

Said Anil Kapoor who plays the film's title role,

Though *Rajkumar* is a costume drama, it is going to be believable. The people and the scenes are real. The story operates on a serious level. The *Rajkumar* maybe a character out of a costume drama but the characterization is real. There is nothing unbelievable in the story of the film, believe me.

Hindustan Times, 7 May 1994.

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## The Compelling World of Hindi Films

*Hindi films have always reflected the prevailing mood of the society. In that sense they have truly been 'entertainment for the masses'. Even in this age of satellite television Hindi cinema continues to play a certain socio-political role, showing the world as it is by the light of its convictions and conventions.*

No one really knows when one first became addicted to the Hindi film or why one began to love it. Even those who grow up and forsake the addiction are occasionally tempted into the boudoirs of its fantasies.

One can hate the trash of the films and ridicule everything in them. But that too is a role the Hindi film has come to play. To its devotees it provides recurring moments of love, joy, and happiness; to others a splendid opportunity to vent their spleen against 'balderdash'. But one only has to see a few to discover in them the means of personal and psychological liberation from the inanity and restrictions of everyday life.

The Hindi film magnifies daily suffering into an epic of Good against Evil. It transforms the petty, limited affairs and anecdotes of one's life into a romantic, emphatically significant series of adventures. It instils in us the hope that our life too is meaningful; that the commonplace is not devoid of the heroic dimension.

To the battered body of human beings inhabiting the modern Indian state, always struggling against bosses, poor pay packets and circumstances in general, the Hindi film provides a holiday from life.

The other side of the coin is that it makes accessible to the common Indian's imagination the rarefied world of the affluent and privileged. It takes the pauper through the walls of five-star hotels and gives him a dip in the swimming pool. It takes him inside the bungalows of the rich. It stokes his imagination with pictures of how much money can be spent by one man, how much power can be accumulated by one individual, and how apparently alien people, in their problems and their anger, their sensitivities and humilities, their aspirations, foibles, wit and dignities, are the same as any of us; ridiculous though we might appear in the mirrors of our wives or parents, colleagues or masters.

Yet, ironically enough, cinema is not really the poor man's entertainment in India, though it often bears such a label. The fact is that the 9000-odd permanent, semi-permanent, and touring theatres that dot the country, scarcely penetrate village India. It was estimated by Pune exhibitor and film historian B.V. Dharap in his catalogue, *Indian Films 1973*, that at least 4517 towns and villages with a population exceeding 5000 await this amenity (of local cinema theatres).

At present there are but 2500 towns in the country which have theatres of their own. The really poor Indian, the vast majority of whom live in villages, is distantly located from movies. Despite this, the magnetic power of cinema is so strong that each successive wave of rural immigrants into the urban centres helps increase the number that throng the cinema's box-office window. And 65 per cent of cinema halls in the 2500 townships, towns, and cities screen Hindi films.

The popular Hindi film is the dominant, seminal influence on entertainment movies in the regional languages, though it too often borrows stories and themes from the popular regional talkies. The

Hindi film's writ runs primarily in the realm of filmic treatment—both in terms of the stars and the environment it displays. Its dominance stems from the fact that it was the first to champion modernity in daily life. The social mores of the rich, 'the England-returned' characters, might be painted as evil practices, but they are also the vehicles of hedonism in cinema theatres—hedonism that introduced new sensations and new ideas to an audience restricted by too many social taboos and too much poverty of opportunity to otherwise enjoy itself.

As new lifestyles penetrated into the Indian's world during the last three decades, the Hindi film introduced them to its audiences through the villains and the vamps. Smoking, drinking, eating out in five-star hotels, night-club entertainment, swimming pools, fast cars and limousines, air travel and helicopters, slit skirts and revealing blouses, hash and ganja smoking, tape recorders and swivel chairs—practically every new item in a man's personal charter of wants has been first tagged on in the movies to negative characters. It is almost as if the poor Indian's first reaction to the gadgets of modern technology is cynical.

After 1947, the Hindi film became the cultural vanguard, surprisingly though not unreasonably, of a movement against the virtues of ascetism and abstinence, sacrifice and resignation. The poor hero, who charmed the rich man's convent-educated or England-returned daughter, may not have been a true manifestation of social reality, but he was a genuine expression of the common man's aspirations for a better life. Years ago, Sukarno, the first president of free Indonesia, told an American journalist that he welcomed the screening of Hollywood films in his country because they would show his people what life had to offer. That would motivate them to work harder, he said.

The Indian establishment too at one stage envisaged a progressive and reformatory role for Indian cinema. V. Shantaram's *Do Aurkhen Barah Haath* (1957) provides a good illustration of the willing subservience of cinema to the national cause. The film was

a vehicle for the message of non-violence, as twelve ugly dacoits laid down arms and immersed themselves in social welfare projects. However, what the Establishment had not anticipated was that Hindi cinema would become an 'uncontrollable' medium of communication in the hands of the masses of free India. Two years before *Do Aurkhen Barah Haath* came to the theatre, Raj Kapoor's *Shree 420* (1955) had 'exposed' the working of the elite. It showed stock-exchange speculators fiddling with the economy while pavement dwellers burnt in the fire of starvation.

*Shree 420*, which has a strong resemblance in plot and treatment to Rene Clair's 1932 silent movie masterpiece *Liberty Is Ours*, took Indian film intellectuals by surprise. Other films that dealt with Indian poverty, such as K.A. Abbas's *Dharti ke Lal* (1946), Zia Sarhadi's *Humlog* (1951), and Bimal Roy's *Do Bigha Zamin* (1953), had come a cropper at the box office. Their audience was confined to middle class, university-educated filmgoers. The poor themselves stayed away from the truths that they knew only too bitterly in their own lives.

In sharp contrast to these three films, *Shree 420* became one of Hindi cinema's all-time money spinners because, in Raj Kapoor's world, poverty was coupled with defiance and sensuality. It was a love story of the poor (Raj Kapoor and Nargis) whose music, enshrined in such eternal scores as '*Ramaiya vasta vaiya*' and '*Ichak dana bichak dana*', held its own against the cabaret numbers of the rich men's club. The lower middle class school-teacher played by Nargis rivalled the orgiastic lifestyle of the affluent that Nadira adorned, with the '*Murh-murh ke na Dekhi*' number. Raj Kapoor's tramp rose from the pavements and conquered the world of the rich, only to renounce it once again—aghast at its amorality, its dehumanization, and its narrow, money-obsessed perspective of life. The charm and tenderness in the love story of the tramp and the teacher seemed full of life's sensuous pleasures which even money, especially money, could not buy. *Shree 420* blended the traditional Buddhist ideal of renunciation with sensuality.

At the same time, cinema broke through the fossilized world view fostered by the Indian joint family. It insisted on showing us the face of evil, of corruption, and of debauchery. It showed us what the joint family wanted us to close our eyes to—even if these evils were happening within the family itself. Gambling, for instance, or drinking, or going to visit nautch girls in the *kotha* was behaviour in sharp contrast to the ideals associated with the joint family system. Cinema insisted that life could not be divided into two separate compartments—one to be embraced, the other to be totally shunned; one to be discussed and talked about, the other to be totally ignored; one of idealism and the other to be experienced only in guilt.

Above all, the Hindi film struck at the very roots of that pernicious social practice which kept men and women, boys and girls in rigidly segregated isolation. In its own inelegant way, the Hindi film taught a million young Indians how to accept their natural attraction for the other sex. It taught them how to establish some kind of communication with their opposite numbers, despite the great taboos that governed social intercourse till the early 1960s—particularly in towns and cities other than the four metropolises of Bombay, Delhi, Calcutta, and Madras.

In the early 1960s, as undergraduates in a bustling industrial city in UP, we would laugh and tease each other every time a heroine's father said in the film, '*Main apni laalki ki shaadi us sharabi, kababi aur randibaaz se nahin hone doonga!*' (I will not let my daughter marry that drunk, meat-eating womanizer). The filmy father's exaggerated invective could not hide from us the reality. Even in the early 1960s, provincial towns were overpopulated with a middle class that banned beer and meat, which looked upon the most casual exchange between a boy and girl—even if they were studying in co-ed schools or colleges—as tangible proof of secret orgies between the two!

To the children of free India, including those who came out of the protected shelter of childhood after Independence, the popular

Hindi film has been a surer guide into both adulthood and the twentieth century than parents. Our parents, even those who had studied abroad and been social rebels in their youth, were not uninhibited enough to instruct us in the ways of the world. In their middle age, they were enamoured once again of the platitudes and ideals of an ancient cultural heritage. They might have used short cuts in their own careers, but they did not have the honesty to tell their offspring that this was the only road to success. Nor could they talk to us about premarital sex, divorce, abortion, or masturbation. It was instead the Hindi film that touched on, or suggested, these issues, albeit superficially, through the 1950s and 1960s. It was the popular Hindi film, with its emphasis on the love story, that reared an entire generation of young Indians and taught them to accept the social life of co-educational schools and colleges, picnics and birthday parties, dating and jam sessions.

Shammi Kapoor may well have been the terror of middle class mothers. But his brazenness in *Dil Dekte Dekho* immediately fired the imagination of millions of undergraduates who quickly discarded the *Devdas* concept of the passionate lover suffering at a distance, satisfied by a mere look in the morning when his dreamgirl reached college in her rickshaw. Asha Parekh in her jeans and Shammi Kapoor gambolling around with girls in his jeep fired the imaginations of teenage boys and girls, giving them reason to cut through the swathe of their parents' prejudices. If Shammi Kapoor could snatch Asha Parekh's dupatta in broad daylight and if she could tease the life out of him, couldn't the undergraduates muster the courage to speak to each other inside the portals of their colleges?

The realist school critics of the *Bumbaiaya phillum* would at this point shriek that Shammi Kapoor was an eve teaser and a road-side Romeo. And it is true that those with minds warped enough in the first place to turn into petty criminals and crooks, would find in the antics of the phillum hero a stimulant to their own latent perversions.

*An Evening in Paris*—established once for all the need for the Hindi film to cater to the socio-sexual demands of people supposed to remain blind and ignorant about the human body. When Sharmila Tagore wore a bikini in Shakti Samanta's *An Evening in Paris* all the old inhibitions of the film audience were broken. Films became the standard bearers of fashion and modernity. Moreover, they were schools for some kind of a sex education of youngsters who did not live within the confines of the joint family.

The rapid industrial development of the country after Independence started an epidemic of nuclear families, particularly among the middle class. But popular cinema alone catered to the new psychological and cultural needs. The radio was obsessed, thanks to B.V. Keskar's strictures as the Union Minister for Information and Broadcasting, with classical Indian music. It was an inclination towards high culture that was also to be found in the more respectable magazines then being published—*The Illustrated Weekly*, *Saptahik Hindustan*, and *Dharmayug*.

I was 19 years old, with three painful histories of unrequited love behind me, when I bumped into Rajshree in *Geet Gaya Patharon Ne*. Shantaram had evolved a bold design to introduce his beautiful, voluptuous daughter. Playing the role of a classical danseuse, Rajshree went around in a number of scenes with her shoulders bare, her alabaster-white waist caressing the breeze (flowing out from sighing male filmgoers) and her mouth open in a perpetual pout. Shantaram's design used the camouflage of ancient Indian sculpture to cover up for the creation of a sex goddess.

It was Rajshree and some years later Mumtaz, in movies like Raj Khosla's *Do Raaste* and Manmohan Desai's *Sachha Jhootha*, who made me realize that for young men whose fathers were not members of the big, colonial clubs, the only place where they had the chance to see a pretty girl for a reasonable stretch of time, was in the movies.

Perhaps all that has changed now, in the Amitabh Bachchan era. Perhaps that is why the cabaret dance seems to have disappeared

But for the general mass of young people in 1959 and 1960, Shammi Kapoor's articles were not templates for imitation but the expression of a mood. The peppy songs, the iconoclastic mannerisms of both Shammi Kapoor and Asha Parekh created the heady illusion of living out a love story in an Indian city. Just as in 1973, Dimple Kapadia, Rishi Kapoor, and the music of *Bobby* created another kind of mood for young lovers.

Did *Bobby* initiate a rash of elopements in the country? No, not at all! Did *Bobby* tempt every college girl to go around in hot pants and tucked-up shirts? Unfortunately, no! Film-makers realize now that as an instrument of social change the popular film plays a largely enabling role—helping to articulate individual impulses to turn them into social trends.

The examples of Yash Chopra's *Kabhi Kabhie* and B.R. Chopra's *Pati, Patni aur Woh* stand out in this context. Opening in Bombay theatres, *Kabhi Kabhie* began on a lukewarm note but once the film was released in the north it became almost a sociological phenomenon. Bombay's cosmopolitan permissiveness prevented people from responding enthusiastically to the film's basic theme (an acceptance by a married couple of each other's premarital, romantic involvements). But in the more inhibited, orthodox, and segregated social milieu of Delhi and the rest of the Hindi belt, *Kabhi Kabhie* seemed the catalysing agent for discussions that never took place in apparently modern families.

*Kabhi Kabhie* evoked intense identification from women of conservative families in the north because even in New Delhi there are families that do not permit teenage daughters to talk to boys, let alone witness adult members discussing their love life with one another. In the same way, *Pati Patni aur Woh* provided an acceptable idiom to wives and husbands to talk about extramarital escapades—a subject that conservative couples would not even allude to in normal conversation.

The popular success of *Dil Deke Dekho* and the films it inspired—*Junglee*, *Professor*, *Dil Tera Diwana*, *Kashmir ki Kali*, and

from the Hindi film in the 1980s. Or is it that the heroines have taken over from the Helens, Bindus, and Padma Khannas? This last seems more likely; and I wonder how many college boys go to the movies only to see Zeenat Aman in her bare dresses, Rekha twisting her hips, and Ranjeeta smiling in a big close-up on the screen.

Sex has of course not been the only magnetism of the Hindi film; but it has certainly been an essential ingredient for a long time. Indeed, it is surprising that like the Hindi film, life outside it too does not seem to change very much. In 1938, Master Vinayak directed *Brahmachari*. Vinayak himself was in the lead role—a roly-poly predecessor of our own Sanjeev Kumar. Dressed in shabby, khaki shorts, Vinayak fell in love with Meenakshi, who went around in skirts.

In 1938, girls from respectable families were forbidden to see *Brahmachari*, because Meenakshi showed a lot of leg in the movie. Meenakshi's modern, anglicized father of course was in a class by himself. He insisted that he would marry his daughter only to a young man who believed in afforestation and family planning and was against the practice of dowry. That was in 1938—and the issues are still alive today.

One reason why the basic framework of the Hindi film has not changed over the years is that, for the vast majority of Indians, life does not yet show any signs of basic change. The changes in our lives and, therefore, in our films are restricted to details. The *mujra* gives way to the cabaret, the bohemian rebels played by Dilip Kumar, Raj Kapoor, and Dev Anand give way to the unemployed student, a stereotype that Rajesh Khanna played with great aplomb in his heyday in the late 1960s. The break-up of the joint family in *AVM's Bhai Bhai* (1956) is re-structured into a new joint family film in *Trishul* (1978). Sunil Dutt plays a psychotic dacoit in Mehboob's *Khan's Mother India* (1957) who speaks the eastern UP dialect, the Purabiya's language. In 1961 Dilip Kumar speaks Purabi in *Ganga Jamuna*; and in 1973 Gabbar Singh alias Amjad Khan is a psychotic dacoit speaking Purabi in *Sholay*.

Nor, for that matter, is there anything new about the action film. Homi Wadia directed Nadia's ballet-like fight sequences in *Hunterwali* twenty-five years ago. Dev Anand was fighting *goondas* with a car handle in *Taxi Driver* (1954) and knocking stuntmen by the dozen in *CID* (1956). Like Sean Connery was to do later in James Bond films, Dev Anand would pick himself up from the rubble, settle his scarf or his necktie and walk away from the scene as if it were but a trifle. A violent prelude to the film's cathartic end was as compulsory then as now.

It took me fifteen years as a Hindi film addict (including four years as a professional film critic) to realize the significance of the obligatory fight scene towards the end of the film. Dharmendra was socking Ajit and his cronies, when things began to gell inside my mind. Every punch that Dharmendra landed began to assonate in my mind with all the rotten things that had gone to make it a depressing week for me.

I felt wonderful after I came out of the theatre in Delhi's old city quarter and I finally understood why the masses wanted the hero to sock the villain on the silver screen. Each punch that the hero swings carries behind it the force of a million admirers who cannot, unfortunately, punch the villains in their own lives.

However, the Hindi film is more than a subliminal discharge of feelings pent up within an audience that is weighed down by the social system. The reason why the Hindi film stole a march on regional cinema immediately after Independence was that it was the first to realize that the old cultural heritage had become a wash out—that the Indian wanted a new lifestyle that was totally different from the one he had inherited from his parents. And yet one not totally different.

Over the years, the Hindi film has evolved its own formula. A formula that is probably unique in the world and which has been adopted wholeheartedly by the popular film in the regional languages. There is a very broad, very generalized morality prevailing on the periphery of the action. This morality pays its

homage to conservative social values. It deifies the mother, the values that hold families and communities together, and is often studded with direct religious overtones. Dacoits, smugglers, police inspectors, all worship gods and goddesses in the movies. This overall conservative framework of values is also stressed at the very end of the film. Its main purpose is to reassure the mass audience that the status quo shall be maintained; that they are not being confronted with the possibility and the trauma of a total upheaval in society which is a fairly frightening thing for the average Indian who cannot think beyond survival. It is a psychological obstacle that has drowned successive attempts at an Indian revolution.

Within this broad, general framework, however, the Hindi film injects the very antithesis of that framework's conservative morality. Everything new on the surface of society is picked up and broadcast through the cinema's communicational force for the consumption of the average man. In this area the Hindi film is an unabashed protagonist of modern living, though with a typically Indian middle class hypocrisy, many of the stellar attractions are tagged on to the villains and vamps. In recent years filmgoers have seen through the strategy and are willing to shower as much affection on Amjad Khan's killers and Bindu's whores as they are on regular heroes and heroines. They have learnt to accept Amitabh Bachchan as a smuggler and Rekha as a courtesan. The old black-and-white divisions between good and evil are finally over. The Hindi film can claim a bit of credit for making free India's successive generations a shade more knowledgeable about the way the world functions.

In its pursuit of novelty, the Hindi film has become one of the most sensitive medium to the opinions, attitudes, and perspectives of the common man. Whereas daily newspapers, radio, and TV assume didactic postures seeking to guide the common people with elitist brilliance, the Hindi film knows only the compulsion of establishing a rapport with a large section of the common people.

In 1964, long before it was fashionable in the national press to expose the personal lives of political leaders, producer S. Mukherjee cast Dilip Kumar in *Leader*, a movie in which politics mingled with corruption and love affairs. In 1968, Mehmood unveiled the face of the ugly politician in a bizarre caricature in *Sadhu Aur Shaitaan*—nearly a decade before the press started writing about that creature.

It was this sensitivity to the people's real thoughts that placed the popular Hindi film at the vanguard of modern India's cultural evolution. During the last few years, however, the movies seem to have lost sight of the true nature of this vital connection. They have started taking their own formulas too seriously. Their makers have begun to believe that movies are entertainment alone.

As an addict who grew up on both the Bumbaiya phillum and T.S. Eliot, I can only complain that that is not true, and never has been.

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## Rags to Riches Stories Made Real

*Film-making is both an art and a craft that needs to be systematically learnt in an institution. Though written about the famed Film and Television Institute of India, Pune, this piece is about the learning process as a must for students of cinema.*

Every young boy who thinks he is brighter and better looking than his schoolmates, has also at some time or the other, thought of a future for himself in cinema. Many young people, indeed, do make a desperate, hoping-against-hope attempt to crash into films. Some