

The Dynamics of Tradition and Modernity in Hindi Cinema

Why has Hindi cinema failed to shed its over-the-top emotionalism and digressive narrative form? Is the Indian film-maker as much of a survivalist as the average Indian? The perennial question of aesthetics in popular cinema is addressed in order to understand the psyche of the average film-maker and his audience.

The 'popular Hindi film'—also known as the box-office formula film and the commercial film—is a genre in itself in international cinema. It is a genre that defies easy categorization.

On the one hand, its format violates the Aristotelian concept of the three unities of time, space, and action. On the other, it cannot be completely designated as a modern variation of a well-preserved folk tradition. It is influenced both by the world that confronts it—the Euro-American world—and the world of the vigorous traditions of Indian folk theatre. The two worlds impinge on the Indian's psyche and never allow him to escape from the psychological parameters of being a villager.

Existing in a no-man's land, the popular Indian film or, as may be a more appropriate definition in aesthetic terms, the Indian pop film, is an eclectic, assimilative, imitative, and plagiaristic creature that is constantly rebelling against its influences—Hollywood and European cinema and traditional Indian aesthetics and lifestyles.

Everything that it borrows from the Euro-American film scene it distorts and caricatures; in the manner of the village actor for

down a narrow, bumpy unending village track, or splashing in a village pond or a temple tank.

However, even as the film-makers give us this message, even as we lap it up, it is clear that this is a dream that can only be realized by a minority of the 8 million-odd Indians who fill some 9000 good, bad, and temporary cinema theatres every day of the year. Modern technology's gadget paradise on earth becomes a dream that can only be dreamt and scarcely pursued.

Nature's images of eternal life, on the other hand, belong to a world whose history has been one of uncertainty and travail, of poverty and extreme economic disparities, of feudal tyrannies and a monotonous routine. It is a world closed to technology, except in the bits and pieces that the rich landlords or big farmers 'import' from the city. The ecological monotony of village India lends itself, like a telepathic momentum, to the large-scale migration of peasants to urban centres and the urban young leaving India for England, Europe, and North America.

As the popular Indian film constantly posits it, ever since India became independent on 15 August 1947, modern technological aspirations have been interlocked with a largely feudal pastoral reality. The former injects a desire for change into the latter, which in turn colours the former with conservative dimensions of survival and consolidation.

Post-Independence industrialization in India, as in most other Third World countries, has been haphazard, restricted to regional pockets, and has had little effect on traditional socio-economics. Since twentieth-century industrialization in a society like India's is not the result of a self-propelling industrial (or technological) revolution but a process of change by grafting, much in the manner of a middle-class family that saves every penny it can to purchase possessions and properties that shall finally enable it to rise above its economic class, no clear demarcations between social mores, cultural values, and lifestyle can be made. Realism becomes impossible as style in the arts.

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whom nothing is sacred save the presence that the human body may command in a folk-theatre arena.

Yet it must constantly borrow from the affluent alien's film culture. For the Euro-American civilization of today is like a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow for the Indian whose psyche lies in the shadow of a long, callous history of economic disparities; a psyche that tries to preserve itself and its shell of flesh and bones from the wretched sea of poverty that exists all around it. The dividing line is so thin and fragile that consciousness can only lead each man to conceive of himself as an oasis in the desert.

The Indian pop film is the most sustained articulation of the pressures of the Euro-American lifestyle on the contemporary Indian's mind. Because the objects of modern technology—from the bicycle, the train, and the automobile to the massive and intricately designed factories—are so photogenic in appearance and so cinematically powerful in their physical-ness, the face of the technological world has always been intrinsic to cinema as a counterpoint to the timeless images of elemental life: the river, the lake, and the sea, the pretty flowers and trees. By counterposing images of technology with images of nature, cinema probes the human animal's relationships with the environment. Now merging into it, now dominating it, we hear and see the love song or the car ride in the rain or the lovers standing atop a dam or a cable car. The camera zooms in on the stars and fills the silver screen with their handsome bodies and their sentiment-suffused faces. The Bhakra-Nangal complex and the valley in the Alps are reduced to little more than studio backdrops.

For the Indian pop film-maker and his audience, the objects of technology are not merely cinematic motifs that mirror individuals in action, in a relationship with their environment. They are also the motifs of an elusive, largely inaccessible paradise on earth. This is what you could be doing, says the film-maker when he shows his lead players driving a car or carousing in a swimming pool, instead of pushing your way into an overcrowded city bus, cycling

This amorphous social background provides the basis of the confusing format of the Indian pop film. Popular cinema is the most alert medium of communication in Indian society, because it is consistently concerned with preserving its enormous popularity. The demands of popular appeal see to it that the medium does not depart from the essence of the social situation. If mass media have the ability to introduce the common folk to new directions in life, the Indian experience also emphasizes the fact that mass media cannot depart too dramatically from life as it is—awkward and undefined. Mass media cannot introduce a greater rationality than that which already exists within society. Indeed, in many ways, the media must place itself on the lowest level at which certain mores and values are commonly accepted.

Such a role came naturally to the Indian pop film. It has never conceived of itself in aggressive terms: Even today, when its presence invades every city and town and a number of villages, it does not dare to assert itself as the dominating culture in the country. On the other hand, it has always been defensive and clamouring for social responsibility. This defensive posture of the most powerful and widespread communications media is the result of a 'living tradition' of contradictions in Indian society.

The feudal division of court culture and folk culture has, in India, become enmeshed within the idealistic culture espoused by the Indian religious order. In most parts of India, artistic activity is an intrinsic element of religious rituals and ceremonies. Over the centuries, these religious rituals have assumed an identity that makes the artistic activity merely a concretization of the philosophic essence of the ritual. The temples were not merely the schools of dance and music, they also made dance and music subservient to religious and philosophic ideals. This, in turn, fostered dogmas about the arts, about the grammar of their form, and about their social role.

This elitism in the arts coincided with the elitist categorization of society under the caste system. Certain types of music and dance

were, like certain types of people, commendable, socially acceptable, and worthy of patronage. Other types of arts and people were 'untouchable'. These unrespectable arts came to include all those cultural forms that were not part of the religious framework or, as it turned out, art not patronized by at the court. These were the arts of the poor, far removed from the direct influences of court and temple.

The popularity of cinema in India is not accidental. It became a symbol of industrialization and of the new world society, as India sought to transform itself and enter the twentieth century. Indeed, the cinema theatre became the new temple. In the tradition of religious-cultural events such as the Ram Lila—the dramatic enactment of the story of the Ramayana—Janamashtami—the celebration of the birth of Lord Krishna—and other festivals such as Holi and Diwali, cinema gave a sense of the collective to a people bred as ciphers in a tight-knit community living in the very heart of industrialization, its sprawling cities, and its dehumanizing effects.

Cinema not only became the new arena of folk theatre, it went further and introduced a new religious pantheon of gods, goddesses, and priests. It destroyed the old and made common people look at themselves, rather than at superior beings. In many ways, the history of the Indian feature film—from its inception in 1912—is a history of rediscovery, by the Indian city, of folk theatre. The forbidden culture of a colloquial, iconoclastic, slangy version of the epics that the folk performers had created was now brought into the open and housed in palace-like edifices in the very centre of the rich minority's city. Admission was not only cheap, it was open to all who could pay for a cinema ticket. The film became an agent of liberation from the dogmatic, idealistic world of morality and religion and from the deprivations of poverty.

The Indian pop film is the only cultural outlet that Indian people have which accepts the great contradictions of Indian society within one format—the idealistic and the immoral, the

ascetic and the hedonistic, the rags and the riches, the brave and the ludicrous. As against the caste system, religious elitism and sectarianism, and the concepts of art and culture in the court and among the ruling elite which divide various aspects of life and separate people on to different levels—in the way the Hindu joint family imposes definite stereotype roles on family members—the Indian pop film is willing to incorporate an innumerable number of people, details, motifs, facets, and events from everyday life in order to create a world view as close to and comprehensive as real life, no matter how chaotic that is.

Like the Hindu epics, whose familiar stories reawaken the hopes of a hopeless people, the Indian pop film has evolved a rationale of its own. Thus one film is like another. Each film confirms once again the world as it is and has been and is likely to remain. The very hopelessness created by poverty and social immobility demands that the world and the attractions of the world remain as they are. That, indeed, is how it is for the average Indian who is not a member of the ruling elite.

Yet there is also the human instinct for change, the desire to enlarge one's personality and one's presence, to transform oneself. Overriding that instinct is also the fear that a tidal change may sweep the small man aside and drown him. Ordinary Indians are people living on the border of extinction, surviving against odds all the time; they are a people who are too frightened to change lest they destroy even the little that preserves them presently. Therefore, the symbol of change must be one of make-believe.

Out of this tension between aspiration and fear has emerged the Indian pop film. It is an agent of liberation and also an agent of extreme conservatism. It is a show-piece of 'the sweet life' and of the wretched, a compound of clean, moral values enshrined by the family and the social framework and, on the other hand, of debauchery and hedonism, erotica and sensuousness.

This is the first 'formula' of the Indian pop film. The first precondition that the film must live up to if it is to be acceptable

as a mass medium for those who feel 'deprived' or victimized by society. Each film must deal with as comprehensive a picture of the whole world as possible. For the cinema story is not about individual men and women but about situations common to a large audience. It is a cinema that must articulate collective dreams that the social system does not easily approve the articulation of; a cinema that must also confront the people with what they want out of life.

The need for a comprehensive world view imposes a highly stylized and formal format that in its broad outlines is symbolic, suggestive, and allegorical of the total world view of life on the Indian scene. Indian film-makers, most of whom have quickly shed any pretensions to art that they might have started with, and who work like hard-boiled businessmen dealing in an entertainment medium with heavy allegorical references, have evolved a list of ingredients that they consider acceptable to the mass audience. These elements can be seen in film after film, thereby provoking the label of 'the formula film'. Yet, because life is in a constant state of flux, the formulas are shuffled and recast from time to time.

The Indian pop film's relationship to trends and fashion in society is clearly discernible in the way the various formula ingredients are discovered and discarded. Essentially the Indian pop film is concerned with reflecting or portraying the human animal in an environment he is conscious of, does not have, but can acquire. It makes itself attractive by offering entertainment novelties that are not commonly available. The cabaret dance sequence of the Indian pop film stepped-in during the mid-1950s when big city hotels launched nightspots with women dancers and crooners. During the 1950s, however, the simulated cabaret dance in the pop film (for example, Nadira's dance in Raj Kapur's *Shree 420*) was located in a private club and not in a regular nightspot. It was only during the early 1960s, when nightclubs sprouted all over the metropolis, that the cabaret dance sequence came into its own. Throughout the 1960s and the 1970s, the cabaret dance sequence of the Hindi

pop film (which has been the forerunner and the dominant sub-genre of the Indian pop film circuit) was a necessary requirement for each and every film. It was only when it had become jaded and commonplace that it began to be cut out of the show. It was no longer a novelty for the audience.

This casual, stock-taker's attitude about the film's ingredients is primarily a result of the fact that the images of contemporary reality shown in the Indian pop film are the details within the rigid framework of the 'film as an epic' about the contradictions and categorization in Indian life. Within that rigid framework, these details are constituted by the pop film's reflections of the way its audience lives or desires to live. Every serious producer of Indian pop films wishes to present these details as originally as possible. The framework, however, remains the same.

The Indian pop film has evolved a highly individualistic format for its purpose that is episodic in structure. Each episode is, in a way, complete in itself with its own cathartic climax. The various ingredients can, therefore, be cinematically unrelated to each other—as, for instance, through flaws in continuity—without disturbing the overall framework of the film.

The episodic structure is convenient both for simulating a comprehensive world view and for keeping up with the times. It also helps to make the Indian pop film a more engaging mass medium than any other. The very looseness and imperfection of the episodic structure makes it possible for a pop film to incorporate the most recent happenings in Indian society and to give shape to the very 'latest' objects of technology, fashions in daily living, and social trends and events. This is largely done not in visual but in verbal terms, with a strong satirical dimension, in order to incorporate comment and reaction. Very often the pop film turns out to be the first among the mass media to locate and comment upon new social trends. This is because newspapers and magazines in India are fairly elitist and rarely express the common man's perspective. And when they do express his perspective, it is only

in terms of deflating his ego. Highly derivative of the mass media and fashions in Europe and North America, Indian newspapers and magazines coerce their readers to imitate things that are being done abroad. The Indian pop film, on the other hand, reduces objects and fashions from the Euro-American civilization into caricatures adorned with the shape, colours, and awkwardness of the Indian urban landscape. It reduces the 'foreign', 'alien', and inaccessible to a motley shape, an object of parody rather than one which could make the film-goer feel inferior.

Since radio and TV are didactic and propagandist organs controlled by the government, they do not have a mass-audience of their own at cultural level. Radio and TV cater primarily to the needs of political information and developmental instruction. At a cultural level, their programmes are divided into three sections. A major chunk of radio and TV time is devoted to classical music and dance. This is derived from temple and court art and does not command a mass audience because of its rarified and dogmatic aesthetics. A second need is rather 'educational', 'morally uplifting', or 'intellectual' in tone. Programmes fulfilling it could be on the life of a great Indian, a poet, or a saint. The third (and by far the most popular) chunk of radio and TV time is consumed by programmes that include the replaying of songs from films and from plays that are close to the pop film, in content and approach, if not totally derivative of it.

In the period after India's Independence in 1947, the Indian pop film has become gradually aware that it is the communication medium that is willing to reflect the point of view and perspective of that vast section of the population which is not part of the ruling elite. Pop film-makers have also realized that their fortunes lie in striking a rapport with the commonest of the common. The films, therefore, are constantly engaged in discovering this rapport. Such an effort, of course, requires an amorphous structure in the film so that all kinds of unrelated and even contrary attitudes, views, and visuals can be inserted in order to coincide with the various

attitudes and perspectives that may be prevailing within one given audience in one given theatre.

The audience itself is an extremely diverse one. Not only does it reside in a vast kaleidoscope of regions with strong local cultures, it also comes from varied socio-economic levels in such regions.

The Indian pop film in the Hindi language is the one that is taken to most parts of the country. Moreover, being the dominant forerunner of the Indian pop film, this sub-genre has coped with this variegated audience by incorporating certain elements from the various regions of the country. These elements have been done over in a slapstick machine and reintroduced as minor formula details in the genre.

All this makes for a format that is not inhibited by a need to be perfect and complete in itself, a format that is malleable and given to additions and deletions. Such an imperfect structure is also required to contain and balance the strong streak of irreverence and iconoclasm that the Indian pop film inherits from folk theatre that entertains even as it sublimates the most violent tensions of protest in the minds of the audiences.

The spiritual needs of the larger part of the Indian people today, the contradictions which exist between their lives and the lives of the rich minority, the desire to escape from the purist aesthetics of the priests and the intellectuals of the court (the ruling elite), the need for hope in a hopeless and unchanging society, the need to get away from reality—all this leads to the rhythms of imperfection on which the Indian pop film thrives as an agent of liberation and of conservation; juxtaposing the obscene with the pious, and the inane with the brilliant. They are not so much films as revues of everyday emotions under the shadow of the great, eternal passions—blood and wealth, conflict and achievement, music and hedonism, sentiment and frailty, romance and ruthlessness.

In creating the make-believe pictures for such a world of situations and representative figures, the Hindi film follows a style of dressing up its people, its objects, and its backdrops which is completely different from that in the Euro-American film. Indian

film-makers plagiarize Hollywood; but everything that they plagiarize, they distort and caricature to prevent a straight imitation of life in the West.

In the sustained and long campaign of distorting what it imitates, the Indian pop film may be said to be against a mindless mimicry of another culture. The Indian pop film's consistent espousal of chauvinism in cultural matters supplements such an interpretation of this sustained caricature of things foreign. It must also be kept in mind that for the vast majority of the Indian population, a life of Western manners and mores is simply not possible at the physical level. The cost of dressing up as a modern man is a hundred times more than most Indians can afford. It is only the upper class and middle-class minority that can afford to indulge in such a façade. By caricaturing the objects of an alien culture, which seems to the poor Indian to be the culture of an alien paradise on earth, the pop film makes it unreal and, at the unconscious level, even irrelevant and unnecessary. It revels in showing the beautiful as gross and ugly and the simple and the ascetic as dignified. It helps a man to see everything that can possibly be included in the film without really desiring it. This may be an anti-revolutionary approach, as radicals and Marxists in India insist in their criticism of the Indian pop film, but it is definitely a useful crutch in evolving an ideology for survival. In the confused terrain in which the Indian pop film exists, there are no clear directions into the process of industrialization—the dividing line between the haves and the have-nots is so vast that an element of conservatism is dominant. As long as the common Indian continues to have the psychology of the survivalist, the Indian pop film can change its broad framework only at the risk of losing its audience.

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