

Pictures of *Pardes*

Imaging the Foreign through Indian Cinema

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The Indian diaspora is over 20 million strong, spread over 60 countries and representative of 7 different regions of India and at least half a dozen of its religions. The relationship of this diasporic community to its homeland has undergone a vast change, especially at the turn of the present century. The nostalgic sentiment of the first-generation immigrant is gradually on the wane; gone is the desperate reaching for an elusive and homogenous Indian identity. A new transnational sensibility is emerging, as is evident in the writings of second-generation migrants like Jhumpa Lahiri. “Such people,” says Stuart Hall in *Modernity and its Futures*, “retain their strong links with their places of origin and their traditions, but they are without the illusion of a return to the past. They are obliged to come to terms with the new cultures they inhabit, without simply assimilating to them and losing their identities completely...The difference is that they are not and never will be unified in the old sense, because they are irrevocably the product of several interlocking histories and cultures, they belong at one and the same time to several “homes” (and to no particular home).”

Gibreel Farishta of Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses* is perhaps just such a hybrid, an individual who must learn to inhabit at least two cultural identities, to speak

two cultural languages and translate, negotiate, between them. As Sumita Chakravarty point out in *National Identity and Popular Cinema*, it is no accident that Gibreel Farishta hails from the fantasy world of Bombay cinema. Since Independence, our films are arguably the single-most imposing cultural influence shaping and reflecting the Indian identity – along with cricket and voting, they are among the most important community experiences that Indians have. Rushdie’s Gibreel encapsulates, perhaps, the collective memory of the immigrant Indian, all that a diasporic Indian views of India through the media and particularly through Indian cinema.

Interpreter of Mythologies

With the decline of folk traditions, it has fallen to commercial cinema to create a new cultural lexicon for Indian public life. In the Bollywood universe, the formulaic nature of the films, the standard plots, the stock characters, the ubiquitous stars and playback singers and the film-makers’ extraordinary penchant for remakes all have a special function. Pleasure is drawn precisely from a sense of familiarity, which expresses not so much an escapist fantasy as a desire for order and pattern. Bollywood is an amalgam of stories, plots, heroes, heroines, songs and dances, all of which interweave with one another; it is, as some have



Parminder Nagra gets a makeover in *Bend it Like Beckham*

suggested, a modern-day version of the Mahabharata, a technological vehicle for the affirmation and diffusion of collective mythologies.

Non-Resident Indians (NRIs) have been well known to use cinema to explore their identities and to satisfy the cultural pull of their motherland. How, though, does mainstream Hindi cinema view this diaspora, among which are numbered some of Bollywood's most fanatic enthusiasts? In the films of the decades immediately post-Independence, *vilayat* was always London – no other country or continent existed in our filmmakers' mental map of the lands beyond our borders. Heroes setting out for foreign shores left for indefinite periods, with all channels of communication snapped – thus conveniently hastening complications in the plot. Letters were forever being lost in transit or were prone to falling into the wrong hands. Sometimes the hero never came back, forcing the heroine to go in search of him *saat samundar paar*, all the way across the seven seas. The land at the end of those seas was always vice-ridden, a wilderness of ogres and monsters. Nor could one expect much help from one's fellow expatriates: in *Prem Pujari* and *Des Pardes*, the diasporic community is portrayed as worse even than the native *gora*. Indians abroad are seen running mafia networks, working in bars, smuggling drugs. With danger lurking at every corner, the heroine would make brave attempts to westernise herself in hope of winning back her beau, preparatory to bringing the prodigal home. Finally, of course, malefactors were always either thoroughly chastened with sermons on the Indian value system or simply wiped off the screen.

An Imaginary Vilayat

Gradually, however, filmmakers realised that enforcing a return on errant émigrés was not the only option; tuning them in to the



Expat boy meets *bharatiya nari*: diaspora romance in *Hum Dil De Chuke Sanam*

Bollywood version of the Indian value system would work just as well. Over time, *vilayat* expanded its frontiers to the United States – the land of so-called unlimited opportunity. In 1990s films such as *Tere Mere Sapne* and *Pardes*, suitable NRI boys, Indian values intact, would revisit the mother country, seeking the *adarsh bharatiya nari*, the ideal Indian woman. These heroes, many shown as born and brought up abroad, were squeaky clean and far more Indian than their *desi* cousins who never left home. The India constructed in these films is as imaginary as *vilayat* itself: it is a veritable tourist brochure, with the visiting NRI receiving a kaleidoscopic tour of Indian cuisine, Indian weddings, Indian relatives and Indian holiday destinations. The tenor is exaggerated, melodramatic and essentially North Indian. In *Pardes*, India is a never-never land of lush, idyllic fields where a huge joint family bursts spontaneously into patriotic song – *I love my India, yeh mera India*. In *Hum Dil De Chuke Sanam*, the Italian NRI is taken on a similar joyride through the colourful collage of a

Gujarati family. However, this hero cannot marry the *bharatiya naari* – he is not Indian enough, he speaks with an accent and romances the heroine without the blessings of her parents. The diasporic hero has a refurbished image in these films but he can be called an Indian only when he conforms to the requisite social norms. The NRI hero of *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* proves his worth by refusing to elope with his Indian beloved because their marriage does not have the sanction of her parents. The stigma attached to having been brought up across the black waters has been forgotten, but there remain other conditions a diasporic protagonist may be required to fulfill before he can find popular acceptance.

The India-*vilayat* divide essentially moves along the lines of the pre-established norms of the popular small-town/big-city conflict. Bombay, the city of impossible dreams in so many films, has been replaced by America as the setting for the clash of home and world. It is also interesting to note how, in the 1990s, the diasporic site in Hindi films also

operates as a site of transgression. In earlier films, wayward heroes would abandon their beloveds and claim the manipulations of their mothers as their pretext. But the hero of the 1990s now has the strange laws of a foreign country to bring to bear to excuse his lapses. In *Aa Ab Laut Chalein*, for instance, the hero's father abandons his family and is 'forced' to marry an American, to gain citizenship and make money. Conveyed through much tear-jerking dialogue, the irrefutable logic of pragmatic necessity apparently absolves this character of all his wrongdoings.

There was a time in Bombay cinema when inter-community relations were like the tableaux at the Republic Day parade, where greenhouse minority communities were showcased with gusto. Memdidi and Khan *bhai*, once omnipresent in Bombay *masalas*, are, these days, either completely absent or found best resurrected only in films depicting the diasporic community. At home, communities may be divided; abroad, they are united under the same objective – making dollars – and against the same enemy – vice-ridden Americans, forever out to get them. This kind of inter-community bonhomie is also seen in the numerous war films made in the 1990s. It would seem that our films can only provide us a glimpse of secular India either during war or in America.

Bollywood has come, in part, to express a certain Indian aspiration for its own version of the modern and the desirable. The foreign and the western are incorporated and sometimes mocked; at the very least, they provide great backdrops to *desi* dramas. Song and dance routines are filmed in locations from Switzerland to New Zealand with no mention of the fact that these are foreign locales – they could be somewhere between Bombay and Khandala, for all you



Stills from *Hollywood Bollywood*

know. In case you see a Harrods or a White House in the distance, remember they could very well be in India. This brazen quality adds another interesting dimension to the question of the imaginary homeland. For the diasporic viewer, for whom cinema is a vital aid in imaging an India she/he has probably never seen, such visuals help traverse the distance from the country of their origin to the places where they now reside. Chiffon-clad Indian actresses singing Hindi songs in the snows of the Alps

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may seem incongruous, but the Indian viewer has an astounding capacity for the willing suspension of disbelief.

At Home in the World

However, there is an alternative discourse emerging out of the diasporic filmmakers themselves. In Gurinder Chaddha's *Bend It Like Beckham* and in Deepa Mehta's *Hollywood Bollywood*, we see a realistic glimpse of the diasporic community. Both these films are in English; drawing attention to the fact that the language of the mother country is not so widely spoken in the diasporic community, something which Bollywood films on the diaspora do not even mention. Another fact that is often ignored is that NRIs come from various linguistic backgrounds and are not necessarily all either North Indian or Punjabi or even Hindu, as our Bollywood films would have us believe. The struggles and experiences of the Indian diaspora vis-à-vis the outside world are both as specific and as diverse as the backgrounds of its members; the diasporic identity itself is one that is in constant flux.

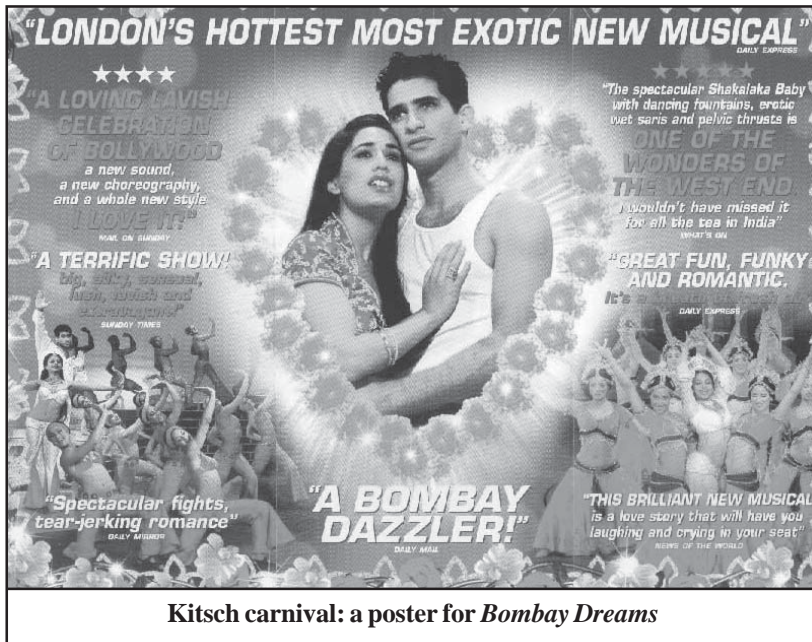
New generation filmmakers of Indian origin living abroad show distinct transnational sensibilities, aiming to reach world audiences beyond the South Asian diaspora. In Britain, the Asian community is making definite inroads into mainstream society with Bollywood spearheading the assimilation process. In fact, Bollywood, as the world's largest Institute of the Imaginary, is fast becoming India's most recognisable cultural export. 'Exotic Asian kitsch' has caught the Western imagination even as Andrew Lloyd Webber proudly introduces A.R. Rehman to audiences dazzled by *Bombay Dreams* and Baz Luhrmann admits to being inspired by Bollywood

musicals, while incorporating lines from *Chhama* a *Chhama* to *Moulin Rouge*. *Lagaan* makes it to the Academy Award nominations for Best Foreign Film of 2001. Mira Nair's *Monsoon Wedding* wins the Golden Lion at Venice and earns a Golden Globe nomination for Best Foreign Film. *Devdas* has its first screening at

the prestigious Cannes Film Festival. Britain's conventional media has embraced Bollywood to such an extent that the BBC features Indian film festivals which even non-Asians watch with interest. The hallowed Victoria and Albert Museum in London opens a special exhibit of Bollywood posters. Shekhar Kapur is invited to take on British history with *Elizabeth*. The Empire, apparently, is striking back, and with a vengeance.

Bending Stereotypes

These developments owe most to second- and third-generation Asians born and bred abroad. The Indian diaspora is characterised today by young professionals who have grown up in the consciousness of several traditions, some often at variance with each other. The last decade has seen these young Indians use cinema to give expression to their feelings of displacement. *Bend It Like Beckham*, for instance, is, in many ways, a protest film where several thresholds are crossed in terms of acceptable cinematic discourse both in Britain and in India. The young woman protagonist wants to play soccer against the wishes of her parents. She fights racial and gender prejudices to enter the



Kitsch carnival: a poster for *Bombay Dreams*

competitive arena of a white male sport. As a second-generation Indian in Britain, she finds it difficult to acquiesce to her mother's desires that she spend more time in the kitchen, learn how to make *aloo-gobhi* and eventually marry a boy from her own community. Her thoughts, instead, are dominated by her tremendous zeal to play her game and to define her identity in the land of her birth. Her obvious discomfort with things Indian is believable and evokes real humour, not least because of the contrast she presents to all the Bollywood film characters who, despite having spent all their lives outside India, manage to break into *bhajans* at the drop of a hat.

In *Hollywood-Bollywood*, the diasporic community enacts Bollywood's favourite stereotypes to the hilt, through the roles of a hypersensitive mother and an interfering, dominating mother-in-law. The son, another second-generation immigrant, hates anything Indian and is under pressure from his mother and grandmother to marry an Indian woman. Desperate to produce a *bahu* for his family's approval, he lights upon an Italian escort to play the part. However, to the audience's relief, the girl turns

out to be a Punjabi Hindu, who sings and dances her way to acceptance in her prospective husband's household and is a huge success. Meanwhile, the hero's American girlfriend, a yoga practitioner, dies in a freak accident while levitating in *samadhi*, duly captured live on local TV. The irreverent diasporic sensibility cuts both ways and is tremendously refreshing. Perhaps this also indicates the ease with which

our hybrid, translated individual straddles two cultures and accepts the weirdness of her/his cross-cultural identity.

Both these films employ a language of light-hearted frivolity, perhaps in an attempt to gloss over the harsh realities of an immigrant's existence. The pressures of maintaining authentic ethnic cultures in an alien land and in the age of globalisation can indeed be traumatic. The diaspora experience is even more extreme in a space where all boundaries are not merely permeable but very often merge. Is it possible, after all, to acquire a consistent diasporic identity in these globalised times? Diaspora films are documents of cultural confrontation and of the new interpretations of the self that result; their half-mocking, self-deprecating style is, perhaps, the only mode in which their stories can at present be told.

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