

Harmony in Popular Hindi Cinema

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With the spread of globalization during the last twenty-five years, there has been a corresponding emergence of identity politics in several countries around the world. In India, the process of economic liberalization and the disparate rates of development in different parts of the country have been additional factors in the wide-spread questioning of traditional identities and social formations. Consequently there have been increasing factions, fractures and fissions in the national consciousness and many of these are reflected in literature and cinema as varying notes of dissonance.

Popular Indian cinema is an entertainment juggernaut whose chief function is to cater to the fantasies and desires of its audience and, in the process, to “manufacture consent’ and create a homogenous pan-Indian mass. Murmurs of dissidence have admittedly appeared, though to a relatively small extent, in mainstream cinema. But these are more recent trends. If we examine popular Hindi cinema of the 60s and 70s, and even part of the 80s, we find for the most part the depiction of religious harmony.

Traditionally, religion has been a non-issue in Hindi cinema. During the nationalist movement, the British enforced censorship, so it’s easy to see why controversial issues could not be explored. After independence, the goal was nation-building; Nehru and the other leaders had a secular vision and urged all Indians to think of themselves as proud Indians above all other considerations and identities. Hence the drama in films arises out of social and economic problems, whether caste and untouchability, the feudal system in the villages, or urban issues such as the scarcity of jobs and housing. Surprisingly, the traumas of Partition are not even touched upon. There are few stories addressing inter-religious love stories; however, a popular and frequently-used plot device is that of the lost child who is brought up by a follower of another religion and grows up to respect both – a device which may have its source in the apocryphal story of the saint Kabir. Religious hostility is practically non-existent or where it is hinted at, is very quickly contained (perhaps

enforced by the Central Board of Film Censors). There is a tendency towards monolithic cultures, mostly majoritarian, but a popular offshoot is the Muslim social drama which projects an Islamicate culture as a backdrop rather than as a set of religious beliefs. Hence the overall emphasis remains on syncretism and communal harmony.

As for the depiction of religious identity in Hindi cinema, it is immediately apparent that this is almost entirely in the form of genial stereotypes. Communities are lumped together through distinctive speech, gestures and easily recognizable symbols which serve both to identify them and to mark their difference from the majority Hindu community, but not as targets of discrimination or intolerance. Thus Muslims are shown with beards, bowing as they say 'Adab' or 'Khuda Hafiz'; Christians wear a cross rather prominently, the women have names like Rosie and Maria, and the men wave around bottles to signify varying stages of jovial drunkenness; Sikhs are loud and jolly figures, and Parsis even more comical because of their lovable idiosyncrasies. The patently absurd world of the film serves to mute the likelihood of resentment or protest at such characterizations.

The idealization of religious harmony in mainstream cinema is powerfully expressed through its music. These songs use simple ideas and symbols that have wide recognition and instant identification. In this respect they are fairly representative of the genre of popular Hindi film songs; they become ear-worms, enter one's consciousness, and exert a long-lasting subliminal power. Let us look at three song sequences from films made in what is still a time of relative innocence and secular beliefs.

Allah teronaam (*Hum Dono*, 1961) invokes God by different names from both Hinduism and Islam. The film is set during the Indo-Chinese conflict, and as the song progresses we see how the honour of the nation is insistently conflated with the honour and security of its women. The visuals emphasize what is essentially a prayer for the happy married status of all women in the land, as signified by the symbols of marriage, such as sindoor in the parting of the hair. Muslim women are

shown alongside Hindu women as the song makes a fervent plea that the honour of all mothers and sisters be preserved.

Jaisesurajkigarmi se (**Parinay**, 1974) initially establishes a distinctly Hindu setting by showing several pictures of Ram. The occasion is a wedding; the mixed bag of guests features a Muslim rather prominently seated in front. This intermingling of guests from different religious backgrounds is deliberately presented as a social practice. However the lyrics are universal and generalized: they speak of the seeker who ultimately finds sanctuary and shelter from the heat of the sun and the troubles of the world. The haven of the song is thus inclusive.

Itnishaktihamedena (**Ankush**, 1986) has now become a popular universal prayer that transcends specific religious references. The film depicts a group of young delinquents of different religious backgrounds. A girl from the neighbourhood appoints herself as their unofficial big sister and tries to reform them. Ultimately, they come to recognize that truth, compassion and service to others constitute humanism, the only religion that matters.

A good question to ask at this point would be, did all these songs and films capture the realities of Indian society accurately? And while they express a warm, cosy and pleasing sentiment of harmony, did the minority communities share this feeling? Mainstream cinema seldom poses such inconvenient questions, for its very raison d'être is a construct of consensus. However, by the 1970s, the anxieties and conflicts that were increasingly apparent in reality could no longer be entirely glossed over. Hence the phenomenon of the Angry Young Man appears in Hindi films, drawing on the disillusionment and cynicism which now begin to appear in society at large, fuelled by political uncertainty, corruption, and a host of social problems.

By the 1980s, identity politics start to play an increasingly important role in national life as Hindu and Muslim hardliners become increasingly more shrill and strident, and this shift becomes more apparent in the cinema of the 90s. ***Hum Aapke Hain Kaun*** is only one among many films to use the family as a thinly-disguised symbol

of the country; just as it behoves all members of a family to live together harmoniously, all religious communities in a country ought to submerge their egos and live together in peace. The unambiguous message is that the pater familias and therefore the centre of power is the Hindu. The Muslim must set aside every other consideration and learn to be the good Muslim, and thus the good Indian. This good Muslim/ bad Muslim dichotomy linked to the notion of patriotism is the subject of several other films of the 1990s, especially *Roja* which explores the issue of militancy in Kashmir. However the very nature of Hindi cinema as a mass entertainment machine largely catering to as well as controlled by majoritarian interests seems to preclude the likelihood of any deep or significant questioning of the status quo.

A space for dissent has now opened in the form of independent low-budget films, mostly in the regional languages. The documentaries of Anand Patwardhan have sparked considerable controversy, especially *In the Name of God / Ram ke Naam* (1991) which conflates Hindutva and aggressive masculinity. But these, like the hard-hitting Hindi film *Parzania* (2007) which was set in the 2002 Gujarat riots, are typically viewed by small niche audiences on film festival circuits rather than mainstream cinema houses, so there is limited scope for any extended debate.

As we all know, there are no winners once we get into the identity hostilities. I do believe that God can't be very happy with this state of affairs. So call it escapism or idealism, I'd like to go back to the essence of all faith that is expressed so beautifully in this song:

Ganga aayekahan se (*Kabuliwala*, 1961) is an ode to Ganga, the river that symbolizes the very soul of India:

Where do you come from, where do you flow, rippling like sunlight and shadow ...

As the shades of black night and radiant day merge at dusk, see how all hues become indistinguishable ...

Those multi-coloured cups, some made of glass, others of clay, both serve alike to bear water for the thirsty ...

O Ganga ...

Hauntingly rendered by Hemant Kumar, and shot on the banks of the Ganga, the song is a paean to our syncretic culture. The song celebrates the concept of diversity, duality and multiplicity.

This idea of the motherland is not a fluttering flag or a rousing national anthem, not armies and borders and Republic Day parades, but a way of life; a quality, a texture, an essence that is all-embracing, all-forgiving, accepting diversity as a matter of fact by naturalizing it. Origins and destinations, past and future, do not matter; the present is a synthesis of light and dark and the many hues in between. Nature shows the way: the darkness of night and the brightest light of day can co-exist, as evening obliterates the differences by merging them so harmoniously that the boundaries and margins disappear. The ideal of plurality now finds another metaphor: the homely array of cups and glasses, whose material ceases to matter as long as they can slake one's thirst. And finally, the manifold faces of the ideal – whether God or country – teach us that we must love one another.