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A Study of Indian Popular Cinema

A STUDY OF INDIAN POPULAR CINEMA: S K SINGH

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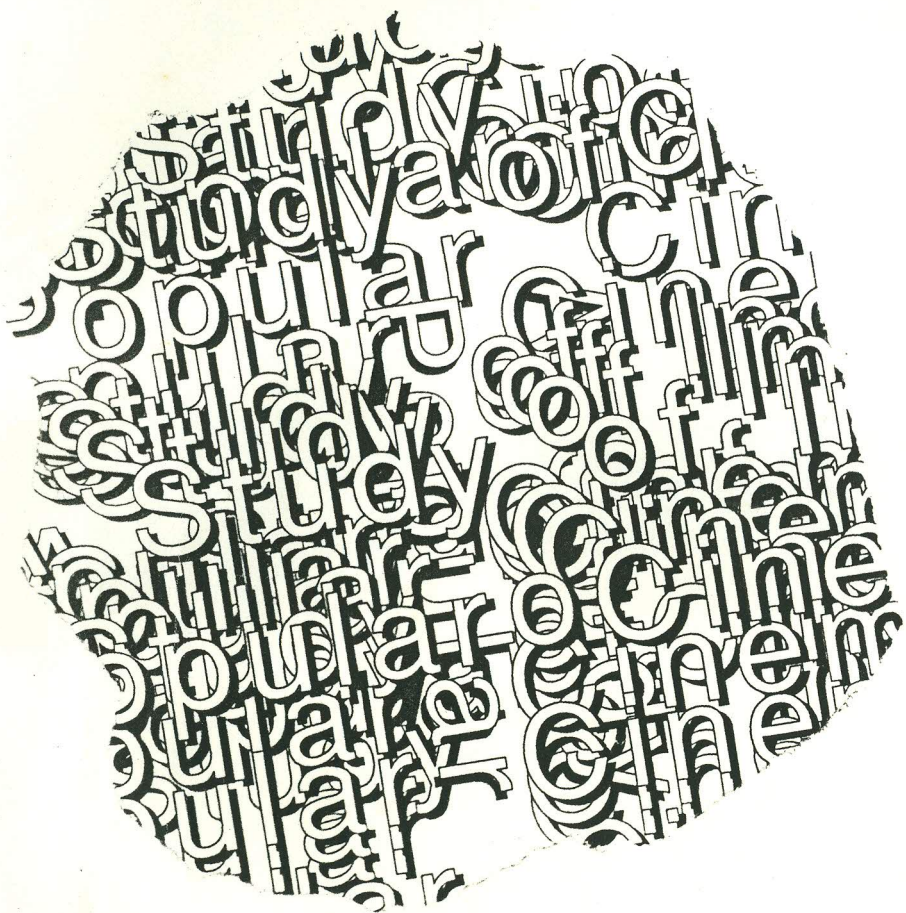
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1. Popular Cinema

4 It is a common belief that the popular cinema is not usually intended to be important or significant - that it is trash because the sole objective behind making of such cinema is to make money and provide cheap entertainment. //

// And still, these movies are considered important for - that they are capable of influencing people - that they can teach wrong values - that they can cause psychological damage etc. //

// The popular films are considered an escapist mass-entertainment which distracts the poor from the real cause of thier misery. There are others who argue with equal zeal that these films play a positive role; these films fulfill psychological needs of the poor and express concern about the real issues of poverty, crime, violence, communal prejudice, the institution of family; and provide a preferable diversion from the cock-fighting, drinking and gambling. //

// In India, more than 800 films are made every year and watched by more than 12 millian people every day. The popular television programmes are either based on popular cinema or imitations of the same. Vividh Bharati radio service transmitts music and other programmes from popular cinema for more than 70% of its transmission time. //



'What is it that makes 'The Popular Cinema' popular?', is the basic question to be answered through this seminar paper. In general terms - to what extent is the popular cinema reflection of society's interests and 'ways of seeing'? And more specifically - what are the ingredients used in these films that tell us about the society that supports and sustains this kind of cinema.

One of the answers offered to the question - why are Bombay commercial films so popular? - is that the masses seek pleasure and diversion from the daily-grind, and that they find it in the explosive action and melodramatic emotions of this cinema.

One may ask : why look for meaning in a product, when no one - nor its makers - nor the audience - intend its contents to be regarded as serious or important?

Not all the movies that are made for the purpose of making money and providing entertainment, become commercial success. So, it is not just the presence of a few 'stars' and 'a formula story' that make a film successful.

The cinema, like language, requires its viewers to understand its grammar in order to be able to enjoy it; and the elements of this language are the style, fashion, archetypes, ideas, beliefs etc. of a particular social reality.

The profit motives behind creation of these films force the producers to produce - what they believe the audience like. According to Pradip Krishnan, 'it is possible to make out a convincing case that it is not the poor audience, but the powerful



producers and distributors who are manipulated by their perception of what the audience wants'.

“This Seminar Paper deals with a few characteristics of Popular-Cinema that make it popular. It was felt that getting a first hand experience would provide a better understanding of the subject. So, eight popular films of the '80s were also viewed and analyzed, in addition to compilation of available literature and one's own perception of the popular cinema.”





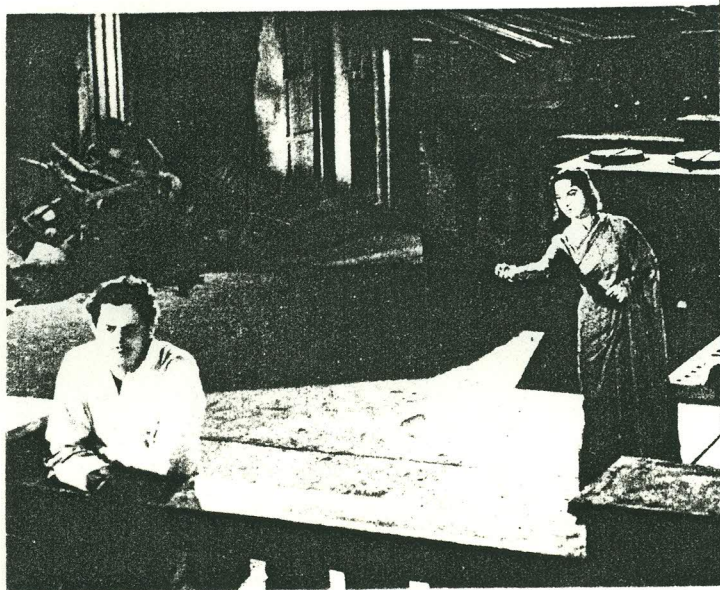
2. Popular Cinema as Collective Fantasy:

An Escape Vehicle

The popular cinema can be viewed as collective fantasy. Millions of people dreaming together, trying to escape the hardships of daily-grind, living in a make-believe world of 'wishfulfilment'.

The reason for existence of this kind of cinema is not very difficult to understand. The makers of these films are strongly motivated by the goal of making money. 'As with pornography, the film makers have to create a work which is singular enough to fascinate and excite, and general enough to excite many', says Sudhir Karkar, a psychoanalyst. The popular films provide a release of tensions caused by tough living conditions by offering make-believe escapist solutions to the real problems.

Like other high-fantasy products, such as children's fairy tales, comics (Amar Chitra Katha) etc. and adult day dreams, Hindi films (or Bombay films) emphasise the main features of fantasy- the fulfilment of wishes and the destruction of enemies. The predictable twists and turns ensure the repetition of the very message that makes the fairy tales so deeply satisfying- namely, that the



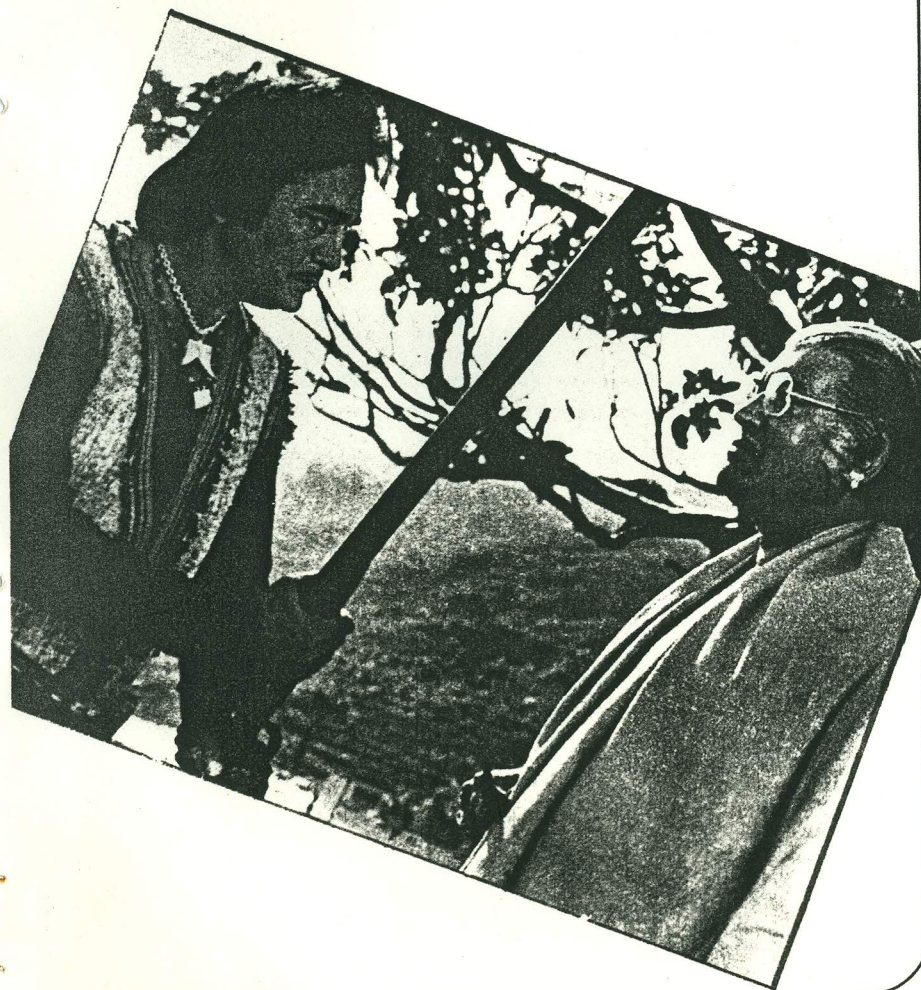
hardships of life are unavoidable, but if one faces them with courage, one will eventually emerge victorious.

Another quality, common to both Bombay films and fairy tales is over simplification and use of extremes in terms of characters and situations.

Wishfulfilment

Wishfulfilment operates at various levels. For one, Bombay film story does not generally have an unexpected conclusion, it only has a predictable climax. It happens as the audience want it to happen. It bases its appeal not on the linear development of a story line but on the special configuration which the film presents of many known elements of themes derived from various traditional tales and other popular films. The viewer is actually expected to know these elements by heart. The producers and story writers of these films reject the idea that the elements of a story are a form of individual creation.

Somewhat like, Ramlila and Raslila, a Bombay film aims at presenting a not-so-unique combination of themes that have been witnessed hundreds of times before. Talking about 'Khayal', a traditional oral narrative theatrical form of Rajasthan, Komal Kothari says, '.....Infact, just before a Khayal troupe arrives in a village, hundreds of copies of the text of Khayal are bought by the audience..... A Khayal performance attracts large audiences of upto 10,000 people (popular!!), and while it is in progress there is usually a steady rumble from the audience, as individuals mouth



the lines that they know by heart. If an actor leaves out a bit from the text, he will angrily be prompted by the audience: "What about these two lines? We want you to say them."..... I have the impression the cinema only makes a pretence at newness, that in reality it is merchandising the same themes over and over again. Infact, I could go so far as to say that an important ingredient in the success of a new film in India is the extent to which the audience can presume that it knows its theme in advance.'

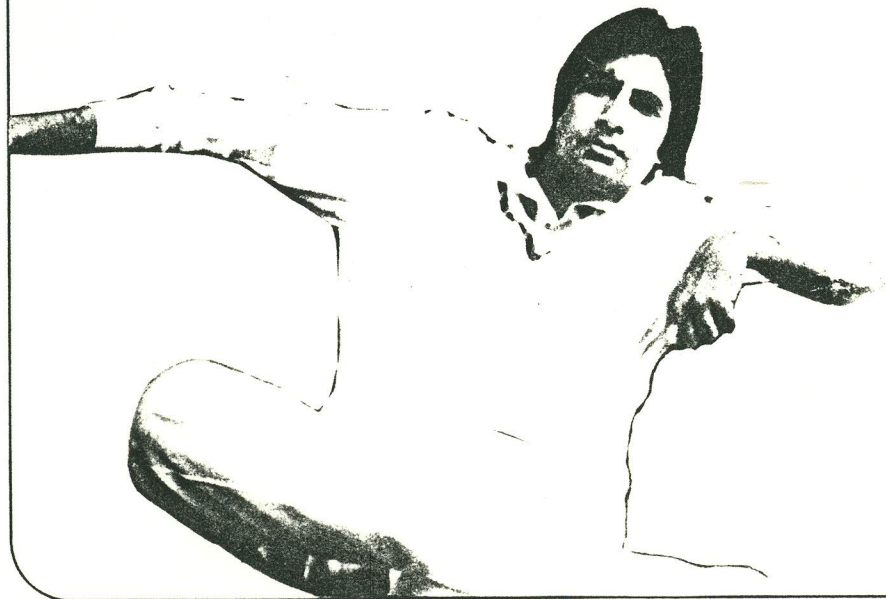
Good Vs Evil

Almost all the popular films, like the fairy tales, deal with one basic theme: victory of good over evil. The theme used in Ramayana, Mahabharata and thousands of folk stories. It is not suprising then that in these films 'black' is shown jet black and 'white' as pure white. Shades of gray, as they exist in real life, seldom find any place in popular cinema. At each moment a character is judged by- what he has been, what he is and what he will become. The viewer knows from the very beginning that the villain- played by an actor who specializes in that role - will, however good in his behavior, bare his true self sometime or the other, and that he will ultimately be humiliated, jailed, beaten up or killed. The hero too, even if shown as 'bad' in the first few reels, eventually, will turn out to be 'good' or become 'good'.

Escape Vehicle

Popular Bombay films, like the fairy tales, also provide

supernatural and unrealistic escape from the real hardships of life. The popular Bombay films have the heroes and the villains possessing magical powers. The hero can single-handedly fight a gang of professional killers, his car can fly over the traffic in case of a traffic-jam and so on. By hook or crook, finally, the 'justice' is done. These films do show the hardships of today, but the solutions they offer are of unrealistic and escapist nature. We shall discuss this issue in detail in the chapter on Cinema of '80s.





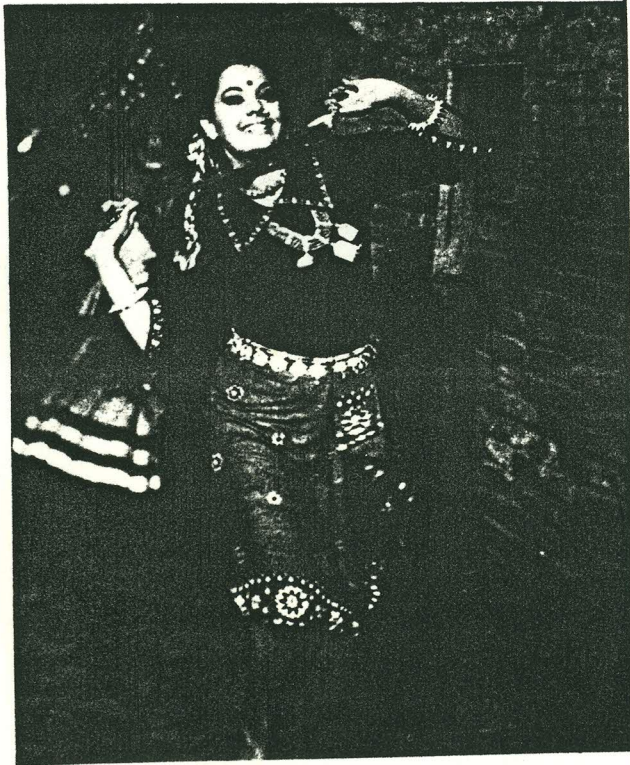
3. Mythology and Folklore

In India - where mythology is still alive, living in temples recitations, as well as in Amar Chitra Katha comics and in folk theatre everywhere -

film has proved an extraordinarily rich medium in which grows, a new collective fantasy that is contained in Hindu myths. After all, a cinema hall does provide the cool and dark atmosphere like a temple (!).

The loss of community living has changed the role of myths in our lives. And yet, the myths remain a dominant feature in some form or the other in popular cinema. The two major Indian epics - namely- Ramayana and Mahabharata still dominate the screen. A few times, the stories from these epics are retold. At times the efforts are made to portray the characters similar to those in the epics. So much so that if the hero is named Gopal the heroine would generally be Radha or Meera. In some films, the situation are borrowed from the epics viz- 'Dropadi's Cheerharan', 'Lanka Dahan' etc.

The Indian popular cinema, at times, also uses the myths created by other popular films. I remember one incident, somewhat related to the same: Sitting in a restaurant, pointing to a potrait of Kshtrapati Shivaji, which was displayed, I was telling a ten year old boy- how Shivaji was so brave a man that he could never be



defeated etc. The boy's immediate reply was- 'Amitabhachchan rahata to usko bhi hara deta' (If Amitabh Bachchan had been present in those times, he could have defeated Shivji as well). I think, this just goes to show the kind of alternative / imaginary / make-believe world, full of myths, the popular cinema offers to its audiences.

The popular cinema provides the masses the 'great escape' they long for; the mental holiday. The bravado of Amitabh Bachchan, the gyrations of Kalpana Iyer, the villainy of Amjad Khan, the sex appeal of Mandakini, the antics of Satish Shah etc - all created, designed and packaged to provide three hours of bliss, without need for initiation of basic training required for appreciation of, say, music or other art forms. Cutting across the barriers of illiteracy, cast and creed, movies today are not a cult but near religion. The cinema theatres are nothing less than temples of worship and 'stars' not less than the gods. It is this mania that shapes the 'Durga' images in Calcutta, each Puja time, close to the popular heroines of today. The common man's new mythology, movies in India, cater to the emotional needs of the biggest cinema audience in the world.

Use of Music

All the major folk theatrical forms in India involve music / songs as part of the narrative, nonseperable from the main story. In Indian traditional performance vocal expression take various forms which, generally, can not be seperated:

SPEECH - DIALOGUE - POETIC RECITATION
- INTONED SPEECH - SONG

It is for this reason that the Indian audience do not feel an artificial break when an actor, without a warning, bursts into singing. The Indian audience are used to viewing traditional folk forms which tightly integrate story and music-dance. Infact, in the popular films plot develops through the songs.





4. The Basic Characteristics of Popular Cinema

The Indian popular films follow a 'grammar' that is different. It is not that these 'rules of grammar' were written first and then the films were made following the same; but, the films were made first and then, probably, these unwritten rules evolved through the process of 'trial and error'. A few of such rules or characteristics which are noticed in the popular cinema are listed here:

Black is black

These films show 'black' as dark black and 'white' as pure white - emotionally, motivationally and morally. All shades of gray are generally avoided. Thus, in popular Bombay film, when somebody has a change of heart, the change is dramatic and total, and clues to such a change are clear and well defined. Even if hero is shown a mixture of good and evil, he is eventually shown be good.



An Overstatement

A disgusted critic once wrote that whenever a clock chimed in an Indian movie he could be sure that it would chime twelve times. Overstatement and melodrama are crucial stylization in the popular films. In these films the characters do not develop through the situations, rather, the situations develop through the characters; if Amitabh is playing the hero we know almost know the whole story and the type of character he is playing. The story is told through a series of incidents which are interwoven through artificial means such as coincidences, accidents and through songs and dances.

Predictable Climax

Bombay film story does not generally have an unexpected conclusion, it only has a predictable climax. It happens as the audience want it to happen. It bases its appeal not on the linear development of a story line but on the special configuration which the film presents of many known elements of themes derived from various traditional tales and other popular films. The viewer is actually expected to know these elements by heart. The popular cinema only makes a pretence at newness, that in reality it merchandises the same themes over and over again. Infact, an important ingredient in the success of a new film in India seems to be - the extent to which the audience can presume that it knows its theme in advance.



Synchronic and Ahistorical

This follows from the previous characteristic; because the climax is always present in the beginning and they are partly modelled on timeless tales, stress is not on linear development of the story. At each moment, a character is judged by - what he is, what he has been and what he will become. Thus, there is a kind of continuity amongst the past, the present and the future. A part of the story is made clear in the beginning by the fact that the role is played by 'a wellknown actor'.

Type Casting

The logic behind type casting seems to be - that the audience can not be left guessing as to who will later turn out to be the hero and who the villain. The hero is played by actors like Amitabh Bachchan and the villain by Amjad Khan. The identification with the characters is provided only to the extent that they are 'types'. Any attempt for identification based on realistic depiction of a character, one that relates him to a particular historical time and space, is seen as a useless exercise.

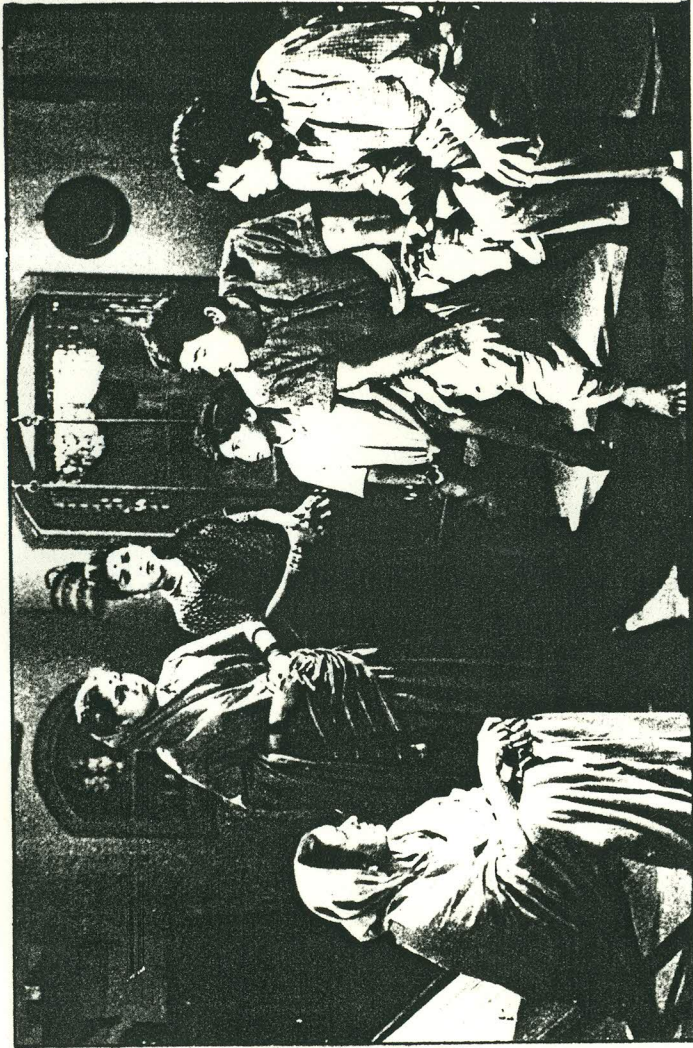
Time and Space logic

A different set of time and space co-ordinates are used. The locale of story might shift without warning from one scene to

another, the heroine may magically change series between the cuts in a song and dance sequence, the seasons may pass while she is singing, and hero, inspite of his poverty may dress like a prince and sing like a well trained professional. It may seem rediculus at first glance, and yet, it is possible look at these with a view that it is product of an alternate form of logic having different sets of co-ordinates.

Culture-free Appeal

The social particulars are present in popular films solely as stereotypical details. The angry, conservative and loud-mouthed father of the heroine may have an upper cast name like Mr Chaudhari or Thakursahib, the local drunk may speak with identifiably Bengali or Tamil accent and the nightclub manager may have a typical Goan name like Mr Pinto, but the hero would simply be Mr Vijay or Mr Raj - surnameless and thus, regionless and castless. The villagers may speak a hindi dialect of east U.P., but when they dance, they dance Garbha or Bhangda, the songs they sing may have Bengali folk flavour.



5. 'The Family' in Popular Cinema

Almost all the popular films portray family relationships of the hero and the heroine in great detail. Often, the family relationships are central to the plot. Here we shall discuss some of the family relationships as portrayed in the popular films.

Mother

A large number of popular films start off with a portrait of idealized mother. This role, like many others, is generally played by actresses specializing in the roles of mother; Nirupa Roy is perhaps the best known. This is the good mother, whose only purpose in life is the welfare of her son, the hero-as-child. Feeding the son, as it is implied in these films, is the greatest pleasure and satisfaction that life can offer her. If for the reasons of the plot, baby hero is unavailable, then the mother is often shown in her private 'Puja Ghar', where she is absorbed in devotion of child Krishna. Generally, references are made of the mother as 'Yashoda Ma' and son as 'child Krishna'.



Another characteristic of good mother in popular films, is her suffering. For Indian popular cinema-'the mother is a holy cow of tradition, and the family lives on the milk of her kindness of which she gives lavishly, keeping nothing for herself'. The suffering is, generally, caused by a drunk husband or 'bad mother-in-law'. The son is often shown as mother's saviour. The scene of a young boy telling his weeping mother, 'Tum mat ro ma, mein jab bada hounge to....' (don't cry mother, when I grow up.....), the mother then clasping the son in excess of strong emotions, is familiar from many popular films.

In *Deedar* (1975), Amitabh has an honest police inspector brother, while he himself has turned against the law and made himself rich. In a typical encounter between the two, the law-breaker asks the upholder of the law, 'I have everything, what have you got with all your honesty?'. The answer he gets is another side of the same coin. The brother says, 'I have mother'.

Bad mother is often shown as mother-in-law or step mother. The strong mother-son tie often results in illtreatment of daughter-in-law in popular cinema and in real life as well. The mother's abhorrence of the other claimant of her son's love- his wife, due to oedipal (?) hostility towards her daughter-in-law, results in bride-burning episodes (?).

'In Bengal (and some other parts of the country as well), until recently, a son going to depart for his wedding (which his mother was not suppose to attend), would utter the ritual words: "Mother, I am going in order to bring a maidservant (dasi) for you".



Obviously, this is an attempt to mollify his mother and to assure her that she need not fear the loss of his love to her traditional rival. Indian Cinema offers many clues to oedipal fears and violences.....', says Chidananda Dasgupta, a famous film critic.

Often, the mother is shown a widow, with her son as the only man in her life, to emphasise the oedipal element(?).

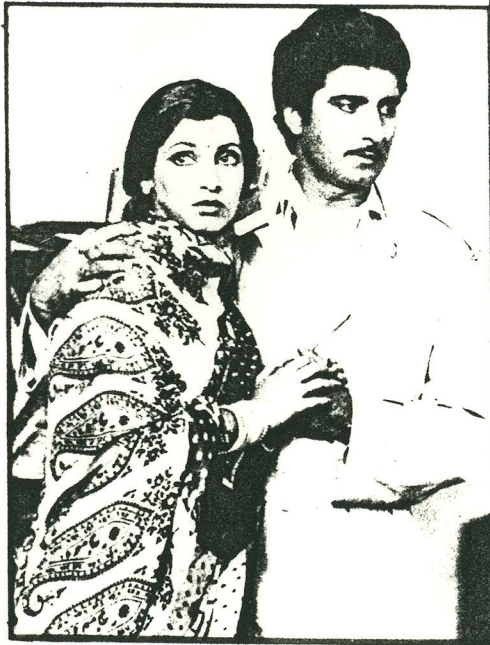
In recent times, however, the importance of mother's character to the plot has shown signs of deminishing.

Father

In Bombay films, father-daughter relationship aspect of 'father' is depicted in great detail. In the films where the father-daughter relationship is important for the plot, the father is often shown as a widower, with the heroine as his only daughter. Either the father is very rich and the daughter a selfwilled, 'spoilt princess' or he is very poor and the daughter the sole, heroic crutch of a poor and ailing father.

Unlike mother-son interactions, many of which are shown to take place in hero's childhood, the father-daughter scenes take place in the heroine's adolescence i.e. when she reaches (Indian) age of marriage.

In these movies, the father is shown very close to his daughter. He invites physical expressions of affection from her and visibly enjoys such demonstrative love. There is an atmosphere of



shared fun and teasing between the two, but only until she falls in love with a man whom her father initially considers quite unsuitable. The mythological prototype which could be given here is Daksha: Daksha's great attachment to his daughter Sati, and his opposition to Shiva as a husband for her.

Wife

The major ambition, as shown in popular cinema, for a woman is to get married and give birth to a son. She is always faithful to her husband even if the husband maltreats her.

In mythology, the example of Sita - 'the perfect wife', the perfect woman, accepted unquestioningly her husband's rejection of her in what was nothing more than an unconditional surrender to the prejudice of male dominated society. It is this image of Sita, that popular cinema tries to project.

Love is by no means forbidden. A woman may love a man - Radha loved Krishna - but it has to be an pure and eternal love. A man may have a wife and a mistress, but both the wife and the mistress can not have an affair with another man. The perfect or ideal woman, when she falls in love, she must give up her profession in order to devote herself to the object of her devotion. As such, these portraits reflect no so much society as it is evolving, but as the way they (the film makers) would wish it to remain.

A good wife, generally, has all the qualities of 'a good mother', mainly to suffer without protest.

In a film made in late seventies, Thodi Si Bevafaii, for instance, Shabana Aazmi is personification of a modern woman. The spoilt daughter, marries the man of her choice, when he loses his money, instead of putting her education to constructive use by working, she simply picks up her son and goes back to her father. The wheel comes to a full circle, eventually crushed and defeated, she is eager to return to her husband. This pattern is endlessly repeated in majority of 'social' films, where the modern, educated woman is seen as a threat to 'status-quo' which has to be maintained.

The good and the bad brothers

This theme was very popular in the seventies, and still used in many popular films. The theme of 'splitting of self', splitting of good and evil. Often, as shown in these films, two brothers, who represent good and bad selves, get separated (geographically and emotionally). The 'good' brother is good, the 'bad' brother is bad, but not portrayed in complete negative terms. 'As a part of the self that should also arouse identifications, however, fleeting and temporary, it could hardly be otherwise', says Sudhir Karkar, a psychoanalyst. The 'badness' is often shown as a result of developmental deprivations, most often longed-for mother's presence.

In many films, the split in self is highlighted by brothers getting separated during childhood, development of each unknown to each other, till final climatic scene in which the confrontation

between the two takes place and the two selves are finally united. The origin of the evil self, in Bombay movies, is very often connected with child's feeling that the mother has turned away from him and, in doing so, taken away his goodness.

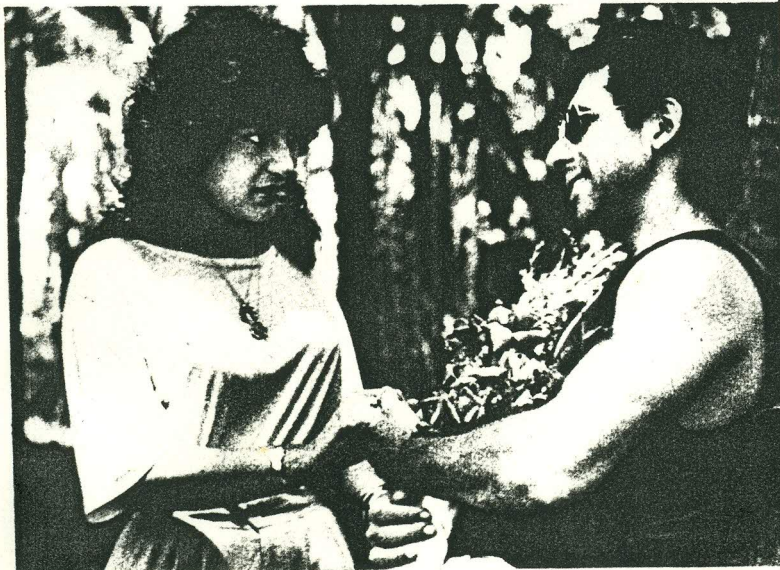
Here, the contemporary myth has a model in the well-known myth of Karna in the Mahabharata. Kunti, the future mother of the five Pandavas, had summoned the Sun when she was a maiden. Though her calling the Sun was just a playful whim - she was just trying out a Mantra - the Sun insisted on making something more of the invitation. The offspring of the resulting union was Karna. To hide the shame at Karna's illegitimate birth, Kunti abandoned the infant and cast him adrift on a raft. Karna, later, supported the bad group - the Kauravas - in the great battle of Mahabharata.

The maternal uncle

Although, traditionally, a minor role in popular movies, the character is often central to the plot. The mother's brother, the maternal uncle, who is, traditionally, supposed to be affectionate and protective of his sister.

Jeevan, the actor, was made to play 'Mama' (maternal uncle) in hundreds of popular films.

In India, the brotherly behavior towards the sister still governs the brother-sister relationship to a large extent. Yet, in popular cinema, the maternal uncle is often shown villainous. He betrays his sister's love and trust, usually, by cheating or robbing her of



her jewellery etc.

The mythological parallel to the murderous uncle is Kansa, Krishna's maternal uncle who tried very hard to kill infant Krishna. It should be noted that Kansa's notoriety as villain is second only to Ravana.

How did this myth come about in popular cinema? I quote Sudhir Karkar, a psychoanalyst, 'The villainous maternal uncle of fantasy, I would suggest, is the result of son's envy of the uncle's place in his mother's affections. In clinical work, patients often recollect and recount the stories their mothers had told them about their brothers..... This leaves little room for a doubt that her brother is the central male character in her emotional life..... The mother's idealization of her brother provokes the son's counter fantasy of uncle being a villain and betrayer of the mother's love and trust'.

Coping with changing values

One of the major functions of popular cinema - whether for good or for bad - is the ability to act as interface between traditional and modern values. At this plane, a Bombay movie acts as a means of:

- giving cultural meaning to western outlook.
- demystifying some of the culturally unacceptable modern structures.



— ritually neutralizing those elements of the modern world which have to be accepted for reasons of revival.

For example, let us take the case of love-marriage. In a society where the arranged marriage is considered the ideal and the most popular mode of establishing a relationship between two families. Hindi movies have created a new legitimacy for love marriage through various devices. Some movies show the couple discovering that unknown to them, their parents had planned to get them married to each other anyway. A few movies 'justify' love marriage by the fact that the hero, separated from the heroine by the barriers of caste, status etc., does a good turn to the family of the heroine, so that the family, in the last scene, guiltily give their girl in marriage to him as a reward. Alternatively, instead of the hero, it is the heroine who does a good turn to the hero's family to win the hearts of the hero's arrogant family.

Similarly, moderate westernization in dress and life style is given some legitimacy by portraying hero / heroine as moderately westernized and villain as a conservative cad or over-westernized clown. Even though the heroine may be shown moderately westernized, she is essentially a good Indian wife, docile and self sacrificing.

A love affair of a widow is allowed to develop in Indian popular cinema, but remarriage is not. In Sholay, Amitabh Bachchan has to die to avoid marriage with a widow.

One can see that efforts are made by popular cinema to maintain

status-quo as far as the norms of the morality and relationships are concerned, even though it accepts the changing values at the surface level.





6. Popular Cinema of '80s

In addition to literature survey and compilation of some thoughts about various aspects of Indian Popular Cinema, a sample study of 'Popular Cinema of '80s' was conducted. The first question to be answered was - how to choose 'popular' for this purpose? Finally, the criteria used was - outstanding public response at the box-office. A list, then, was drawn of the films which were the most successful at the box-office. One film each was chosen for each year from 1980 to '86. These films made the largest box-office collections for the years of their release. Two exceptions were made - one in the case of 'Ardha Satya' and another 'Tohfa'. Ardha Satya was included in the list even though it was the second biggest hit for the year 1983. It was a film which had 'art film' label and yet, went on to become a great commercial success. For the year 1984, Chhota Chetan was the most successful film, but it was excluded from the list because it was 'felt' that the commercial success of this film was due to the novelty of 3D, rather than the contents of the film. Following films were finally chosen for the study*:

- 1980 Asha
- 1981 Ek Duje Ke Liye
- 1982 Namak Halal
- 1983 Andha Kanoon, Ardha Satya
- 1984 Tohfa



1985 Ram Teri Ganga Meli

1986 Karma //

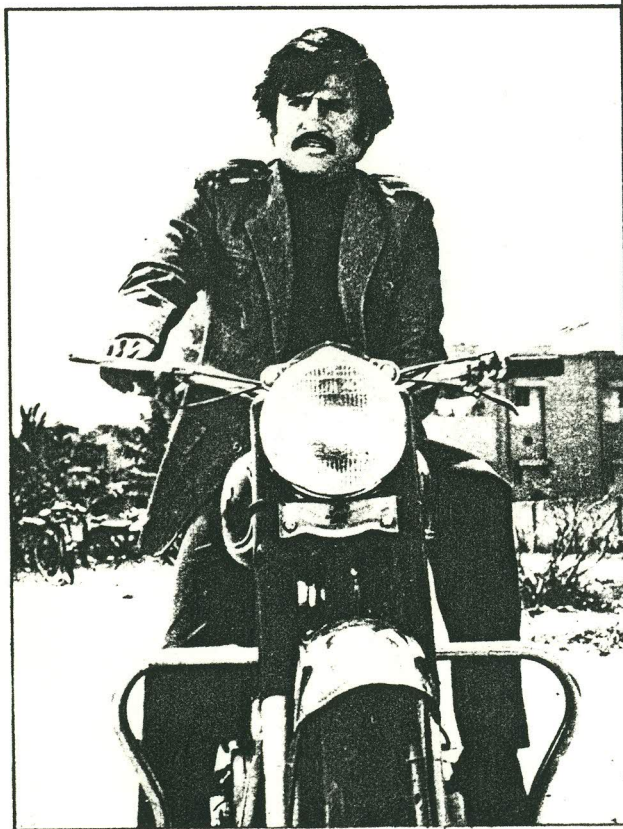
(* source of information: Trade Guide, Bombay) //

// The analysis, attempted, was not from 'cinematic' stand, but from the border point of view of culture. The basic feature of mass media product is repetition, obedience to a pre-established schema. Probably, because of the tensions of the daily-grind and hardships of life, there is a wish to relax, to seek repose in the familiar. It is for this reason that popular cinema explores and exploits the familiar. And yet, there is no pure repetition. As Iqbal Masud puts it - 'There is a variability in the repetition, there is organized differentiation, regulated irregularity.....'.

Even though, the popular cinema of '80s is not much different from the popular cinema of '60s or '70s, the cinema (popular, of course!) of '80s does have few characteristics which were not present in earlier cinema. //

Popular cinema and the state of politics in the country

The year, 1980, was the year when Indira Gandhi came back to power. She was forgiven by the masses. There was a sense of 'hope' in the masses. And yes!, 'Asha' (hope) went on to become the biggest hit of the year. The film is basically about a love triangle. A journey to 'Veshno Devi', another form of goddess Durga (Indira Gandhi ?), is highly glorified. Girish Karnad is



shown as an atheist who finally starts believing in god. The year of hope; and the film Ashha concluded with a statement - hope is life, life is hope.

1981 was the year of regionalism, the year of communal differences, the year of Punjab and Assam problems. Ek Duje Ke Liye, the biggest hit of the year, was about two lovers who can not meet because their families come from two different parts of the country. The film was about the fact that barriers created by caste, region or creed do not affect 'love'.

1982 saw the law and order situation going down in the country. The film which made the largest box-office collection for the year was Namak Halal. The film had much in common with the popular films of '70s. The second biggest hit for the year was Vidhata. The year marked the beginning of films which show hero as messiah.

1983 was, probably, the year of frustration. The law and order situation in the country went from bad to worse. Killings in Punjab and Assam reached their peak. Ever since the emergency, people's distrust of the various arms of bureaucracy, had found more open expression. The character of the police and bureaucracy, in recent period, disillusioned people with political system and its machinery. It was not surprising then that Andha Kanoon and Ardh Satya became the biggest commercial success of the year. Andha Kanoon (blind justice) is about the kind of justice which exists today - available for strong rich and against weak poor. Infact, the film ridicules the judiciary system. As the title song of the film suggests - Ye Andha Kanoon Hai..... . Similarly, the fact that Ardh Satya looks at the corruption and



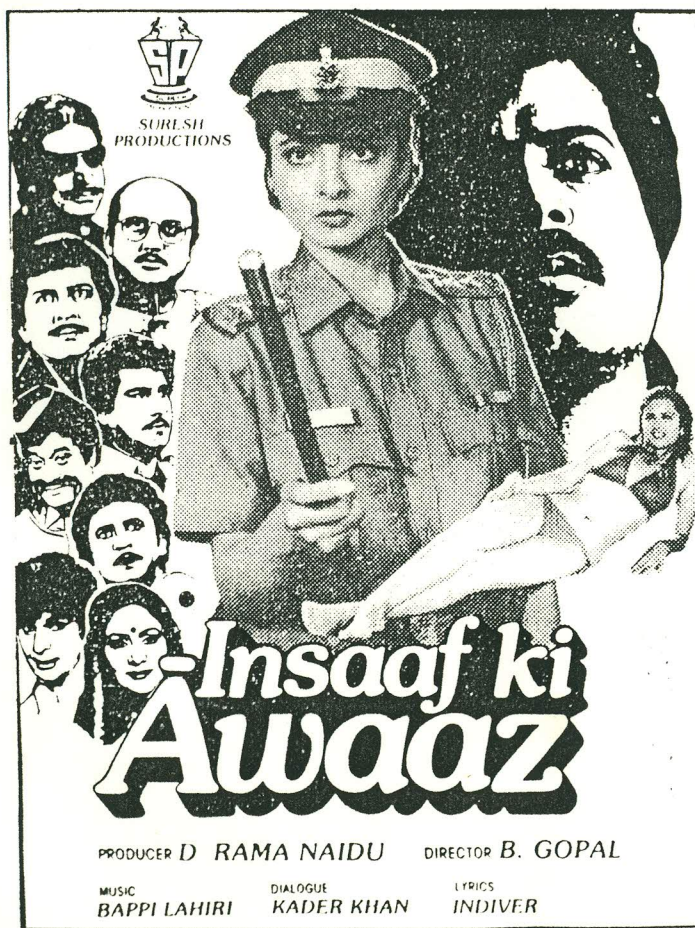
perversion of the system, the police in particular, from the point of view of urban middle and lower-middle class, who constitute the major film going population, may explain the phenomenal commercial success of this film inspite of its 'art film' label.

1985 was the year marked by the assassination of Indira Gandhi, Rajiv Gandhi taking over, Delhi riots etc. The politicians were always as corrupt as they are today, but 'the clean image' of Rajiv Gandhi, as it was projected by the media, made the fact all the more obvious that the politicians were corrupt. By now, a corrupt politician has almost become an archytype in popular cinema. The film which made the largest box-office collections and went on to become a 'block buster', Ram Teri Ganga Meli, had a corrupt politician for a villain.

1986 was the year of V.P.Singh, the finance minister. He was voted 'man of the year' by quite a few national magazines. He created panic amongst the corrupt businessmen. Punjab terrorism became part of life, and it still is. The biggest hit of this year had one V.P.Singh for its hero. He was called Vishwa Pratap Singh (just missed Viswanath Pratap Singh, the finance minister). Terrorism was central to the plot. The hero and three of his subordinates fight the terrorism.

Hero as messiah

The '80s have seen hero emerging as a super human being. 'Ramboism' seems to have taken over, which is not merely a man with a machine-gun; one- it diables dissent by appealing to



chauvinism (Karma, Mard, Ardh Satya, Andha Kanoon), two- it reduces women to powerlessness, who are useless in meeting the crises of '80s according to these films. In Karma, V.P.Singh (Dilip Kumar) strongly opposes Anil Kapur having an affair.

Many of these films revolve around a superman who confronts and destroys the corrupt, debased machinery of law and justice and the unholy alliances between the politicians and the profiteers. The profiteers are portrayed as active participants in crime or, at the very least, as themselves hiring criminals.

Unlike the hero of '50s or '60s, the superhero of '80s is not very different from the villains in his actions and methods, except that we are told - his brutality and trickery are in the service of a supposedly good cause. The films of '80s insist on exterminating 'bad guys', unlike the films of '60s where the villain went through a change of heart. Thus, most films end with a few dozen murders in the name of justice. This creates the mistaken notion that the justice has been done whereas nothing in social system is shown to have changed.

The '80s have seen a new genre of films, like - Aj Ki Awaaz, Insaaf Ki Awaaz, Mard, Coolie etc. and also the TV serial 'Rajni'. All these films have certain common themes and purposes. The most characteristic purpose is to spread contempt and cynicism towards the existing political and economical institutions. However, the films are always careful to limit their criticism to the level at which people come in contact with the rulers. We are assured that at the very top, there are a few 'just' figures. All the problems will vanish as soon as they are brought to the notice of these godlike



eminence. This seems in line with the political culture we are building in our country; the answer to every problem is a petition to Rajiv Gandhi.

Woman in the cinema of '80s

Traditionally, in Indian films, the most important aspect of a woman was motherhood. What happened to the mother of '80s in popular cinema? The mother as an archtype has ceased to be relevant. It is not only the mother but women, in the films of '80s, mostly served as decorative purpose, or as in case of Ram Teri....., as sex object.

There has been no strong performance of a woman character in the popular cinema of Bombay. Dimple, in Sagar, was discribed as 'Jalpari'. Sridevi and Jayaprada are, of course, not more than petty objects of desire. None of the popular films produced in '80s have any woman character which would leave a mark; not because lack of talented actresses, but for the reason that women characters do not have any substantial place in the popular themes of the '80s.

Justice

Justice at the end, or victory of good over evil, has always been central to Indian popular cinema. In popular cinema of '80s, it has taken a special form. Justice in our times can not be acheived by



just means or popular struggle. So, one man rises, uses unjust means as the villain or the system uses, and finally exterminates them, as shown in dozens of films made in the '80s - Andha Kanoon, Ardh Satya, Karma etc. The question arises- can justice be done by exterminating an individual or a group of individuals? Is it acceptable to enjoy the suffering of someone we think bad, but not of someone we think good?

Dream sequences

The use of dream sequences has become a common feature of the popular cinema of '80s. Almost all the popular films have atleast one dream song-dance sequence. One wonders why?

In India, even today, two lovers walking on the street, holding hands, are not acceptable. The Popular Cinema for maintaining its popularity tries to maintain status quo, and still, it needs to show a liberal amount of sex for the reasons of economics- money making being its prime objective. What is the alternative then? - the dream song-dance sequences seem to offer an easy way out. In Tohfa, Sridevi on the brass pots and Jitendra in a position that leaves nothing for imagination.

Even in past, such techniques were used to show sex on the screen; the vamps were, generally, depicted as Anglo-Indians, and thus, by placing them outside the society. Today, the heroines doubling as vamps, leaves no option but to use dream song-dance sequences.

So, as we can see, the Indian Popular Cinema has a structure which is not-so-easy to understand. Theoretically, it should be possible to identify all the parameters that make popular cinema commercially successful, and yet, one wonders if it would be possible to come out with a commercially successful film everytime. The reason, to me, seems that there are too many parameters involved and not-easy-to control. Anyway, the objective of this paper was - to identify the elements used by popular cinema which make it popular and - not how to make commercially successful films.



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