

Article

Manoj Barpujari

Coding and Decoding Bollywood



Flashback 1

It was in January 1999. In a jam-packed press meet at IFFI held in Hyderabad, a young lady asked Shekhar Kapur a question on his changing role from a director of several popular Bollywood action movies to a British period drama. The festival of the year was opened with Kapur's new film *Elizabeth* (1998). Before replying to the question he pronounced his utter dismay over the word Bollywood and told the lady point blank that there was no film industry called Bollywood and, instead of it, reference should be made only as Mumbai or Hindi films. For the record: the questioning lady journalist was Geetha J from Kerala, now turned a filmmaker, of *Run Kalyani* (2019) fame.

Flashback 2

In a dinner-time get-together at the IFFK 2008 at Thiruvananthapuram, I noticed that the FIPRESCI jury chairman Chris Fujiwara was visibly perturbed by a person well-known as screenplay writer from Mumbai. Although

Fujiwara wanted to join his jury colleagues including me, he was not let off and soon I could hear that the person was practically rebuking Fujiwara over a reference of the B-word. The same orthodox allegation: there is nothing called Bollywood, it is a misnomer, etc. I interfered, telling straight that the big studio, big budget, orientation towards entertainment, the star system, media hype, all those associated with the Hollywood style actually made some writers categorize films churned out of Bombay as Bollywood films. The explanation disarmed my complainant countryman, much to the relief of our guest.

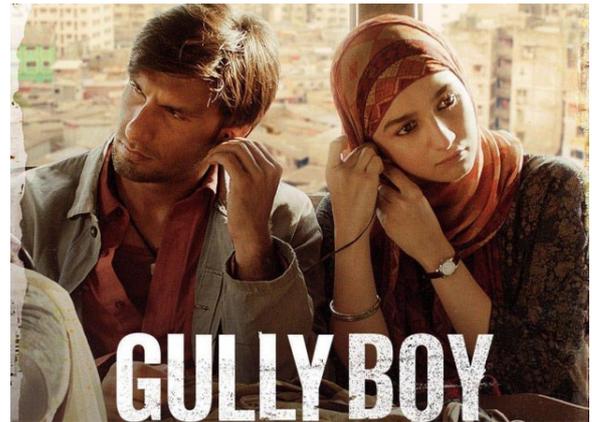
Anti-cinema

Those instant reactions from the mainstream film personalities were nothing strange, if we examine the recorded statements from others as well. In 2002, Shah Rukh Khan in conversation with Derek Malcolm told *Vanity Fair*: "It's a term only foreigners who don't know our films use." Is it, then, correct to tell the term borrowed, and hence, a hollow one? In the changing market economy of 1990s, the algorithm for Indian cinema underwent an

upheaval too. It accumulated a context which contrasted sharply with cinema's official status of the decades after Independence. State patronage started to dwindle as cinema was no longer considered a form that needed all-out support if realistically made. The concept of the 'Bollywood diaspora family movie' gained much in the changed norms of film making and marketing. A growing support of the people of Indian origin made Indian mainstream films compete with Hollywood products in certain pockets around the globe. Even a British departmental store deployed the 'Bollywood' theme in their London and Manchester shops highlighting Indian décor and clothes, as Hollywood's global surge was thwarted in India. The theme became synonymous with location shooting and tourism in some exotic European destinations because of high selling-out of or high-profiled mainstream Indian movies, particularly the Bombay film industry products.

The category of 'Bollywood' thus got a shot in the arm, used frequently in cinema discussion, trade magazines, television shows and popular print outlets. It was also used retrospectively that suggested imitations by the third world of the real American thing. Films which shared certain rationalist drives, civil-social agenda of educating and reforming the audiences, on the other hand, were blamed as imitating the Western models of neo-realist structure. But discourses on cinema found true Indian ethos in the realistic film patterns against the Bollywood masala films which were largely unrealistic and pretentious – thereby attracting harsh criticism, for instance film scholar Ravi Vasudevan's: "The Bollywood sector of Indian film production is anti-cinema." The criticism was laid a ground by major Hindi filmmakers in Mumbai themselves by their shallow utterances. Subhas Ghai told *Vanity Fair*: "Do not call it Bollywood. This is a very wrong thing to call it.... we are making films that allow people to believe for 3 hours that they are not poor and hungry." That remark by a filmmaker of Ghai's stature showed at what dexterity they were hell-bent on making profit out of the general audiences' self-defeating pleasures nestled in total fantasy and invertebrate

filmy consciousness.



When writers and directors took the aesthetics of cinema worldwide as a vehicle of socio-political and philosophical enlightenment, when the concepts like the Third Cinema took a firm ground, the mainstream filmmakers in India took all for granted and projected themselves, knowingly or otherwise, as insincere towards not only the film idioms but also the audiences. Sticking to the popular identity – by catering to the demand for a product whose balance of spectacle, music, melodrama, choreography, and costumes creates an allure for the cross-over audience – they compose their own brand name to which they may not agree, but by doing so they produce consumerist entertainment, service, values, but certainly do not create arts. As a result, the titles of a number of books that might earlier have simply used Hindi Cinema or Popular Indian Cinema, increasingly started using the term Bollywood, for instance the recent academic titles brought out by Routledge. It is startling to note that in a Sage publication, a writer had gone back to the extent of the year 1926 as an index of Bollywood film viewing in Britain, citing the example of Himansu Rai and Franz Osten co-directed film *Prem Sanyas* (Light of Asia, 1925) being screened at Windsor Castle!

Actually, this hybrid term signifies three distinctions. First, it is used to represent the Hindi film industry based in Bombay – before the metro city was renamed as Mumbai in 1995 – which has been traditionally seen as hegemonic over the regional cinemas of the Indi-

an sub-continent excepting the South Indian film experiences. Second, while it is easy to compare the nomenclature to that of Hollywood films, the popular Hindi films as well as the same patterns followed by the mainstream South Indian films are distinguishable from the traditions of Hollywood filmmaking by the narrative conventions of dialogues and musical forms. Third, Bollywood is popularly described in relation to and against the hegemony of Hollywood; and the term is sometimes akin to an alternative to the western and white ethno-centric dominance in cinematic explorations. If Hollywood represents the homogenizing effect of a cultural imperialism, the study of Bollywood shows a growth or proliferation of a fragmentary cultural process. Clearly any Hindi film with a star ensemble cannot be equated with Bollywood variety as the basic laws or formulae governing it remain static over the years while the rest is moving on. Satyajit Ray, Buddhadeb Dasgupta, Jahnu Barua, Dr Bhabendra Nath Saikia and many others also made foray into Hindi films without succumbing to Bollywood characteristics.

Kiss of death

All this can be studied keeping a conscious drive of understanding how indie films in Hindi filmdom and underground film genres defying Hollywood industry norms flourished over time. The unavoidable truth about it is Bollywood thrives on mediocrity – its big players shun the languages of cinema for which they find all the pretext of caring for the Indian psyche, refuse to get mature and resort to childish melodrama. Vasudevan's lamentation – in his book *The Melodramatic Public* (2010) – that Bollywood is “anti-cinema” has found a cockeyed echo in no less a person than Shekhar Kapur whose *Elizabeth* had the distinction of getting nominated for eight Oscars. The veteran director in a recent tweet to renowned music composer A. R. Rahman told: “An Oscar is the kiss of death in Bollywood. It proves you have more talent than Bollywood can handle.” In comprehending

a bitter truth, Kapur has practically declared that doors of Hindi film industry are not open for extraordinary talents; and his tweet also shows a transformation in his ego by publicly embracing the hybrid B-word. Geetha J might be laughing at the tweet, to which sound designer Resul Pookutty's reaction was he too had stopped getting work in Bollywood after he won an Oscar (for the 2008 film *Slumdog Millionaire*).



This sudden spike in Bollywood-bashing came up after a raging debate on nepotism following a gifted young actor Sushant Singh Rajput's unnatural end of life. The sudden and unexplained death of SSR opened up “a can of worms in Bollywood”: exclaimed the celebrity producer-writer Pritish Nandy in his essay *The gangs of Bollywood* – an allusion to Anurag Kashyap's! At full throttle he vented his anger: “Bollywood is seen as just a cozy little clique of vested interests that feeds off nepotism, bullying, and incestuous media manipulation. Its awards are questionable. Its claims are often dubious. And its business practices have stayed opaque over the years.” These critical comments by a former editor of *Filmfare* magazine hold weight not only in view of recent controversies surrounding an infamous death but also against the age-old debates that refuse to subside. In this perspective, it was not surprising that a rather pompous film like *Gully Boy* (2019) made an entry to the Oscar nomination race representing India and expectedly failed. But that very film received maximum laurels in the history of Filmfare Awards 2020 which was held in

Guwahati this year amidst widespread controversies. Eyebrows were raised as the results were announced and they further dented the Filmfare Awards' already dwindling reputation. It can be mentioned that the film was among 39 selected titles in the initial list for FIPRESCI-India's annual grand prix for the best Indian film of the year and finally it was out failing to be among the top 20 films. But I am sure such discredit would not shame the Bollywood lords for obvious reasons: they are too insensitive, morally too bankrupt to acknowledge their own shortcomings and learn from mistakes.

Award fiascos

Let aside Filmfare Awards, other awards in Bollywood too could hardly claim respectability or credibility, as revealed by senior journalist-editor Shekhar Gupta in the case of Screen Awards which is owned by The Indian Express Group. Aamir Khan never made himself available for these awards functions because he knew that the awards continued to be more or less fixed. A self-respectful artist cannot accept the notoriety of compromise that goes hand in hand with the awards made solely for Bollywood – although Aamir's stance would not vindicate his brand of film business. Shekhar Gupta is brave enough to divulge some of the behind-the-scene dramas taking place almost every year around those awards. A star attending these awards functions or performing there would depend mostly on whether he or she was getting an award or not. An award not forthcoming would mean an individual star, his or her clan, whole unit of a film boycotting the event. In one such bizarre episode, when the jury led by Amol Palekar didn't find a Shah Rukh Khan starrer *My Name is Khan* (2010) worthy of getting nominated in any category, its director Karan Johar declined to accept the decision and threatened of boycotting the event. This put the organizers in a jittery and eventually a viewer's choice award based on an internet poll was added as out-of-the-jury-award to satisfy the said film in order to save the event

from a threatened "boycott of the entire film industry"!



There are many such dark stories termed "Screen Awards ordeal" by Shekhar Gupta, exposing morally corrupt Bollywood stars whose ungracious attitudes tend to betray the artist's basic, supposedly magnanimous, and generous, attributes. Now the things have come to such a pass that an average cine-literate would unhesitatingly tell that some awards were managed by the clout of established stardom, dynasties, and cliques. Nobody is surprised though, as any informed person is aware that the number of 'stars' rating in film reviews come (not all but mostly) under the influence of the industry, particularly in powerful media. So, when the allegation of nepotism in Bollywood was thrown by Kangana Ranaut, nobody was surprised. She was quickly joined in by well-known and well-established actors, musicians, and others like never before – many of whom seldom gathered courage to raise their voice against what Kangana described as "the mafia". The mafias of Bollywood are perhaps as old as the hybrid word. From the days of Haji Mastan to Dawood Ibrahim, the underworld active in the money-spinning Bollywood wore different hues: there have been Hindu mafias and Muslim mafias as well. Year after year, "Bollywood's ugly gangs" have been getting exposed: but the volley of accusations thrown by Kangana is smack of vested interests as the allegations are selfishly concerned with, in her words, "the flagbearer of nepotism" and not with the ones that should concern all of us who dream of a betterment of the Indian

film industry in totality or rectifying the other Bollywood gaffes.



Unpredictable woes

All this laid bare a reality that everything about Bollywood is not rosy, rather they point to many things rotten inside. Behind Kangana's ire, bitter feuds and much darker rhetoric overworked for political and other hidden gains. Sadly, Bollywood played to the tunes of a poisoned chalice this time too against which the success rate is abysmally poor. How many films produced in Bollywood actually become hit in a year? From among 200 plus films in average produced annually there could hardly be 30 films worth noting for success. Investing in Bollywood proves misadventure for even big corporate studios many of whom entered and exited it in the last 20 years. It's a gambling, if not film aesthetics, as for instance two Ayushmann Khurana starred films proved, namely *Hawaizaada* (2015) and *Dum Laga Ke Haisha* (2015) the latter being released just a few months after the former one experienced a colossal flop. The former one, made on a budget of Rs 35 crore by Reliance Entertainment, could not even gain Rs 10 crore, while the latter one made in less than Rs 10 crore earned Rs 42 crore at the box office. After the debacle, Reliance Entertainment called it a day; and everyone in the industry said to have warned Aditya Chopra, the producer of the other, against releasing a film having Ayushmann in the lead role opposite a fat girl, both going against the set patterns of Bollywood blockbusters. But Chopra's film, a romantic comedy enveloped in family drama, had an impressive run, even received the national award for best film in Hindi for a bold narrative of in-laws relationship with a subtle

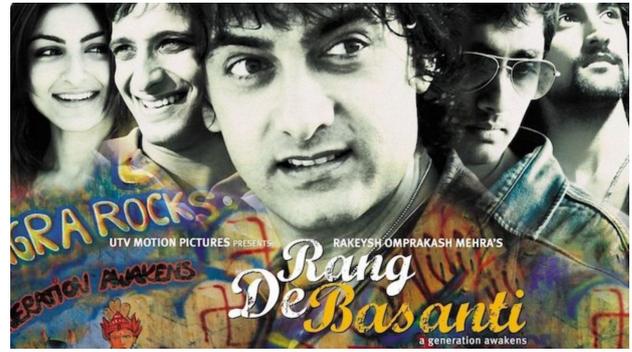
feminist zeal unseen in Hindi heartland. Perhaps the general filmgoers were fed up with the set patterns and they just enjoyed a fresh lease of life in the film's low-lying content and common threads of life which were treated in an uncommon fashion. Interestingly, Chopra's production banner Yash Raj Films, a name to reckon with for their typical Bollywood ventures like *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (1995), *Rab Ne Bana Di Jodi* (2008), *Befikre* (2016), tasted this success not with just another run-of-the-mill venture but with a middle-of-the-road effort directed by young gun Sharat Katariya.

Same outcome was witnessed in Sujoy Ghosh's *Kahaani* (2012). **In the time of its making**, Bollywood pundits dismissed it saying a film with a pregnant woman as a central character will not work. But the Rs 8 crore-film ultimately did business of Rs 104 crore. The problem seemed to be a basic failure in exploring beyond the set patterns. The managerial think heads treat films as FMCG – but the 'fast moving consumer goods' fade fast too, become sour grapes – once sold turn distasteful quickly in the recipient's palates unlike the consumer goods. Movies and matinee idols cannot be equated with durable consumer products for long. Thus, Reliance delivered big flops with big stars, like Hrithik Roshan's *Kites* (2010) and Salman Khan's *Jai Ho* (2014). The casualties were the profiteers whose sole aim was to make money by luring the millions of poor Indians. The Walt Disney Company, one of the biggest studios in the world, shut down their motion pictures division in India after its 2017 production, a Ranbir Kapoor-Katrina Kaif starred *Jagga Jasoos* proved highly unprofitable during its theatrical run. The other corporates who shut shop in Bollywood by the same time were Sony Pictures, PVR Pictures, Sahara Motion Pictures, Birla Group's Applause Entertainment, the Singhanian Group, the Tata Group and the Mahindras, along with a few others.

Inherent paranoia

The big question is why they show total apathy to creative freshness, a stubborn reluctance to infuse the new blood into the larger narrative. The reasons are explicable, in broad spectrum. Firstly, the mainstream film characters in Hindi as well as other regional language films are endowed with inexplicable tales drenched with tears and romance, hates and vengeance. With special effects and VFX widely used in big-budgeted films, the protagonists do a hell lot of humanly impossible things on screen. Danny Boyle described his Bollywood-formulated film *Slumdog Millionaire* a comedy owing to such funny premise on which the film was based, and he eloquently said his film was a tribute to Bollywood! The showcasing of lavish lifestyles, eye-drooling designs, glamorous cocktail of costumes and choreography, besides the lip-served song-and-dances and loud music was explained as “glamorous realism” by Yash Chopra – its sole aim is to foreground emotions without the distraction of economic or other day-to-day problems, although the main motive is to do business by warding off the harsh realism, dodging the honest film senses.

Secondly, whenever the plot summary is given a radical twist it becomes worse example of unrealistic pattern. On the pretext of questioning the status quo, if the agenda is to examine the hegemony of nationalistic visions, or to debate consumerism ethics, or may be to judge the gender equations, the films are designed in such simplistic or absurdly melodramatic veins that they fail to make the real impact. The aesthetics of violence is packaged as the only or ultimate way to weed out corruption and immoral practices from the institutions of power or religion, for example the likes of *Rang De Basanti* (2006) and *Sadak 2* (2020). Actions like a corrupt minister killed by a group of youths, a radio station taken over by them, a fierce godman and his accomplices including a mafia leader killed by a single person are devoid of reality, although they garner applause from the fantasy-driven spectators in cinema theatres and OTT platforms.



Thirdly, borrowed, and stolen stories are covered up by Indianizing through superficial costumes and emotions, and cosmetic cultural ethos. Plagiarism has steadily assumed shameless proportions in Bollywood through storyline and music which only show the average Indian’s prejudiced notion of perfection in the white West. Strangely, the Censor Board hardly objects to plagiarism in so-called mainstream films. The popular Bollywood filmmakers’ known yearning for making it big among the Hollywood glitterati is a result of this unhindered complex. Amir Khan’s attitude towards Bollywood awards is praiseworthy, but all his efforts to reach the Oscar stage of Dorothy Chandler Pavilion by dint of a film like *Lagaan* (2001) that fails under the sheer weight of cliché was laughable.

Fourthly, a lack of proper critical tradition has also contributed to a poor standard in current Bollywood. The role of the media is responsible for not building up a secure space for meaningful criticism. This is why in spite of fostering a heritage of film criticism, Indian media falls short of creating separate spaces for critics, film reviewers and cine reporters. As a result, all these sections of writers are mixed up somewhere, their perfection and accomplishments tend to blur always. Baburao Patels of yesteryears thus failed to become role models. As an implication, there are very less articulate film appreciation seen in traditional outlets as mediocre or nonsensical write-ups pass on as criticism. They don’t reflect the essential understanding of the complicated vocabulary of filmmaking, the genres in which a film is supposed to be taking place, the inherent layers of meaning or philosoph-

ical tones, the various editing methods, the exemplary mise-en-scene, and so on. It is a pity that only gossip magazines and columns run the roost, and all the healthy film journals meet with premature death.



Finally, Bollywood is full of trained crafts men and women – from cinematographers, sound designers, editors, to actors and other technical persons passing out from film schools – but very often they are to function under the poorly equipped director. Though die-hard Bollywood fans and supporters unabashedly claim it as true representative of Indian Cinema, it is non-accommodative to accomplished directors from other regions across the land. It offers readymade role, notwithstanding exceptions, to second generation son or daughter taking the reins of the studio, thereby giving way to nepotism. They are inwardly weak, knows and aware of their own follies: insecure owing to their mediocrity, and thus try their own petty business of shunning, mocking the talented ‘outsider’.

Postscript

As I wanted to gauge the significance of the term Bollywood, the focus is not on the product value of the output from the industry, but, rather on the logic of the system, and what it means to the recipients and observers alike. For clarification, the Bollywood system is evolving with its body of works and selection of the content and their treatment by the creative forces which are changing themselves over the ages, their choices and preferences shaped by the shifting socio-political mores. Thus, Bollywood study can have its room partitioned by different periods like the Nehru Years and Indira Years, globalization period and millennium period, to say the least. But just because it draws significant size of viewership, thanks to the Centre’s pro-Hindi policy till date, Bollywood cannot claim a superior position in the annals of Indian film history. Promoting Bollywood films is a dangerous and anti-cinema viewpoint that acquires constantly ominous portends. Indian cinemas have a myriad of geographical, linguistic, i.e. cultural orientation – a heterogeneous identity – upon which the hegemony of a single regional orthodoxy cannot go on unabated. Unfortunately, this is one fiefdom that has been used as a tool to remove, wipe, elbow out, or bulldoze cultures of minor ethnic groups, even in the backwater of Maharashtra. It will be interesting to see how, under the conditions of the pandemic and lockdown hitting hard in every front, the Bollywood norms adjust themselves in coming days. Certain probable changes are talked about, but will they favour Bollywood or other Indian cinemas, vice versa or both, would be a pointer to further transformations.

Mr. Manoj Barpujari is a Member of Fipresci-India, based in Guwahati.