

INDIA

ON BOLLYWOOD SCREEN



At one point in its ongoing war on terror, the CIA discovered the strong hold Bollywood has over the radicalized Islamic groups in the South Asian community in the UK. Soon Bollywood producers were offered all cooperation to shoot parts of their films – films with an anti-terrorism message – in the US. Some of those films did touch the hearts of the audiences.

Hindi cinema is like a veil of mist casting its charm on people far and near, initiated and uninitiated, friends and foes. During the early socialist phase of Raj Kapoor's cinema, his films travelled far to raise outposts of goodwill and friendship. Perhaps no study has ever been done to assess the influence of Bollywood, how far its flavour has spread. Waiting in the long line for the Statue of Liberty ferry one Sunday morning many years ago, I was surprised to hear the familiar tune of *Mera Juta Hai Janani* being played by a busker on his mouth organ. The tall African American smiled giving me a nod of recognition.

For India, Bollywood has been an alter ego, a mirror image. It does not reflect India in a perfect, clinical way but through a prism of absurdities and idiosyncrasies. A bandit on horseback overtakes a long-distance train, a man on his deathbed makes a long statement with the right stress, pauses and passion, and then suddenly falls silent, breathing his last. Things are always melodramatic, they happen on a large scale, a little garish, often bizarre too. But essentially, the films, churned out of the dream factory, are about us, ordinary, vulnerable, fragile folk;

they are about our times, rise and fall of empires, and about this land, its epiphany and melancholy.

India and Bollywood, come to think of it, are tied in a process of osmosis, intertwined, entangled in a give-and-take relationship. It's a magic canvas registering the aspirations, angst, turmoil and trends around the country. Of course, this process of documentation is neither academic nor accurate, but still, deeply authentic.

The dream merchants' fare has been part of our growing up. In a sense, Bollywood has grown within us. Each one of us recollects his first Hindi movie with the same fondness as someone in another culture would the first date. Which one is your first Bollywood movie? Well, the answer varies from generation to generation. For someone it was Bimal Roy's *Madhumati*, for me Raj Kapoor's *Sapno Ka Saudagar*, for another it's Aamir Khan's *Qayamat Se Qayamat Tak*. The kid I saw grow up down the corridor may have begun life with a Salman Khan starrer.

Why do we see these films? A more exacting question could be: why do we find the pull of tinsel town so irrevocable?

Because they're inside us.

Many of us who were enamoured of the works of great masters like Kurosawa, Godard, Renoir and Ray, and in the iconoclastic years of our youth sneered about the *buffoonery* of the Bombay films, unknowingly let the fantasies creep into us. In those days, many middle-class homes had imposed injunctions against the belly-baring, violence-prone films; they were bad influence on young impressionable minds, we were told. For high-school boys, however, they were temptation, kind of a forbidden fruit. Bunking school for a movie – that was the test of the early teens, like crossing the final frontier.

Much later, studying the journey of India, I realized that Bollywood was an important component of the nation's life. Those dream merchants have been interpreters of the idea of India. And

despite the drollery, hackneyed tropes and clichés, their works document the Indian journey in all its nuances.

The first hundred years of Hindi cinema has centred around three towering figures – Raj Kapoor, Amitabh Bachchan and Shahrukh Khan. There have been many others, many more talented than the three; but it is no measure of their gift that they have represented their times more authentically than others. In a way, Raj Kapoor gave voice to the nation's age of innocence: the Nehruvian idyll, robust dreams of an egalitarian society, socialist worldview and a firm belief in the goodness of fellow human beings; that evil is only temporary, a dark patch disappearing in the morning light. The world of Raj Kapoor was unmistakably Chaplinesque; despite many iniquities, depravity, there was plenty of goodness, love, compassion in this world. This trust in the newly independent nation, the tryst with its destiny came in for a rude jolt in the late sixties with worsening economic conditions. The milieu of a majority of Amitabh Bachchan's movies in the seventies was dark, malevolent and grimly distrusting. The good man got home with a bloody nose at the end of the day. To avenge the wrongs, wreak havoc all around, he needed to tear off the policeman's uniform; he needed to be an outsider, a dysfunctional man. And by the time Shahrukh Khan shone in the Bollywood firmament, urban, middle-class India got infatuated with the fascinating figures of growth.

In the years after the economic reforms it was a different India, not Raj Kapoor's country of deprivation, slights and hurt. Bachchan's anger at an opaque, inherently corrupt system was behind us. It was a shiny sleek land of big brands and 10 per cent growth. As all the social indicators point out, yet another edition of India is unfolding at the moment – informed, technology-driven, crying for renewal and openness. Very soon, a new hero will emerge to stride across the big screen capturing the aspirations of the new wannabes.

And the Bollywood *hungama* will go on...

