a host of other actors joined politics, like Clint Eastwood. It was a link Indians were aware of: 'Can the trigger-happy Clint Eastwood shoot his way into the White House?' asked *Showtime* while discussing the issue (October 1987: 28–33). One can only conjecture what Nehru—product of Harrow and Cambridge—and Gandhi—the London lawyer—would have thought of the invasion of their world of politics by film stars. India is certainly large enough to accommodate variety.

The superman image in turn affects India's regional aspirations. Using troops outside its boundaries to right wrong, as it perceives, clearly shows this resolve to maintain an involvement outside national borders. Despatching troops to Sri Lanka and the Maldives was justified by India through familiar arguments. The USSR had used them to justify its presence in Afghanistan and, earlier, the Americans to justify their presence in Vietnam. Even the vocabulary was similar. There had been earlier Indian clashes with foreign nations (in Kash-

mir, Goa and with China) but they were restricted to India's borders, an attempt to consolidate national frontiers. Besides, in each case India's actions were supported by historical, legal and moral arguments. India's presence in Sri Lanka and the Maldives reflects its present perception of itself. It is an uncomplicated show of military force, an assertion of its paramount position, a confirmation of its status as the regional power.

Not so subtle shifts in position were perceptible. The early position of India rested on legal and moral arguments. India depicted itself as an innocent victim of international intransigence, the dove of peace confronted by military aggression. In its present international role it is seen as the aggressor. Its military capacity overawes and intimidates smaller neighbours. India's role has changed from passive victim to aggressive assertor of military power.

The contemporary images of Indian conduct and style of foreign policy that remain after being flashed around the world are opposed to the earlier Indian images a generation ago. Once the images were of Nehru discussing Keats or Angkor Wat or organizing Third World conferences. His grandson, Rajiv, mounted large-scale military exercises—creating tension—along the border with Pakistan, as a show of force, and ordered troops into Sri Lanka and the Maldives to 'police' them, and to maintain the fragile peace in the Punjab. Nehru's portraits reflected a pensive and sensitive man largely at ease with himself, Rajiv's photographs showed an isolated man behind bullet-proof shields. The symbols of the two men reveal their personalities and the times in which they live: the flower in Nehru's jacket and Rajiv's cold and impersonal designer dark glasses.

The philosophy of the Foreign Office in Delhi is no longer Gandhian. It is hard, cold real-politik based on geo-political strategic imperatives. We are a long way from the days when Gandhi fasted in 1947 as a protest so that the assets due to the recently formed government of Pakistan should be released by Delhi. The moral theme is conspicuous by its absence in the contemporary posture. Politicians are quoting film dialogues like film heroes: Rajiv's lines about making Pakistan remember its granny are said to have been provided by his close friend, Amitabh.

Rajiv is not the first Prime Minister to quote Indian film dialogue. Mr Bhutto paid a similar compliment to the Indian cinema when he used the title of a film, *Roti kapra makan*—food, clothes and house—as the slogan of his party, the Pakistan People's Party, in the late 1960s. The party governed Pakistan in the 1970s and the slogan became part of history.

When India helped break Pakistan politically in two in 1971 many forces were unleashed (Ahmed e). What concerns us is that Pakistan's struggling film industry withered. The Pakistan cinema, never very strong, just faded away after 1971. Long periods of martial law further discouraged artistic and cultural expression. In any case Pakistani cinema was characterized by stars that imitated the Bombay heroes. As we saw, Nadeem, Hanif and Raza copied Dilip, Raza even took a 'Hindu' name, 'Santosh Kumar', to approximate to his model. A Muslim adopting the Hindu name of a Muslim actor in India; this was a supreme irony in self-consciously Muslim Pakistan. Kamal imitated Raj Kapoor. Presently Rahat Kazmi—more a TV than film star—is the leading 'copy' of Amitabh. Stories were plagiarized from Western or usually Bombay films. The result was often a plagiarized version of Bombay's plagiarized version. Besides, those who wished to see Indian films could do so at home on the VCR. Pakistan also made some excellent television serials which further drove nails into the coffin of the Pakistan film industry. The medium, Urdu, was another problem.

The Urdu film was really limited to urban Punjab and the cities. East Pakistan also provided a market. Stars were exchanged between East and West Pakistan (Nadeem and Shabnam, for examples). But once the Urdu cinema collapsed in 1971 the vernacular cinema emerged to take its place. In the 1980s a thriving Punjabi film industry had grown at the cost of Urdu (Butt, 1987). Its themes were crude, and its characters stereotyped. The heroes shouted far too loudly, its heroines waggled their padded selves far too clumsily and its villains bellowed far too often. It was the price of a monopoly. There was no competition, and the market was limited but fertile. Pukhtu and Sindhi films, too, were made with increasing frequency. Even Baluch films were made. The four recognized 'nationalities' of Pakistan were expressing themselves through their cinema. The growth of regional films coincided with an implicit rejection of Urdu as an imposed and external language. Thus regional linguistic revivalism encouraged the growth of the regional film industry in Pakistan.

Indians (or Pakistanis) once appeared as bit-players in international films: I. S. Johar as the train-driver in *North-West Frontier*, or Zia Mohyuddin as the camel boy in *Lawrence of Arabia*. In keeping with India's emergence and its new confidence, Indian actors like Shashi Kapoor, Kabir Bedi and Shabana Azmi, are now full-blown stars. Amrish Puri made an effective villain in the international hit, *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*. Ismail Merchant with James Ivory, and assisted by the scripting of Ruth Jhabvala, now moved out of India to

make films of and in the Western world. India was no longer only being observed but was also observing. Indian films had truly come of international age.

VIII. Conclusion

We have argued that the popular cinema in India may be employed as a metaphor for society. Although we simplify a complex and diverse area of the world, it allows us to see how people perceive themselves, their values and behaviour. It also enables us to assess the extent of change in society since Independence, over forty years ago. The changes reflect internal society and external policy. They also comment on the role of minorities and smaller neighbouring countries where people see Indian films. Society and cinema, we have argued, show a close relationship which reflects each others' norms and nature.

We witness the dramatic change not only of Indian technology — especially the TV and VCR — but also of Indian social philosophy. From the simple values depicted in the films, we see the transformation to complex ones, from rudimentary black and white technology to high technology. Moral principles, the hopes of a bright vision, a new dawn, give way to a riot, an anarchy, of conflicting individualistic philosophies, many based on little more than a vision of the good life and materialism. The dulcet and subdued songs of rural India make way for the boisterous, raucous, noises of urban life. Fatalism and social differences give way to optimism, slow, inarticulate motion to frenzied bursts of energy, serenity to neurosis, melancholy and resignation to anger and action. Whether the present mood of rebellion and anger is permanent or a transition, a passage, to another phase in society is a question beyond the scope of the paper.

We also point out the continuities, the permanent themes, in society. Each generation looks back to a 'golden age', while it attempts to create and cope with its present reality. Also pointed out is the connection between foreign policy (Fortress India surrounded by hostile, foreign powers), cultural revival (explaining the phenomenal success of *Mahabharat*), the posture of politicians (self-consciously bathed in religious aura) and communalism (like the dramatic emergence of the BJP). The paper is a propaedeutic offering; it indicates further areas of research. We have argued that far from being a marginal pastime the cinema is important in understanding Indian society, culture and politics.

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