

BIASES: FROM BOLLYWOOD TO TINSEL TOWN

Saisha Hayes

What problems does India have?’ my mother asks me, perched on the sofa, inquisitive eyes wide open hoping for a detailed answer. To be quite frank with you I know as much as the next spoiled NRI brat, who pronounces their name Ar-PAN instead of Arpan. I suppose my mother thinks I’m qualified due to my ‘exposure’ to the outside world. A self-proclaimed nomad, I have lived in seven countries and been to 13 schools. However, throughout this whole experience I have been in my cute little expatriate bubble, so I am speaking from a place of extreme privilege, I am speaking as a person who has only seen glimmers of India every June and July, not every day, minute or second of my life. I haven’t gone to school there I haven’t experienced the groping on a DTC bus or the laughter and warmth from total strangers.

Being an NRI is a mindboggling experience, especially for one that has a Bihari mother and a British father, combine that with the moving every two or three years and you have someone who doesn’t really have a strong sense of home – or identity – but with an adaptiveness that Charles Darwin could only hope to see in organism. This constant uprootal has allowed me to recognize patterns and how even though countries could be drastically different there are always subtle similarities. This exposure is what enables me to proceed to make a critical comparison between the portrayal of women in Bollywood and Hollywood and what the consequences of these portrayals are, or why they reflect underlying problems in society.

Watching movies in India is often a collective experience with the members of a joint family sprawling around the home theatre. In Europe no one can think of home extending beyond the parents and children. Here in India many families tend to have uncles and aunts, grandparents, cousins and even nephews and nieces. And they watch a movie together whether in the family living room or in the neighbourhood multiplex. This is primarily why Bollywood differs from Hollywood. In many ways Bollywood movies are reminiscent of television soaps, they have romance, violence, drama all rolled into one. As an industry they are aware that movie going is a family affair, an event experienced together by the entire clan, and therefore they need to have different elements to entertain each of its member; for the young girls there’s a handsome but slightly misogynistic hero, for the perverted uncles there are sizzling hot babes dancing in skimpy wet saris... Bollywood movies are a buffet offering something to everyone. Movies as an artform can either challenge, reinforce or hold up a mirror to its immediate society. Jean-Luc Godard, pioneer of the 1960s French New Wave film movement, says, ‘Cinema is truth.’ As a film student, who has studied the subject in-depth, I cannot agree more.

Bollywood often sets the yardstick for Indian values benchmarking the rights and wrongs, it reflects them too. There is definitely some bidirectional ambiguity to which both are plausible.

TIME TO REFORM HOW WE REFORM INDIA

Bhaskar Chakravorti

As I began to write this piece, with my morning stack of newspapers around me, I was struck by a headline in London's *Financial Times*: 'Hopes for Reform after Modi's Triumph Drive Foreign Buyers to Overweight India'. This may be that one instance where it is a good thing to be overweight; that said, the weight now sits squarely on the shoulders of the Modi administration that has made a thunderous return to power. More significantly, I was also left wondering about what these 'reforms' might be.

I would suggest that with its renewed mandate, the Modi 2.0 administration might want to reconsider the idea of 'reform' and break out of its traditional notions of reform that are primarily centered around reducing regulations and red tape. It ought to consider a more expansive – and more fundamental – interpretation of what reform might mean.

Let me offer three examples.

New Focus on Ease of Living: Reform the State of Well-Being

Let us put aside GDP and growth rates or how many trillions we have to add to get to the administration's \$5 trillion goal in 5 years and ask a simple question: How is the ordinary Indian doing in terms of their day-to-day sense of well-being?

According to Gallup's 2018 World Poll of 150 countries, India scored the lowest in the world in terms of perception of well-being: A shocking three per cent of Indians reported (in 2017) that they were 'thriving'. In comparison, China's response was 21 per cent. In fact, even in India, the response back in 2014 was 14 per cent. Now, you might find it odd, as I did, that, simultaneously, the majority of these respondents felt local economic conditions were getting better and even gave Modi an 80 per cent approval rating.

It is heartening to see the Prime Minister emphasize improving 'ease of living' as a goal for the bureaucracy under Modi 2.0; but this issue needs to be central and not a peripheral nice-to-have topic. So, here is my recommendation to the Modi 2.0 team: focus on improving well-being of not just the average Indian, but include those who are in the most wretched of circumstances. Find out what is behind this shockingly low Gallup number and take steps to address the underlying issues. I would also suggest resisting the knee-jerk 'all polls are nonsense' response. The infinitely forwarded euphoric messages on your WhatsApp feed and – as we are now discovering – the official GDP figures could be misleading as well. Besides, Gallup has been in this business for a while, so it is a little bit more credible than your crazy uncle, a fundamentalist friend or a political hack.

SARKAR AS THE CASTLE

Reshma Hingorani

The year was 1985.

A starry-eyed gynaecologist, fresh from the oven, faces the crossroads – private practice with moolah or public service with salvation? Not a difficult choice for someone deeply steeped in true middle-class values.

She would soon get familiarized with the decentralized, complex network of primary, secondary, tertiary and quaternary levels of healthcare. She wouldn't be able to spot the highly skewed urban distribution, her only brush with villages being the month-long rural posting mandatory to get her degree, in the city suburbs. She has, of course, remained too insulated to fathom the role of different state governments and vote-bank politics.

The year was 1986.

Fate transports her to that dreamland back then – yes, the US of A, and thus ensues a see-saw ride between tiny dispensaries in the back of Delhi's nowhere and the glitzy mother of all opportunities, replete with its high-tech facilities and what seems like instant nirvana!

Within a week of arriving there, she witnesses a fellow shopper throwing an epileptic fit. She rushes to help but is held back by her friend.

'Not here – legal issues you know.'

'But I'm a doctor, I need to help!'

Her argument is drowned by a siren. Within minutes, the paramedics have wheeled away the patient, as the traffic stands still by the roadside, making way for the speeding ambulance.

Quality healthcare is easy to recognize.

And best experienced first-hand, as a few months later, she herself wakes up in a hospital bed one morning – having thrown a seizure in sleep. Not only has she been fully investigated and treated, but her neatly packaged belongings including some jewelry, are next to the pillow – as safe as she is!

Gosh, it's difficult to shuttle between the cramped health outlets and chokingly crowded large hospitals back home! And also between the two countries. All the time now she is plagued by the dilemma: 'What was I doing there? I should have been here long ago!'

But serving the poorest of the poor it is going to be, and the permanent pensionable government job is an easy winner.

The year was 1990.

Her rose-coloured spectacles steadily losing sheen, and the stars in her eyes not yet dimmed, and then, the final straw – this tête-à-tête with her boss:

'But ma'am, I've conceived after four years, this is a precious pregnancy!'

'And who will run the MTP clinic?'

'But ma'am, we advise complete bed rest to patients of threatened abortion!'

ASIAN DRAMA: INDIA AND THE OTHER GIANTS

Sarathi Acharya

At the onset of the Great Chinese Famine in 1958, Chairman Mao, idiosyncratic that he was, directed that sparrows be denied landing on tree branches, the grass... anywhere lest they have a share of the already scarce grains. Thousands of people, particularly the party faithful, began beating pans and canisters to scare away the descending birds. The Great Sparrow Campaign during which the species nearly depleted leading to a serious ecological imbalance, underlined the terrible food crisis China was going through.

Around the same time, hit by acute food scarcity, India was compelled to purchase rice from the US under the Public Law 480 programme whose conditionalities were extremely harsh. America's excess rice bought during 1956-1959 cost about ₹452 crore.

Fast forward to the future. Through a series of experimentations, reforms and initiatives, China, specifically since 1983, forged ahead embarking on reforms to improve land-use efficiency, rationalise land management, harmonise urban and rural development, and create land markets. Production and productivity rose and paved the way for industrialisation through the classic 'agriculture-to-industry' route. The paddy yields in the recent times have exceeded the target of five tonnes per hectare. The proportion of workers engaged in farming to the total workforce, going by the 2018 figures, is 17.5 per cent, down from more than 70 per cent in the 1970s. This seems to indicate a high level of mechanisation of the farming process.

For its part India, scarred by repeated food crises and consequent political turmoil in the mid-sixties, took a massive initiative in 1966 for self-sufficiency in food. Known as the Green Revolution, the move saw heavy induction of technology and use of high-yielding seeds boosting particularly the wheat production in Punjab and Haryana. Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and agriculture scientist MS Swaminathan were the two heroes of this revolution. Within a few years India attained self-reliance ending its dependence on others for food. It's another matter that instead of consolidating the gains, the policymakers let agriculture languish by their lopsided priorities resulting in the spectre of large-scale farmer suicides and rural-urban migration by the turn of the century.

Let us look at the picture in its totality to understand why and how India lags behind some of the other Asian giants on key parameters.

The starting point in any development process is creating conditions for rapid agricultural development. East Asian countries initiated significant agrarian reforms from the 1950s onwards and most were complete in the next quarter century or so. Southeast Asian countries, too, have embraced reforms though the degree of success has varied across the region. By contrast, South Asia has fallen behind by not addressing the agrarian issues adequately. This resulted in poor implementation of agrarian reforms in most parts of India, or no reforms at all – in Bihar and much of Pakistan.

PASSAGE TO THE AWARD NIGHT

Nikhita Nair

Perhaps, if one wishes to remain an individual in the midst of the teeming multitudes, one must make oneself grotesque', Salman Rushdie pithily observes in *Midnight's Children*.

This seems to be an Indian's only option when it comes to leaving a dent on the world. If you look at the rubrics for benchmarking excellence globally, India perilously exists on the outer ream of the periphery, nowhere near the centre. Take the highest awards for a yardstick to assess achievements in areas like science, literature and the entertainment industry; despite intermittent flashes of genius, India's share of the honours is minuscule.

Pathetic institutional infrastructure, bureaucratic stranglehold over processes of intellectual excellence and creative expressions, lack of funding, inadequate opportunities, and above all absence of a professional culture – all this has been responsible for India's underachievement in winning recognition from the world. The Indian situation seems to have perfectly illustrated American psychologist Abraham Maslow's celebrated theory about the 'hierarchy of needs'. In his 1943 paper published in *Psychology Review*, Maslow argues that man has to meet his physiological needs before satisfying his intellectual or creative urges. In India, the early struggle to overcome the obstacles is so exhausting that one burns out before climbing to the top of the pyramid for the glory of success. Moreover, the system bequeathed to us by the British colonizers is more attuned to the privileged than talent.

The good story is that despite this bleak scenario Indians have regularly made it to the global big league over the years. By sheer determination and grit they overcame huge obstacles – both systemic and societal – to compete with the world and be appraised for the awards.

Of course India's search for intellectual excellence has had a long start. Ancient Indians had built a knowledge society with significant contributions to areas like astronomy, mathematics, medicine and surgery. The 12th century astronomer Bhaskaracharya's seminal work on mathematical techniques, cosmology and law of gravity left a lasting impact on the world. So were the works of Aryabhata and Brahmagupta. Sushruta, author of *Sushruta Samhita*, one of the world's oldest treatise on medicine dating back to the 6th or 7th century BC, is considered the 'Father of Plastic Surgery'. The mathematical concept of 'zero' was an invention of ancient India. This land that has always excelled in pursuing knowledge, should have led the hunt for excellence.

The point is we lost our edge with the arrival of technology. In a field where bare, raw talent alone mattered India was ahead of others. When the process of pursuing excellence got expensively mechanized India started lagging behind. But there is no space for defeatism just because Brahmagupta pioneered the concept of the negative number. As we are presently catching up with the world closing the technological gap, there is hope again of an Indian revival. This is perhaps the time to look back on our record in winning laurels in the international arena.

INDIAN VOICES TO THE WORLD

Jad Adams

I can hardly remember a time when I did not know about Srinivasa Ramanujan. This is because my headmaster, who was a mathematician by training, thought it a good idea to tell us boys his story. It was the tale of a lowly Indian clerk, born in Erode in 1887, the son of a silk merchant's clerk who became known as one of the most profoundly original thinkers in the history of mathematics.

Though with very limited education, Ramanujan's gifts were apparent to those who took an interest in mathematics and one of them thought he might like a textbook of applied maths which he took and devoured, proving all the theorems with zest and then starting to invent his own. For the next few years he worked on his own, reinventing large parts of Western mathematics.

Ramanujan's talent at last brought him to the attention of the British colonial administration in Madras and he was given a job as a clerk which gave him ample time to work on mathematics. With the support of his immediate superior, he wrote to GH Hardy of Trinity College, Cambridge, who was a leading figure in the field.

Some of Ramanujan's theories, Hardy said, 'defeated me completely, I had never seen anything in the least like them before.' He had Ramanujan travel to Cambridge to work at the university. Though homesick and finding it difficult to obtain vegetarian food, between 1914 and 1919 he turned out a series of enduringly influential papers on the subject of number theory. He died at 33 from tuberculosis.

On reflection, the cultural resonance of how I know of him is important: at one time Indian schoolchildren would be told tales of the heroes of the British Empire to inspire them. Here we were in the 1970s with the empire fully in shut-down mode being told an inspiring story about a former colonial subject. His example made young people of all nations feel that mathematics could be an exciting adventure.

I even remember an anecdote that was used to demonstrate Ramanujan's almost superhuman abilities. It concerned a visit Hardy made to Ramanujan's lodgings when he was ill (as he often was in the cold and damp of wartime England). Hardy, in common with many clever people, didn't have much small talk and as numbers were all they really had in common he casually remarked that the cab he came over in was 1729, which he said was a dull number.

'No,' Ramanujan replied immediately, 'it is a very interesting number; it is the smallest number expressible as the sum of two cubes in two different ways.' After this exchange, 1729 became called as Ramanujan's name. He had his own number – if that isn't cool, I don't know what is.

Well, what is even more cool than that is having his own movie. Dev Patel starred as Ramanujan in the 2015 film *The Man Who Knew Infinity*, based on a book of the same name by Robert Kanigel. While many stars of entertainment and sports have had a film made about them, very few people working in the field of higher mathematics have. A couple who have are cosmologist Stephen Hawking who had *The Theory of Everything* made about him in 2014 and mathematician John Nash with *A Beautiful Mind* in 2001.

CRICKET EMPIRE IS STILL A SPORTING MIDGET

Mihir Bose

In the summer of 2012 Abhishek Bachchan came to the London Olympics as a brand ambassador for Omega. As always happens at such events the brand hosted events at a house entertaining the media with excellent wine and food, and celebrities were paraded in the hope that their words would provide the media coverage to justify the investment. Omega did it in style and at one such event the young Bachchan was the star speaker talking about the excitement he felt about attending his first Olympics. In London, India had its best ever Olympics winning six medals and Bachchan spoke about his hopes for Indian sport.

However, when I pointed out that India's six medals did not include a single gold, and it not only ranked below China, who came second to the USA, but also Taipei and many countries in Africa and the Caribbean like Algeria, Uganda, Trinidad and Tobago and the Bahamas, he brushed it aside. And when I further probed why he was not angry with such a dismal Indian performance he said, 'What is the use of anger?' But while there was a Gandhian touch in the answer for me it summed up why India remains a culturally rich country but a sporting midget – apart from cricket.

The world's second most populous country, largest democracy and now fifth biggest economy, higher than the UK, India, since it began competing in the Olympics in 1920, has won the grand total of 28 medals, only nine golds, eight of them in hockey – but none since 1980, when because of the American inspired boycott many powerful hockey nations like Germany did not take part. If you ignore Norman Pitchard, India's sole representative in the 1900 Olympics who won two silvers in 100 metre and 200 metre sprints, the IAAF with good reason considers him to have represented Britain in the Olympics, no Indian athlete has ever won a track and field medal at the Olympics and this after nearly a century of competing in the Olympics. In Beijing in 2008, an Olympics which was China's great 'we have arrived on the world stage' card, India's ratio of medals-won to population was one per 383 million Indians. In Beijing its hockey team, once the greatest in the world, did not even qualify for the Olympics. Yet India celebrated at Beijing as if it had conquered a new frontier and all because for the first time it had won an individual gold and that too in shooting, very much a minority sport.

The London failure was all the more galling despite the fact that millions had been poured into Indian sport by one of Britain's richest men – Lakshmi Mittal. The causes of this failure are endlessly analysed by sociologists, but I am convinced about one reason for the appalling record. This was most vividly demonstrated when just before the London Games at a reception in India House the visiting Indian sport minister proudly announced that coaches who did well would get jobs as civil servants.

INDIA MUST GROW THE INDIAN WAY

Mark Tully

Very few commentators from the West have seen and interpreted India from as many prisms as **Mark Tully**, former BBC Bureau Chief in Delhi. Tully's life has been intertwined with the Indian journey from the final phase of the Raj through many crucial moments in the country's post-colonial history. Born in Calcutta in 1935, he was sent by his businessman father to a British boarding school in Darjeeling. He was four years old. Five years later he went home to England and joined Twyford School, Hampshire to complete his schooling.

Graduated from Trinity Hall, Cambridge, he joined BBC as a broadcast journalist. In 1965, he came back to India as a BBC correspondent and reported to the world the ebb and flow of India, its big moments and gloom. Whether it was the 1971 Bangladesh War, the Emergency or Operation Bluestar at the Golden Temple in Amritsar, the world heard the news first from the BBC man. Perhaps it was a compliment to his bold journalism that he had to leave the country during the Emergency. It's an equal tribute to Tully that he received Padma Bhushan, one of the highest civilian awards in India, and also knighthood in England. For Indians for a long time BBC news had been synonymous with him. During his 30 years with BBC in India Tully saw the country in many dimensions – cultural, spiritual, political – and sought to understand the East-West binary. Are India's spiritual traditions more desirable than the technology-driven progress of the West? In 1997, when India celebrated 50 years of Independence, he recollected his childhood in British India in an the largest economies in the world, is assuredly moving forward to consolidate its position with a big focus on infrastructure and technology despite lingering issues of underdevelopment, skewed growth and systemic flaws, Tully reflects on the enigma of India again. In a wide-ranging interview to **Nikhita Nair** of *The Equator Line* he dwells on India's development pitch. **Excerpts:**

You have been reporting India to the world for half a century now. Perhaps no other journalist from the West has seen the country as closely as you have at many crucial junctures of its post-colonial history. On the whole how much has India progressed – in comparison with not its neighbours but the developed world?

India has progressed in its own special way because India has its own special set of problems, which in turn, affects the country's development. The democratic structure India has put in place provides stability. Democracy offers different advantages to a nation. It obliges India to try and carry all along with it in a way that undemocratic or totalitarian governments are not able to. The Indian system is very strong and has a different style of functioning. There is direct election of candidates through securing a majority in a particular constituency.

OUT OF DARKNESS AND INTO FUTURE HOPE

Tim Grandage

I have lived in Kolkata for the past 32 years and believe that India's greatest strength is its diversity and its tolerance. I never fail to marvel at the way people from different backgrounds look after each other and how the different communities, by and large, live happily side by side and enjoy joining in each other's festivals. I remember being surprised that the President of the Durga Puja committee near Newmarket was a Muslim who enjoyed designing and raising the funds to build the pandal where the goddess Durga was worshipped. India throws many challenges and stretches every sense in the human body to the limit with its colours, tastes, sights, temperatures, and the sheer volume of human beings that walk its streets and live in its countryside. I remember my father who visited me around 23 years ago at the age of 80. He was blind and frail, and I worried that as he could not see, Kolkata would be too much for him. He laughed and told me that he was quite relieved that he could not see as all his other senses had been so fully stretched that he could not cope with anything more. India to me has always been a country where the people are optimistic and usually see things positively, they enjoy the fun in life.

Soon after I arrived in Kolkata I met an elderly English woman who was married to a Bengali and had lived in the city for over 40 years. I went to her to try and clear my mind and to help me sort out my thoughts. I asked her hopefully, 'Since you have lived in this city for 40 years, perhaps, you would explain to me how India works?' She smiled wisely and replied that after 40 years she was as confused as ever but at a slightly higher level, and after 32 years this is how I feel as well.

I was posted to Kolkata by HSBC in 1987 as a young manager to its Shakespeare Sarani Branch. I relished living in the city with its vibrant and chaotic lifestyle. My customers were interesting and challenging and my staff kept me on my toes with their strong sense of right and wrong. Their communist dogma, learned from their charismatic leader Jyoti Basu, taught me that, as their manager, I was from the bourgeoisie who should not be allowed to tell the 'workers what to do'. I once asked an office assistant to move a cash till from one place to another only to be told that that was 'coolie's work' and he was not a coolie, so I did it myself. This produced a strong reaction; suddenly many of my colleagues stopped their work and it took a lot of persuasion to get them to start again. It was a valuable learning experience for me, and it taught me that I needed to adapt myself to their way of thinking if I wanted to get the work done and keep my customers happy.

It was in Kolkata that two things happened that changed the direction of my life. Every morning when I drove to work I would dump my car near the Rackets Club and walk the 500 yards to the branch; here I came across small ragged children who slept on the steps of the Bank. Whilst I never shoo-ed them away, as everybody else did, I felt guilty because I did nothing about their plight. After work I returned to my car at about midnight and drove home. It was on one of these evenings that

I was surrounded by a group of children who slept rough on the street next door to the Rackets Club.

HOME AND SOME OTHER PLACE

Taha Kehar

Every morning, Sahir took the Piccadilly Line to commute from Hounslow East to Russell Square. It took over 40 minutes when there weren't any delays or disruptions in the underground services. But his was lonely travel even though he was never alone. The coach was crammed with men and women in their tweeds and suits – on their way to work; the few teenagers had their hands stuck deep into their trouser or coat pockets to suck in the warmth against the biting chill. The loud boys, their backpacks on, recalled a football match or a fight on the school playground.

Ignoring their thick cockney accent and pointed glances, Sahir would look out the window and watch the drifting green fields that dotted his line of vision. They reminded him of Fatehnagar – its lush green meadows, canopied peepal trees and the slow breeze with its rustic charm. When the train slid into the cavernous tunnel, Sahir's memories of Fatehnagar fell away. In that spooky darkness he kept looking at the window and scrutinized his reflection – one odd man who had traveled to this cold country leaving behind the street-corner chatter, bazaar noise, rich aroma of kebab on charcoal fire, ripe smell of mangoes – everything that Fatehnagar used to be.

When he got to Russell Square station, Sahir took the elevator to the ticket hall, jostled through a sea of impatient commuters at the automatic gates, and hastened to the Pret across the street where Noah was waiting for him. He always sat at their usual window table sipping coffee from a red paper cup. He kept checking his watch. Noah had always come first and waited for him. At times the wait could be very long indeed. Now for a change he was the first to sit at the table looking out.

'Love makes us do strange things,' Noah would say softly holding his hand whenever Sahir apologized for being late. He smiled indulgently holding him warmly. Hugging him Sahir often felt he belonged here – this cold place, filthy snow lining the streets, Fatehnagar had never been his memory. Sahir was no longer homesick. In those brief moments, London felt like home justifying his escape from a world that didn't seem to understand him.

After coffee and sandwiches – actually their breakfast – the two hurriedly walked down Russell Square Garden towards the SOAS campus for their classes in the law school. By the late afternoon, after the classes were over, they met again in the university's basement bar. As usual Sahir ordered two tall glasses of Heineken, chips and a samosa, the last one a reminder of home, home meant Fatehnagar. His boyfriend, too, would have some idea about the place where people bit into such deep-fried snacks.

When they had first met during Fresher's week, Sahir spotted a plateful of samosas inside a glass cabinet at the bar. Instinctively, he placed a one-pound coin on the counter and the bartender gave him the mouthwatering snack on a paper plate.