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## THE MAKING OF THE MAN'S MAN: STARDOM AND THE CULTURAL POLITICS OF NEOLIBERALISM IN HINDUTVA INDIA

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THE MAKING OF THE MAN'S MAN: STARDOM AND THE CULTURAL POLITICS OF  
NEOLIBERALISM IN HINDUTVA INDIA

by

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A Dissertation

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the  
Doctor of Philosophy Degree

College of Mass Communication and Media Arts  
in the Graduate School  
Southern Illinois University Carbondale  
May 2021

DISSERTATION APPROVAL

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A Dissertation Submitted in Partial

Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in the field of Mass Communication and Media Arts

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April 5, 2021

## AN ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION OF

Soumik Pal, for the Doctor of Philosophy degree in Mass Communication and Media Arts, presented on March 26, 2021, at Southern Illinois University Carbondale.

TITLE: THE MAKING OF THE MAN'S MAN: STARDOM AND THE CULTURAL POLITICS OF NEOLIBERALISM IN HINDUTVA INDIA

MAJOR PROFESSOR: Dr. Jyotsna Kapur

In this dissertation, I trace the contours of state control and capital in India, starting from the 1970s and see how the state's increasingly centralizing tendencies and authoritarianism, in the service of capital, creates cultures of violence, fatalism, desperation, and ultimately, even more desire for authoritarianism. I study male stardom in Bombay cinema, beginning with Amitabh Bachchan (who was the reigning star in the 1970s and 80s), and following up with Shah Rukh Khan and Salman Khan (who have been successful stars from the early 90s), to understand how changing subjectivities, responding to changing socio-economic reality, were formulated and expressed through these star texts by the film industry. Through the study of these stars, I try to understand how dominant ideas of masculinities were being formulated and how misogyny came to be a prominent aspect of those formulations, because of social structures of caste and patriarchy as well as neoliberal precarity. I also study the cultures of fascist violence that have emerged in India under the rightwing Hindu nationalist BJP government in the light of increased individualization and self-commodification under neoliberalism. I contend that the socio-political system that enhances individualization and self-commodification and thus, gives rise to a heightened celebrity culture, is also responsible for the limits on the agency of the stars and celebrities through the formation of a totalitarian state. I study Indian prime minister Narendra Modi as the ultimate celebrity commodity text to understand the future of stardom itself in India.

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## DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to the memory of the late David Graeber, the finest thinker I have ever known, whose work not only helps us understand our world better but also instills hope for the future.



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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION: ARTICULATIONS OF MASCULINITY, SPACE AND STARDOM IN NEOLIBERAL INDIA

On February 2, 2021, pop music artist and global superstar Rihanna posted the link of an article from the CNN website about the ongoing farmers' protest in India against exploitative and potentially disastrous farm laws, and the Indian government's crackdown on the protest. With the link, she just wrote, "why aren't we talking about this?! #FarmersProtest" This single tweet caused a storm on Indian social media as people backing the farmers welcomed the international attention Rihanna's tweet had brought to the protest and pro-government (formed by the Hindu right-wing party BJP)<sup>1</sup> people reacted that foreign celebrities had no business interfering in India's internal matter. In quick succession, other well-known public figures from diverse fields, such as environmental activist Greta Thunberg, US politician Ilhan Omar, US climate justice activist Jamie Margolin, globally famous pornstar Mia Khalifa, American lawyer Meena Harris, Instagram star Amanda Cerny, and many others took to social media to express concern over the Indian government's crackdown on the peaceful and democratic farmers' protest, which is one of the largest in human history and had been going on for about six months in the form of a huge encampment outside the borders of the nation's capital, Delhi.

With global celebrities taking the lead in building global awareness about the protest, the Indian government responded (unofficially) by getting a slew of Indian celebrities to tweet against "foreign interference" in India's internal matter. For example, Sachin Tendulkar, India's biggest sports icon, tweeted, "India's sovereignty cannot be compromised. External forces can be

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<sup>1</sup> BJP stands for Bharatiya Janata Party which translates to Indian People's Party

spectators but not participants. Indians know India and should decide for India. Let's remain united as a nation. #IndiaTogether #IndiaAgainstPropaganda.” There is no proof as to whether the celebrities, from mainly films and sports, were instructed or coerced by the government to tweet but the striking similarity of language across the tweets, all talking about internal unity against foreign propaganda, made it quite obvious that this was a concerted government effort.

The sheer scale of the protests and the resilience of the farmers, have made them impossible to be ignored. Indian mainstream media, largely acting as mouthpieces of the government, had ignored the protests in their initial days. But when the protestors moved to outside Delhi and set up camps (which have turned to mini settlements by now), they could not be ignored anymore and the mainstream media started vilifying them. One of the most vicious narratives that the media tried to circulate was that the farmers, largely being Sikhs, were actually Khalistani<sup>2</sup> separatists trying to break the nation.

I found it curious that for a protest movement related to agriculture, fixing of base prices of crops, maintenance (or dismantling) of the crop buying/ selling system etc., the general conversation had moved to what stars and celebrities, none of whom were farmers, had to say. Surely, the celebrities expressing concern for the protestors must have felt that a resistance movement of such proportions should not be ignored. Moreover, it has now started to become established outside India, thanks to diligent work of activists, scholars and journalists, that the nation has an authoritarian government that regularly censors free speech. So, connecting a resistance of historic proportions with the context of an authoritarian government was only natural.

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<sup>2</sup> The Khalistan movement was a Sikh separatist movement that demanded a separate homeland for the Sikhs in the Punjab region in South Asia

The Indian government tried to counter the awareness brought by the celebrities about the protests by creating the spectacle of a celebrity counter-attack. While some of the biggest celebrity icons put out the uniformly worded tweets in support of the government, a few right-wing celebrities like Bollywood actress Kangana Ranaut, backed by the complicit media, went on the offensive. This is a familiar right-wing tactic to go on the offensive with wild accusations of conspiracy, terrorism, sedition etc. so that the accused is left defending against them. The aim of the right-wing offensive is to keep up the attack till the articulations of the demands of the protestors gets lost. However, it seems as if the extraordinary organizational capabilities of the farmers and building on that, their steadfast stance of not budging from their demands, has been able to nullify the threats mounted by the celebrity spectacle. The protests are firmly lodged in public consciousness now and cannot be ignored.

Even if the alacrity with which the government mounted the concerted social media (counter) campaign is surprising, it is not surprising that it roped in stars to opine on this contentious issue. For anyone familiar with Indian political culture, this has become a familiar feature by now - that the right-wing BJP government's policies or initiatives, or even vague campaigns without specific goals, are almost always headlined by stars. And the other aspect of this is how much Narendra Modi, India's prime minister and projected by his party as a strong leader destined to lead India to greatness, loves hobnobbing with the stars.

This project started with the coming together of my observations about stars in the two fields that I am interested in – Hindi cinema and Indian politics. I was noticing a resurgence in popularity of the already successful Bollywood superstar actor Salman Khan. From around the turn of the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, almost every single film that he acted in turned to box-office gold. Films like *Wanted*, *Ready*, *Bodyguard*, *Dabangg* etc. were not only successful, they

were also attracting maddening adulation from a wide variety of fans. Salman Khan had suddenly become the undisputed number one.

The second is the personality cult around Narendra Modi. It is important to note that Modi rose from the rank and file of RSS, a “cultural” (Ahmad, 2016) organization (and one of the longest running fascist organizations in the world). RSS, which stands for Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh which means “National Volunteer Organization,” was started in 1925 as an upper-caste Hindu and strictly male organization. Historically, RSS founders and members traveled to inter-War Europe and have interacted with and been inspired by European fascists. Over the years, the RSS has implemented Mussolini’s principles of fascist youth camps in its own operations and has sought to learn from Hitler’s “solution” to the Jewish question and apply it to India to make it a Hindu only nation (Hindu *rashtra*). In an interview with Tariq Ali, Aijaz Ahmad (TeleSUR English, 2017) observes that by describing itself as cultural, RSS excuses itself from scrutiny into its finances as well as membership numbers. Moreover, RSS describes the Hindu idea of culture as encompassing all spheres of life – politics, economics, religion etc. So, by this logic, it claims the right to influence all these spheres of life. After BJP, which is the political front of the RSS, meant to attend to the political form of parliamentary democracy, has come to power, RSS’s influence and interference in all forms of administration has increased even more. RSS ideologues have infiltrated all higher positions in administration, judiciary, education etc.

Modi had had a successful and popular stint as the Chief Minister of the state of Gujarat. Even though his stint was tainted (or bolstered, from a counter-view) by large scale communal violence in 2002, he remained in the spotlight and eventually led his party to victory in the central, parliamentary elections in 2014. Unsurprisingly, BJP’s victory led to an increase in

communal violence, identity based polarization of the Indian society, physical attacks on minorities (often in the form of mob violence), violent censorship of free speech, along with declining economic development. But every act of oppression, every instance of terrible governance or obviously bad measures like demonetization (the government banned the use of 500 and 1000 rupee notes which consisted about 86% of India's total cash in 2016, causing widespread misery to people) not only did not diminish Modi's popularity, they seemed to make him even more popular.

On the face of it, Salman Khan and Narendra Modi have stark similarities and dissimilarities. Firstly, Khan is a Muslim actor and Modi is a rightwing Hindu nationalist with a track record of Islamophobic bigotry. The son of celebrated scriptwriter Salim Khan, Salman Khan is a film industry insider who has had a successful film career for decades whereas Modi came from humble origins (though the details are not clear), rose through the political hierarchy to become India's prime minister. But both seemed to have fan followings that defy logic. Khan has had many run-ins with the law and has been the quintessential bad boy of the film industry. Moreover, he is clearly an actor with limited skills. But for his fans, none of this seemed to matter. Even when he ventured into other activities like singing or painting, things in which he was even worse, the fans still did not seem to care. Similarly, Modi has openly lied in his speeches (that were fact checked in the public domain), made elections promises which did not materialize and yet the very people of India who had suffered because of his policies kept supporting him. It was as if Khan and Modi both had got cheat codes in their respective careers.

The similarities extended to authoritarian traits shown by the characters that Khan was playing and the authoritarian manner in which Modi was (is) running the country. Khan's characters, often within the law establishment, repeatedly make a mockery of the rule of law and

presented due process as a hindrance to justice. For a country, still struggling with the stifling effects of bureaucracy, this was a welcome change as it promised to get things done. In a way, this was also the promise of Modi who positioned himself as the CEO of the country rather than the state head. He promised to unshackle India's growth from the red tape of government interference and lead India to a corporate-led path of growth.

Here, the sleight of hand is positing private capital as the antidote to the stifling red tape of the public sector. As Mark Fisher (2009) and David Graeber (2012) show, bureaucracy has only increased in the neoliberal era and public and private bureaucracies work in a manner which makes them impossible to separate. In what Graeber (2015) has termed the "iron law of liberalism," whenever the government tries to cut down on bureaucratic procedures through market reform, it ends up having the opposite effect – proliferation of more paperwork and the increase in the size of the bureaucracy.

Examples of such Quixotic bureaucratic undertakings abound in contemporary India. For example, Modi announced on November 8, 2016 that currency notes of the denominations of 500 and 1000 Indian rupees were null and void and had to be deposited to banks and that the government would issue new currency notes later. He initially touted it as an attack on black money, then justified the move as a way to transition the Indian economy to a cashless one. Shifting rationalities notwithstanding, what this move did was cause untold suffering in people. Not only did millions of people have to queue up in front of ATM machines for hours to withdraw their own money, many small-scale industries dependent on daily cash transactions closed down leading to job losses and the ruining of livelihoods. In the name of efficiency, the government has been centralizing all power, even cutting on the power of the state governments of the country. Such totalizing visions of control over the entire polity and the population have

led to initiatives such as Aadhaar (an initiative to issue unique identification numbers to all residents or passport holders of India based on biometric and demographic data). The government's insistence on linking all facilities to the Aadhaar card has led to disastrous consequences in a large, heterogeneous country like India with an unorganized economy. For example, in a particularly tragic case, in 2017 an 11-year old girl in Simdega district in the state of Jharkhand starved to death in her mother's arms because the family did not have an Aadhaar-linked ration card. (ANI, 2017)

Public life in India is structured by frustrating bureaucratic procedures as the daily experience of people in India would attest. In fact, access to resources has become even more difficult, and life stultified, under neoliberal bureaucracy as compared to the infamous "license Raj" of the pre-neoliberal era. Max Weber (1920 (2011)) has described bureaucracy as a hyper-rational, joyless iron cage that seemingly eschews both favoritism and personality. If anything, these suffocating qualities of bureaucracy and their monumental inefficiencies have given rise to intense desires for strong, charismatic figures who would "shake up the system." I contend that Salman Khan and Narendra Modi benefited from and made use of this desire. In that sense, the rise of charismatic figures, who act with impunity, in films and in politics, is a product of neoliberal bureaucracy.

In my work, I trace the contours of state control and capital in India, starting from the 1970s and see how the state's increasingly centralizing tendencies and authoritarianism, in the service of capital, creates cultures of violence, fatalism, desperation, and ultimately, even more desire for authoritarianism. I study male stardom in Hindi cinema, beginning with Amitabh Bachchan (who was the reigning star in the 1970s and 80s), and following up with Shah Rukh Khan and Salman Khan (who have been successful stars from the early 90s), to understand how

changing subjectivities, responding to changing socio-economic reality, were formulated and expressed through these star texts by the film industry. I also study the cultures of fascist violence that have emerged in India under the BJP government and try to understand by examining the phenomena of individualization and self-commodification under neoliberalism. I study Modi as a star/ celebrity text to understand the future of stardom itself in India.

### **Neoliberalism in India**

India had already started adopting neoliberal reforms from the 1980s and officially adopted neoliberal reforms in 1991. A starting definition of the idea of neoliberalism, as provided by David Harvey, is this:

Neoliberalism is in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade. The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices. (Harvey, 2005, p. 2)

As this definition implies, all aspects of human life could then be opened up to the market forces in neoliberalism. The justifying logic of neoliberalism, which has great hegemonic power in the current times world over, is that state intervention in social life stifled the natural tendencies of human enterprise and created bureaucratic labyrinths that trapped the free human spirit. Thus, at least in theory, it was a return to Adam Smith's theory of the "invisible hand" of the market in which a capitalist system, modeled on the astronomical model of the solar system, would be a self-sustaining system without the need for any external stimulus. The appeal of the neoliberal model was thus, based on its supposed "naturalness." And this was what Modi was

also promising – to release the “animal spirit” of business.

But of course, as Harvey’s definition points out, the state was to be the guarantor of private property rights, an environment conducive to business and the smooth movement of capital. This goes counter to the commonsensical notion, highly amplified by political figures like Modi, that neoliberalism would mean a reduction in interference and retreat of the state from public life. In fact, critics have pointed out that neoliberalism has meant a return of untrammelled capitalism without the intervention of any state-led program of redistribution (like the New Deal in the United States). For a post-colonial country like India, this was a return to the exploitative ways of the British colonial state which withdrew from and destroyed agriculture to carry out a process of primitive accumulation (Patnaik, 2017), or accumulation by dispossession. (Harvey, 2004)

This colonial legacy and its resuming has had a great influence in the shaping of popular Hindi cinema. The migrant from the village who comes to the big city (Bombay for Hindi cinema) in search of a living and to fulfill their dreams – has been a classic type that has been staged and re-staged ad infinitum, as scholars have pointed out. (Virdi, 2003, p. 12) (Mazumdar, 2007, pp. xix, 5.7, 16, 44) (Banaji, 2006, p. 176) (Vitali, 2008). To a large extent, this has made Bombay/ Mumbai a city of migrants.

This migration pattern has also meant that there has been an excess of labor force in the cities that the urban infrastructures have struggled to assimilate. The role of the state, the neoliberal state, in particular, has been crucially inimical to labor. Aijaz Ahmad (2000) argues that

...the shell of the nation-state is sought to be maintained, as a way of enforcing differential labour regimes in different parts of the global capitalist system, but

then the nation-state is expected to obey the dictates of the market while the nationally enclosed market is itself opened up to unhampered action of global capital.

And as Ahmad (2000) succinctly puts it elsewhere, "...capital, national or transnational, wants not a weak nation-state but a state that is weak in relation to capital but strong in relation to labour."

It is important, however, to note that the state and capital alliance is not unique to the neoliberal era at all. Post-Independence, the Indian state put the national capitalists at the forefront of national growth and even though there was an extension of infrastructure and public services, it was limited to the national elite, through the axes of class, caste, gender, ethnicity etc. The post-Independence euphoria of nation building had gone away after the initial couple of decades and discontent grew. After enjoying state patronage and protection from international competition, the national capitalists in India wanted to further increase their profits and used the state to impose restrictions on labor. The state's restrictions, in turn, spawned criminality and illegality, that find representation in Hindi cinema from the 1970s and 80s. Labor union and student protests elicited even more repression from the state that reached a flashpoint in 1975, when the Indira Gandhi led Congress government declared Emergency, suspending democratic rights.

The optimism of the post-Independence era about nation building was reflected in films of Raj Kapoor, Dilip Kumar etc. Hindi cinema changed its register in the 1970s when the crisis hit. Madhava Prasad (1998) called this the "moment of disaggregation" which was a fragmentation of the Hindi film form, the most famous of which was the masculine, action film headlined by the new star Amitabh Bachchan. Singular in looks, voice and acting style,

Bachchan came to dominate the film industry for close to two decades with several variations of the “angry young man,” the proletarian hero.

The state continued to back capital in cutting costs while systematically breaking the back of the working-class. The 1982-83 textile mill strike in Bombay, which lasted 19 months and involved two hundred and fifty thousand workers (van Wersch, 2019), is a good example of that, where the state allowed the industrialists to get away without meeting the workers’ demands, from which the working-class never recovered. The factories were dismantled, and the land sold at tremendous profits. Now a large mall occupies the land along with some areas left underdeveloped where wilderness has taken over. The increasing exploitation of the working-class by the state and capital ultimately culminated in the opening up of the Indian economy to global capital through the 1980s and officially adopting neoliberal reforms in 1991.

The Bretton Woods institutions used the increased deficit in the economy to introduce neoliberal reforms, known as “structural adjustment policies” (SAP) in India. Jayati Ghosh and CP Chandrashekar (2002) state that the adoption of neoliberal reforms meant “a changed relationship of government interaction with economy and polity... not a ‘withdrawal of the state’ so much as a change in the character of the association.” They add that

while the state effectively reneged on many of its basic obligations in terms of providing its citizens access to minimum food, housing, health, and education, state actions remained crucial to the way in which markets functioned and the ability of capital to pursue its different goals. Government and bureaucracy remained crucial to economic functioning at the end of the decade of reforms; in fact the overall context was one of greater centralization of economic and financial power. (p. 38)

Ghosh and Chandrashekar further add that the since a section of the population had

political voice (and cultural capital), they could partake in the spoils of economic liberalization (opening up the economy to global competition under the reforms) but the rest of the country had to sit out.

Caste plays a central role in the process of impoverishment of neoliberalism as opposed to the common misunderstanding that caste is a relic of the past (as often argued by caste apologists). Drawing attention to the importance of caste in globalization of the neoliberal era, Anand Teltumbde (2010) writes,

Globalization, as a process of ‘accumulation by dispossession’ enriches the elite but impoverishes the poor. In order to contain mass discontent, it needs an effective ideological state apparatus to hold the masses in conformity. The ideology of caste, with its proven prowess in benumbing entire populations into acquiescence with their own exploitation, can only be seen as complementary to it. (p. 32)

Teltumbde also thoroughly refutes the argument about the irrelevance of the neoliberal state, echoing Aijaz Ahmad’s point about state, capital and labor, and highlights its repressive nature:

It is an interesting paradox that while globalization is euphorically spoken of as rendering nation-states increasingly irrelevant as they compress the world into a global village, security considerations about the same nation-states have created the paranoia of the war on terror and numerous smaller wars within nations across the globe. In India, while the crisis unleashed by neoliberal economic policies drives the poor to naxalism, it is used by the state to become increasingly repressive and to intensify the crisis. This vicious cycle underscores the paradigm of contraddevelopment amidst the galloping economic growth attributed to neoliberalism. (p. 158)

As I explore in later chapters, the severe weakening of the working-class, withdrawal of

basic services of sustenance by the state and increased centralization (leading to authoritarian measures) produced different kinds of subjectivities that found expression through cinema. The onscreen neoliberal subjectivities, projected and amplified by stars such as Shah Rukh Khan and Salman Khan, formed complex equations with the changed socio-economic structure often reinforcing, and sometimes challenging or revealing the contradictions within it.

### **The Caste System and Cinema**

The Hindu caste system, a fundamentally unjust structure of social hierarchy, is the most pervasive social phenomenon in India where every aspect of life is experienced through the social practice of caste. The caste system, which is an infinitely complex social phenomenon, has had a hold over Indian society over millennia because it is both a rigid as well a flexible system. Anand Teltumbde (2010) explains that caste is both *varna* and *jati* where Hindu scripture gives a four-*varna* (*chaturvarna*) system comprised of – brahmins (priestly castes), kshatriyas (warrior castes), vaishyas (business/trading castes), and shudras (the working classes). There are thousands of *jatis*, on the other, hand which have evolved as subdivisions of the *varnas*.

Teltumbde explains the polyvalent structure of the caste system:

Varna represents Hinduism's hierarchical framework, but it is *jati* which really dictates the rules and regulations of life for the average Hindu. Each *jati* has its own special norms dictating permissible food, occupation, marriage, social interaction and so forth, and from each *jati*/caste come numbers of subcastes, making the whole system highly complicated. While the caste cluster within a *varna* easily admits the *varna* hierarchy, the castes within it contend among themselves for superiority, the more vigorously with those in their hierarchical vicinity. Perennial internal tensions paired with the *jatis*' acceptance of their inferiority/superiority within the broad *varna* framework have lent the

system its dynamism as well as its longevity. (p. 13)

There is a large segment of population who have not been included in the varna system altogether (rendering their status as sub-human, according to the caste system). The Hindus included in the varna system are thus, “caste Hindus” or *savarnas* and the people outside the varna system are *avarnas*. The *avarna* population includes Dalits (literally meaning ‘oppressed,’ a self-defining term used as a politically unifying force) and *adivasis* (indigenous people). As Dalit and Adivasi activists have been arguing, Dalits and Adivasis are not Hindus but this status is also debated as the Hindu rightwing has been constantly trying to appropriate this population into the Hindu fold to expand its mass base. Dalit activist Kancha Ilaiah Shepherd, for example, is one of the most vocal critics of this rightwing position and has written about this in his book *Why I am Not a Hindu*. (2019)

The evolution of caste and the ways it is experienced also differs in various parts of India. I will give my own example here. I grew up in West Bengal, a state in the Eastern part of India, neighboring Bangladesh. Sreya Sarkar (2019) explains that West Bengal’s complex history, which includes being partitioned<sup>3</sup> during India’s Independence in 1947, and a subsequent turbulent political history, including a 34 year-long Left coalition state government headed by a communist party (Communist Party of India (Marxist), or CPI(M)), resulted in the suppression of caste as a social category. Sarkar explains that the communist party had turned the state into a

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<sup>3</sup> India was partitioned to create Pakistan out of India, a state for Muslims. The partition happened in two regions – in the Northwest part of India and in the East. The two linguistic states that got partitioned in the process were Punjab and Bengal. Separated by the landmass of India, they became West Pakistan and East Pakistan. Later East Pakistan revolted against the dominant West Pakistan, mainly on the issue of the imposition of language, and became independent in 1971, forming the nation Bangladesh. Bangladesh and West Bengal formed the erstwhile Bengal region.

“party society” where old forms of hierarchy (based on caste) were broken and replaced by the party. But the party itself was controlled by an upper-caste (Brahmin) leadership (also male, I would add) from the capital city of Kolkata. The orthodox (and superficial) Marxism of the party-Left insisted on talking about class without acknowledging the reality of caste in society,<sup>4</sup> while being controlled by an upper-caste leadership itself. This led to a suppression of the category of caste in public and political discourse. Of course, neither caste nor casteism disappeared. All this did was construct a culture of denial regarding caste. This denial of caste by the party-Left was not restricted to West Bengal either. For example, the Left organized textile mill strike that I wrote about earlier, continued the practice of caste based untouchability. (Teltumbde, 2018)

Growing up in an industrial town, Durgapur, I never developed an explicit caste consciousness. Caste practices were present but were muted and did not present themselves *as* caste practices. For example, when a domestic help would be offered tea or snacks, she (they were mostly women) would not be offered a seat at the table but on the floor. While this is a purely casteist practice, it was understood that the reason for this was that her clothes would be dirty as she did menial labor. I presume that the casteist rationale of this practice in many other parts of India would be more apparent. This denial of caste also meant that people would not normally ask each other’s caste in regular conversations, as would be the practice in many other states. I have also mostly internalized this caste denial for most of my life where “I did not see

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<sup>4</sup> Anand Teltumbde (2018) laments about the divergence the politics of the party Left and Dalit-Ambedkarite parties where the former talk of an abstract idea of class, denying caste, and the latter insist that class does not help understand reality in Indian society

caste,” because I never needed to.<sup>5</sup> In fact, I still do not know what my own caste is (internet searches have given me ambiguous results). However, I can say that I am not Dalit, otherwise I could not have lived my life with the luxury of not knowing my caste. Even my higher education in West Bengal’s Left leaning, progressive academia did not introduce me to caste as a fundamental category of life in India.

Caste denial, in contrast to the actual omnipresence of caste in Indian life, is also there in Hindi cinema. Suraj Yengde (2018) argues that Hindi cinema has rarely acknowledged caste in its texts and “...has successfully elided caste as a theme by subsuming it within categories of ‘the poor’, ‘the common man’, the hard-toiling Indian or, at times, the orphan.” (p. 3) Yengde further argues that Hindi films “...tend to portray a dominant caste/dominant Hindu society, offering subaltern subjects only a limited form of escapism; through cinema, Brahmans and allied castes have actively imposed their hegemony on the medium of mainstream cultural expression.” (p. 4) This caste denial in cinema is a result of the near complete dominance of the dominant castes in Hindi cinema, especially, in the “intellectual” roles through which creative control over the medium is exercised. Kancha Ilaiah Shepherd (2020) shows that historically, dominant castes – Brahmin, Baniya, Kayastha and Khatri, along with elite Muslims, have been in control of the Hindi film industry.

I argue in my work that caste forms the political unconscious (Jameson, 1981) in Hindi films. Hindi cinema, despite being produced in a caste society, rarely features any explicitly lower caste or Dalit character, let alone have them as protagonists. Hindi cinema characters generally either have upper caste names, or their caste character is left unclear. One must read

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<sup>5</sup> In a way, like white people in the US who claim to “not see color,” mostly because they can afford not to

caste against the grain of the film, placing it against the historical and socio-cultural backdrop. Though, it is important to mention that efforts by Dalit artists are gradually pushing conversations about caste in mainstream Hindi and other regional cinemas. Some examples are *Masaan/ Crematorium* (Neeraj Ghaywan, 2015), *Kabali* (Pa. Ranjith, 2016), *Fandry/ Pig* (Nagraj Manjule, 2013), *Sairat/ Wild* (Nagraj Mangule, 2016) etc.

### **Fascism in India**

Historically, fascism has been notoriously hard to define but it has also inspired a rich tradition of scholarship. With the rise of the Hindu rightwing, especially, with the Narendra Modi led BJP occupying state power in 2014, and the attendant rise of communal violence and state repression, many critics have called this rise of fascism in India. And this is also in consonance with political trends across the world where alleged fascists have occupied power in countries like Brazil, USA, Turkey, Philippines, Hungary among many others. Unarguably, the political structure in India lies within a spectrum of rightwing authoritarianism, arising both from the contradictions of neoliberal capitalism and informed by ethno-nationalist supremacist ideas. Writing about the Hindu rightwing and its cultures of cruelty, Aijaz Ahmad (1998) attempts a broad working definition of fascism,

The sum of ideologies for which the word 'fascist' seems appropriate are ideologies that belong specifically to the age of imperialism, anti-imperialism and revolutionary class struggle, and...fundamental to these forms of politics has been the will to fashion an anti-materialist conception of revolution, anti-liberal conception of nationalism, anti-rationalist critique of Modernity, antihumanist assaults on the politics of liberation, in a rhetoric of "blood and belonging", and in the name of a glorious past that never was. (p. 4)

Studies of fascism have attempted to look at it in terms of ideology, or political formation arising out of capitalism, or sustained by authoritarian personality and fascist states of mind etc. I think instead of restricting the understanding of fascism derived from an *ur-text*, such as Mussolini's Italy or Nazi Germany during interwar Europe, a multiplicity of approaches would help us understand present realities better, something that Ahmad's loose definition attempts. Ahmad's strategy is not to set out to define fascism but identify phenomena (set of ideologies and practices/movements of politics) and then see what all can be called fascist. I think this approach is useful.

Under Modi, India has increasingly taken on the characteristics of an ethno-nationalist state. Hindutva (which literally translates to Hindu-ness), which is an upper-caste/ Brahminical, Hindu male supremacist ideology, has gripped life in the country. Minorities, primarily Muslim, but also Dalits and Adivasis have been the targets of violence through a combination of mobs and the state apparatus. Use of mass media, television, print, radio as well as the internet, mobile phones etc. has aided this violence and normalized proclamations of bigotry and hate speech.

If we call the BJP government a fascist state, it is also imperative to look at the fascist movement that led to the political formation. In India, this has been an almost century long phenomenon, in which the RSS has done groundwork of indoctrination through its schools, relief work and calculated application of communal violence at the grassroots level. Much of what is happening in India, like the deliberate relegation of the Muslim as the nation's 'other' through a revision of history and criminalization of them by positing them as the enemies of the Hindu majority, is getting popular support because of this decades-long work by the RSS.

Backed by RSS's groundwork, preparations to create the perfect storm to take over the state had started in the 1980s when mobilizations were created through fascist spectacles such as

the *Ramjanmabhoomi* movement and the demolition of the Babri Masjid. *Ram Janmabhoomi* translates to Ram's birthplace. According to this movement, Hindu deity Lord Ram's exact birthplace was on a spot in the city of Ayodhya in Northern India where a 16<sup>th</sup> century mosque – the Babri Masjid, built by Mughal ruler Babar stood. Hindu nationalists claimed that there used to be a shrine on the exact spot centuries ago and the mosque was unjustly built there by the Muslim ruler Babar. In a concerted fascist attack, a *rath yatra* or chariot journey was arranged by BJP leader LK Advani (an air-conditioned Toyota car was redesigned to look like a chariot) from September 25 to October 30, 1990. The chariot traveled thousands of kilometers and created communal violence in its wake. The culmination point came when cadres (called *kar sevaks*) of the Hindu right wing demolished the mosque on December 6, 1992. The demolition caused riots across the nation. Bombay/ Mumbai was the worst hit with about 900 casualties and hundreds of other injuries during riots in 1992-93. That, in turn, caused retaliatory serial bomb blasts that killed more than 300 people in a day (March 12, 1993) and injured more than a thousand people.

Now that the Hindu rightwing has captured state power, Aijaz Ahmad, who was one of the earliest to identify these rightwing mobilizations as fascist, has said that the current BJP government is not fascist per se. Ahmad identifies the RSS as a unique grassroots fascist organization whose political front is the BJP. So, the BJP is RSS's way of tackling with the question of parliamentary liberal democracy. Ahmad (2019), like Jaffrelot (2017), has argued that the reference to understand what is happening in India should not be interwar Europe but present day Israel. Achin Vanaik (2017) has called the Hindutva politics as “Hindu authoritarianism” but not fascism as it does not meet the requirements of a “fascist minimum.”

I think it is more productive to look at the forms this rightwing politics takes and the factors that are determining them. Defining fascism as a rightwing revolutionary populist

political ideology, Roger Griffin (1991) (2012) identifies notions of rebirth or palingenesis and an organic concept of a nation as defining characteristics. Hindutva's stated goal of a Hindu-only nation (*Hindurashtra*) has these characteristics.

Other scholars have identified close connections of fascism with capitalism. Daniel Woodley (2010) explains fascism as based on the inherent conditions of capitalism where in fascism, the commodity form colonizes human relations and the social sphere, where the commodity form is structured social practice or labor objectified in social relations constituting an impersonal sphere imposing over individuals. This idea resonates with Situationist Guy Debord's (1994) idea of the spectacle that "corresponds to the historical moment at which the commodity completes its colonization of social life." (p. 29) In my work, I study this commodity form in the figure of the film star and the celebrity and look at how the capitalist process of individualization results in commodification. I also look at how this process is not contained within the spectacle of the star/celebrity but also happens through self-commodification. This can be seen in the dispersion of the celebrity culture where the self is packaged and presented as a commodity on the one hand, and the need for newer and more novel spectacles have given rise to mob violence and authoritarian figures such as Modi.

Woodley, drawing from Michel Aglietta (2001), also emphasizes on the role of a strong, repressive state in fascism. Hannah Arendt ((1979) (1951)) also looked at the role of the state in what she called the contradictory idea of 'permanent revolution' of totalitarianism (of which fascism is one form) where the state imposes its repressive order but also keeps alive mobilization through violence. Such approaches are able to account for the entire political structure where the state is the crystallization of the larger political movement and is able to perpetuate it in turn. I look at this ecosystem formed by vigilante groups such as cow protection

groups or “Romeo squads” meant to prevent Muslim men and Hindu women from interacting, the state which directly or indirectly supports them, and the ideology which supports such socio-political formations.

There is also a considerable body of scholarship looking at the psychology of fascism. For example, Cristine Weiland (2015), drawing from Robert Paxton (2005), tries to understand fascism as a state of mind where fascism is not characterized by “its ideology or certain immutable political arrangements but by the ‘subterranean passions’ that it ignites and represents.” (p. 6) Wilhelm Reich also dealt with the psychology of fascism by situating the fascist mind within the “authoritarian family” characterized by repression of sexuality of the individual which leads to a conservative, reactionary mentality in society. My understanding of the Indian case is again informed by the study of subjectivities produced by self-commodification, as evidenced from popular culture and journalistic accounts, and forms of isolation that arise from social conditions such as normative homosociality, a conservative family structure, and increased ghettoization due to sectarian violence.

Anti-caste scholars and activists have argued that the caste system in India is inherently fascist. BR Ambedkar, famous anti-caste scholar and activist, a leader in India’s freedom movement and architect of the Constitution of India, had criticized the Hindu social order, based on the caste system, as one which prevented even the realization of the sense of wrongdoing to develop amongst the oppressed. In this sense, the caste system is a more totalizing system than the system of oppression designed by the Nazis. The hegemonic structure of the caste system, which internalizes oppression as natural, does not need to resort to the spectacular violence like the Nazis, Ambedkar argued. (Ambedkar, 2019, pp. 126-127)

Kancha Ilaiah Shepherd (2004) has described this totalizing feature of the caste system as

“spiritual fascism,” also emphasizing on the extractive nature of the caste system,

The concept of spiritual fascism refers to the historical essence of the Hindu religion that is basically fascistic: it seeks to strike down all possibility of dissent from, or revision of, its glorifying of inequality, its hatred of debate and change, its antipathy to productive activity and its emphasis on outward action including physical force, symbols and ritual. (p. XV)

While Ambedkar and Ilaiah get to the philosophical core of the caste system and show how it is inherently fascist, Anand Teltumbde argues that the caste system has evolved historically and shows how the nature of oppression against Dalits changed in the neoliberal era in India, using the category of the “atrocities.” Teltumbde argues that “... although dalits were cruelly dealt with throughout history, their maltreatment was not yet an atrocity” (2010, p. 30) but in the neoliberal era, violence against Dalits was organized, pre-planned, and deliberately gruesome and spectacular. Teltumbde points out the sadistic nature of caste violence that is specific to the contemporary era.

In fact, caste is not limited to Hinduism only. Over the years (centuries), religions such as Buddhism and Sikhism have risen as a response against the caste system. Historically, the Brahminical system has dealt with these religions through both opposition and appropriation. Islam and Christianity have also provided solace to Dalits and lower caste Hindus by providing them opportunities for conversion. So, the targeting of Muslims, Sikhs and Christians (Buddhism has a miniscule presence in India) also comes out of this deeply casteist structure. Hindutva sees these religions as threats to its caste hierarchy and deals with them through both appropriation (“Sikhs are also Hindus” or “Jesus is a Hindu avatar”) and violence. The dominance of the caste system has been such that it has been replicated in other religions too. So, there are upper and

lower castes in Muslims, Christians, Sikhs in India.

Here, I would also like to mention the Mandal Commission, or the Socially and Educationally Backward Classes Commission (SEBC) report, that came out in 1983 and recommended caste reservations for the category of Other Backward Classes (OBC), based on their socioeconomic status and numerical significance in the Indian population. The recommendations were implemented in 1990 by the then Prime Minister VP Singh and that sparked off incredible protests, primarily by upper-caste students in campuses in North India. Protests, strikingly, included acts of self-immolation. These protests are significant because of the ferocity with which the dominant castes clamped down on minor concessions made for OBCs. K. Balagopal (1990) argues that the impression given by the upper-castes of being robbed of resources is false as the access to resources provided was miniscule and that the protests were to protect the caste order itself.

The anti-Mandal Commission protests, like the demolition of the Babri Masjid, also mark an important event in Indian fascism as it galvanized the dominant castes against any attempts to challenge the caste hierarchy. K Balagopal shows how all upper-caste political parties, setting aside their Left-Right-Centrist political alignments, vociferously criticized the otherwise meek attempt at caste equity. The RSS is a dominant caste organization where its leadership is almost exclusively Brahmin. Suraj Yengde (2019) argues that one of the aims of the Babri demolition was also to stop the consolidation of the OBCs after the Mandal Commission.

The nature of Hindu fascism, drawing from the nature of the RSS, is Brahminical. This means that it seeks to preserve the caste hierarchy of Hinduism but also strategically makes concessions to lower castes for its own use. For example, OBCs were made foot soldiers by the RSS in the Babri demolition campaign and made to do its dirty work. RSS's vision of the Hindu

society, that it wants India to become, is a totalizing one as it wants to include all castes, otherwise excluded by the varna system, into its fold. But its vision is anti-egalitarian where the relationship between the dominant-castes and the oppressed-castes will remain exploitative, as is evident from recent history. Hindutva's claims of "one people," Teltumbde (2005) explains, does not include justice or redistribution of any kind. It wants to maintain (or even invent or distort) historical senses of hurt and keep the sense of injustice alive to foster violence without actually attempting any redressal.

Tanika Sarkar (2002) also echoes this sense of mindless revenge while understanding the gruesome violence in Gujarat in 2002 where two to three thousand people, mostly Muslims, were killed by Hindutva mobs. Hindutva ideology developed a fabricated history of Muslim tyranny in India (itself a product of colonial history) and the RSS developed its agenda as: "All Muslims are a threat to faith and nation, and especially to women at all times, and, therefore, revenge must be taken on present-day Muslims both for historical wrongs and for the future danger that they embody." She further shows "Revenge emerged as a mobile concept, as did the figure of the Muslim." I think these two characteristics that Teltumbde and Sarkar point out – a kind of sadistic gruesome violence, and a passion for revenge undergirded by a manufactured sense of victimhood, are important to understand Indian fascism.

I think all of these approaches are required for a fuller understanding of the politics in India, which I think, should be called fascism. While I see Aijaz Ahmad's point of the BJP managing to stay within the overall forms and rituals of liberal democracy such as holding elections and a functioning within the three-part state structure, its transgressions have also been colossal and numerous. I believe that India's colonization of Kashmir through military force, or the government subverting the secular character of Indian democracy through the judiciary are

clear breaches of even the cosmetic ideals of liberal democracy and should be identified as fascism.

My own entry point in this is through an understanding of neoliberalism as a state backed project of appropriation of wealth and resources by capital (global and national) and the culture of neoliberalism that manages this plunder through an ideology of radical individualism, most clearly exemplified by the figure of the star, informed by an often-suppressed violent streak.

### **Urban Space, Gender and Masculinity**

One of the direct effects of neoliberal policies was the informalization of the working-class. Informalization of labor – which involves breaking up of unions, doing away with health and pension securities associated with jobs, or converting jobs to temporary gigs, or people being forced to become small entrepreneurs with high risk of failure and so on – is basically a pernicious way of capitalist abstraction i.e. obscuring the fact that labor is the producer of value. In urban spaces, the mass impoverishment of the proletariat (the precariat) along with increased migration from rural areas have led to radical changes in urban geography. De-industrialization of cities (part of the informalization process), speculative construction as a result of capitalist accumulation and complete lack of provisions for human needs has made the world a planet of slums. (Davis, 2006) While making urban conditions unlivable for millions, radical rearrangements in urban space and their accessibility, have given rise to isolated, unstable and often violent subjectivities. Henri Lefebvre (1967) wrote about how the bourgeoisie in Paris isolated the city for themselves and ousted the working, productive proletariat through their class strategy. Thus, Lefebvre wrote, “Isolated from places of production, available from a sector of habitation for scattered firms, the proletariat will allow its creative capacity to diminish in its conscience. Urban consciousness will vanish.” Urban conditions of 1960s’ Paris and 21<sup>st</sup> century

Mumbai are surely different but such isolation, ghettoization has only intensified, if anything.

The violence of such spatial reorganization on the consciousness is immense. Isolation among different strata of society, if not interpersonal, becomes a problem even in crowded cities like Mumbai. Increased privatization of public space through construction of malls, apartment complexes, office spaces – all part of speculative construction, not only drains the cities' resources and has disastrous ecological effects, it also squeezes out the democratic spaces. Access to public space has become increasingly difficult and unequal. Socio-economic class, caste, gender play an important role in that. Questions of status, anxieties about acceptance in the gentry inform films like *Oye Lucky! Lucky Oye!* (Dibakar Banerjee, 2008). Bigotry and violence around caste has also been easily translated into tools of discrimination and exclusion in the changing equations of urban space. And legitimate anxieties of women about safety in public spaces, arising out of concern over increased crime against women, has been retroactively used for moral policing and censorship. (Phadke, Ranade, & Khan, 2009)

In this work, I focus on the masculinities arising from such lopsided conditions. The focus of my work is understanding the dominant forms of subjective experience of individuals with respect to reality and relations with others, as represented in popular Hindi cinema. My objective is to read film texts and star texts against documented social realities, and formulate the individual subjective experiences embedded in narratives both diegetic and extra-diegetic. With the informalization of labor being largely gendered, women being forced out of the workforce (which means that they keep working but are not remunerated for it) and the systematic undervaluing of care workers (Ghosh J. , 2014), the nature of public space vis-à-vis private or domestic space also changes. But when these concerns regarding space are combined with the general impoverishment of the populace and ideas of male honor and responsibility of being the

bread winner and the morality of work (Haywood & Mac an Ghaill, 2003, p. 21), masculine anxieties often emerge as crisis.

With increasing authoritarianism and rising aspects of fascism in a communally divided society like India, dominant forms of masculinity have changed and evolved over the years. Jyotika Virdi argued about the centrality of masculinity in Hindi cinema, “An aspect of constructing masculinity is the hero’s role as a primary agent shaping the nation’s history. Like all heroes, the Hindi film hero upholds the law...” (2003, p. 88) The fashioning of the neoliberal identity, often expressed as a new India, awakening from the slumber of public sector bureaucracy, license raj and a “Hindu rate” of economic growth, was expressed and asserted through the intertwined concepts of consumption and Hindutva (or Hindu-ness). And this Hindu “reawakening” was masculine. The new economic order maintained existing social hierarchies, as Hindutva sought to not only maintain but also extend to and impose upper caste Hindu male hegemony upon the rest of society.

In this work, I explore through popular characterizations produced in film fiction, how masculinities develop with regards to public space, changing familial equations, questions of isolation, issues of personal responsibility.

### **Stardom and Celebrity**

Richard Dyer famously theorized that the star image is inherently polysemic i.e. it is a “structured polysemy” which is “the finite multiplicity of meanings and affects they embody and the attempt so to structure them that some meanings and effects are foregrounded and others are masked or displaced.” (Dyer, 1979, p. 3) So, even though a star image contains multiple meanings, some meanings are dominant.

The star image is the repository of meanings and affects individually or collectively

created. The construction of a star is the product of the labor of not just the actor who is the star but involves an entire apparatus of the creative filmic crew, publicists and ultimately the audience and fans who perform the imaginative or interpretive labor of meaning making. Just like in the commodity form, where human labor is concealed and the commodity's characteristics seem inherent to it rather than the function of human labor, the star's charisma and appeal is made to seem an inherent quality of the star like charisma. Just like the whole process of human labor and the journey of the commodity from raw material to its final form is concealed, in case of the star, the entire filmic apparatus is invisibilized so that all qualities seem to emanate from within the star. So, the star is a commodity. The cult around the star is bigger than the person. But this cult is constructed and does not organically emanate from the inherent characteristics of the person behind the star. Walter Benjamin calls it the "spell of the personality" which is "the phony spell of a commodity." (1936)

I attempt in this project such analyses of star images of male stars such as Amitabh Bachchan, Shah Rukh Khan and Salman Khan, and read them in a larger social and historical context so as to understand their socially constructed nature. The values invested in these stars, heroism, strength, charm etc. are a product of human labor and the star commodity realizes its exchange value only when it is part of the market system i.e. box-office. On the relationship of the veridical self of the star and the star image, Barry King notes,

The distinction between the use value of a particular actor's personal service in the portrayal of character as character and its exchange value is immanent to stardom. Stars *qua stars* are required as a matter of professional success to sustain in public an equation between their veridical selves and their personae (or box-office selves) as an exchange value. (King, 2010, p. 14)

This public equation or exchange value comes into play only when the star commodity enters the arena of the market and thus, its value is realized when it enters a totality. This is where its social and political dimensions come in as this totality which is the market or box-office is socially and politically determined. Thus, an ideological analysis of star images necessarily would have political implications, which is the aim of this project.

Barry King has also written about the development and evolution of stardom to that of celebrity:

What can be said is that the development of the star system, its formal evolution toward celebrity, is a process of increasing *encorporation*, in which the body of the star and his or her physiognomically construed veridical self are ever more intensively employed as signifiers of exclusive possession of persona or exchange value. Increasing encorporation is the logical outcome of two broad exigencies: labor power rests on the inherent properties of the actor (albeit refined by techniques such as acting lessons, working out, cosmetic surgery, and motion picture technology) and the drive to establish a personal monopoly over a vastly expanded transnational market for star-centered services. (p. 15)

These star-centered services, to be deployed across time, space and media, is what King calls “presences.” So, once a film star moves from being a star to a celebrity, the star image can be decoupled from its original source of signification – film. This is a process of commodification where this commodity i.e. the celebrity, to be used as “presences,” can be deployed anywhere.

This brings us back to the use of celebrities to change the narrative about the farmers’ protests. What these celebrities (both film and sports) did was lend their “presences.” The only difference from King’s formulation here is that in this case, there is no personal monopoly on the

“star-centered services” anymore. On the one hand, everything is increasingly subsumed under the totalitarian fascist state. The compliance of the celebrities that can be read from their uniform tweets means that the apparent power and impunity that their fame, money and popularity bring, is restricted under the fascist state. I will explore in my work how the very socio-political system, that leads to the exalted status of the stars and celebrities, is also the system that places severe restrictions on their agency.

On the other hand, as the society moves towards an increased entrenchment of celebrity culture, there is push back too. As is quite apparent from the involvement of celebrities in the farmers’ protests, the severity of the uncertain future that the farmers are facing and their sincerity in the face of it, means that the materiality of the historical situation is preventing it from becoming about the celebrities. Celebrities who are sympathetic to the farmers’ cause, such as Punjabi singer and pop star Diljit Dosanjh, have showed up at the protest site but their presences have been assimilated into the greater cause.

## **Chapter Plan**

I look at the star texts of Amitabh Bachchan, Shah Rukh Khan and Salman Khan in the first three chapters. In the chapter on Amitabh Bachchan, I do a close textual analysis of the film *Deewaar* in the context of the sociopolitical crisis of the 1970s. This chapter looks at how the “angry young man,” faced with the uncertainty of his turbulent times, develops a radical experience of *kismet* or fate and how that is related to how he experiences his own life and understands his place in society. This chapter attempts a reevaluation of a generally accepted “proletarian hero” as a reactionary force, who normalizes the revenge narrative as the means of justice seeking, and whose legacies are a masochistic, lonesome individualism and risk taking and defiance of death.

In the chapter on Shah Rukh Khan, I look at his early career to understand the instabilities underlying his consumer persona. I closely study *Baazigar* in which SRK plays a “psychotic” hero, which I argue is the prototype of the consumer persona whose inherent violence, rooted in caste-patriarchy, had still not been ironed out. I examine him as a sadistic and violent singular presence whose radical isolation, expressed through cinematic techniques, forms the basis of the consumer persona that SRK was to eventually exemplify. In the second part of this chapter, I identify aspiration and ambition as the other aspects that go into the making of Khan’s globally well-known image and trace them primarily in the film *Raju Ban Gaya Gentleman* and also, *Yes Boss* and *Phir Bhi Dil Hai Hindustani*, which have the same set of leads (Shah Rukh Khan and Juhi Chawla) and director (Aziz Mirza) and which can be, I argue, considered to be a loose trilogy. I examine how neoliberal aspiration and ambition, premised on individualism, and caste-class hierarchy bolstered access to public education, emerge from an older community which supports and sustains this individualism but is threatened by it in turn. I end the chapter with a discussion on the limits (or impossibility) of political agency and social justice when it is combined with the profit motive and how the neoliberal consumer or businessman persona that Shah Rukh Khan comes to embody, reworks the element of risk that it inherits from the “angry young man.”

In the chapter on Salman Khan, I attempt an expansive study of his star text, looking at different films throughout his career to trace how he came to embody a muscular masculinity that was an iteration of neoliberalism but was antagonistic to the consumerist, suave masculinity of Shah Rukh Khan. I examine contradictory aspects of his star text, like his contradictory sexuality or his image of both a sovereign as well as a victim, through detailed textual analyses of *Being Bhaijaan* and *Tere Naam*, along with looking at other film texts. I see how he goes onto

develop a sovereign kind of persona which begins to hold onto his body image the contradictions of the desire for authoritarianism.

In the final chapter, I attempt an understanding of the star image of Narendra Modi, his relationship with other stars and how the political economy of the film industry and stardom acts as the limiting factor to the agency of the stars within the fascist state. In this chapter, I look at the new unstable and violent reality of fascist India characterized by mob violence. I attempt to understand the afterlives of the stars I study, as celebrities, and through that understand how the commodification of life, expressed through the proliferation of “presences” cannot be contained by the commodity form of the star. I relate this to understand the ecosystem that is made up of lynch mobs and viral media. I hypothesize on whether the neoliberal era of extreme commodification means the end of stardom as we know it as the capitalist need for spectacle spills out of the star-fan engagement and takes on more grotesque forms.

Even as I had started this project drawn in by what seemed to be similarities in the roles played by Salman Khan and the personality of Narendra Modi, I did not envision this project to be a study of how stars and celebrities, and the apparatus that constructs them, exert such great control in our lives. In fact, when it started to become clear that studying stars and the political economy of their stardom might lead to some insight into the disturbing contemporary political climate, I had unknowingly resisted it. When I realized my own bias much later, I pondered over why that might be. I realized that I had also internalized the process of individualization that the stars were a product of. I wanted to study fascism and violence in society. I wanted to study large phenomena. I reflect and wonder whether this internalized and not completely conscious sense that by studying stars I might miss out on the “real” phenomena was a cynical reaction of mine to the phenomenon of spectacular, individual stars having an outsized influence on culture and

politics. I now wonder whether my resistance to a culture of stars and celebrity was itself entrenched too deeply in individualizing mechanisms of society that I took time to recognize the value that my work could have in showcasing the constructed nature of these stars and showing their connections with larger reality that are deliberately obscured. So, through the efforts to understand stardom, the cult around stars, the hold of the spectacle over society, and the ways that commodification in the capitalist system makes our social relations invisible, I hope I have rectified my own biases.

During the time that I was working on this project, there was a rise of rightwing forces worldwide. There can be legitimate arguments over whether to call them fascists, authoritarian leaders, strongmen, neo-Nazis, far-right, ultra-right etc. But the rise of larger than life leaders like Donald Trump in the US, Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, Rodrigo Duterte in Philippines, Viktor Orban in Hungary, Boris Johnson in the UK, and the growing in power and stature of leaders like Benjamin Netanyahu in Israel, Recep Tayyip Erdogan in Turkey, Vladimir Putin in Russia and so many more, tell us about a sharp rightwing lurch in world politics. But living in the US and following every morsel of news coming from India, one could not help but feel everything that one held dear in life being snatched away by neoliberal regimes world over. The overwhelming sense that I got from following what was happening in India and in the US, and from what I gathered from news from across the world, was that of shock. Trump had started his campaign by calling Mexicans rapists and after a year and a half, he became the President of the US. On the same fateful day, Modi declared a majority of India's currency invalid. And there would be my own sense of incredulity at watching people support such abhorrent figures and their regressive politics. I know I am among millions of people who experienced, and were overwhelmed by, a sense of shock as each new day brought some new horror.

This work is my own way to deal with that sense of shock because I think that is the ethical thing to do. Shock is produced when something unexpected happens. But that is possible only when we do not know what historical movements led to these developments. For example, the time of the BJP rule witnessed brutal violence on minorities that included Dalits. Incidents like a Dalit man being murdered just for daring to wear sunglasses, were happening. It came as a shock because I had not paid attention to the Khairlanji murders that took place in 2006 and shook the country. I had initially not been aware of the sharp rise in atrocities against Dalits even before BJP came to power. This was also probably due to my own lack of awareness of caste. My work is an attempt to make these connections, in my own small way, that will help me make sense of the situation we are in. In this way, I hope to contribute, along with many others working in different fields of life, to a fuller understanding of our own peculiar historical predicament. I want to contribute to a sense of historical and political understanding, from my own corner of academia, that does not see Modi or Trump as freak accidents that just happened, but dispassionately understand the connections that led to them. And as a student of cinema, I have attempted to understand the Indian case of fascism through a study of popular cinema.

Having grown up reading about Hitler and how the Nazis killed millions of Jews, fascism seemed like a distant, exceptional phenomenon. Until the specter of Hindutva forming the Indian state, and destroying the Indian society, became real to me, it had not occurred to me that fascism could be here and now. Now that I try to understand fascism by understanding fascist culture, I attempt to find the macabre and the fascist in our own mainstream, popular culture. My effort through this study of masculinity and stardom, studying stars that I grew up watching, is to see how commonplace cultural phenomena that I have experienced all my life had also played their part in shaping our collective psyche and thus, a role in getting us here. I try to understand

neoliberalism, caste practices, gender and class positions to understand how fascism is not an exceptional occurrence that comes out of nowhere but is a system that builds on the injustices of our banal realities.

## CHAPTER 2

### TEMPTING FATE: LONESOME INDIVIDUALISM AND RISK IN AMITABH

#### BACHCHAN'S ANGRY YOUNG MAN

Amitabh Bachchan emerged as the reigning superstar of Hindi cinema in the 1970s, portraying roles that collectively came to be known as the “angry young man.” This was the period following the disillusionment with the Nehruvian nationalist project after Independence in 1947. The Nehruvian project of nation-building focused on building big infrastructure through public sector undertakings. Jawaharlal Nehru, independent India’s first prime minister, was a Fabian socialist and his reign was marked by protection given by the state to the nation’s capitalists from international competition but any real system of redistribution of resources amongst the vast population of the country failed to materialize. Therefore, even though India formally remained a secular, functioning democracy, the nationalist dream of a prosperous India had turned sour by the 1970s.

The 1970s were marked by discontent amongst people against the government and the increasingly authoritarian state reacted by clamping down on all protests. The then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi imposed Emergency in 1975 and all democratic rights such as freedom of expression and the freedom of press were suspended. Journalists and political opponents were put in prison. Informed by racist colonial assumptions about the colonized subjects and pushed by US-American imperialism, the Indian state conducted mass sterilization drives, in the name of family planning. Even though mass sterilization as public policy was pursued since the 1950s, it came to a focal point during the Emergency imposed by the government of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in the mid 70s. (Green, 2018) The entire official machinery of the state was deployed to enforce mass sterilization for which targets were set by the state.

The combative persona of the “angry young man” (henceforth AYM) emerged against the backdrop of the stifling of dissent, loss of political agency and direct attack on personal freedom. Jyotika Virdi (1993) points out the series of events, both at the global and national level, that led to the increasing strain on daily life in India. There was a failure of monsoons that affected agriculture and resulted in food shortage and price inflation in 1972-73, compounded by the oil shock of 1973-74 leading to inflation and unemployment. The state’s economic policies, including the IMF loan of 1974, increased economic inequalities greatly, which gave rise to widespread corruption.

What characterized the widespread corruption was that a political class oversaw inequitable distribution of resources, gotten from the industrial and trade sectors. The political and economic system was heavily tilted towards the elite and a sense of injustice was felt across the country. Labor unions (railway strike of 1974) and student movements (answering to JP Narayan’s call for “total revolution”) protested this heavy-handed corruption and the state came down with repression against them.

Javed Akhtar and Salim Khan (collectively known as Salim\_Javed) were the scriptwriter duo that were most instrumental in bringing the AYM phenomenon to screen. This scriptwriter team was behind some of the most successful films starring Bachchan such as *Zanjeer/Chains* (Prakash Mehra, 1973), *Majboor/ Compelled* (Ravi Tandon, 1974), *Deewaar/ Wall* (Yash Chopra, 1975), *Sholay/ Embers* (Ramesh Sippy, 1975), *Trishul/ Trident* (Yash Chopra, 1978), *Don* (Chandra Barot, 1978), *Kaala Patthar/ Black Stone* (Yash Chopra, 1979) among others. Commenting on the connection between the fraught political situation of the 70s and the rise of the angry young man, Javed Akhtar remarked, “The Emergency was imposed and the average Indian was losing faith in the various institutions—the police, courts, the government, the

bureaucracy, and so on. When that happens, some kind of aggressive individuality develops...” (quoted in (Joshi P. , 2015) who cited from (Gahlot, 1992)).

It is this sense of a loss of faith and the limiting of life as a field of possibilities in relation to the emergence of the “angry young man” as an explosive but lonesome individualism that I want to explore in this chapter. Bachchan first broke out as the angry young man with his first big hit film *Zanjeer/Chains* after he had acted in a string of flop films already. This was the first film that put the narrative template on to the silver screen in a big way – a young man, wronged by the system, carrying the impossible burden of hurt and insult, lashes out with a mixture of explosive anger and brute strength in an attempt to set things right. *Zanjeer* endeared itself to viewers with a hero, who had been wronged, someone that the audience could get behind.

As the state clamped down and imposed its authoritarian visions with more severity, it was *Deewaar/Wall* (Yash Chopra, 1975) that explored in detail how the state’s restrictions had spawned the sphere of illegal activities like smuggling, exemplified by the hero as smuggler in *Deewaar*. Whereas *Deewaar* does not directly implicate the state and its authoritarianism in its narrative, it clearly shows the effects it was having on the larger society. What *Deewaar* manages to capture through its narrative progression is the sense of the larger sociology of the breakdown of the society that was happening in the 1970s. That breakdown came into sharp focus in the declaration of Emergency in 1975 but the “angry young man” was not a product of the Emergency but the overall social breakdown that led to it. In fact, *Deewaar* was released in January 1975 and the Emergency was declared in July the same year.

In writing about the urban context from which the “angry young man” rose, Ranjani Mazumdar (2007, pp. 1-40) formulates the concept of the “unintended city,” drawing from a Weberian argument of the unintended consequences of modernity. She makes a distinction

between the “official city” i.e. the city of the planners and architects, and the “unintended city” i.e. the city in reality, filled with people whose presence, needs and activities had not been accounted for. Along similar lines, Madhava Prasad wrote on Indian metropolitan life, “The spaces of the city are a site where struggles between opposing forces and desires, hopes and projections, are played out, confrontations between a governing will and a resistant population or between classes, rulers and ruled.” (Prasad, 2007, p. 82) Mazumdar cites sociologist Jai Sen’s definition of the “unintended city” as “the often unintended result of planning and social work programs and policies, as opposed to direct exploitation” (Jai Sen as cited in (Mazumdar, 2007, p. 5))

I argue that the chaos, clashes and conflict resulting from the “spilling over” of life in the “unintended city” is precisely the result of exploitative structures. The “unintended” consequences are very much a part of capitalism’s exploitative structure. Since gaining independence after 1947, even though the Indian state pursued large scale developmental projects, there was no attempt at redistribution of the nation’s resources. This lack of redistribution and equity includes lack of land reforms as “...a major underlying feature of the continuing structural inequality that has prevented broad-based economic growth” (Ghosh J. , 2014, p. 13) as it does the lack of access to the nation’s resources of culture, education, planning etc. Thus, the coterie of planners, thinkers and architects who designed the cities never included the vast majority of people those cities were being designed for, in any meaningful way. The problem of the “unintended city” is not exclusively an urban problem either. Land reforms, responsible for economic growth in several Asian countries as Ghosh points out, did not happen in India, and the resulting underdevelopment of agriculture and the Indian village meant that large scale migration to the cities has always been a major source of pressure on the urban

infrastructure.

This lack of redistribution, whether in terms of the lack of land reforms or the way in which only a certain kind of elite got to control India's planning commissions or development programs, was in turn determined on the axes of caste, class, gender, religion, ethnicity etc. Post-Independence, these violent social mores got institutionalized in the bureaucracies that conceived, managed and implemented the state policies. Graeber (2015) has argued that bureaucracies are so frustrating and complicated because they are structures built on violence and are thus, characterized by non-comprehension and stupidity. In short, Graeber's argument is that violence is the only form of communication which is non-communicative. So, in a confrontation between unequal parties, the powerful can apply violence and have the desired result without having to explain themselves and the task of figuring out (why is the violence happening, how to avoid it etc.) is left to the victims. So, when this violence is institutionalized, it creates structures where the task of imagination or figuring out what the other party is thinking (interpretive labor) falls disproportionately on certain people i.e. the minorities (considering India's widespread poverty, severe caste hierarchy, and deeply entrenched patriarchy, the minorities, in fact, make up the vast majority of the population). The millions of people living in these cities are then forced to deal with a system which is designed to not understand them. Thus, the "unintendedness" of the city is in fact a result of blindness caused by structural violence.

I think this discussion about structural violence is germane to understanding the phenomenon of the "angry young man" because it not only prevents us from looking at the crisis of the 1970s as a historical break but more importantly, it can give us tools to re-evaluate the legacy of this cultural phenomenon. The star figure of Bachchan and the "angry young man" have been synonymous over the years (though Bachchan has done other significant work in

different kinds of roles, especially, comedy) and has been celebrated, quite rightly, as the silver screen embodiment of the resistance figure.<sup>6</sup> But I argue that in doing so, it has also replicated some of the hierarchical and repressive elements that it was resisting, which makes the “angry young man” a reactionary figure in many ways. And I hope to show that understanding the legacy of this phenomenon would help us understand the growth of reactionary politics in India.

### *Deewaar*

Among the pantheon of Bachchan’s films, I think understanding *Deewaar* is important because it is not only both a successful as well as cult film with a lasting impact on popular culture, it also managed to combine myths of the Indian society with topical problems of its day to present a narrative that had both sociological richness and lasting cultural resonance. As most of the “angry young man” films, *Deewaar* too, is a revenge drama but the narrative is not set up just as a revenge story. *Deewaar* is about a family of four – the father Anand Verma or Anandbabu (played by Satyen Kappu), the mother Sumitra Verma or Sumitra Devi (played by Nirupa Roy), and two sons Vijay (young Vijay played by Alankar Joshi and adult Vijay played by Amitabh Bachchan) and Ravi (young Ravi played by Raju Sreshtha and adult Ravi played by Shashi Kapoor). It starts in a small town where the father, Anandbabu is a labor union leader in a coal mine. The film starts with Anandbabu leading protests against the management of the mine to demand better pay and living conditions for the workers. The management, wary of his popularity, kidnaps his family and forces him to sign documents on the management’s terms, thus forcing him to betray his fellow workers and making him a villain in their eyes.

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<sup>6</sup> Vijay Mishra’s (2002) evaluation of Bachchan’s star text is an exception.

As Anandbabu comes out of the coal mine owner's bungalow after having signed the documents, the coal mine workers assault him out of anger and frustration. The film shows that the entire society around the family, consisting of working-class people who had been affected by the labor union's defeat, turns against them. Even as Anandbabu lay fully bandaged on his bed, from the injuries sustained from the assault, kids pass by outside shouting the slogan "*gali gali mein shor hai/ Anandbabu chor hai*" (The word on the street is that Anandbabu is a thief). Even as Sumitra Devi tries to assuage her husband's hurt, Anandbabu lies wordless. Unable to deal with the dishonor, Anandbabu leaves home and is just shown sitting inside a train headed towards an unknown destination. Anandbabu remains permanently missing from his family and hereafter, the film shows him sparingly either on trains or unknown railway stations only. Having lost his honor, reputation, and the respect and solidarity of his comrades, Anandbabu turns into a silent, roaming apparition.

After this betrayal, there is a spectacular collapse in solidarities among the community. The elder son Vijay is accosted by local men and his forearm is forcibly tattooed with the words "*mere baap chor hai*" (my father is a thief). Sumitra Devi realizes that there is no place for her and her sons in the community anymore, and moves to Bombay with them in the hope of providing them with a decent life. Sumitra Devi is faced with the hard questions of food and shelter for her family and she takes up the job a daily wage worker at a construction site. Homeless and barely making ends meet, the family takes shelter under the only roof they can find – under a bridge.

Here, it is interesting to note that *Deewaar* firmly places the politics of Anandbabu within the gambit of identifiably Leftist politics. The introduction scene of Anandbabu, showing him giving an impassioned speech from a makeshift dais, is replete with red flags, reminiscent of

communist flags but missing the hammer and sickle. The filmmakers probably did not want to explicitly align themselves with communist ideology, especially, in a time of increasing political repression but provide enough to make their inclinations clear. However, there is no mention of caste politics or caste struggle, even on an oblique manner. The Verma family, would be from the otherwise dominant Khatri caste, despite the poverty of this particular family. Later, as the film constructs scenes depicting the working-class, it shows diversity in terms of religion but caste does not enter the film's social discourse. Suraj Yengde has criticized this by arguing that such Hindi films create Hindu-Muslim relationships as fetishes to construct a liberal post-colonial polity. Yengde calls this the "Hindu-Muslimisation by the liberal and privileged caste nexus" that "negates a critical enquiry into the class, caste and gender dynamics existing within the Hindu and Muslim binaries as a theoretical construct." (2018, p. 3) Indian Islam is itself coded in casteist terms and caste anxieties are displaced on to Islam.

Despite abject poverty, Sumitra Devi and her elder son Vijay work to get Ravi an education. Vijay works as a dockyard worker, gets into trouble with the local mafia and eventually joins a rival gang and becomes a gangster. On the other hand, Ravi (grown-up Ravi played by Shashi Kapoor) becomes a police officer and the two brothers find themselves on the opposite sides of the law.

With the family moving away from the original scene of their trauma, the injustice done to the family and the scar in the mind of a young Vijay remains with them as a painful, and sometimes overwhelming, memory but does not provide for a definite revenge arc. In contrast, in *Zanjeer*, the protagonist (also Vijay) witnesses the murder of his parents as an infant. Growing up as an orphan and then becoming a police officer, Vijay bottles up a lot of angst, directed against crime in general, but which gets release only when he exacts revenge from the criminals

who had killed his parents. *Deewaar* is a more sophisticated narrative of violence and personal suffering as Vijay does not seek revenge from the industrialist who had actually ruined his life. Instead, he develops an inner life of turmoil – a subjectivity shaped through pain and the burden of memory. Various scholars have pointed out how Amitabh Bachchan, with his tall, lanky frame and deep set-eyes (Chakravarty, 1993, p. 229) was particularly adept at portraying this deep, dark, brooding interiority (or “inner exile”) (Mazumdar, 2007, p. 11) characterized by a quiet aloofness but nevertheless betraying a simmering explosive anger just underneath (Mishra, 2002, p. 137). Jyotika Viridi points out that *Deewaar* is different from the usual AYM film as Vijay’s “anger is directed at a generalized system of oppression, a web of power networks that unleashes an everyday situation of degradation for millions of people in India. This is different in that while it is the story of an individual hero, it is not one of the individual hero's revenge against another individual industrial/ upper-class/bourgeois member.” (Viridi, 1993, p. 8)

The qualities of being a relatively open narrative which is not completely determined by the usual AYM revenge narrative and also, sociologically attentive to the problems of urban India (Mazumdar termed it as the film’s “journalistic gaze” (p. 19)), makes *Deewaar* a particularly rich text to understand the AYM phenomenon.

### **The Two Brothers**

The film shows the two brothers – Vijay and Ravi, as studies in contrast. It is the ways their lives turn out that makes them completely different persons and the narrative establishes that in great sociological detail. On the one hand, Ravi gets a decent education and upbringing with the help of his mother and Vijay (who sacrifices his own education for Ravi’s) so that he has a shot at the middle-class life. On the other hand, Vijay grows up with a world of hurt, tries his best to avenge the insults caused to his mother, and get her out of a life of misery. Vijay is

shown leading the life of hard labor, working as a porter in a dockyard.

Both the brothers face difficulties in their lives but the quality of their hardship is radically different. Ravi is educated but is shown battling unemployment in a system where personal recommendations and connections with the elite matter more than qualifications. However, he does not lose his kindness and compassion while being in constant competition for jobs.

Vijay is also shown battling corruption where corruption is in the form of violent criminals who collect weekly ransom in his dockyard. The death of a young porter, after refusing to pay, stirs Vijay into action and he takes on the criminals and beats them in their own den.

Even though the two brothers refuse to bow down to injustice – Ravi by not being a ruthless competitor and Vijay by standing up the exploitative criminals – their lives are governed by very distinct impulses. Two different interactions of the brothers with their mother brings it out distinctly. After Vijay beats up the goons in their own den, Sumitra Devi, worried sick at what could have been had things gone wrong, rebukes Vijay. After a long reproach, she tells him: *“jab tujhe maloom tha ki woh log tujhe dhoond rahe the toh unke samne jaane ki zaroorat kya thi? chup chaap wahan se nikal nahin sakta tha?”* (When you knew those people were looking for you what was the need for you to go there? Couldn't you leave silently?) (Figure 2.1) The camera then cuts to a close up of Vijay, who had been silent till, then taking in his mother's reproach quietly. He replies, *“tum chahti ho main bhi muh chhupa ke bhaag jata?”* (Do you want me to also hide my face and run away?) (Figure 2.2) Vijay's answer invokes the suppressed memory of the father and reveals the different ways in which he lived on in their memories. For Sumitra Devi, he was a bold and upright man who was forced to do the wrong thing but for Vijay, his only impression of his father was that of a deserter. Unable to reconcile Vijay's vitriol

towards his father and her own precious memory of him, Sumitra Devi slaps Vijay but this exchange revealed the underlying fault line in their family.



Figure 2.1: Sumitra Devi chides Vijay for confronting the goons



Figure 2.2: Vijay replies, “Do you want me to also hide my face and run away?”

A few minutes later, Ravi is shown pouring over job advertisements late at night when his mother tells him to go to sleep as it was almost morning. To this Ravi replies: “*subah abhi kahan hone wali hai maa? subah toh uss din hogi jab har kisi ke paas kaam hoga, ghar hoga, koi footpath pe nahin soyega, gehun black mein nahin bikega... aur jab woh subah hogi na maa...*” (How is it morning yet? It will be morning when everyone has a job, a home, no one will sleep on the footpath, wheat will not be sold at the black market...and when that morning comes mother...). As Ravi is saying this, Anand babu’s voice emerges and drowns out his own for a few seconds. It is the same lecture that the film shows him giving at the beginning to the coal miners. (Anand babu: “*aur woh subah uss din aayegi jab mazdooron ko unka adhikar unki mehnat ka theek silah milega*”) (And that morning will come that day when workers get their rights, when their labor fetches the right wage) In a poignant flashback constructed through sound and not image, Anandbabu’s words replace Ravi’s and he appears to speak to Ravi.

Anand babu’s voice is heard because Ravi’s words reminded Sumitra Devi of her husband’s. In the scene, both are sitting facing the camera (Figure 2.3), framed in a mid-shot, both wearing white against the background of the night’s darkness, lit by the light of the table lamp. It is as if their white against the black background makes them transcend that moment in their poor roadside slum – Ravi into the unknown utopian future he is imagining, and Sumitra Devi into a happy memory of her husband when he was still able to fight for his lofty principles. The sense of approaching dawn also adds to the sense of liminality of the moment. Ravi looks ahead (not directly into the camera but just above as if into the horizon of the morning he is dreaming of) and Sumitra Devi looks to the side signaling a detour her mind has taken, going in her own flashback, that the audience is given access to. In this moment, a repressed moment is brought up and then covered over. Ravi then realizes that he is getting carried away and checks

himself and says, “This is the problem of reading newspapers. A normal man starts giving lectures.”



Figure 2.3: Ravi speaks of his utopian dream as Sumitra Devi is reminded of her husband

The main difference between the two brothers, that the film establishes quite clearly through the narrative with some sociological depth, is their integration into the society and its dominant discourse. This difference can be read through their dispositions towards the absent father, Anandbabu. The crisis of the film starts with his disappearance. Anandbabu is forced to choose between the labor union and his family, and he chooses his family. This marked a comprehensive defeat of the labor union, as not only were their demands not met, Anandbabu's signature guaranteed that any future strike would also be deemed criminal. This debacle can also be read as signifying the loss of the Leftist dream of equity and justice, that the film voices through Anandbabu, in the nation's history.

The sleight of hand, that the narrative performs, is that despite choosing his family over

his fellow-workers, Anandbabu leaves his family instead of leaving with them. The film shows in the beginning that Anandbabu is known in his community for his lofty principles. But when he is forced to compromise on them, he loses his sense of self-respect along with the respect of others. Unable to face his family or friends, he leaves and leads a permanently anonymous existence, roaming around in trains without any fixed destination. Anandbabu does not return to the family even as his wife and children are compelled to leave the workers' community and arrive all alone and vulnerable in the city.

The absence of the father then becomes the unspoken site of trauma in the film. In this sense, the absence of the father is the site of the political unconscious (Jameson, 1981) in the narrative. The trauma in the collective unconscious of the nation is the loss of the Leftist dream of a just and prosperous India. The narrative displaces that sense of loss to the absence of Anandbabu in the family. Interestingly, even as the narrative removes Anandbabu from the family, he does not die and neither does he start a new life elsewhere. He is shown only when his memory is directly invoked in the family. He remains a ghostly presence in the film just as the Left's dream lingered on in the national unconscious, evoking pain that kept returning. The family does not get closure. This absence shapes the lives of the two brothers as they choose different paths to deal with this loss. The pain of the loss of the Left's anti-colonial dream also structured the historical horizon of possibilities of the nation. With the lack of equity and justice, and increasing state repression, many lives were lost to history. And many others tried to cope and survive by joining in the state's project in the service of capital. The narrative of *Deewaar*, then becomes popular cinema's way of dealing with a national trauma by displacing it on the family, and through the two brothers, articulating the historical possibilities (or their lack thereof).

The dispositions of the two brothers towards their father are markedly different. On one hand, Vijay abhors his father because he only relates to him as a father who abandoned his family but on the other hand, Ravi's words echo those of his as a union leader, someone who was available to a collective. While Vijay is shown to have solidarity with people, the center of his moral and emotional universe lies with his mother. In contrast, Ravi has been socialized to the extent that his dreams and desires are not anchored within the family.

In voicing the dream of a socialist utopia, Ravi also talks about the black marketing of food. This foreshadows the life of crime that Vijay was about to enter and also, Ravi's life as an agent of the state apparatus. Vijay's life as a footpath dweller, without education and doing hard physical labor meant that he never gets a chance to get out of his tight little corner of the world. Ravi, on the other hand, gets assimilated into the system through education (and reading newspapers, as he puts it) so much that he ends up becoming part of the state – the same state that is the purveyor of the rotten condition of the society that Vijay is part of.

Ravi mentions black marketing (and his hope of its disappearance) in his utopian dream. But the activities of black marketing and smuggling were a direct result of state restrictions. For example, gold is a highly prized commodity commonly collected by Indians as security. Investing in gold is investing in one's future. Gold provides a sense of security and stability to mitigate the risks of an uncertain future. "Having to sell mother's/ wife's jewelry" as a last resort, is a common refrain in India, frequently used in popular cinema, to signal disaster in fortunes. At a time when there was a heightened sense of insecurity in society, people wanted to buy gold. High tariffs by the state meant that it was expensive in India and so, smugglers like Daavar would buy gold cheaply from Dubai, smuggle it in India and sell at a higher price, his crime being not paying taxes to the state on his profits.

On the other hand, food grains are essential commodities for daily survival and mismanagement of the distribution of grains spawned food black markets. Priya Joshi gives the context for food black marketing during the 70s:

Rather than wiping out hoarders by providing subsidized staples inexpensively as promised, the state first creates the food shortages by mismanaging the supply chain, and then enables the black market to thrive by failing to stamp it out. India's considerable agricultural output is sold overseas to prop up its hard currency reserves; its population suffers rising prices and limited foodstuffs, and the hoarder is born. (2015, p. 99)

Thus, criminality and the explosion of the sphere of illegality in the economic and political life, was a direct result of the restrictive measures of the state. So, the state fighting crime meant that it was fighting something that it had given rise to. Ravi's joining the state apparatus to impose its restrictions were then in direct contradiction to his dream of equality and justice.

In a later scene in the film, Ravi shoots a thief running away from him, in the leg. But he finds out that it was a young boy who had stolen just a loaf of bread for his family. A remorseful Ravi visits his family with food. There he is met with severe reproach from the boy's mother who questions the hypocrisy of the punishment when "criminals" who were hoarding food and engaging in illegal activities went unpunished. The mother's reproach is balanced by the father, a former school teacher, who apologizes for his wife's behavior saying that hunger does not justify stealing, or else the entire country would be doing that. Here the film masculinizes the state and the law. While the boy's mother screams injustice, her protests are heard but quietly neutralized by her husband, the idealist schoolteacher, as the voice of morality. The cry for justice is thus relegated to the woman who is hysterical, the boy who steals, and eventually Vijay who chooses a life of crime. The scene acts as a discourse between justice and legality, the two being opposed

to each other in the fallen state of society. The idealist schoolteacher, acting as the benevolent patriarch in the scene, pronounces that morality is on the side of legality. His authority comes from the fact that he is a man of letters and that he is also an aggrieved parent whose son had been shot. In this incident, even as the state's punitive actions are lamented, it ends with displacing the blame on to criminals and this convinces Ravi to take up Vijay's case as he realizes Vijay was also one of those "criminals."



Figure 2.4: The mother of the boy who Ravi had shot, reproaches him



Figure 2.5: The boy's father gives a lesson in morality after the mother has been removed from the scene

So, Ravi is part of the state apparatus that had spawned the crime business. But he could not see that, despite his education, due to his position in the bureaucracy. The manipulation of the narrative here is that despite his “lesson” from the young boy’s family that crime is a result of circumstances, he does not apply that to his own brother. For him, Vijay was one of the rich criminals who was responsible for the poverty and hunger even though it was a direct result of state policies, and Vijay himself had been forced into crime by poverty. Ravi becomes a part of a system which is designed for such non-comprehension. In this sense, “Police are bureaucrats with weapons.” (Graeber, 2015, p. 73) Graeber posits that despite popular culture showing the contrary, all that the police ever do is enforce rules rather than fight crime. In *Deewaar*, when Ravi is shown fighting crime heroically, all that he is actually doing is enforce the restrictive rules (increasingly authoritarian in the 70s) of the state, as its agent. As I have argued earlier, bureaucracies are institutions of structural violence which are meant to not understand the plight

of common folk contextually. The police are the violent end of this system. Ravi eventually kills his brother and is feted by the state for that.

### *Mere Paas Maa Hai*

Vijay's daredevilry against the dockyard goons attracts the attention of smuggling gang leader Daavar, who recruits Vijay in his gang and Vijay gets rich overnight. The film leaves subtle forewarnings indicating that Vijay is venturing a path of no return. For example, on his first payday in the life of crime, as Vijay is stunned at earning so much money at once, the money is shown from under the glass table on which it is kept, forming a circle around Vijay. Probably hinting at how the money is forming a noose around Vijay's neck and the law is going to close on him, this low-angle shot is neither from a normal eye-level position nor is it from anyone's point of view. (Figure 2.6) One could interpret that the camera is occupying the point of view of all the still poor people, Vijay's brethren, who are silently witnessing his rise that is only doomed to end in disaster.



Figure 2.6: Money forming a noose around Vijay's neck, a sign of things to come

This sense of doom in Vijay's life, with a burdened past and the gradual closing of future

possibilities, is contrasted by Ravi's successful assimilation into middle-class life. Ravi is shown romancing Veera (played by Neetu Singh) whose father is DCP Nagar (played by Manmohan Krishna) who eventually becomes his boss in his police job. Even though Ravi does not get rich overnight like Vijay, he gets the prestige, social acceptance and security that came with the job. Vijay's life was one of risk and danger. It is of interest to note that of the two brothers, it is Ravi who is allowed to "become a man" i.e. have a family and reproduce. But this happens only after he joins the patriarchal state and follows its rules. That Ravi's boss is his girlfriend's father (possibly, his future father-in-law) also means that there are clear lines of authority even in his erotic and conjugal life.

The drifting apart of the two brothers comes to a flashpoint over their mother, captured in what are two of the most famous scenes in Hindi cinema. In the first, Ravi confronts Vijay and asks him to sign a paper agreeing to reveal details of his criminal activities and his gang members to the police, in the presence of their mother. The scene is mounted in a melodramatic mode with background music underlining and emphasizing each word. Each part of the conversation is framed and blocked in a manner that each character is not just present on screen but they bring with them their moral positions too.

When Ravi lays down the accusations against Vijay and asks him to sign the paper as he looks on, they are put in a close frame. (Figure 2.7) Vijay retorts by invoking all the hardship and injustice they had faced as a family. But as soon as Vijay is about to speak, Sumitra Devi is brought into the frame with her back facing the audience (Figure 2.8) as if to include everyone who had shared this difficult life together. As Ravi shouts at him in a burst of anger for not signing the paper, the scene shows close-up shots of all three of them with loud music underling each frame as if to re-establish the characters in this tripartite conversation. Vijay then enlists the

people who had wronged them – the mine owner, the construction site manager who had insulted their mother and fired her, and the man who had tattooed his arm (Figure 2.9) – and says that he will sign once Ravi gets their signatures. Here, the moving frame shows Vijay from a slightly low angle while showing Ravi’s back. In reply, Ravi talks of how crimes of others do not excuse Vijay’s own (Figure 2.10) and then declares that he is leaving and is taking their mother with him. As Vijay resists, Sumitra Devi takes Ravi’s side and says that none of the people who had wronged them were family. But Vijay is family and all his wealth was not enough to keep her with him. (Figure 2.11) As they leave, Vijay is shown alone and lonely in his mansion, which now meant nothing to him. (Figure 2.12)



Figure 2.7: Ravi asks Vijay to sign the paper



Figure 2.8: The frame includes all three characters as Vijay is about to speak



Figure 2.9: Vijay asks for the signature of the man who had tattooed his arm



Figure 2.10: Ravi says that crimes of others do not excuse one's own crimes



Figure 2.11: Sumitra Devi chooses Ravi's side



Figure 2.12: Vijay is left all alone in his mansion

By invoking the sanctity of family relations and kinship, Sumitra Devi brings the law into the family. She lays down the letter of the law as the basis of their personal conduct. To become a man, was then to follow the law and submit to the state, and only then could one be permitted to have an erotic life, a family. So, in a sense, she has repressed the memory of her husband and his principles of justice upon which he had confronted the factory establishment and indirectly questioned the state for its silence in the face of worker exploitation.

This scene underlines the difference between how the two brothers have interpreted the past. Vijay had accumulated each and every injustice done to him and his family, and fed his internal hell of rage. Vijay is unable to mourn the absence of his father. Freud (1917) had described the condition as melancholia – where a person, unable to externalize and objectify a loss, relegates it to the unconscious. Because the pain is not processed by the conscious mind, it is felt internally and is often directed at the self. Vijay's trauma then becomes self-directed and

his masochism can only then result in a spiral of doom.

On the other hand, Ravi could just retort by saying others' crimes cannot justify one's own. While Vijay is unable to mourn, Ravi, it appears, has sublimated the loss with admiration for the state and its laws; principles he receives through his education and later his career as a police officer. Vijay could never attend school, having to work to support the family and makes a living as part of the underworld. Mazumdar calls Ravi's talk of principles and values, "the public language of abstract citizenship." (2007, p. 33) Whereas Vijay had to deal with a life of hard labor, constant injustice, and then a life of crime full of risk and danger, Ravi had followed the prescribed path of an ideal citizen and joined the state apparatus. Vijay is never able to leave the quagmire of a perilous existence and so, the social contract of citizenship never becomes valid for him. On the other hand, Ravi secures his life by joining the state and speaks its language and can participate in its program of constructing ideal citizens based on abstract ideals, by becoming one. His ideals can be abstract because he does not have to deal with real dangers of a perilous life, like Vijay or most of the people in society. The "abstraction" of abstract citizenship enables Ravi to externalize his internal suffering and put it in use in the service of the law.

The political unconscious of the film, regarding the trauma of the failure of the anti-colonial nationalist dream, is then again invoked when the two brothers meet under the bridge where they grew up as a last ditch attempt at reconciliation. This brings out the divergent relationships that the brothers had with the past and memory. As Vijay puts it, that bridge was the only bridge connecting their lives together through their shared childhood and that they could meet in only that one spot in the whole city. The deep social chasm that existed between the two brothers – one a police officer and the other a criminal, had rendered the whole city unviable for

them to meet.

Aarti Wani (2016), in her book *Fantasy of Modernity: Romantic Love of Bombay Cinema in the 1950s*, showed how the Hindi cinema of the fifties managed to iterate a version of modernity through the idiom of romance that expressed a new era of possibilities. This era carried the promise of modern selfhood which could be experienced through the possibilities afforded by the anonymity of the city. In contrast, what we see in *Deewaar* is a city whose spaces have been burdened with meaning so that they have lost their potential of discovery and possibility, and they have been rigidly demarcated, the “unintended city” notwithstanding.

The scene of this meeting is burdened with the past – it invokes both their shared childhood and the childhood of the nation (the post-Independence dream). As Ravi waits for Vijay, the patriotic song “*saare jahan se achchha Hindustan humara*” (Better than the whole world is our Hindustan) is heard. This extra-diegetic soundtrack evokes their childhood when it was being performed in a local school, as shown in an earlier scene. The bond formed by a shared past also held within it a promise of a prosperous India, both of which were under severe duress in the film’s present. The conversation again brings out the incongruity between the brothers’ points of view. Vijay realizes that he has cast his dice and he does not have the option to change and Ravi once again speaks his official language of principles. The wall between the two brothers is ultimately of this incongruity that is borne out of their life trajectories.

Frustrated at not being able to convince Ravi to take a transfer, Vijay attempts to shame him for his ordinary economic status. He enlists all his material possessions and asks him what he had, to which Ravi replies, “*mere paas maa hai*” (I have mother). The exchange also speaks to the deep ideological belief, prevalent in capitalism, that the rich are unhappy. This belief works to justify unjust distribution of wealth and resources. While the rich, enjoying all the

luxuries of life, are deemed unhappy, the poor have to be content with the supposed moral superiority that goes with poverty. The mother, thus, symbolizes that morality.

In his analysis of the function of class in action films in Hollywood, Chuck Kleinhans argues that “through textual processes of condensation and displacement, the deep structure of class conflict is converted into manifest content, but the effect is to attenuate conflicts at the level of real conditions and to amplify and resolve them at the surrogate levels of the melodrama.” (1996, p. 245) In *Deewaar*, the deep structure of class conflict is the state mediated failure of the socialist dream of equity and justice that had informed the anti-colonial struggle. The dream of a prosperous nation, the socialist utopia, whose loss is the original trauma (displaced onto the absent father) is displaced onto the mother. The narrative functions to displace questions of class, like labor rights or justice for the poor, onto moral and ethical choices, and displaces the socialist dream onto the moral figure of the mother.

“*Mere paas maa hai*” (I have mother) is possibly the most famous dialogue in all Hindi cinema. The invoking of the mother touches upon the affective core of Indian masculinity. Sudhir Kakar wrote that unlike the West, “minimal demands are placed on the Indian infant to master the world around him and to learn to function independently of his mother. (Kakar, 1981, p. 103) (Kakar was talking primarily of the male child) As a result, there continues to be an outsized importance of the mother in the Indian male’s life. The central feature of the mother in the Indian male psyche, “is not her capacity to feed but to provide life-giving reassurance through her *pervasive presence*. (original emphasis)” (p. 84) Vijay faced all possible vagaries of life including homelessness, violence and child labor but he anchored his life around the presence of his mother. Ravi, on the other hand, was relatively more sheltered, made possible by the stepping up of Vijay in a fatherly, providing role. However, Ravi also replaces the father by

joining the masculine state apparatus. Though he is shown speaking of a socialist utopia like his father, he brushes it off by saying that newspapers make anyone give lectures – he nullifies his own socialist dream as too pompous, too idealistic.

Whereas his mother is the affective, moral and existential core of Vijay's life, it is Ravi who she chooses to go live with. Vijay's sense of reality and his understanding of his own life was anchored in his mother. Her presence was what gave his life purpose. When she decided to leave Vijay's house and go with Ravi, he tells her "*Lekin maa maine yeh sab tumhare liye kiya. Yeh bangla, yeh gaadi, yeh rupaya-paisa yeh sab tumhare liye hai. Yeh sab kuchh tumhara hai*" (But mother I did all of this for you. This mansion, car, money...I got all of this for you. All of this is yours.) Whereas Ravi had sublimated his trauma in the service of the state and had Vijay's sense of reality was predicated on the presence of his mother. While on the one hand, Ravi had been integrated into the bureaucratic machinery, Vijay's life still sought meaning from the benign presence of his mother – a presence that signified to him his unspoiled childhood. When she herself rejects Vijay, his world falls apart.

### ***Kismet* – Vijay and His Bit of Reality**

When Sumitra Devi took her two sons to the local Shiva temple, Vijay, even as a young child, refused to enter it, saying he didn't have anything to do with god. Over the years, he diligently accompanies his mother and brother till the steps of the temple but never enters it. Later in the film, as Vijay is hounded by the police, he learns that his mother has fallen ill. The police take advantage of the situation and heavily man the hospital. Worried about his mother's health and desperate to meet her, Vijay finally breaks his boycott and enters the temple. But he does not pray to Shiva. He confronts the idol. (Figure 2.13, Figure 2.14) Vijay mocks the god saying that he must be happy that finally Vijay has been forced to enter the temple. But he

chastises him that his mother, the woman who unfailingly worshipped him for years, is suffering for no fault of hers. Vijay enlists all the injustices faced by him and his mother and says that even though he never asked for anything, he is now begging for his mother's life.

Vijay rails and rants in this scene in front of the Shiva idol before finally accepting his defeat and powerlessness. The scene sets up this shifting dynamic visually and through sound. Even though Vijay's tall frame gives him an imposing presence, he appears puny in front of the large Shiva idol, also especially, because he is wearing black against the dark background of the night in contrast to the white reflexive surface of the idol. Also, Vijay keeps moving, raising his finger, shooting angry glances, and is framed in various mid-shots, close-ups, from behind etc. Bachchan's voice modulations give Vijay's voice quivers during his cries of helplessness and the sound design gives his voice an exaggerated echo effect that would normally not happen in the small inner chamber of the temple. The audio-visual design of the film conveys Vijay's struggle and contrasts it with the idol's unmoving, imposing presence. Vijay's human cries are met with divine indifference.

This scene makes it clear that Vijay was never a non-believer but was angry with god for his misfortune. Also, his mother's presence as the source of signification in his life probably made him believe he did not need any other authority. Vijay holds onto a memory of the mother prior to the disappearance of the father – for him, she is the site of plenitude. What is interesting is that in his altercation with Ravi, even though Vijay mentions the coal mine owner, the construction site manager, the tattoo maker as some of the people who wronged them, he held god (Shiva in this case) responsible for his misfortune – that god was specifically responsible for the misfortunes that befell him.



Figure 2.13: Vijay confronts god Shiva in the temple



Figure 2.14: Vijay chastises god Shiva for making his mother suffer

In another telling scene earlier in the film, when the two brothers are still children, Sumitra Devi rebukes young Vijay for throwing a stone at the construction site manager to

avenge his mother's insult. She tells Vijay that the poor should know their place in society (directly opposed to the socialist principles of her husband). When she remarks on how different the brothers were, Vijay retorts by showing his tattoo and saying that it was the biggest difference between them. Vijay perceived that he was "marked" for life and that this mark could not be undone. Later in the film, when Vijay is in a short-lived relationship with Anita (played by Parveen Babi), she suggests to him getting the tattoo surgically removed, as it was the source of such pain in life. To this Vijay replies, removing the lines on one's palm does not remove one's fate and that the writing on his arm had also been written on his heart, mind and soul. Vijay's belief that he had been "marked" for doom becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy as Anita is killed by the rival gangster Samant and his only shot at leading a normal and happy life gets lost.

Talking about the relationship between social structure and individual agency, philosopher Roy Bhaskar wrote: "Society is both the everpresent condition (material cause) and the continually reproduced outcome of human agency. And praxis is both work, that is, conscious production, and (normally unconscious) reproduction of the conditions of production, that is society." (2005, pp. 37-38) This echoes Marx's famous formulation about history, "Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past." (1852)

It is this social condition or circumstance that Vijay finds himself in (society as the everpresent condition), that is particularly turbulent in the 1970s. It can be said that Vijay's life is overdetermined, in the Althusserian sense. (Althusser, 1962) There is a multiplicity of historical factors (accumulation of contradictions) that influence and shape Vijay's life. One can point out several structural factors - capitalist greed (coal miner), the state's favoring the industrialists

against the working-class, the city's inadequate resources to provide for migrants which in turn is the result of bureaucracy, entrenched patriarchy (Sumitra Devi was harassed by the construction site manager with impunity), lopsided labor laws, restrictive license regime – that led to Vijay's suffering. The list is endless. It is impossible for anyone to completely understand the given social conditions in which they find themselves (also because those conditions are constantly changing). But Vijay was particularly ill-equipped to get a grasp of the conditions he finds himself in. He leads a turbulent life, constantly in flux. So, his overwhelming reality seems to exist outside of him, independent of his actions, in a reified form. This is what he experiences as *kismet* or fate.

Interestingly, the Hindi/ Urdu word *kismet* comes from the Turkish *kismet* which in turn comes from the Arabic *qisma/qismat* which meant “portion” deriving from the root word *qasama* meaning “he divided.”<sup>7</sup> Another word used for fate in Hindi is *bhagya* which comes from Hindu philosophy. The root word of *bhagya* in Sanskrit is *bhag* which means “part” or portion.<sup>8</sup> Thus, both *kismet* and *bhagya* carry the connotations of apportionment. The idea is that one gets what is apportioned in one's fate/*kismet/bhagya* by the divine. Vijay's belief in his fate but the fact that he struggled against it nevertheless, defines his life's tragedy.

I want to go back to Sudhir Kakar's understanding of the development of the Indian male child. He posits that the emphasis during child development in India, in comparison to the West, is more on primary processes rather than secondary processes. This means that representational and affective thinking relying on visual and sensual images is given more emphasis than

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.etymonline.com/word/kismet>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.wisdomlib.org/definition/bhagya>

conceptual and secondary-process thinking relying on words.<sup>9</sup> (1981, p. 104) It follows that:

The relative absence of social pressure on the Indian child to give up non-logical modes of thinking and communication, and the lack of interest or effort on the part of the mother and the family to make the child understand that *objects and events have their own meaning and consequences independent of his feelings or wishes*, contribute to the protracted survival of primary-process modes well into the childhood years. (p. 105) (my emphasis)

This is exactly how child psychologist Jean Piaget theorized egocentrism in children. I will cite Graeber here: “Egocentrism, according to Piaget, is a matter of assuming one’s own, subjective perspective on the world is identical with the nature of the world itself.” (2001, p. 63) Graeber builds on this and shows that when one confuses one’s perspective as the total reality, things seem to possess qualities that they really do not (just like how children seem to think that all objects are invested with intelligence). This is fetishism (in case of children, this is narcissism). And the objects possessed with those qualities are the fetish objects.

Marx wrote in *The German Ideology*, “as long as a cleavage exists between the particular and the common interest” (here, interest could be substituted by perspective) “man’s own deed becomes an alien power opposed to him, which enslaves him instead of being controlled by him.” This is of course how Marx defined alienation. Thus, partial perspectives lead to the misrecognition of social circumstances (reified as fate), of objects possessing intentions and

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<sup>9</sup> I would qualify Kakar’s formulation as being dated now. The primary and secondary processes are weirdly blurred now as children are forced to read and write ever earlier and earlier for a highly competitive economy, but this is also compensated through emotional and physical cajoling, rewards and coddling. Anne Allison (2006) has studied this phenomenon in the context of Japan but this applies, to a large extent, to urban India

qualities that they do not (fetish objects) and the fruits of labor of the individual and the collective to have control over human beings rather than the other way around (alienation).

While Ravi sublimates his trauma in the service of the law, Vijay cannot externalize and objectify his trauma to the conscious realm. With the socialist dream disappearing, Vijay has no access to a system of signification. He does not have his father's ideology of social justice. He does believe in an idea of justice, and acts violently to personally bring it to fruition when he deems fit, but it is not anchored in an understanding of social (in)equity. On the other hand, he has also not chosen to surrender to the patriarchal state with its demarcations of hierarchy, like his brother. As a result, Vijay loses his bearing in reality and fails to fully comprehend his place in it.

### **Tempting Fate**

During his time as a porter at the dockyard, Vijay's senior fellow-worker Rahim *chacha*/uncle (played by Younus Pervez) points out to him, the significance of his badge number, which was 786. Rahim *chacha* explains that 786 is considered auspicious among Muslims as it means Bismillah or "in the name of Allah." True to the nature of Indian working-class syncretism, to which Hindi cinema has been very attentive historically, Rahim *chacha* compares it with the Hindu symbol "Om" so that Vijay, a Hindu, can comprehend it easily. Rahim *chacha* tells Vijay that he is lucky to have that badge and that he should never lose it.

This badge acts as a fetish object and plays an important part in the film's narrative. The first assignment that Vijay gets from Daavar was to bring Daavar's gold, arriving at a beach from Dubai, safely to his warehouse. Vijay boldly demands to do the job alone. When Daavar warns him that both the police and his rival gang leader Samant's men will be after him, Vijay defiantly replies, "*mere peechhe tof sirf meri kismar hogi*" (only my fate will be after me). Vijay tricks

Samant's gang to do the job for him and then steals the vehicle with the gold from their warehouse. But while doing so, Vijay gets shot at, but the bullet strikes the badge which was in his pocket and he is saved.

In another instance, Vijay plans to plant an insider in the rival gang. For the plant to gain Samant's confidence, he goes with a piece of information that Vijay would leave a certain bar at a certain time. Desperate to seek revenge, Samant sends his men to shoot Vijay at the given time. Vijay meets Anita (played by Parveen Babi), Vijay's eventual love interest, inside the bar where she flirts with him and he buys her a drink. As Vijay leaves at the given time, knowing fully well that his life was in danger, he forgets his badge on the bar counter. Anita, goes after him to return it. As she is about to, it falls on the ground, Vijay bends to pick it up and the bullets fired by Samant's men miss him. Once again, he is saved by the badge no. 786.

The badge seems to have powers that can save Vijay and when Vijay finally drops it and cannot retrieve it when he is being chased by Ravi at the end of the film, he is shot in the back. The badge is a fetish object here. To go back to fetishism, when human beings lose track of their own actions being part of a complex system (and having partial perspectives), external things, that are the result of their own labor seem to have a power over them. The subject/ object relationship is reversed. (This ties to Marx's idea of inversion). A fetish object is thus, something that is created by humans but holds power over them instead.

The badge's number 786 and its importance is obviously the result of a convention. Muslims (in South Asia) historically decided to invest it with the respect, auspiciousness and compassion of the invocation of Bismillah. The use of the badge as a fetish object by the film's narrative, is an example of the melodramatic film form to externalize Vijay's fatalistic comprehension of the world. (Gledhill, 1987) The use of the number 786 also appeals to the

working-class syncretism of the urban proletarian audience, of whom Vijay is himself a member.

Vijay clearly respects and believes in its auspiciousness. And because he is completely unable to make sense of his life and his part or position in the larger totality of the society, he readily surrenders to it. Graeber, who was a socio-cultural anthropologist, shows that fetishes were initially objects that parties to an agreement (Europeans and West Africans) invested with authority so that the agreement was honored. (2005) Ultimately, those were, like the number 786, results of human choice. He warned that “The danger comes when fetishism gives way to theology, the absolute assurance that the gods are real.” (p. 431)

An alienated Vijay, trapped in his own head and unable to find his place in the world, either lashes out (the angry part of the angry young man) or invests his life’s possibilities in fetish objects completely. Then, since it is all fate and there is no way of knowing what fate has in store, Vijay tempts fate. He shows daredevilry in taking risks, where he is clearly flirting with death, because he has already left his life to fate.

### **Lonesome Individualism and Risk Taking**

This aspect of taking risks and the defiance of death is one of the characteristic features of the “angry young man” template of masculinity and I argue that it is key to understanding the legacy of Bachchan’s onscreen persona. Through its complex narrative structure, *Deewaar* both critiques the repressive state and provides justification of it in the lives of the characters who experience it. Through the trauma of the absent father and Vijay’s inability to have a future, it speaks deeply on the costs of not being integrated in the laws of the capitalist state. But using the melodramatic form, the film displaces Vijay’s experience onto fate. Once the experience of repression by the capitalist state is formulated as fate, quite like explaining the vagaries of urban life as “unintended,” it covers up the structures of capitalist exploitation that are systemic and not

accidental. Experiencing the increasingly insecure life in capitalism as fate means a change in disposition and attitude towards future.

Unable to understand the ever changing realities of an insecure life, daredevilry, risk taking and defiance of death gave a false sense of agency to the angry young man. The lonesome individualism of the angry young man, portrayed by Bachchan, resonated with audience members who themselves were leading compromised lives, unable to figure out how to get out of their current predicaments. Vijay fails to survive, unable to sublimate his trauma either in law of the state (like his brother) or in the service of a greater good through collective action.

The quest for justice it is generally understood through the revenge narrative. The failure to sublimate, results in a sadomasochistic drive for revenge. Although Bachchan's characters are driven by revenge, the rage is an outcome of a self-destructive sense of shame. Vijay Mishra (2002) points out the inevitability of violence in Bachchan's revenge films, and reading them against the backdrop of an increasingly violent India (and the end of Gandhian non-violence), asks the question:

Can one say that Bombay Cinema has quietly (and inadvertently) colluded with the rise of separatist and communal violence in India by justifying, in art, the efficacy and imperative of individual revenge outside of the law? Does sanitized violence in cinema spawn the frighteningly real violence outside? (p. 138)

The failure of the socialist project, both due to intrinsic flaws in the visions of the organized Left and sustained attacks on Left working-class organizations by militant rightwing outfits backed by the state, led to the loss of the collective as the site of social justice. The quest for justice was transformed to an individual prerogative and thus, the narratives about justice became narratives about revenge and retribution. Revenge, rather than a pursuit of justice,

necessarily precludes the possibilities of a future. The possibility of a future with a family arises in Vijay's life only briefly when he decides to quit crime, own up to it, and start over. But he fails to come out of the cycle of revenge and it ultimately engulfs him.

Bachchan's AYM films formed a part of the larger culture of violence that Vijay Mishra is talking about and the quality connecting Bachchan's films with the larger growing rightwing violent culture in the country is not just a disregard for the due process of law but an inability to imagine and envision a future. Sreya Sarkar (2019) writes about how politics of oppressed peoples can get stuck in time, "Being stuck in the loop of history can take away the vision to move forward with a strategy to right the wrong, which is counterproductive to the original project of securing political power."

The masculine charge of Bachchan's characters, as Mishra points out, led to the banishment of the "centrality of romance" (p. 137) and the marginalization of the female actor from the Hindi cinema screen. While the Bachchan persona obviously did not invent patriarchy on the silver screen, it did leave a legacy of misogyny that took on more sadistic and violent forms in subsequent male screen heroes.

Bachchan was at the height of his stardom in the 1980s when the neoliberal reforms were starting to be implemented. As the economic "liberalization" was officially done in 1991, popular Hindi cinema was beginning to rework these legacies of Bachchan's angry young man. Neoliberalism ushered in the era of financialization, speculation (hence, risk taking) and also, consumerism. I argue in the subsequent chapters that the legacies of lonesome individualism (and partial perspectives) and risk taking (a departure from the middle-class virtues of thrift and working towards future security) on the one hand, and a sense of misogyny, on the other, were given newer avatars by newer screen heroes like Shah Rukh Khan and Salman Khan.

## CHAPTER 3

### FROM *BAAZIGAR* TO THE DREAM MERCHANT – EARLY ITERATIONS OF BRAND

#### SHAH RUKH KHAN

*Arre iske aage koi na tikeyaa...Shah Rukh Khan hai yeh!*

(No one can last in front of him...he is Shah Rukh Khan!)

As Lucky (played by Abhay Deol), a thief, in *Oye Lucky! Lucky Oye!* (Dibakar Banerjee, 2008) waits to be taken in front of the media, where he would be accompanied by the Delhi police commissioner himself, a police constable says this line about him in a tone consisting of equal parts mockery and admiration. Lucky is a thief who made a career out of stealing all kinds of stuff from people's homes and shops, and selling them in the black market. When Lucky, surrounded by multiple police personnel attending to him, is asked whether he has any preference of clothing before going in front of the media, says he looks good in black. This elicits the remark from an amused policeman comparing him with Shah Rukh Khan. The film then cuts to the media conference and a pan shot shows the hundreds of household items that Lucky had stolen. The bounty included TV sets, stereo music systems, jewelry, chairs, tables, musical instruments and every conceivable thing that can be found in a household, including a Pomeranian dog.

*Oye Lucky! Lucky Oye!* is about Lucky, a young man who grew up in a lower-middle class Punjabi family in West Delhi, looking at the shiny objects of neoliberal India from the other side of the class divide (a younger lucky is played by Manjot Singh) wanting to understand how everything works in rich people's fabulous lives. A motherless child, and spurned by a loveless father, Lucky wants to fill up his life with rich people's things and may be, one day, pass off as one of them. Lucky grows up to be a prolific thief, blending in affluent habitats to

steal from unsuspecting wealthy people and gradually, starts moving among the upper crust. Lucky wants to fill up his emptiness with commodities, and even attempts to simulate a real domestic household by filling it up with household items that he had stolen.

Lucky is emblematic of a generation that grew up in neoliberal India in the 1980s and 90s and keeps looking for identity, family, support, recognition and acknowledgment all their lives and believe that they can achieve those through brands and commodities. This is a generation that has been made to believe in the possibilities that commodities offer - that branded clothes, or a new car, or dining in an American chain of restaurants, or going for that foreign vacation is what the good life consists of.

It is in this context that the comparison of Lucky by the policeman to Shah Rukh Khan is pertinent. Shah Rukh Khan (henceforth SRK), emerged as the chief dream merchant, selling the dream life of globalized consumption in neoliberal India during the 1990s. The initiation of the Indian middle-class to the excitement of foreign brands and lifestyle products has been headlined by a galaxy of stars and celebrities, of which SRK has been at the forefront. In the super hit film *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge / The Bravehearted Will Take the Bride Away (DDLJ)* (Aditya Chopra, 1995), SRK plays the role of Raj, a British-Indian in London who rides a Harley Davidson bike, drinks Stroh's beer, drives a Lamborghini, finds his way confidently across Europe while speaking Hindi, and yet, is suave enough to win over the hearts of his lover's family in rural Punjab. The aplomb with which Raj wins people over while sticking to conservative values of the Indian patriarchal family, and also, feeling completely at home in his decadent party-filled London life dotted with expensive consumer items, seemed to sell the idea that these two spheres could be straddled effortlessly. In fact, such big budget Hindi films increasingly seemed to suggest that the values of one sphere would reinforce those in the other.

Over the years, as Indian consumerism evolved and ideas like brand recognition and brand loyalty became commonplace, most of the nation's collective dreams and desires started to be mediated through brands. And SRK found a place in most of them (Dudrah, Mader, & Fuchs, SRK and Global Bollywood, 2015), (Mankekar, 1999) (Mehta, 2005). For example, as a diehard cricket fan, when I recollect the 1999 cricket World Cup, apart from the actual cricket, I remember a Pepsi ad featuring India's biggest cricket stars like Sachin Tendulkar, Rahul Dravid and Mohammad Azharuddin, and also, SRK.<sup>10</sup> This 60-second cricket themed ad was repeatedly broadcast before and during the sporting event, and in collective memory, Pepsi became fused with India's aspirations of sporting victory at the global stage.

Cricket, though already a popular sport, had been introduced to big money during the 1990s. India's large population meant that the privatization of television broadcasting rights of cricket fetched astronomical sums of money from global media corporations (Haigh, 2010). As the influx of money increasingly turned the game itself into a spectacle and brands swooped in to have a piece of the pie, India's cricket board became richer and gradually came to dominate the world of cricket. So, apart from providing excitement to the game's fans, cricket became a means for millions of Indians to feel confident about their place in the world.

The ad is set in England, where the World Cup was being hosted. In the comical ad, SRK (not playing himself) impersonates Sachin Tendulkar's curly hair look to enter the Indian cricket dressing room for a can of Pepsi, after being denied entry by a British guard. As he makes his way to the refrigerator, barely escaping the eyes of the cricketers in the dressing room, the match starts and it is Sachin's turn to bat. The captain mistakes him for Sachin from behind and tells

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<sup>10</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wGsOgjAQuY8>

him “You’re on.” In the comic ending of the ad, as SRK is fumbling his way out into the field not knowing what to make of the situation, Sachin meets him in the pavilion and tells him that he will take it from there. As a relieved SRK is about to hand him the bat, Sachin takes away the Pepsi can from him. A perplexed SRK is left finishing the Pepsi punchline “*yeh dil maange more/ this heart wants more*” with a nervous “aha!”

At a time when the middle-class in India looking at cricket and Bollywood and starting to imagine themselves as global citizens (as global consumers) on an equal footing, SRK straddled both worlds and occupied a prominent place in the Indian imagination of the image of an Indian global consumer/ citizen. In the Pepsi ad, SRK impersonates Sachin Tendulkar. This period marked the height of Sachin’s popularity when he came to symbolize India’s prowess. The popular sentiment was that, coming from a poor country utterly lacking in sporting achievements, Sachin, bat in hand, was taking India’s fight to the world. He was THE Indian subject. Everybody wanted to be Sachin. By impersonating Sachin and gaining proximity of the cricketers, SRK stood for every cricket fan in India in that dressing room. But the slippage in the ad is that the prize is not Sachin but Pepsi. So, all the acts of bravado in acting on one’s desire (including conning the British guard), were ultimately in the service of a brand.

As SRK became India’s leading model of consumer culture, available to brands for hire, he also became a focal point of the negotiations of national identity, both for audiences from within the country and for India’s sizeable diaspora. Patricia Uberoi (1998) shows how SRK films like *DDLJ* and *Pardes / Foreign Land* (Subhash Ghai, 1997), became sites of “ideological transformation and contestation” (p. 334) regarding questions of national identity for both the nostalgic diaspora audience and the new middle-class in India.

SRK’s associations with brands also opened up newer avenues of consumption through

newer modes of identity. In a move then considered novel for a male actor in Bollywood, SRK endorsed Lux beauty soap, a product of Unilever Corporation, in 2004. The television commercial showed him in a bath tub, surrounded by leading Bollywood women actors – Hema Malini, Kareena Kapoor, Sridevi and Juhi Chawla.<sup>11</sup> (Figure 3.1) This broke a convention as Lux had been traditionally endorsed exclusively by women. The ad, seemingly places SRK at the level of the “looked at,” (Mulvey, 1975) a role traditionally reserved for women. Nevertheless, he is the centerpiece in the ad and is surrounded by the women. In the ad, SRK asks the audience to pick their favorite “Lux star” out of the four and ends it by jokingly suggesting that since Lux needed a superstar for their 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary, he suggested his own name. At this, the four women jokingly push his head into the water.

This ad was one of the earlier iterations of Indian metrosexual masculinity. A brand endorsement such as this helped expand the men’s grooming industry. The ad is visually composed in a manner where, if we break down the frame by the rule of thirds, SRK is placed right in the middle third of the frame (vertically) and even though he is partly submerged in the water, holds a central presence in the frame. The actresses are symmetrically arranged in a manner such that Hema Malini (left) and Juhi Chawla (right) are at the same height and Kareena Kapoor (middle-left) and Sridevi (middle-right) are at the same height, with their heads forming a concave arc, almost like a crown for SRK’s figure. There is nothing in the grey-white background to distract from this formation either. Also, even though SRK is submerged, his arms are fully spread and he is taking up space (“manspread”). His posture is also such that he could be there in the bathtub alone and still his pose would look natural but the actresses are positioned

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<sup>11</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EvfjRFAuuw>

in a manner that their presence is a corollary of SRK's presence.

So, SRK might have been placed in the bath tub in the ad but it also preserves the role of the man who is served. The image and persona of SRK as the “safe” man (where four women can be comfortable around him while he is bare-bodied in a bath tub) mitigates the unequal relationship.



Figure 3.1: Still from television commercial for Lux beauty soap, 2004 (Screenshot taken by me from Youtube)

### **What Came Before the Consumer Persona –The ‘Psychotic’ Hero and the ‘Aspirational’ Hero**

The emergence of Shah Rukh Khan as the neoliberal consumer persona was gradual. A look at some of his earlier films reveals some of the instabilities underlying this persona before it settled into a successful format. In this chapter, I argue that these earlier films of SRK rework some of the existing tropes and narrative arcs of Bombay cinema. I look at how a template of individualism was developed via the SRK star text, in part by reworking the lonesome

individualism of the “angry young man,” especially, in some of the early films where he plays what has been simply termed the “psychotic hero” (Mazumdar, 2007). SRK plays the psychotic hero in three films - *Baazigar/ Gambler* (Abbas-Mustan, 1993), *Darr/ Fear* (Yash Chopra, 1993) and *Anjaam/ Consequence* (Rahul Rawail, 1994). Both *Baazigar* and *Darr* were commercially successful films and along with *Anjaam*, established SRK’s credentials as a leading man with a “difference,” who was ready to take on challenging roles. In these films, SRK’s roles are clearly characterized by criminality. Despite that, the films’ narratives perform complex maneuvers to balance the criminality and immorality of the characters with sympathy for them. Even though SRK’s characters in these films make morally reprehensible choices, as a combined effect, they only added an element of risqué masculinity to the actor’s screen persona. I will mainly look at *Baazigar*, from the “psychotic” films, in this chapter to see how these early iterations of the SRK persona played their part in what became an exemplary template of neoliberal individualism. In another segment of the chapter, I trace three films – *Raju ban Gaya Gentleman/ Raju Became a Gentleman* (1992), *Yes Boss* (1997) and *Phir Bhi Dil Hai Hindustani/ Still The Heart Is Indian* (2000), all starring SRK and directed by Aziz Mirza, primarily focusing on the first, to understand the emergence and evolution of the aspiring/ aspiration individual. In this section, I try to understand the historical slips and fissures, reading them off popular cinema, that made it possible for emergence of the ambitious neoliberal individual from within an older kind of community.

### **The Psychotic Hero – Construction of A Singularity**

*Baazigar* is a revenge narrative where Ajay Sharma (child version played by Sumeet Pathak and adult version played by Shah Rukh Khan) grows up with the trauma of losing his father, Vishwanath Sharma (played by Anant Mahadevan) and his baby sister. Ajay’s father, who

was an industrialist, was cheated off his property and business empire by an employee called Madan Chopra (played by Dalip Tahil). This rendered the whole family destitute and ultimately led to the deaths. This tragedy also caused Ajay's mother (played by Rakhee) to lose sanity and become mute. Defined by this childhood trauma, Ajay's single purpose in life becomes seeking revenge from Madan Chopra. To gain proximity to Chopra, Ajay becomes romantically involved with both of his daughters Seema (played by Shilpa Shetty) and Priya (played by Kajol). After discreetly courting Seema without anyone's knowledge of their relationship, Ajay ruthlessly kills her by throwing her from the rooftop of a building in a gruesome scene. He also kills the circumstantial witnesses who could have implicated him for her murder. He continues his relationship with Priya and is then set to get married to her. Having gained Madan Chopra's trust, he takes over his business empire just how Chopra had taken over his father's. This leads to a chain of violent events which ends in the deaths of both Chopra and Ajay.

Like many of Amitabh Bachchan's "angry young man" films, *Baazigar* is a revenge drama in which an original trauma and its overbearing memory play an important role in the protagonist's life. Comparing *Deewaar* and *Baazigar*, Ranjani Mazumdar (2007) points out that the former provides biographical details of Vijay's life (his trauma of the loss of his father, his interactions with other characters etc.) that not only add sociological depth to his character but also provide strong justifications and motives for his subsequent actions. But this causal relationship is upended in *Baazigar*. While the film shows Ajay's murderous manipulation and his manic obsession, the causes of his motives are left unexplained till much later in the film. The film begins by showing a young Ajay taking care of his mother like a parent and working odd jobs to provide food for her. It draws us into feeling sympathy for him as he goes hungry to feed his mother, in a role reversal of the parent-child relationship. As Ajay is shown suffering

through his difficult childhood, the film only gives cryptic hints to a possible trauma, like Ajay looking at photographs that are not revealed to the viewer, or him having a nightmare portrayed as a disjointed montage of negative images. The first flashback in which the audience gets to know about Madan Chopra's treachery happens past the mid-point of the film after Seema and some of the witnesses have already been murdered, and Madan Chopra, unaware of Ajay's real intentions, has offered him an equal partnership in his business empire.

This is a shift at the syntagmatic level of the narrative form from the earlier revenge dramas and its effects are far reaching. The film shows a short segment of Ajay's childhood but does not provide information about how he grows up. It skips to the life of a grown-up Ajay, living in a decent house, still taking care of his mother, but now with the assistance of a domestic help. This kind of transition from childhood to adulthood is not uncommon in Hindi cinema and goes to show that childhood is staged as a primal scene projecting the adult protagonist's identity. (Creekmur, 2005) But compared to *Deewaar*, in which Vijay's childhood's hardship was situated both sociologically and within the family, *Baazigar* only gives a familial explanation, and that too after more than half the film is over. The transition from childhood to adulthood in *Deewaar* is shown through dissolving shots of ringing bells in the Shiva temple and the adult Vijay is shown sitting on the exact same spot on the steps of the temple as the child Vijay used to. But in *Baazigar*, we do not get to know where and how Ajay grew up. All that an adult Ajay has in common with his younger self is an ailing mother and an unexplained rage.

This withholding of crucial information about the protagonist's backstory and the lack of sociological detail about his life, that raise doubts over the veracity of the film's account of Ajay, give Ajay the quality of what Mazumdar, drawing from Georg Simmel, has called a "stranger." For example, we are shown that Ajay leaves his home in Panvel (a small town close to Bombay/

Mumbai) to fulfill his life's mission to exact revenge from Madan Chopra. But he is then shown hitchhiking his way there (he gets a lift from his school friend Vicky Malhotra, whose identity he eventually steals). One would guess that it would be a momentous occasion for Ajay, something that he had planned for his entire life, but somehow he did not have a plan to reach Bombay! This detail of hitchhiking adds to the menace of his strangeness and it plays into the trope of a stranger who might do horrible things in future.

This strangeness of Ajay gives him a singularity that keeps the narrative tightly with him. Not only does the film block details of his traumatic past until he achieves a milestone in his revenge mission, it also deliberately avoids specifics of his present. The film does not tell us if Ajay has a job, how he met Seema and got into a relationship with her, how he keeps track of Chopra's whereabouts etc. Even urban spaces are used nondescriptly in the film. Even though we do see public parks and roads, the film never features any iconic monument or location that can be easily identifiable. In countless stories of migration to Bombay, Hindi cinema has generally used iconic locations like the Victoria Terminus railway station to mark the arrival of the migrant. *Deewaar* had shown Sumitra Devi walking with her two young children at Nariman Point, by the sea (also known as the Queen's Necklace). Such iconic locations help anchor characters in specific spatial grids in a city, even if they do not provide realistic details. All this ensures that, in effect, Ajay has total narrative control of the film. This also became a characteristic of Bollywood (in the 90s) where Bombay disappeared from its own cinema as the real locations of the city were unable to match up to the dreams of consumption that the cinema was trying to peddle. (Kapur & Pendakur, 2007)

The film does not allow for a multiplicity of voices. In *Deewaar*, Vijay failed to transcend his limited perspective but there were other voices, who understood reality differently.

But in *Baazigar*, the audience only witnesses what Ajay does, mostly without any narrative explanation. There are no alternative viewpoints offered on what is right or wrong, either from other characters or from any authorial intervention. Whereas Vijay clashes with his brother, begs his mother to stay with him, confides his deepest insecurities to Anita; in *Baazigar*, the only explanations of his actions Ajay gives or confessions he makes (before the final reveal to Priya through a flashback) is to himself in front of a mirror. (Figure 3.2) Thus, whereas Vijay could not find his place in the larger reality, Ajay eschews it altogether.



Figure 3.2: Ajay confesses to himself in front of a mirror

### **Instrumental Rationality and The Entrenchment of Caste Patriarchy**

This erasure of the subjectivity of others is a consistent pattern in all the “psychotic” films of Shah Rukh Khan and can be read as an indication of the increased entrenchment of patriarchy in society, represented in cinema. For both Vijay in *Deewaar* and Ajay in *Baazigar*, their mothers are the emotional centers of their lives. In *Deewaar*, Vijay’s mother Sumitra Devi

has the authority to disapprove of and reject Vijay's life of crime. She does not have that authority because of her being an individual. Her authority comes from her position of a "good mother" (Kakar, 1981, pp. 79-87) within the familial structure i.e. her idealized image of the permanent Other in her sons' lives that made them feel whole, especially Vijay. In contrast, Ajay's mother has been rendered mute. She is the "good mother" too, and the reason why Ajay leads a life just preparing for a revenge mission, except, that she has no say in that mission.

Ajay also uses Seema and Priya as disposable goods. He murders Seema brutally. He uses the identity of his friend Vicky Malhotra to start afresh, also using the original Vicky's parents' deaths in a plane crash as a backstory, to get romantically involved with Priya to get to Madan Chopra. Ajay also murders Seema's college friends Ravi and Anjali, who came to know about Ajay's existence in Seema's life as her lover (their relationship was kept clandestine) and would have implicated him in her murder. Ajay's constant manipulation of people and display of extreme brutality in killing innocent people in the name of his righteous revenge, is an expression of instrumental rationality (Weber, 1978, p. 24) taken to an extreme where the ends justify the means. This "rationality" is the basis of the idea of *homo economicus* where each human being is considered to be a calculating, scheming individual interested in maximizing their own interest/ profit. (Brown, 2015, p. 22) But Ajay's cynical and brutal manipulation is performed under the justification of doing it for his mother. The elevated position of the mother in the moral economy of the Indian family provides the moral justification for Ajay's heinous crimes.

This erasure of women is systemic. The core of the plot crisis is about property and the transference and control of property is patrilineal. Though legal struggles regarding women's access to property are an ongoing process, with both instances of progress and retrogression

happening, the hegemonic idea of property itself remains patrilineal. When Madan Chopra cheats Ajay's father of his property, Ajay is denied his right to the property as the legal heir. With his father and his baby sister dying, and his mother losing her sanity, he remains the sole claimant to the property. On the other hand, Madan Chopra has two daughters and no sons – thus, no “rightful heir.” Even though he is shown doting on his daughters, the moral economy around property is very obviously patriarchal. After Seema's death, Ajay (as Vicky) gets close to Priya and the family. Madan Chopra accepts Ajay/ Vicky into the family and generously offers him equal partnership in his business empire. It is a patently hypocritical and patriarchal act that the man who committed major fraud and violence to steal someone else's property would offer half of it to a man who he knew only for a short time but not even consider giving it to his own daughter!

When Priya gets to know the truth about Ajay's crimes and confronts him in the climax scene, they talk property. Priya tells Ajay if he wanted their wealth, he could have just asked her father and he would have given some in charity. Ajay replies that the wealth on whose basis her father owns such an empire, was his father's and is now Ajay's. This clash between Ajay Sharma, a Brahmin and Madan Chopra, a Khatri, is also a clash between members of two dominant castes for property. Not only is the working-class absent in the film, so are the lower castes. The only working-class characters in the film are the servants at Madan Chopra's house and they are there in the film for comic relief. The team of servants, headed by Babulal (played by comedian Johnny Lever), have bits of comedy sketches that run parallel to the film's main plot and have almost nothing to do with it. Babulal (who is not even given a last name in the film) is shown to be exceptionally forgetful, inept at work and useless for all purposes. His low class and status of a servant could be interpreted as low caste (though not necessarily) and he,

being the head of the only characters engaged in a productive profession in the film, is shown to be useless. *Baazigar*'s upper-class diegetic world is characterized by misogyny and contempt for the lower class.

Issues of property, women as honor of the family, and male control are intermingled here. Ajay had kept his relationship with Seema clandestine. In good faith, Seema wanted to let her friends know about their relationship but Ajay dissuaded her by invoking shame due to his poverty, in contrast to her wealth. After her death was declared a suicide (because Ajay made it look so), Priya, unsatisfied with this explanation, finds out that Seema had a clandestine lover. When she brings it up to her father, he shoots her down saying that the information about his daughter being involved in a clandestine romantic relationship would be scandalous for the family honor. Madan Chopra had built his empire by openly cheating his former employer and then made sexual advancements on his wife (Ajay's mother) when she begged for help – in this narrative, he is the embodiment of dishonor. The honor that he invokes here is about his social status and wealth.

The status of women in a patriarchal family, which is premised on private property itself, is that of property. It might not always be experienced in such stark terms, given grounds gained by ongoing feminist movements, or the privileges enjoyed by affluent women like Seema and Priya. But the idea that women are property, nevertheless survives in social customs such as *kanyadaan* in Hindu marriages (*kanya* means daughter, *daan* is the act of giving – which means a transference of the daughter from the possession of the father to the husband). Underlying Madan Chopra's anxiety regarding Seema's clandestine affair with an unknown man is caste anxiety. Uma Chakravarti (1993) shows that historically, Brahminical caste hierarchy has been preserved through the sexual control of the bodies of upper-caste women. They are considered to

be “gateways” through which miscegenation (through sexual relations with lower caste men) can occur. By controlling women’s sexuality through marriage, caste and the system of patrilineal succession of property can be maintained. In contrast to the anxiety regarding Seema’s stranger boyfriend, Madan Chopra has no problem in offering Priya’s boyfriend Ajay (who he knows as Vicky Malhotra), half his property. With the implied assumption of Priya’s future marriage with Ajay/ Vicky, Chopra has no problems passing on his property to a Malhotra, also a Khatri. In Madan Chopra’s patriarchal caste mindset, he thinks of his daughters as his property (though he might not express that in those exact terms). How this is coded in social terms is that the daughter (or women, in general) is considered the “*izzat*/ honor” of the family or the repository of “family values.”

This distinction between (and also conversion to each other of) economic worth and an abstract intangible concept like “*izzat*/ honor” is what Graeber (2001), (2007), (2013) has called the distinction between “value” and “values.” Here, value represents the monetary, material, or what people work for, buy and sell, conduct business for etc. In short, the “economic.” Values are everything else that cannot be measured or quantified like love, loyalty, beauty, honor etc. Graeber argues that the separation of the economic and the non-economic is itself a capitalist obfuscation. Capitalism maintains this distinction but tries to bring “values” into the domain of “value” (“everything is for sale”), even though this process of turning everything into capital can never be complete. The conservative right-wing political approach has been to suppress the domain of “value” (wage suppression, predatory insurance) and compensate in the domain of “values” (family values, honor, patriotism etc.). Coupled with economic impoverishment, the right-wing values thus become regressive values. For example, family honor is used to control women, patriotism or nationalism is used to target minorities etc. The anti-market rhetoric of the

right-wing that is sometimes heard in far-right movements can be explained by the fact that the market sometimes encroaches upon the conservative values for profit.

In *Deewaar*, the trauma of the absence of the father also represents the loss of socialist ideals and the loss of a socialist dream. But in *Baazigar*, it is an amoral capitalist world where one businessman fights another. The loss of Ajay's father is a personal loss for him but not the loss of social ideals. In the universe of *Baazigar*, the amoral world of business is built on the conservative world of patriarchy. Here, the domain of "values" (conservative) is put to use in service of the "rational" pursuit of "value" (amoral). The murderous pursuit of property by Ajay is thus, justified in the name of the mother. Vijay also commits crimes such as smuggling in *Deewaar* to buy luxury for his mother but in Ajay's quest, his mother has no say. For the whole film, she neither approves nor disapproves of her son's actions.

Also, when Madan Chopra is faced with the fact of Seema's clandestine affair, he talks about possible widespread gossip and media attention (implying the devaluation of his property) and the difficulty of Priya getting married (transfer, control and maintenance of property patrilineally). So, in that sense both Ajay and Madan Chopra, though enemies in the film, are part of the same casteist and patriarchal moral economy. Seema is the only one who transgresses this strict patriarchal caste structure. She has a clandestine affair with a man of a different caste (even though of a dominant caste) and is the cause of anxiety to the patriarchal order. So, she is made to pay for it with her life. When Ajay is about to throw Seema off the rooftop of the building, they have a macabre conversation. They talk about how a girl/ woman must leave her world after she gets married. Seema meant leaving her father's world for her husband's while in a double meaning, a smiling Ajay meant her death. Just before throwing her off the rooftop, Ajay tells her, "A girl walks towards her freedom...freedom from her old world. I am freeing you

now. Forgive me.” The patriarchal caste world is so constricted that Seema gets her freedom from that through her death.

### **Other Iterations of the Psychotic Hero**

The complete isolation of the “psychotic hero” is expressed in the violent erasure or censure of women. Shah Rukh Khan plays the role of a stalker in both *Darr* and *Anjaam*. Without going into the details of the films, it would be worth noting the nature of the interactions of the characters that Shah Rukh Khan plays, with the female leads in the films. *Darr* is about Rahul (played by Khan) who is an obsessive stalker of Kiran (played by Juhi Chawla).

Rahul is shown to have a private fantasy world populated with the images of Kiran. He not only talks to the images (Figure 3.3) but also makes alterations to them (Figure 3.4) according to his fantasies. It is only in his lair, where he has complete control and domination over the images of Kiran, can he have happy conversations with her. In reality, Kiran does not have romantic feelings for him and his behavior turns violent.



Figure 3.3: Rahul talks to the image of Kiran



Figure 3.4: Rahul draws on the image of Kiran

Similarly, in *Anjaam*, SRK plays the role of Vijay Agnihotri, a rich businessman who stalks Shivani (Madhuri Dixit) for years. In what turns into a violent and gory stalker film, and then a revenge drama, he establishes a relationship of domination with her right from their first interactions. Shivani manages to reject and ignore him initially but their social positions mean that she cannot do that all the time. For example, Vijay Agnihotri takes a flight where Shivani is an airhostess and harasses her by demanding undue services repeatedly. The sense that pervades these films, even more than *Baazigar*, is the total non-comprehension of the perspectives of the women by SRK's character. Communication is only a one-way street.

The difference between Bachchan's "angry young man" and SRK's "psychotic hero" is then that while the "angry young man's" actions are directed outward, in the service of others, even if they are misguided, the psychotic hero acts only for himself, as the scriptwriter of *Baazigar*, Javed Siddiqui himself thought. (Mazumdar, 2007, p. 36) Praseeda Gopinath (2017)

argues that the abhorrent qualities of these characters on screen are mediated by the “affective masculinity” of SRK, produced by a combination of his “hammy,” tearful performances and the filmic form (making the subject more accessible). The result was the construction of a new kind of performative vulnerability premised on the body and its direct address to the audience through a confessional form that “shift the tone from aggressive subject to a hapless object.” (p. 316)

This new template of the male star added to the normalization of a paradigm that Roy Bhaskar called “methodological individualism” and defined as “the doctrine that facts about societies, and social phenomena generally, are to be explained solely in terms of facts about individuals.” (2005, p. 29) This paradigm looks at individuals as self-sustained units, ignoring human relations that are, in fact, responsible for the producing the human beings themselves. It is methodological individualism that also became the basis for the marketing and advertising industry and the assembly line of MBA institutes that fed them.

The qualities of the psychotic hero – extreme individualism to the point of the erasure of other points of view based on the entrenchment of patriarchal norms, instrumental rationality justified by an exalted notion (like “love for the mother”), one-way communication, subject-object reversal through the manipulation of the star image and the filmic form – all these come together to form a prototype of the consumer that SRK came to exemplify. But an ideal consumer could not be exemplified by a psychotic criminal. It was necessary to iron out the violent aspect. But to understand the inherent violence of this new individual, I will go back to the idea of private property and David Graeber. Graeber (2006) (2011) (2020) has argued that the paradigmatic form of private property is a slave (that private property historically comes from slavery) and following that, the ownership of private property is defined by three rights – to use, to enjoy the fruits of and to destroy. What makes private property really private is the last right –

to destroy it or *dominium* (coming from the sovereign right of a slave owner to kill a slave). But the exercise of this essential right of private property also meant its loss and the only way to resolve this paradox was by eating (where you get to both destroy and keep the property) – which then became the paradigmatic form of fulfilling desire, also known as consumption.

The inherent destructive aspect of private property, buttressed by the caste patriarchal set-up, erupted on screen as violence, especially against women. In the neoliberal era, public goods and services were being withdrawn by the state (the rights of use and fruits of labor also apply to them). The annexure of the commons (also called privatization) became the new order of the day. And in the post-Mandal Commission era, the caste patriarchal set-up was tightening its grip on control of society and of resources and property, through the control of women. And as Teltumbde (2010) observes, this social control of caste was moving from insidious forms but control through atrocities. The psychotic hero films were uneasy and anxious iterations of this sadistic and violent aspect of this new amoral masculinity, before the film industry settled into the safer format of the consumer persona.

### **The Aspirational Hero**

Raj Mathur or, simply Raju (played by Shah Rukh Khan), the titular character in *Raju Ban Gaya Gentleman/ Raju Has Become A Gentleman* (Aziz Mirza, 1992) is tired of living in the small town of Darjeeling (a hill-station in the northern part of the state of West Bengal). He graduates as an engineer and sets off for Bombay (now Mumbai) to fulfill his dream of building things. Loosely adapted from Raj Kapoor starrer *Shree 420* (Raj Kapoor, 1955), *Raju Ban Gaya Gentleman* is an early formulation of the neoliberal dream that was taking hold of the middle-classes in India in the last decade of the twentieth century.

The film shows a community and manages to give a sense of sameness and familiarity

that exists in a community which translates to a sense of security. *Raju Ban Gaya Gentleman* also carefully constructs a sense of community within the Bombay urban spaces and a sense of time that is intrinsic to the community. Through the aspirations of the protagonist Raju that go beyond what the community can offer, the film also expresses a competing sense of time that expresses a different relationship to reality and tries to understand what the neoliberal era, still somewhat early by that time, was going to be like.

When Raju arrives in a lower-middle class neighborhood in Bombay, he finds out that the distant relative at whose place he was supposed to put up, does not live there anymore. Rendered homeless in a new city, Raju wanders off to a temple in the community where he meets Jai (played by Nana Patekar) who gives him shelter. Raju is then warmly adopted by the members of the community. The film showcases familiar, quotidian activities like playing carom, gossiping and engaging in Hindi cinema fandom (Figures: 3.5, 3.6, 3.7) around which the community coalesces on a daily basis. The working-class community consists of small restaurant owners, bakery and shop owners, construction workers, library workers, cobblers, street performers etc. It provides a safety net for Raju and keeps him afloat while he is still unemployed.



Figure 3.5: Community members gathering around the carrom board



Figure 3.6: Film fandom in the community



Figure 3.7: Community gossip in *Raju Ban Gaya Gentleman*

Raju both becomes a part of the community as well sets himself apart from it by making clear his high ambitions, in fact, much higher than the standards of the community that supported him. When an unemployed Raju is generously offered a job in a bakery, while he is sipping tea at a tea shack, he boldly proclaims that he has bigger dreams and if he gets tied down to doing small jobs, his dreams will also become small. Renu (played by Juhi Chawla), who becomes Raju's love interest in the film later, is offended at what she thinks is the denigration of people who work hard and lead humble lives. She objects and says that people performing ordinary jobs could also be happy. Raju replies that one day he would show everyone what his purpose in life is. From the point of view of Raju, the community is unchanging because they do not have big ambitions. The unchanging nature of the community means that time is perceived to be standing still. For Raju, this feels like being stuck in time – a familiar feeling for him as he came to Bombay from a small town.

EP Thompson (1967) argues that industrial capitalism had produced a sense of time that was abstract and homogenous. In contrast to a sense of time that emanated from labor, i.e. time that is taken to perform a job in accordance with the needs of the job, industrial capitalism had imposed a sense of time that came from without. This out of body experience of time makes one acutely aware of its passing, giving a sense of time coming to an end. Time is turned into a commodity which can then be spent (“time is money”) or wasted. In contrast, a pre-capitalist time consciousness is marked by an indifference and submission to its passing.

The sense of unchanging time is basically a laidback attitude towards the passing of time. This sense of time, that Raju found stagnating, also provides a sense of security that comes from the sense of familiarity. In contrast, a rapidly changing world can cause existential dread because one does not know one’s place in reality.

Raju’s ambitions of wealth and fame reflect a sense of time in which every moment not dedicated to the pursuit of those ambitions is considered a lost opportunity. The economy had been opened to global competition and the Indian market was being flooded with commodities and media from abroad. Influx of commodities meant that the visual grammar of both public and private spaces was changing. Since communities are often constituted around media habits, influx of media was also changing these habits. Media habits were changing and the increase in the rate of newer media coming in also meant that these habits would change at a faster rate. This meant that there was a general quickening of time.

But these were still early days of cable television in India in the 90s and people would gather in houses or community clubs with cable connections to watch cricket matches that were available only in certain channels to form mediated publics. A landmark event in Indian media was the broadcasting of the television serial *Ramayan* (Ramanand Sagar, 1987) based on the

Hindu epic of the same name. The serial was so popular that it used to structure public life on Sunday mornings when it was broadcasted.<sup>12</sup> (Rajagopal, 2001, p. 84)

This impatience and ambition made Raju the ideal protagonist at the beginning of the neoliberal era in India. Raju held within him, the dual characteristic of both being a part of the humble community and being supported by them, and aspiring to rise above their ordinariness. Just as Amitabh Bachchan's characters were nominated by the characters of the working-class to be their leader to take up their cause and fight injustice against the capitalist class, Raju's community also nominates him but for his personal success. When Raju rises in the corporate ladder in the construction business, he receives the blessings of the community. The title song of the film is a community celebration of Raju's individual success. The refrain of the song is “*apna Raju hero hai aur hum Raju ke fan/ Raju Ban Gaya Gentleman/ Raju Ban Gaya Gentleman*” (our Raju is a hero and we are Raju's fans/ Raju has become a gentleman/ Raju has become a gentleman).

This also resonates with the story of Shah Rukh Khan himself, who had come to Bombay from Delhi with dreams of becoming an actor. An outsider to the film industry i.e. not the son of a movie star or director, Shah Rukh Khan made it big in the industry. Though not the superstar that he was to become subsequently, Khan was already a popular name among Indian audiences by the time he did this film. Shah Rukh Khan had started with television serials like *Fauji/Soldier* (Raj Kumar Kapoor, 1989), *Circus* (Aziz Mirza and Kundan Shah, 1989), *Doosra Keval/*

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<sup>12</sup> Rajagopal also showed how the popularity of the show, which seemed to exist outside the tyranny of the workplace, was also heavily monetized. Also, *Ramayana* is considered to be a landmark event in the formation of the Hinduized public in India that helped the Hindu fundamentalist Bhartiya Janata Party gain political foothold at the national level for the first time.

*The Second Keval* (Lekh Tandon, 1989) and was already popular for his infectious energy and screen presence. His first major film *Deewana/ Crazy* (Raj Kanwar, 1992) was a success and it had already made him a movie star.

But more than his newfound movie stardom, *Raju Ban Gaya Gentleman* makes use of Shah Rukh Khan's persona of an educated young man who had come to the city of dreams to make it big. He was not the son of a film personality and was an 'outsider' in that sense. But he had the cultural capital provided by the then robust public education system of India. Khan attended St. Columba's School, a convent school in Central Delhi which boasts of an all rounded curriculum, a rich pedigree and a list of famous alumni from all walks of life. He also joined the prestigious Hansraj College under Delhi University and also, got training in theater at Delhi's Theatre Action Group (TAG). Khan came from an educated middle-class family (he was also the grandson of freedom fighters). Subsequently, he joined the Master's program in Mass Communication at the prestigious Jamia Millia Islamia University before dropping out and joining the film industry. Shah Rukh Khan represents that generation that enjoyed all the benefits of this public system and thus, had the technical and cultural knowhow to make the most of the opportunities offered in the oncoming neoliberal system.

Raju, or Raj Mathur, is from the Kayastha upper-caste and is a middle-class person. He has the social and cultural capital that comes through education, which he got because of his caste-class position. Nandini Chandra (2010) argues that school education has been a liberal and middle-class, upper-caste bastion in India and the access of this population to the resources of education has been held in place by their caste-class position. The inordinate importance given to academics (in a limited sense i.e. not in pursuit of truth but of a career) is probably a legacy of the colonial clerical bureaucratic system that the British had set up, to which the English school

system fed a steady supply. Chandra argues that since the middle-class has such a hold over education in India (for example, the same caste-class students top exams every year) that they have internalized the idea that they inherently deserve it. She says,

the middle class has found it easier to naturalize the idea of *merit* as something sui generis, an index of the hard work and long hours they have put in, never regarding it as another closely guarded caste privilege. (p. 123) (my emphasis)

In post-Mandal Commission India, “merit” is one of the most debated concepts in the middle-class. The idea of “merit” is a concept loaded with casteism as the upper-caste, middle class believes that if the historically oppressed and underserved castes receive some benefits through reservation, which is a form of affirmative action, then opportunities are going to the undeserving because they lack “merit” i.e. they are naturally inferior. This casteist notion ignores the historical advantages that they get and instead, highlights their values of academic competence.

Like Shah Rukh Khan, Raju also emerged from a middle-class that could be described as a web of relations that acted as a safety net and gave one a sense of community and security. The film seems to be acutely aware of that. After Raju lands a job of a trainee engineer in the construction company where Renu works as a secretary, he quickly impresses his superiors with his out of the box thinking and rises in rank. Raju goes to Delhi with his boss Sapna Chhabria (Amrita Singh), who is the daughter of the company’s owner and wins a business contract with his research and intelligence.

In a scene, Raju is shown eating dinner at a humble roadside *dhaba* (roadside food stall) with Sapna, for whom it is a novel experience, as she has grown up amongst riches. As Sapna acts in manners completely incongruous with the setting, like asking for napkins, Raju trains her

in the ways of the plebian world. Curiously, throughout the exchange, Raju keeps telling her how things operate in “our Delhi” (*humare Dilli*). This is a slippage, deliberate or not, as Raju is from Darjeeling and not Delhi. Shah Rukh Khan’s star text (even though it’s only his second film) seems to have spilled over on to Raju.

Shah Rukh Khan appeared in an episode of the talk-show *Jeena Isi Ka Naam Hai/ This Is What Life Is About* (Sucharita Ghosh Stephenson, 2002) hosted by actor Farooq Shaikh. The show delved into the life history of one celebrity every episode, interviewing people who played an important role in that celebrity’s formative years. Shah Rukh Khan’s friends reveal that after coming to Bombay, he had made a proud albeit overtly dramatic and filmy proclamation that he would rule the whole of Bombay one day. Raju also makes a similar proclamation in a later scene, drunk on success and alcohol. (Figure 3.8)

It would be worth reiterating that Raju’s success is due to the support of the community. From providing shelter and food to fixing his shoe to myriad other needs, a web of relations in the community makes sure that Raju is never left to fend for himself – he never falls off the grid. Even when Raju points out to the community members the ordinariness of their lives, they still humor him.

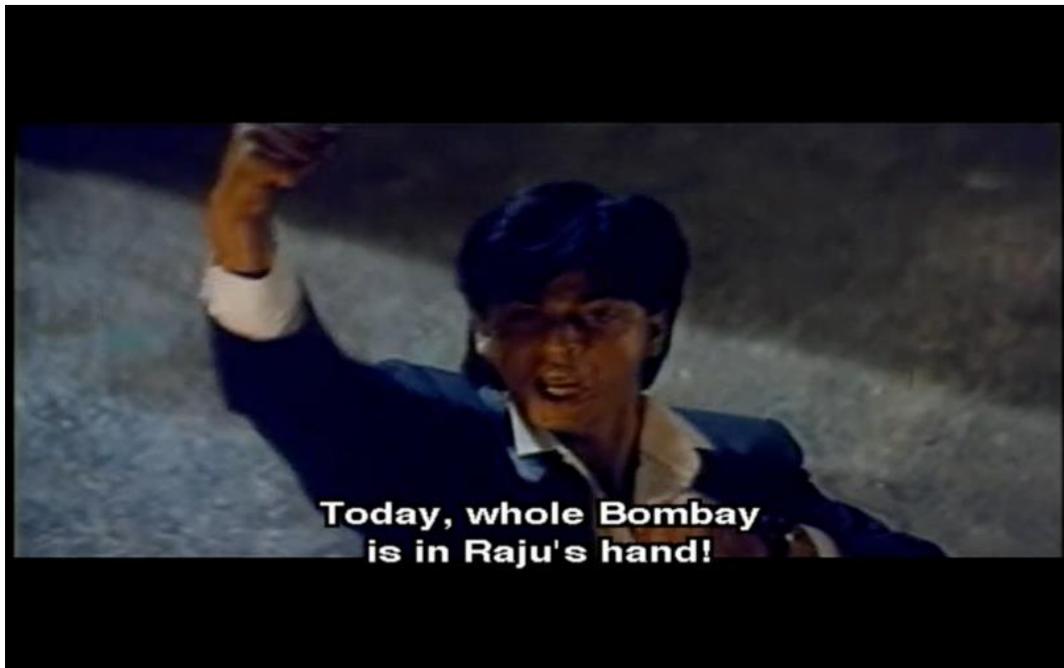


Figure 3.8: Raju makes a proud proclamation in *Raju Ban Gaya Gentleman*

### **Balancing Ambition, Community Values, Corporate Profit and Negotiating Space**

Raju's ambition makes him rise higher in the corporate ladder and he eventually makes ethically questionable choices. Sapna takes a fancy to Raju and showers him with remuneration but expects him to be with her in return. A bridge that Raju was made in-charge of, collapses due to the usage of faulty material and people from Raju's community, who had been employed in the construction project as construction workers, die or are injured. Jai makes Raju realize the implications of his actions and Raju recoils in horror. The film manages to come to a resolution that absolves Raju as he is shown being unaware of the full implications of his action and also because he implicates the real culprits at great personal risk.

The film manages to portray both a sense of an older, accommodating society based upon community values and also, a new ambition and drive towards neoliberal success arising from within it and supported by it. But the film is ambivalent in suggesting that this new success

comes *at the cost of* this community. Even after showing the human costs of avarice, the film backtracks from assigning blame. The corruption and the resulting loss of lives is shown as the result of some fundamentally corrupt people. Raju's going awry is depicted and excused as a temporary loss of good sense.

The film constantly performs a balancing act between community welfare, personal ambition and corporate profit. In Raju's first meeting in the construction company, Sapna presents a proposal of a luxurious high-rise apartment complex, built for the middle-income group, replete with a shopping complex<sup>13</sup>, swimming pools, playground, joggers' park, gym etc. Sapna calls it "Project Dreamland" and says that she had planned it with an American architect. Raju, not realizing that he was speaking above his paygrade, shoots it down saying that the middle-class in India want basic facilities like sources of clean water, hospitals, schools and bus-stops and not markers of status.

Sapna's proposal describes gated communities that became a reality in India a few years after the film released. Her mentioning of the "American" architect marks it as a neoliberal idea coming from the West. When Raju proposes building basic facilities, he does not present this vision because of his social progressiveness. He follows up his proposal by explaining that middle-income people would not be able to afford what Sapna proposes building and the rich people would not go far enough to acquire the apartments. So, the apartments would not sell. Raju foregrounds social welfare but builds it on the logic of profit. This is one of the justifications of neoliberalism – that market forces and the drive for profit could achieve social welfare too. The film presents this as a competing view and in contrast to it, Sapna's proposal

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<sup>13</sup> "Shopping malls" were still a few years away from India and no one used the term back when the film was released

looks like socially irresponsible consumerism that it is.

*Raju Ban Gaya Gentleman* uses the couple formation of Raju and Renu to negotiate questions of public space and privacy. Before getting the job in the construction company, Raju works in a temporary job in a local library. When he gets his first salary, a meager amount, he cannot wait to spend it. While Renu has worldly sense, and wants him to save his money, Raju wants to spend it all to eat in a fancy restaurant. Realizing that the money is too little for even that, they go in a car showroom and pretend to look for a car to buy. In the pretext of checking out the car, Raju and Renu get into a car and Raju rolls up the tinted windows and suddenly, they have a bit of private space. Raju asks for a kiss from Renu and comments that they can otherwise never get privacy in Bombay. (Figure 3.9)



Figure 3.9: Raju asks Renu for a kiss in *Raju Ban Gaya Gentleman*

The lack of privacy that Raju comments upon, is a reality in urban India. Couples such as Raju and Renu rarely get any privacy to spend time together. A conservative society means that

their homes are out of bounds (it also depends on their class) and a regressive public morality means that intimacy is prohibited in public spaces. The occasion of Valentine's Day has continued to create great public furor and acrimony in India. The earmarking of a separate day for the celebration of love has been criticized for being a marketing ploy. But much more importantly, it has been attacked as an assault on Indian culture from the West and Hindu fundamentalist groups have had a field day harassing couples and imposing their will through moral policing, violence and vandalism.<sup>14</sup>

This moment of intimacy between Raju and Renu (they do not kiss) inside the car is stolen from the public sphere. While they do not buy the car, it is clear that in urban India, privacy comes at a cost. That could mean being beaten up by groups of men from Hindu fundamentalist groups such as Bajrang Dal, or having to buy time. Buying time and space for privacy is a common practice (and problem) in India. It could mean having to pay extra for a secluded spot in a bar (cordoned off by curtains) or booking rooms in shady hotels for intimacy.<sup>15</sup> Cinema theaters have also often acted as semi-private spaces for couples to get intimate. Getting "corner seat tickets" has been a popular practice among young couples. Just like in the case of the luxury housing vs. basic facilities, Raju proposes a private solution to a public problem.

The problem with this solution exists at multiple levels. Firstly, access to privacy becomes a function of economic class and in a poor country like India, access to privacy is

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<sup>14</sup> See: <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/02/protecting-valentines-day-in-india/553244/>

<sup>15</sup> OYO Rooms, a fast-growing hotel chain started in India in 2013 by businessman Ritesh Agarwal, have been built on precisely this need. The public perception is that one books a room in OYO to have sex.

denied to a vast majority of people. Secondly, because you have to pay for privacy, intimacy is governed by an acute sense of passing time. This itself gives rise to a separate economy of anxiety. Private spaces and breaches of privacy in them has given rise to large economies of porn where intimate moments between couples are recorded without their consent (or without the consent of just the woman). Bollywood films like *Kalyug/ Modern Era* (Mohit Suri, 2005) and *Love Sex Aur Dhokha/ Love, Sex and Betrayal* (Dibakar Banerjee, 2010) have dealt with the anxieties regarding intimacy, privacy, surveillance and the cycles of violence that result from them. And thirdly, privatization of public space creates pressures of privatization on the public spaces still available for public use.

*Raju Ban Gaya Gentleman* uses a mixed and ambiguous mode of address. The film channelizes and represents the currents of ideology prevalent at the time of its making. It was still early days for neoliberalism in India but one can see that it already had created its hegemony. As I have shown, the film is not a one-way justification for neoliberalism. The sense of community that the film distinctly provides is clearly a remnant of an older social arrangement that still had not been ruined by neoliberalism.

Aziz Mirza (director), Shah Rukh Khan and Juhi Chawla teamed up for two more films: *Yes Boss* (1997) and *Phir Bhi Dil Hai Hindustani/ Still The Heart Is Indian* (2000). In *Yes Boss*, we see the clear evolution of the two lead characters. Rahul Joshi (Shah Rukh Khan) is an ambitious advertising executive who works under Siddharth Chaudhary (Aditya Pancholi), an unscrupulous businessman who uses his money and power to sleep with new, vulnerable models looking for a break. Rahul meets and falls in love with Seema Kapoor (Juhi Chawla), who is an upcoming model. Seema is also ambitious and yearns for material wealth, just like Rahul. Seema catches the attention of Siddharth and he asks Rahul to get her for him. Rahul acts according to

his boss's wish but is also torn between his love and ambition. Seema, initially taken by Siddharth's position and power, also befriends and gets closer to Rahul. After a series of deceptions, manipulations and realizations, both Seema and Rahul choose each other over material ambitions. But the film ends with Rahul proclaiming to Seema that one day he will buy a Mercedes for her but with hard work. *Yes Boss* foregrounds the neoliberal instrumental rationality through Rahul's no-holds barred ambition for most of the film before eventually reigning it in through the morality of love. While the narrative resolution leads to a choice of love over ambition, the film stills keeps alive the neoliberal dream while denying the reality that there are limits to social success with honesty.

*Phir Bhi Dil Hai Hindustani* is distinctly different from the previous two films in the sense that the two protagonists, Ajay Bakshi (Shah Rukh Khan) and Ria Banerjee (Juhi Chawla) are not aspiring professionals anymore but are media stars who are at the top of their trade. Both of them are star journalists in rival channels who "create" news instead of reporting on what is happening. This also makes them corrupt but the film masks that in good nature humor.

Their frivolity with news and reporting around politics comes crashing down when an industrialist-politician from the opposition party is shot and killed by an unknown man (Paresh Rawal). There is political pressure from both the ruling party and the opposition party to declare the shooter as being from the other party and under that pressure, the police commissioner of Mumbai declares him a foreign terrorist. Both parties cause rioting and violence in the city and while the city burns, they blame the other party for it. By a stroke of luck, the unknown man, revealed as Mohan Joshi escapes prison in Ajay's car with Ria in it. He confesses to them that he had killed the industrialist-politician Madanlal Gupta (Mahavir Shah), who was also his former boss, as he had raped and killed his daughter. Determined to protect Mohan Joshi and bring out

his true story to the world, Ajay and Ria hide him in a safe house. They both try to convince their respective bosses to share the breaking story together. Initially reluctant, they agree to it after Ajay and Ria convince them that the story would generate enormous profits for them. Here, the profit motive and social good are again aligned together ignoring their antagonistic nature. However, the two bosses and the two rival politicians all get together and form a money and power sharing alliance, thus sacrificing Mohan Joshi in the process.

The court sentences Mohan Joshi to be publicly hanged and in an especially macabre move, the politicians decide to make the hanging a media spectacle, inviting sponsors to display their logo in every available space related to the event. This is obviously a caricature, but twenty years after the film was released, the state of the media in India does not seem very different from what has been depicted in the film. After a terrorist attack in 2019 in the town called Pulwama in the state of Jammu and Kashmir in India, allegedly by terrorists from Pakistan, television channels ran live polls asking viewers to vote by sending text messages on whether India should attack Pakistan. Both countries are nuclear powers and the absurdity of this level of journalism cannot be overstated.

Almost defeated, Ajay and Ria manage to sneak into the television station which was broadcasting the chief minister and opposition leader's speeches before the live telecast of the hanging. They take control of the station and show a tape of Mohan Joshi's confession revealing the real motivations behind the shooting. Then Ajay addresses the public (possibly the whole nation) to come out in large numbers and storm Central Jail to stop the hanging. Interestingly, even though Ria is shown to be as competent as Ajay (if not more) and Joshi had made the confession in front of both of them, only Ajay goes in front of the camera and Ria diligently stands behind the camera and watches him. Also, the idea of the public is left very ambiguous in

the film. While listening to the address, the film shows public reactions from all over the country. But logically, the call for action could be only be responded to by the people of Mumbai as it called for physical presence (in a short time).

A crowd starts gathering and it marches on the roads towards Central Jail as the title song plays in the background. Here too, a community is imagined. But unlike *Raju Ban Gaya Gentleman*, this community not organic. The crowd is visually shown to be diverse, with people from different religions, handicapped people, uniform wearing workers from factories, defense personnel etc. joining in. The nature and composition of the crowd is metonymic to the nature of the country but it is obviously not possible to exhaustively represent all communities. The film imposes a national character on the crowd by placing large flags in their hands and framing it with a statue of Gandhi as they pass by it. (Figure 3.10)



Figure 3.10: Crowd passes by a statue of Gandhi in *Phir Bhi Dil Hai Hindustani*

The central contradiction in this film is that it tries to combine political activism with the

profit motive. Ajay Bakshi and Ria Banerjee are both introduced in the film as amoral business people, only in the role of journalists, committed to nothing but higher ratings for their channels. They turn into activists when they find out the truth about Mohan Joshi and have a change of heart. While it is possible for corrupt journalists to have a change of heart, the film shows that they could commit to their activism using those very channels through mere trickery. The incompatibility of the profit driven and corrupt media infrastructure, and commitment to social justice is glossed over in the film as it stages, what I think, is a fantasy resolution.

### **Middle-class “Protest”**

This fascination with mass media which can bring people to protest and around which the nation can coalesce, anticipates later films like *Rang De Basanti/ Paint It Yellow* (Rakeysh Omprakash Mehra, 2006) and *Lage Raho Munna Bhai/ Keep At It Munna Bro* (Rajkumar Hirani, 2006). Both films use mass media (radio in both cases) to call people to action to participate in nation building.<sup>16</sup> Nandini Chandra (2010) writes about the contested idea of “merit” in the post-Mandal Commission era as represented in Hindi cinema, especially, *Rang De Basanti* and *Lage Raho Munna Bhai*. She points out that protests, as shown in these films, provoked an immediate response in the Indian middle-classes. Armed with self-righteousness, informed with a misguided, casteist but sure-footed idea of merit, and a trendy, liberal, globalized lingo gained from training in elite institutions, the middle-classes, especially, the students mimicked the protests shown in the films. Chandra argues that with the onset of neoliberalism and globalized media consumption, these middle-classes, via the medium of Hindi cinema, articulated their

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<sup>16</sup> A prominent exception to this would be *Bajrangi Bhaijaan/ Brother Bajrangi* (Kabir Khan, 2015) in which media is used to build cross border solidarity with Pakistan. The fantasy in that film is people from India and Pakistan coming together for a common cause (the reunion of a child with her family), helped by the media.

reactionary protests in a more sophisticated rhetoric as compared to the lumpenized protests during the Mandal Commission's implementation in 1990-91. I think *Phir Bhi Dil Hai Hindustani* is also part of that same articulation of caste privilege, albeit an early one, which later got fuller expression in *Rang De Basanti* and *Lage Raho Munna Bhai*. I would also like to note that the media industry, that is shown in the film, is completely dominated by upper-castes, like its protagonists. Suraj Yengde (2019) writes,

What India consumes today in the form of news is basically Brahmin propaganda. A study by the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) found that in 2008 '[t]op Upper Castes'—the Brahmins—had an 85 per cent share in key media positions, compared to the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, which was nil.

I think the denial of the omnipresent reality of caste in cinematic representation, and the denial of the caste exclusion in both the film and media industries, show up as serious gaps in realism in the staging of the popular protest. Apart from the absurdity of gathering a crowd after giving a call to the nation in a moment's notice in a physical location, the film also assumes the spontaneity of such a protest gathering without the protagonists ever having made the efforts of organizing. Crowd scenes show workers coming out to join the protest. Only in a non-working-class fantasy would working people engaged in productive labor be able to leave their job and join a protest on a moment's notice.

*Phir Bhi Dil Hai Hindustani* ends as the crowd storms the Central Jail and Ajay runs and catches Mohan Joshi after the lever has been pulled, thus saving him from death. Mohan Joshi addresses the crowd (and India) proclaiming that the people of India were still awake and conscious and did not let him be hanged because they cared for the truth. (Figure 3.11) Also, Ria proposes to Ajay on stage and he accepts, in front of a cheering crowd.



Figure 3.11: Mohan Joshi addressing the crowd in *Phir Bhi Dil Hai Hindustani*

Mohan Joshi's statement about the truth and the public feels particularly poignant during the contemporary times because the media has degraded a great deal between the time of the film's release and now. Major Indian TV channels like *Republic TV*, *ZEE News*, *Aaj Tak*, *India Today*, *Times Now* etc. are fascist mouthpieces who spew right-wing propaganda and hate speech all day. This is mainstream news in India today and even the semblance of integrity, impartiality and commitment to the truth is gone. The film shows a media trial, led by Ajay Bakshi and Ria Banerjee but a change of heart and the existence of a constituency of truth among the public stopped Mohan Joshi's death. It is not that people do not care about truth anymore (no degradation can be that complete) but further entrenchment of neoliberalism induced insecurity and the development of a particularly pernicious media ecosystem that preys on the isolation of individuals, makes it harder to stop media induced violence. Media trials have criminalized and

victimized communities and resulted in several instances of mob violence. I explore this in detail in Chapter 5.

The most profound change that had happened from Amitabh Bachchan's *Deewaar* to Shah Rukh Khan's blockbusters in the 90s, was the change in the class character of its central subject. Even though Hindi cinema's central subject remained male, it changed from the proletarian hero to the middle-class consumer or the businessman (films like *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai/ Something Happens* (Karan Johar, 1998) and *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham.../ Sometimes There is Joy, Sometimes Sorrow...* (Karan Johar, 2001) are prime examples). As a result, there was profound change in the experience of time portrayed in cinema and the envisioning of the future.

The inability to sublimate trauma had led to the development of an element of risk in the "angry young man" persona, characterized by an attitude of defiance towards death. But in neoliberal India, risk taking was gradually being re-packaged to serve the speculation of the increasingly financialized economy. For the upwardly mobile middle-class consumer or the businessman, risk increasingly meant the risk of investment. But the earlier "psychotic hero" films show the reactionary violence that undergirded the upper-caste, patriarchal control over society, sexuality of women and access to resources, and how neoliberalism had changed the nature of this control to one characterized by sadistic violence.

As Ajay begins his journey in *Baazigar* (which means gambler), he arbitrarily finds a coin lying on the ground, tosses it up as the frame freezes, and the title of the film is shown. Without caring for subtlety, the film shows that Ajay takes risks (murder, manipulation) as he invests in a life in which he can win back his father's property. In the mellower Aziz Mirza films, Raju and Rahul bet their loves, their dear ones, and their morality to invest in an affluent

future of consumption. This marked a profound change where now, the reward for uncertainty and risk taking was profit, even in the eventualities of catastrophes, or violence. Or as Graeber (2012) puts it, “Profit was the capitalists’ reward for having the courage to enter history.” (p. 34)

## CHAPTER 4

### “GOD OF ONE-SIDED LOVERS”: SALMAN KHAN’S REACTIONARY MASCULINITY AND PUBLIC SPACE

In 2018, a young couple hugged each other while traveling in a metro in Kolkata. An elderly man thought it was indecent to display affection publicly and sternly told them to “do it” at home. The young man in the couple retorted that the old man’s blood pressure could shoot up, implying that the man was titillated and so should save himself by looking away. In turn, the elderly man mocked, “Do you think you are Salman Khan?,” implying that the young fellow was taking on the airs of a star, and that too of the only one who break social conventions and get away with it . The young man sneered at him and said that he would take it as a compliment. At this point, the verbal altercation turned physical and others joined in support of the elderly gentleman and beat up the young couple. Later, it made headlines across the country and sparked protests against such moral policing in Kolkata.<sup>17</sup>

This incident brought into sharp focus the anxieties in public spaces in India around sexuality. While on the one hand, neoliberalism has produced a highly sexualized public space and culture, it has also spawned moral policing that imposes severe restrictions on expressions of sexuality, on the other. Sex is used to sell all kinds of commodities from cars to clothes to soaps etc. Almost the entire advertising segment for deodorants, for example, depends upon the promise of sex appeal to sell its products. Feona Attwood (2006) argues that in capitalism, our sexuality is also commodified and thrown back at us where “we are addressed as the consumers of our own sexual experiences.” (p. 88) Such an experience of sexuality is instant, constantly

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<sup>17</sup> <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/students-protest-couple-beaten-hugging-kolkata-metro-1224569-2018-05-02>

searching for novelty and not deeply meaningful, just like shopping in a mall. This results in the sexualization of culture in capitalism but without necessarily giving depth and meaning to the sexual experience.

While the neoliberal reforms have caused impoverishment of the working-class, they have also created jobs in technology and marketing/ advertising for the technocratic, professional-managerial middle-class. Thus, some young people have disposable incomes, who are then invited to partake in the commodity culture, along with its sexualized nature. The unequal nature of income and resources is also accompanied (not necessarily mirrored) by unequal access to avenues of expressing sexuality. These lopsided social formations create anxieties and feelings of anguish and inadequacy around sexuality which, in an atmosphere of insecurity, are likely to lead to a rupture.

This perceived impunity of Salman Khan, the quality of being able to do anything, anywhere drew both outrage and admiration in this exchange. In this chapter, I explore the culture of the male fans of Salman Khan who are unable to participate in sexual expression freely, on the one hand, but exercise their will and claim over public space through the exercise of their fandom, on the other. I will also try to explore in this chapter, qualities like impunity and sovereignty, as well as anguish and emasculation, qualities that seem to be pulling in different directions as expressed in the complex star text of Salman Khan.

### **Salman Khan - The Shirtless Hero and His Reactionary Masculinity**

Though he was only one among multiple muscular screen heroes, Salman Khan came to own the shirtless, in-your-face machismo to the extent that it became his signature. For almost every film that he starred in or every stage show he was a part of, a Salman Khan performance was not complete till he took off his shirt.

Hindi cinema has had a long history of its heroes playing working-class characters. Whether it was Raj Kapoor as the Chaplinesque tramp in *Shree 420/Mr. 420* (Raj Kapoor, 1955) or Dilip Kumar as the horse-cart operator in *Naya Daur/ New Era* (B.R. Chopra, 1957), or more prominently, Amitabh Bachchan in his “angry young man” persona in the 1970s and 80s, their screen appearances drew their authenticity from their social settings. This indexical quality of the characters and the films that I am referring to, came from their place within the working-class milieu and in relation to other working-class characters. The characters drew their authenticity from within a system of relations. Calling for a more definite idea of plebeian culture, E.P. Thompson wrote,

...I hope that plebeian culture becomes a more concrete and usable concept, no longer situated in the thin air of "meanings, attitudes and values", but located within a particular equilibrium of social relations, a working environment of exploitation and resistance to exploitation, of relations of power which are masked by the rituals of paternalism and deference. (1991, p. 7)

Beginning in the 1980s and typified by the emergence of Salman Khan on the Hindi cinema screen, the working-class characteristics began to be divorced from a system of class relations and ended up being displaced onto some cosmetic markers.<sup>18</sup> It is true that Amitabh Bachchan, as I have indicated in chapter 2, had also cultivated a masculine persona characterized by his brooding eyes, deep baritone voice and lanky but rugged physicality. But these lent him a physicality that could be used as an ideal performative vehicle to channel the proletarian anger borne out of being exploited. I argue that in case of Khan, his muscularity and its subsequent use

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<sup>18</sup> Sudhanva Deshpande (Deshpande, 2005) argues that Hindi cinema in the neoliberal stopped representing the working-class altogether

in action films operate as reified attributes, that stand in for a performance of labor, and are pressed in the service of the “working-class effect.”

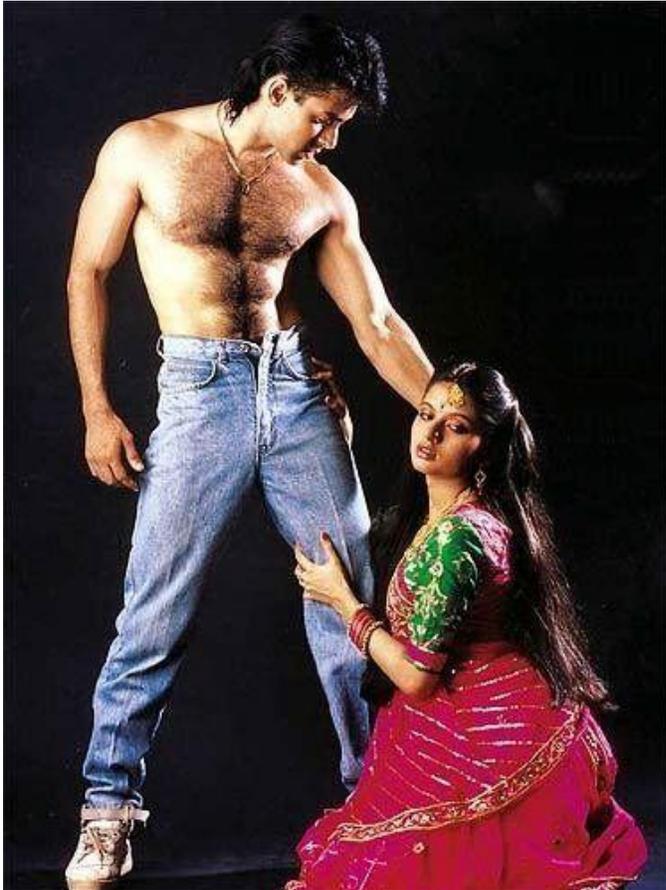


Figure 4.1: Promotional still from *Maine Pyar Kiya* (I Have Loved, 1989) (Image taken from Rediff.com)

Take for instance, this promotional still (Figure 4.1) which was shot (separately from the film) and used for marketing purposes for Salman Khan’s first major successful film *Maine Pyar Kiya* / I Have Loved (Sooraj Barjatya, 1989). In this still, a bare-bodied Khan is wearing a pair of unbuttoned blue jeans and white running shoes while standing, and holding a demure looking, bejeweled, traditionally dressed, sari-clad Bhagyashree. Sitting at his feet, Bhagyashree is looking away at neither Khan nor the camera. This image typifies what Richard Dyer has

identified as instabilities in the male pin-up image:

If the first instability of the male pin-up is the contradiction of the fact of being looked at and the attempt of the model's look to deny it, the second is the apparent address to women's sexuality and the actual working out of male sexuality. (2002, p. 128)

This image attempts to balance the dual roles of presenting Khan as an object of sexuality (bare body and the suggestive unbuttoned jeans) and the subject of a virile sexuality (aggressive holding of and passionate looking at the woman). The suggested appeal of Khan's image in the still is thus, a coalescing of both the body that is to be looked at and the body that is in-charge, by being "in action."

The film itself plays out this ambiguity in its narrative structure. Khan plays the character of Prem Choudhary, the son of a rich industrialist who falls in love with his father's working-class friend Karan's (played by Alok Nath) daughter, Suman (played by Bhagyashree) when she comes to stay with them when her father temporarily goes away for work. Prem's father, Kishan Choudhary's (played by Rajeev Verma) mind is poisoned by his business partner who is seeking to expand his business through marriage. This causes misunderstanding and animosity between the two old friends Kishan and Karan, and Kishan accuses Karan and his daughter, Suman of having designs on his wealth. All of this happens in Prem's absence and when he comes to know of this fallout, he goes to Suman's house to apologize to her and Karan. He is challenged by Karan to be his 'own man' and show him that he could earn on his own without the luxuries of family wealth. The second half of the film shows Prem toiling hard in stone quarries as a layman laborer and going through a lot of physical misery in order to showcase his authenticity as a "real man". (Figure 4.2)



Figure 4.2: Prem toiling at the stone quarry

Thus, Khan plays the role of an industrialist's son Prem who, in turn, plays the role of a working-class man. The fun-loving son of an industrialist needed to be shown as a body performing physical labor to be authenticated as a man in-charge. This was one of Salman Khan's first films (and his first successful film) but it already grounded his stardom in the tool of a socially elite character who is capable of thriving in a working-class environ.

Salman Khan's biggest contemporary star Shah Rukh Khan, was gradually constructed as aspirational, successful and cosmopolitan hero. He became the global face of Bollywood and an icon of neoliberal aspirations. On the other hand, another kind of masculine persona was taking shape that represented those who had not quite "made it." This masculine persona was very different from the working-class "angry young man" persona of Amitabh Bachchan. It could not be shown as revolting against the neoliberal state and capital, expressing proletarian anger.

Instead, this masculinity, that Salman Khan gradually came to embody, came to be constructed in a way that it derived its authenticity from such working-class effects. Unlike Bachchan's characters, Salman Khan's characters did not come up from the milieu of working-class characters (for example, in *Maine Pyar Kiya*, Prem merely spends some time with the laborers before returning to his wealthy life), nor were they characterized by any sense of proletarian anger sparked by capitalist exploitation. This iteration of masculinity was an antagonistic reaction, and in that sense 'reactionary,' and its development through cinema should be seen in conjunction with, and in reaction to, the construction of the successful, cosmopolitan masculinity.

The division or antagonism between the Shah Rukh Khan masculinity and the reactionary masculinity coalescing around the Salman Khan persona is not a division between the "haves" and "have nots." Rather, it is a distinction between attitudes towards the increasingly unequal and unjust neoliberal society. If we look at Salman Khan's characters, they are characterized by an indifference towards their wealth, job etc. In the comedy film *Biwi No. 1/ Wife No. 1* (David Dhawan, 1998), Prem (Salman Khan) is introduced as a husband and father who is fun loving and attached to his family. He cancels his appointments, worth a lot of money, just because he does not feel like leaving them. When his wife tells him that he might have lost a lot of money, he replies, "What loss? Your happiness is worth 5 crores, my kids' smiles are worth 5 crores, my mother's affection is worth 5 crores. I have made a profit of 15 crores in 5 seconds!"<sup>19</sup> (Figure 4.3)

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<sup>19</sup> Prem is talking about Indian Rupees and a crore is equal to 10 million



Figure 4.3: Prem skips office to be with his family in *Biwi No.1*

This is one of the main axes on which the identification of the male fan following with Salman Khan's persona was built over the years - his characters' attitude towards wealth. Like *Biwi No.1*, Khan played characters in several films who are industrialists or sons of industrialists. For example, in the two blockbuster hits from Rajshri Productions, *Maine Pyar Kiya* / I Have Loved (1989) and *Hum Aapke Hain Koun...!!* / Who Am I To You! (1994), both large joint family dramas directed by Sooraj Barjatya, Khan plays the son of a rich industrialist. In both films, he is fun-loving, goofy, juvenile, and is shown to be reluctant towards business and capital. In *Maine Pyar Kiya* (MPK henceforth), he gives up his wealth to be with his beloved and in *Hum Aapke Hain Koun...!!* (HAHK henceforth), he is shown to be shirking his business responsibilities and so, his elder brother has to set up businesses for him. In *Jeet/ Victory* (Raj Kanwar, 1996) Khan plays the son of a corrupt businessman. When he finds that his wealth is ill-gotten, he gives it up and rebels against his own father. Similarly, in *Pyaar Kiya To Darna Kya/ If You Loved*

Someone, Don't Be Afraid (Sohail Khan, 1998), Khan plays an industrialist's son who, in spite of a suitcase of cash that he receives from his father each month, is unhappy because he is bereft of parental love as he is motherless (and has a bad stepmother). Much like MPK, Khan's character Sooraj is put to grueling physical labor by the dominating elder brother (played by Arbaaz Khan) of his beloved Muskaan (played by Kajol) to prove his worth. Sooraj chooses to prove his mettle through physical labor and not his inherited wealth. Similarly, in *Jab Pyaar Kisise Hota Hai*/ When One Falls in Love (Deepak Sareen, 1998), Khan's character is an orphan who is born into wealth but is afflicted by a lack of parental love and warmth.

The conspicuity of the wealth of Khan's characters is offset by either their indifference to it or by their conscientious attitude towards their origins. While Shah Rukh Khan's characters possess aspiration and ambition, it seems that the characters that Salman Khan plays, are not even participating in the race of social mobility. The wealth that the characters possess are either well-deserved ("he would have renounced it if it wasn't"), or ineffective ("what's the use of wealth if he is so unhappy"), or irrelevant ("he does not care about wealth anyway"). Any which way, wealth or its accumulation does not seem to be a motivating factor. This apparent detachment from wealth made Salman Khan appear like a loose cannon. In a way, this added to his appeal because money is (seen as) corrupting, and if he is not motivated by money and wealth, he is not corruptible. Bachchan's angry young man characters were motivated by things other than wealth, like revenge. On the other hand, Salman Khan's characters are indifferent.

Charles Eckert has read Shirley Temple's stardom as embodying the spirit of charity during the Great Depression era. "There is a felt resonance between the persona she assumed in her films and the ideology of charity that no one can miss." (1974, p. 10) Temple's persona was put into the service of the idea that charity was the largesse of rich people and that, in turn,

worked to obscure the origins of such stark class inequalities. As per Dyer's theorization of stardom necessarily being mediated by ideology, Temple's star text worked to conceal the contradictions within the dominant ideology of charity and virtue of rich people. Salman Khan's characters work in a way to make their class origins irrelevant and thus, work to conceal the contradiction in the dominant neoliberal ideology which imposes a moral economy of inherent virtues (or vices) and deliberately ignores an individual's class position. These characters create new modes of identification with the working-class audiences that excludes any idea of class-consciousness altogether.

### ***Pappu Can't Dance Saala***<sup>20</sup>

Writing about a crisis in bourgeois individualism in neoliberalism, Jyotsna Kapur (2011) wrote, "It is as if a terrible fear of remaining stuck, of being ordinary, has struck the hearts of the generation coming of age in neoliberal India. The epitome of this embarrassingly ordinary Other is Pappu." (p. 201) Kapur described, what she calls Pappu, as "...the unconscious of the sexually desirable, savvy, metropolitan young men of global consumer-capitalist culture or the out-and-out con man/musclemen who speaks in a vernacular accent." (p. 201) Clearly, Shah Rukh Khan epitomizes the desirable man of global consumer-capitalist culture in the 90s. But the Salman Khan persona cannot be described that clearly. It did have strong connotations of the muscular vernacular persona that got more prominent in later years. To assert itself, it had to caricaturize the suave, urban, global consumer man, or in other words, "Pappu-ize" him. Salman Khan is

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<sup>20</sup> "Pappu can't dance saala" is a popular song from the film *Jaane Tu... Ya Jaane Na*/ Whether You Know Or Not (Abbas Tyrewala, 2008). It was rumored that the song was making fun of Salman Khan, which the filmmakers denied. *Pappu* is a pejorative term for someone who is slightly dimwitted, slow. *Saala* is a curse word in Hindi and other Indian languages. It literally means brother-in-law (wife's husband). Calling someone *saala* means "I will make your sister my wife" (or rather, have sex with her).

known as Sallu *bhai* (nickname, where Salman is shortened to Sallu and *bhai* means bro) or simply, *bhai* amongst his followers.

The attack of the *bhai* persona on the SRK brand of masculinity was predominantly a masculinized attack as it coded the conspicuous consumption of the SRK persona as feminine. The markers of consumption and taste, such as fashion, dance etc. were ridiculed by an assertion of a muscular machismo. Thus, the assault on the cosmopolitan cool and its polish was also an attack on supposedly “good taste.” The humor in Salman Khan films was often scatological and sexual, and often downright silly, expressed in numerous fart jokes and sexist jokes. For example, Khan’s character Suraj in *Pyaar Kiya To Darna Kya* (If You Loved Someone, Don’t Be Afraid) constantly makes fun of an effeminate man in his friend circle through homophobic and transphobic jokes. The humor, directed towards individuals with apparent “shortcomings” is always a version of punching down. Khan’s characters, playing the muscular alpha male, is generally accompanied by a servant cum friend or minion who is made fun of because of physical appearances, health or habits, or just because they are of lower class status.

The crux of this crudeness is that it makes a virtue of lack of polish or other shortcomings. Salman Khan’s characters have been notoriously badly dressed in several films to the point where his ridiculous sartorial choices have been the topic of film gossip columns. Even when Salman Khan wears suits while playing characters that work in corporate offices, the suits are be invariably several sizes larger than his actual size and make him look comical.<sup>21</sup> Khan not only wore oversized suits and trousers in comedies like *Biwi No. 1* / *Wife No. 1* (David Dhawan,

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<sup>21</sup> However, this seems to be a characteristic of 90s Bollywood where other heroes, including Shah Rukh Khan wore oversized suits. But it was not consistent on him as it was with Salman Khan

1999) and *Judwaa/ Twins* (David Dhawan, 1997) but also in films like *Jeet, Jab Pyaar Kisise Hota Hai, Hum Aapke Hai Koun...!!* etc. The ill-fitted clothes and comical demeanor of these characters went along with their general lack of interest in “serious work” in making a mockery of the rich characters themselves. While playing the wealthy, property owning, office-going characters, Salman Khan seemed to be parodying them at the same time.

Khan’s film persona also made a virtue of his inability to dance. Several of his dance moves have featured pelvic thrusts. Slow in movement and lacking a dancer’s flexibility, his dance moves showcase his muscular body while the pelvic thrusts suggest an aggressive sexuality as a way to confront the world. A particularly crass but significant example would be his dance moves in the song “*Jeene ke hai chaar din*” (life is for four days) from the film *Mujhse Shaadi Karogi/ Will You Marry Me?* (David Dhawan, 2004) where Khan, while wearing a headscarf, a towel and sports shoes, put a towel between his legs and “rode” it. (Figure 4.4) This dance move along with a later one like in *Dabangg/ Braveheart* (Abhinav Kashyap, 2010) where Khan just holds his belt and jiggles it, have become popular among male audiences. (Figure 4.5)

The deprivation from the spoils of professional success were made into a virtue by portraying the affluent man as lacking in street smartness. In *Judwaa*, Khan plays the double role of twins who get separated early in life. One of them grows up rich in the US, and the other one poor in India. The poor twin has to fend for himself all his life, fighting off criminals, and that makes him street-smart. When they finally meet and fight the criminals who had destroyed their family, the affluent brother is useless while the poor one is effective and also protects his brother.



Figure 4.4: Salman Khan dancing on “jeene ke hain chaar din”



Figure 4.5: The “belt dance” in *Dabangg*

### **The *Bhai*-sexual**

Avenues of identification with stars often open up when audiences read star texts (films and star’s biographical text) against the grain. One of the central contradictions in Salman Khan’s public persona is regarding his sexuality and conjugal status. This contradiction provided single, working class men a structure for identification. There are two contradictory sexual

personas that have been built through both Khan's film texts and his mediatized public persona. In one, he is flamboyant, shirtless, muscular and hypersexual. In the other, even though he has a heart of gold, and he is handsome, rich and famous, he has a tough luck regarding love and is a perennial "victim" because he is constantly spurned by women.

Richard Dyer identified this kind of a contradiction in his classic study of the star text of Judy Garland and how gay men identified with her persona. Dyer locates the ordinariness of Garland's screen persona (in her MGM films) as a point of identification for gay men. At first that seems counter-intuitive, given the excess and flamboyance of gay culture, but Dyer shows that there was a simultaneous counter-narrative to Garland's persona that provided the avenues of identification.

The ordinariness is a starting point because, like Judy Garland, gay men are brought up to be ordinary. One is not brought up gay; on the contrary, everything in the culture seems to work against it. Had Garland remained an image of ordinary normality, like June Allyson or Deanna Durbin (who proved her normality by leaving Hollywood and settling down, happily married), she would not have been so available as a gay icon. It was the fact, as became clear after 1950, that she was not after all the ordinary girl she appeared to be that suggested a relationship to ordinariness homologous with that of gay identity. To turn out not-ordinary after being saturated with the values of ordinariness structures Garland's career and the standard gay biography alike. (Dyer, 2004, p. 153)

"Bhai does not get the girl"<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> I used the word "girl" in a flimsy manner to mirror the casual filmy language, and not as disrespect. The Hindi word is "*ladki*"

There is a common understanding amongst Salman Khan fans that *Sallu bhai* does not “get the girl” i.e the romantic relationships on screen do not materialize. One such prominent example of such a character, which has had a long-lasting effect on Khan’s screen persona, is in the hit film *Saajan/ Beloved* (Lawrence D’Souza, 1991). Salman Khan plays Akash, a rich father’s son who becomes a free-spirited playboy. The film is a love triangle between Akash, his disabled childhood friend Aman (Sanjay Dutt), who was brought up by his parents, and Pooja (Madhuri Dixit). Akash is carefree, irresponsible, and has no interest in his father’s business. Aman is responsible, quiet and has a hidden inner world of a poet. Pooja is an avid poetry reader and a fan of Aman’s poetry but knows him only through his pen name, Saagar. When Aman goes to Ooty (a hill-station in South India) for business, he falls in love with Pooja but admires her from afar. Then Akash arrives in Ooty after him, also falls for Pooja and confesses that to Aman. Bound by a sense of duty to his friend, Aman advises Akash to pretend to be Saagar to impress Pooja. Pooja and Akash start dating each other but eventually the truth comes out and the film ends with Pooja and Aman forming a couple while Akash walks away, making a sacrifice for his friend. The final scene, in which Akash walks away while Pooja and Aman are locked in an embrace, is shown through change of focus, underlining Akash’s sacrifice. (Figure 4.6)

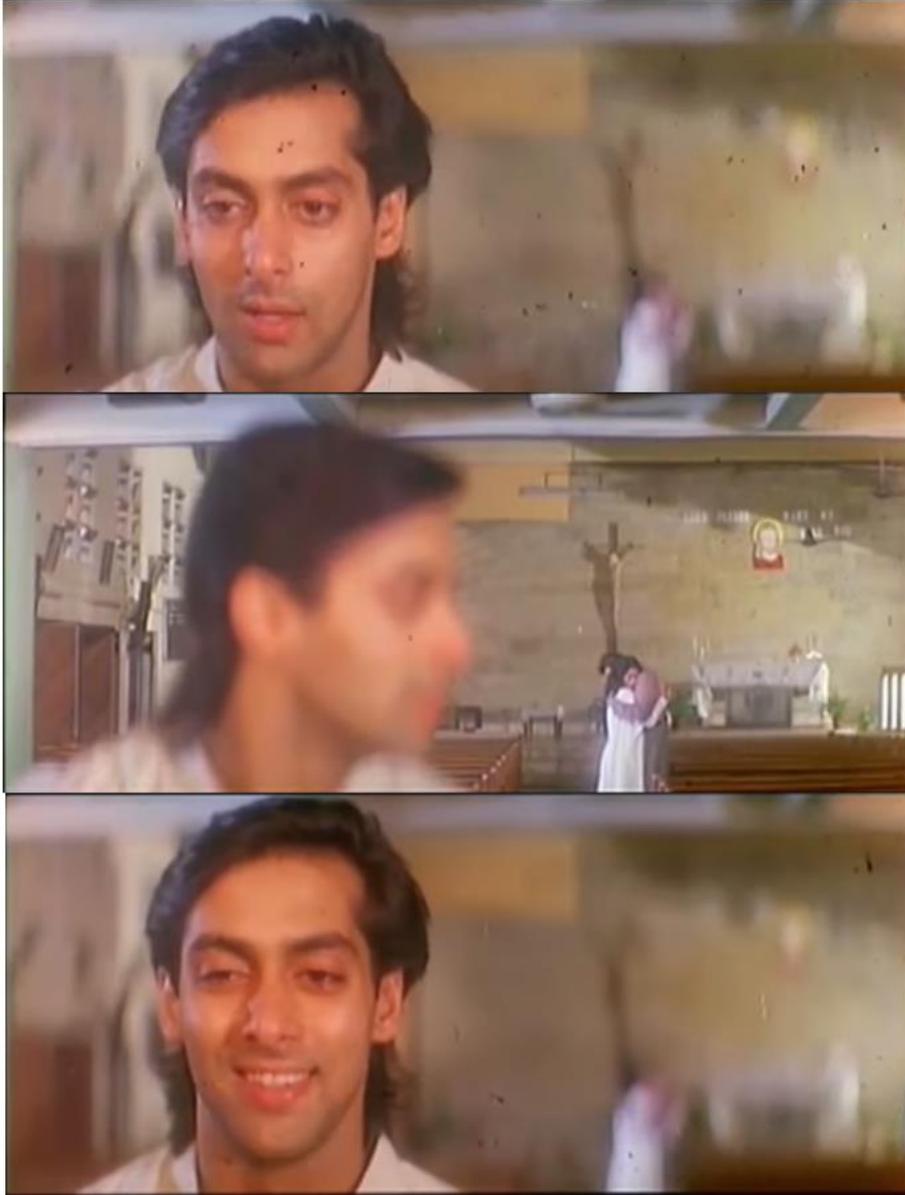


Figure 4.6: Aman and Pooja locked in embrace while Akash walks away in *Saajan* (Lawrence D'Souza, 1991)

Salman Khan had also played a cameo role, in *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* in which Shah Rukh Khan was the male lead. In that film SRK's Rahul falls in love with and marries Tina (played by Rani Mukherjee), leaving his best friend Anjali (played by Kajol) heartbroken. Years later, after Tina had died after the birth of their daughter (also named Anjali) and Aman (played by Salman

Khan) and Anjali (Kajol) were set to get married, the daughter Anjali plays cupid between her father, Rahul and his college friend Anjali (Kajol). Old friends Rahul and Anjali reunite, this time as a romantic couple, and Aman's wedding gets canceled right at the last moment. Not only does Aman accept his rejection with grace, he also dances at what was supposed to be his own wedding! This again established this trope of rejection in his fan circles, this time losing out to rival star Shah Rukh Khan!

In yet another prominent love triangle, *Hum Dil De Chuke Sanam/ I Have Given My Heart Away, Darling* (Sanjay Leela Bhansali, 1999), Khan plays Sameer who is a singer who falls in love with Nandini (played by Aishwarya Rai), the daughter of his classical music teacher. As Nandini's father rejects their relationship, Sameer moves back from India to Italy (where he was from) and Nandini gets married to Vanraj (Ajay Devgan). Vanraj, in a gesture of large-heartedness, takes her to Italy to reunite her with Sameer after he gets to know of their relationship. But as Nandini finally gets to unite with Sameer, she realizes that she loves Vanraj now and chooses to remain with him.

This overarching image of Salman Khan as one who gets spurned by women (and Shah Rukh Khan as the one who always “gets the girl” and sometimes two in the same film<sup>23</sup>) remained despite there being several films to the contrary. Even later films acknowledge that as part of the history of popular culture. A small-town single man, unable to find romance, in the film *Raanjhana/ Beloved One* (Aanand L. Rai, 2013) is shown watching *Saajan* in the theater and he exclaims frustration at *bhai* (Salman Khan) being “rejected,” likening it to his own state. Even in Salman Khan's own *Sultan* (Abbas Ali Zafar, 2016), Khan's character Sultan refers to

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<sup>23</sup> Like in *Baazigar*, *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai*

Shah Rukh Khan as so charming that “even a blind girl can get wooed” by him. However, in real life, it is Shah Rukh Khan who has married once and is seemingly monogamous while Salman Khan, a bachelor, has had a string of widely publicized affairs.

### **The Hypersexuality of Salman Khan**

The other side of Khan’s persona was that of his hypersexual nature. In films like *Jab Pyaar Kisise Hota Hai/When One Falls in Love* and *Pyaar Kiya To Darna Kya/If You Loved Someone, Don’t Be Afraid*, among other films, Khan’s persona is that of a playboy or a heartthrob amongst women. And often his films would play a balancing act between the two sides of his persona – the comical man-child and the hypersexual.

In *Pyaar Kiya To Darna Kya*, the song “O o jaane jana” (O my beloved/ darling) visually expresses some of the aspects of the sexuality of Khan’s persona. The song is constructed as a set piece that is meant to showcase Khan’s muscular physique and construct him as an object of desire. Amidst crazy female fan following shown in the song, Khan is constructed as an object of heterosexual female desire but once the girls start chasing him in the song, (Figure 4.7) they are stopped or whisked away by the male back-up dancers. While being the object of desire of women, it seems that Khan is most comfortable in the company of his male back-up dancers. The contrast between him and the dancer gang is also clear – he is muscular, good looking and bare-bodied with women running after him, and the back-up dancers are thin, nondescript and average looking all clad in the same shocking pink shirt and black headband and black pants. Back-up dancers are not distinguishable by their very role but here they play more than mere pieces in a choreographed dance. By intervening and rescuing him from the girls, they also become part of an all-male gang where Khan is the alpha male. Their averageness also accentuates Khan’s alpha status. The fact that they are wearing bright baby pink shirts could be read as a tactic to feminize

them and accentuate Khan's alpha male status even more. (Figure 4.8) By placing these male dancers strategically around Khan, the song seems to be building up a structure of identification for men where they can vicariously feel powerful via Khan while being firmly rooted in their own ordinariness.

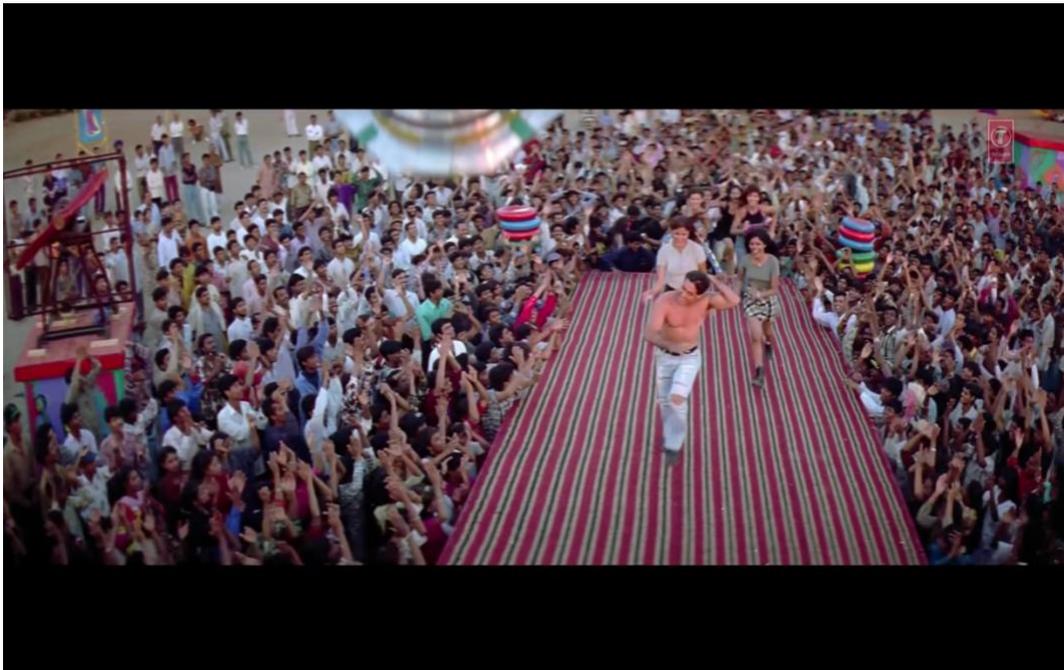


Figure 4.7: Girls chasing Salman Khan, still from the song "O o jaane jaana"



Figure 4.8: Still from the song "O o jaane jaana" from the film *Pyaar Kiya To Darna Kya* (1999)

The opening lines of the song present the main sentiment, which is elaborated by the rest of the song:

*o o jaane jana, dhoondhe tujhe deewana, sapnon mein roz aaye, aa zindagi mein aana sanam*  
(o darling/my life, your crazed lover is looking for you, you come in my dreams every day, come into my life now)

The whole performance is an enactment of the contradiction between the single status of the male and his pining for heterosexual love; and being the object of desire of women/girls. But while the singlehood is shared by everyone (including Khan), being the desired object is only reserved for the leader. Thus, Khan's persona needed to embody both the blocked conjugality of singlehood and the desirable status of the alpha male.

The hypersexual side of Khan's persona was also built up by media reports on his private life and his much-publicized relationships with celebrities. He was reported to be in relationships with Hindi film actress and 1980 Miss India pageant winner Sangeeta Bijlani, Pakistani actress Somy Ali, both of which ended because of Khan's alleged mercurial behavior. There have been other relationships that Khan has had – with Football Association secretary Faria Alam (in the 90s), Bollywood actress Katrina Kaif (in the 2000s), Romanian singer and actress Iulia Vântur (in the 2010s) etc. But the one high-profile relationship that created the most controversy was with former Miss World and Bollywood actress Aishwarya Rai, also his co-star in *Hum Dil De Chuke Sanam*. The relationship became controversial after Rai spoke publicly about Salman Khan's domestic abuse. She said that he had been stalking her and making unwanted and forceful visits to her place even after they had broken up.

This balancing act between the trope of a romantically unsuccessful man (or even sexually stunted, as Khan's later films like *Bajrangi Bhaijaan/ Brother Bajrangi* (Kabir Khan,

2015) and *Tubelight* (Kabir Khan, 2017) seemed to suggest) and someone who is hypersexual (even predatory), established the fundamental contradictory nature of the fan following. While the fans identified with Khan in their shared frustration of not being able to woo a girl, it was also clear that he was not one of them. But in films like *Saajan* and *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai*, Salman Khan's characters willingly give up the woman (love interest) to another man. The failure of the romantic pursuit is mitigated by what Freud (1923 (2010)) has described as the ability of the conscious mind/ego to give up on the pleasure principle in favor of the reality principle. Recognizing the inability to get the desired object, the individual redirects desire, postpones gratification or finds other ways to adjust their wants to what can be realistically acquired. In the case of the characters Salman Khan plays on the screen, the rejection by the love-interest is turned into an act of generosity, where Khan's character willingly frees the woman to go the other man. As Salman Khan's characters willingly cede to a friend, they get to fulfill duties of friendship or just be the bigger man. This goes on to add to the popular notion that Salman Khan is one with a large heart.

### **Star as Text**

Salman Khan's onscreen and off-screen personas coalesced and collided when he transgressed the law multiple times and the transgressions came into public view. While filming for *Hum Saath Saath Hain/ We Are All Together* (Sooraj Barjatya, 1998), he allegedly shot and killed two blackbucks, animals of an endangered species, along with his co-stars in the film, Saif Ali Khan, Tabu and Sonali Bendre. Villagers of the Bishnoi community, traditionally in charge of the endangered species which they also consider sacred, filed a complaint against the actors and Salman Khan was arrested on October 12, 1998. Although Khan had the image of a "bad boy" in the media and was known for his extravagant nightlife, and public affairs, this was the

first time that there was a serious breach of the law. Also, even though there were other actors involved in the case, almost the entire media attention was focused on Salman Khan.

While this case was under trial, Khan got involved with Aishwarya Rai and in March 2002, Rai held a press conference accusing Salman Khan of harassment. The controversy gathered more steam when Vivek Oberoi, actor, and Rai's then boyfriend, accused Khan of calling him several times and threatening him.

With the relationship and break-up with Rai still filling up gossip columns, Khan was arrested on September 28, 2002 for alleged drunk driving, ramming his car into a bakery and killing one homeless person who was sleeping on the pavement and injuring another. This was the third big controversy that Khan had got embroiled in and it firmly established his outlaw image in the media. There was mounting criticism in the media with numerous editorials calling for implementation of the rule of law. Sections of media felt that Khan was taking unfair advantage of his stardom and clout. It was at this juncture that Khan's existing public image, that had been built bit by bit through his film career, was carefully exploited and put to use in his defense by molding public opinion.

The big task of overturning negative public opinion against Salman Khan hinged on exploiting his victim image. Khan's relationship with Aishwarya Rai had begun on the sets of *Hum Dil De Chuke Sanam* (1999). Even though Rai had accused him of harassment, Khan insisted that he had his heart broken by Rai and he did what he did out of passion. The film's narrative had Rai's character Nandini leave Khan's character Sameer heartbroken. Film gossip media ran the reel life and real life stories parallel, conflating the two, and suggesting that real life was imitating art. It was at this point when the release of *Tere Naam/ In Your Name* (Satish Kaushik, 2003) made Khan into an even bigger media phenomenon.

Using media to mend the public image has been a feature of Salman Khan's tumultuous public persona. After he was jailed for brief periods in 2006 and 2007, with regards to the illegal poaching of the black buck case, Salman Khan started his Being Human foundation whose charitable acts included trust funds to sponsor the education of children. (Palat, 2018) Also, important in the restoration of his public persona was the resurgence of his stardom, which rode on the back of his cinema roles of larger than life characters who carried the charge against a corrupt, broken system. As Salman Khan's stardom scaled new peaks, the industry's interests also got more closely involved in his legal battles as more and more capital started being invested on his star persona. *Bajrangi Bhaijaan* was released in July 2015, before the court's ruling on his hit-and-run case in December, in which the court acquitted Khan of all criminal charges. The film was widely perceived to be an exercise in public relations, aimed at whitewashing his image, in which Salman Khan played a savior with an uncomplicated golden heart, in contrast to his media image of an *enfant terrible*.

### ***Being Bhaijaan***

Stand-up comedian Zakir Khan (2015) said in one of his routines, "Salman Khan is the inner man of every man. Whatever we want to do, he has already done it." Zakir Khan describes Salman Khan like an uncontrolled patriarchal id - a person who can actualize his worst instincts, including running over someone with a car. And this produces aggressive, masculinized channels of identification that made Salman Khan "not just a man but a religion... a way of life" as Zakir Khan put it. The comedian then pointed out the incredulity in the redemption narrative of Salman Khan by summarizing his "comeback" in the following way,

Salman Khan is that man who has killed a man, a deer, is about to go to jail, and his career is finished. But then he does not go to jail. Then his *Tere Naam* gets

released. All the gym going dudes from the world over become his fans. Salman *bhai*, you know, is the god of one-sided lovers.

Zakir Khan hits upon one of the key aspects of Salman Khan's star persona i.e. his legion of male fans, and the homosociality and lack of interaction with women, informed by twisted ideas of celibacy, that characterizes the fan culture. This aspect of Salman Khan's fandom is explored in detail in the Public Service Broadcasting Trust (PSBT) documentary film *Being Bhaijaan* (Shabani Hassanwalia and Samreen Farooqui, 2014) in which the two filmmakers explore masculinity in small town India by looking at Salman Khan fans. The film focuses on three young men in Nagpur, Maharashtra – Shan Ghosh, 32 (who is from small town Chhindwara, Madhya Pradesh but operates from Nagpur), Balram Gehani, 25 and Bhaskar, 19. They are part of a fan group on Facebook and Whatsapp called 'Jai Salman' (Victory to Salman) which is also their greeting when they meet each other or receive phone calls.

Shan is considered a Salman Khan look-alike. He works out at the gym with dedication (Figure 4.9), and does everything to look as close to Salman Khan as possible, including wearing earrings, Khan's trademark bracelet etc. As a part-time vocation, he performs as "Junior Salman" at shows and before shows, cuts down on salt and water intake to emphasize muscle definition and even sleeps less before the show to get Salman Khan's droopy-eyed look! Apart from this, he dabbles in diamond business and real estate investment. Balram is shown as working at a sweet shop (confectionary) and earns a meager eighteen thousand rupees a month. Bhaskar is young and is shown to have a knack for making electrical appliances.



Figure 4.9: Shan Ghosh shows off his body at the gym (Screenshot taken by me from Youtube)

The fandom of the men for Salman Khan and their ideas of celibacy seem to define their lives. Shan and Balram strongly emphasize on the importance of celibacy, on the need to remain virgin and not even masturbate so as to not lose their “manly power.” Shan says he also does not eat onion, garlic, or drink hot milk at night, or ever look at sexually provocative videos online. They find legitimacy for their views from the belief that Salman Khan is also a virgin. When asked about Khan’s affairs with women, they rubbish them as rumors spread by the media. Balram even refers to a *Koffee With Karan*<sup>24</sup> episode where Salman Khan had said he was a virgin, something that became a much-publicized joke. Both insist that Khan has never done a kissing scene on screen and that reflects his cultured upbringing.

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<sup>24</sup> A popular chat show hosted by well-known director Karan Johar

Interestingly, Shan mentions Narendra Modi and Atal Bihari Vajpayee, both Hindu rightwing leaders from the RSS and BJP, as examples of great men who have achieved a lot in life by remaining celibate. Balram goes even further and says that just because Salman Khan is single, a lot of men remain single. If Khan gets married, they would too, and reproduce. And if that happens, 3-4 crore (30-40 million) men would reproduce and there would a population explosion. So, Salman Khan's bachelorhood is maintaining the population. Balram goes ahead and anoints him an avatar of Vishnu, the Hindu god, for the same reason!

The ideas on celibacy that these men possess, come from the caste idea of *brahmacharya* – the practice or oath of celibacy that a young man takes when he undergoes training in studies and various life skills. Examining the discourses on celibacy in North India, Joseph S Alter (1994) writes that celibacy or *brahmacharya* is understood not as a philosophical guideline about discipline and focus and building character, but more as to do with the actual physical substance of semen. It is “an exercise in building the body in terms of a theory about moral substance.” (p. 50) Alter argues that ultimately, “...the male concern with celibacy is couched in terms of a truth, and that truth translates directly into the moral politics of nationalism.” (p. 45)

Alter shows how the discourse on celibacy, developed from upper-caste ideas of *brahmacharya*, was developed in colonial and post-colonial India, influenced by and as a response to colonial ideas of masculinity and power, and influences of modernity. He argues the colonial sexuality was characterized by how it linked sex and identity with questions of power and authority. Alter further says that a postcolonial “libertine” idea of sexuality, “that ascribed identity of race-specific martial virility,” emerged from this colonial notion of sexuality. The “libertine” idea would subscribe to the received colonial ideas of martial races of the Rajputs or Muslims and non-martial races of the effete Bengali babu and the “libertine” would assert their

power and position in society through their sexuality.

Alter argues that the idea of celibacy in *brahmacharya* is a response against the Indian modernity that this libertine sexuality represents. Alter says that *brahmachari*/celibate is not just defined by the retention of semen and the abstinence from sex but there is a more fundamental difference. Alter writes

For the *brahmachari*, it is not sex as an act that defines identity nor is power conceived of in terms of one's sexual prowess – quite the opposite: identity and power are inherent in semen and not in those situations in which semen is made to flow. What this means is that gender gets defined in two radically different ways by the *brahmachari* and his “libertine” counterpart: for the postcolonial “libertine,” masculinity is an ideology of domination, self-gratification, and the control of others, an ideology almost pathologically individualistic in the priority it places on the egocentric self in relation to others. For the *brahmachari*, on the other hand, gender identity derives from a regimen of self-control, balance, and integration of the self with natural truth. It is, in part, the sheer abomination of contemporary masculinity, the utter waste of vital fluids, which has made celibacy a persuasive form of embodied opposition to the legacy of colonial sexuality. (p. 58)

Alter shows that while this “libertine” sexuality is identified in figures of modernity like popular film stars, he identifies traditional Indian wrestlers (*pahalwan*) as the exemplar of a *brahmachari*.

Obviously, neither the Salman Khan fans nor the star image itself follows either of the types that Alter identifies from literature on celibacy. However, both Shan Ghosh and Balram Gehani define their regimens of celibacy and self-control not on the terms of an assertive

masculinity but as following the true ordained path. Their misogyny emanates not from a desire to control women (not explicitly at least) but from their conception of women as fundamentally full of artifice and lacking truth. The masculine truth is materialized in their semen and body building is a manifestation of that. Shan Ghosh already is into body building, and both Balram Gehani and Bhaskar express desire to start body building. Balram even has a picture in his room of the celibate monkey god Hanuman, the god most ubiquitous in Indian wrestling gymnasiums (*akhara*). Bhaskar has inherited an old style gymnasium from his grandfather, who used to be a wrestler.

Their insistence on celibacy and its connection to their fandom seems to be recognized and encouraged by the star. Khan's quip on being a virgin on *Koffee With Karan* in 2013 was received without irony by these fans and then Khan repeated the same when he went back to the show a few years later. This trope of celibacy got incorporated into films like *Bajrangi Bhaijaan* and *Tubelight* where he is shown as inarticulate, almost sexually stunted. This seems to have been consciously developed or maintained by the industry's star making apparatus. Gohar Siddiqui (2020) points out this deliberate nod to the nature of Khan's fandom in *Bajrangi Bhaijaan*, identifying the fandom as characterized by "latent homoerotic desire" and argues that this makes Khan's masculinity "non-heteronormative and in stark opposition to the straight aggressive Hindu masculinity of the 1990s films." (p. 210) While one can definitely read homoeroticism in the fan behavior, I think it should also be explained better by misogyny.

All three men proclaim/ admit to being averse to women. Shan proclaims that he is single because women are untrustworthy and that he has witnessed his male friends have their hearts broken by them. Balram shows his Facebook profile to the camera revealing that he "knows" 300-400 women from all over the country via Facebook and considers all of them sisters but has

never met any. He says that he insists on being considered a brother by the women as he does not like to get attached to them and the status a brother can enjoy in a woman's life can never be enjoyed by a boyfriend. The younger Bhaskar just admits that he is terrified of women.

*Being Bhaijaan* shows that the views of these young men on celibacy and sexuality are undergirded by their beliefs about the fundamental untruth about women. They emphasize on the need for women's modesty, chastity, and the responsibility to not provoke men's sexual needs. "Men are made by god like that," quips Shan, and "are made to be attracted to women." He also says that women try to seduce men and "the dark, ugly ones try harder." They express belief in the traditionally assigned domestic roles of women as homemakers and insist that women should know their place. Shan talks about the strict disciplinarian nature of his father who would regularly thrash him. That relationship seems to have been transferred to his relationship with his younger sister, who he believes gets pampered by his parents, making him feel the need to control and censor her.

The subtler moments of the film betray the hard stance of the men towards women and their fascination with them leaks out. While showing his Facebook profile, Balram admits to asking out one girl called Rozia (from the "Muslim caste"), via the 'Jai Salman' Whatsapp chat group, only to be rejected. Also, he seems to be quite proactive in maintaining his long list of sisters on Facebook that he has never met. It seems as if just like the characters Salman Khan plays on screen, who willingly give up their romantic interests to pursue the reality principle, Balram's way of dealing with anticipated rejection was making the women his sisters (but also get some pleasure in being in touch with them).

In another scene, Shan Ghosh introduces his best friend Piyush Sangi to the camera/filmmaker and asks him, "You tell, have I ever dated anyone in Chhindwara?" to which Piyush

hesitates, “I wouldn’t call it a date but...” indicating that Shah might have been involved with a woman before. Shan then goes on to say that everyone, including Piyush and himself, have buried their feelings deep down as this is the norm in a small place like Chhindwara. Piyush adds on, “I need better...I deserve better.” This clearly conveys their desire for sexual contact with women but lack of opportunities due to a closed social structure makes them suppress that. Here too, Piyush sublimates his failure in his belief that he deserves better. In a different scene, on being asked what kind of woman he would prefer to marry, Shan Ghosh does not talk of celibacy but paints a picture of a chaste, modest, virgin woman he fancies. He also says that, like Salman Khan, he looks for his mother in every woman he meets and would only marry if he meets someone like that. But he laments that contemporary women are running towards “modernization” and there were no good women available in the “market.” Shan and Balram’s desire for female company, fear of rejection and the misogynistic belief that young women are cunning, untrustworthy, full of avarice, and out to seduce them, seems to exemplify the worldview of the incel (involuntary celibate).

The younger Bhaskar is more open about his fascination. He says he would like to talk to women but is terrified. He wants the other two to get married, but cannot bring himself to tell them, so that he can gain confidence to talk to women. When asked what he would do if he ever meets Salman Khan, he says he would ask Khan to train him to talk to women as he had trained Govinda (actor) in the film *Partner*. Incidentally, Govinda’s character was also called Bhaskar in the film!

Shan Ghosh seems to embody the neoliberal ethic of self-entrepreneurship and self-commodification. Comparing himself to his younger brother, who is a software engineer and earns well, he says that if his brother loses his job, then it would be a disaster for him. But on the

other hand, Shan is always involved in five things himself (an idea apparently supported by Warren Buffet) and hence, is secure. He also believes in the freedom of being an entrepreneur. Commenting on software engineers like his brother, he says that they have “money freedom but not time freedom.”

But along with the sense of freedom to sell himself in the market however he pleases, there also seems to be acute awareness of his precarious place in the ever-changing society. He says, “Change is the only constant. You cannot stop the world from changing. We are old-fashioned now...orthodox. Some of us hold on to our views. Today’s generation is changing very fast, getting modernized. The youth is greatly influenced by Western culture.” He then explains that it is best to keep expectations low to not be disappointed (a running thought in incel culture). For him, self-commodification was the best way to counter the flux of the changing times. The only thing constant in his life is his body and face and so, he takes extreme care of them. He is aware that the only capital he has got is his appearance and his resemblance with Salman Khan, and reflects that if that was not the case, he would have been like any other “ordinary person.”

I think Salman Khan’s star image embodies aspects of both the “libertine” and the *brahmachari* conceptions of masculinity that Alter writes about. The libertine aspect of his star image, the assertion of masculinity as sexual prowess is quite well articulated in his hypersexual public image. Alter writes that the colonial and postcolonial idea of *brahmacharya* was developed as a strategic concept to oppose Westernization and modernity, and degeneration of its public culture where sex was not a specific activity to be conducted in a proper place and time but was sold as objects. The fans themselves remain celibate to protect themselves from this modernity and also, from the experience of fleeting time. What is interesting is that they locate

their *brahmacharya* in the star image of Salman Khan, despite his “libertine” persona. I think it has to do with his muscular physique, which gets interpreted by the fans as reflective of his celibacy. Also, Salman Khan’s single marital status is also further proof of his celibacy. The fans just choose to see what they need to in Khan’s complex and contradictory star image. The reciprocity of the star apparatus, in Khan playing a traditional wrestler in *Sultan* or celibate (or almost sexually stunted) characters in *Tubelight* and *Bajrangi Bhaijaan* (where he is a Hanuman devotee too) is interesting and makes his star text complex.

Thus, for these men, their fandom and the path to self-definition that it provides, is a way to deal with the risk filled neoliberal culture that includes uncertainty about the future, fear of women, and a sense of passing time that is not in their control. Jyotsna Kapur (2013) has argued that the performance of fandom inside the cinema theaters in India is a shared experience of time and a way to have an anti-capitalist experience. In this film, too, the men seemed to be happiest when they dance inside the theater, with Salman Khan on screen. (Figure 4.11)



Figure 4.10: Shan, Balram and Bhaskar click a picture of an ad featuring Salman Khan

(Screenshot taken by me from Youtube)



Figure 4.11: Shan Ghosh dances bare bodied as a bare bodied Salman Khan is onscreen  
(Screenshot taken by me from Youtube)

Zakir Khan's stand-up act provides a clue to understanding Salman Khan's fanatic male following, as witnessed in *Being Bhaijaan*, by highlighting the importance of *Tere Naam/ In Your Name*. Salman Khan's public career, under intense scrutiny because of his brushes with the law, got reinstated after *Tere Naam* and his subsequent clout in the industry afford him a new kind of sovereignty. I argue this was achieved by mobilizing his male fans by the exhibition of misogyny in the film's text and the manner in which the film played to the conversations in public about the star's personal life.

### ***Tere Naam***

The opening scene of the film heralds this new sovereign persona in unambiguous terms. Radhe Mohan (Salman Khan) is a local jock-like figure and bully in Agra, a city in the northern state of Uttar Pradesh, who hangs around in and around his college from which he has graduated many years ago. The film opens on college election day in which two rival gangs are backing

two candidates. The election promises by Kanak Sharma, the candidate backed by Radhe Mohan, are that of impunity in cases of class bunking, cheating in exams and groping/ molesting women. Kanak Sharma wins the elections and celebrations ensue and there is the performance of a song on campus. The song, that is about topics of love and female guile, has Radhe Mohan mouth lines such as:

*Dekho jaan lo tum*

*Ishq mein na ka matlab haan hota hai*

*Yeh haseenon ke bahane, yahan koi na jaane*

*Hai yeh sadiyon puraane yara*

*Kabhi lab yeh na kholein, sab aankhon se hi bole*

*Jaan yeh le le haule haule yaara*

(See this and understand this

In love, no means yes

No one understands the excuses of beautiful girls

Which are centuries old, my friend

They never open their lips, only speak through their eyes

And they kill you bit by bit, my friend)

As the song ends, there is an attack by a rival gang member and the two gangs break into a fight which ends in Radhe beating the rival gang members into pulp. Thus, the opening election-celebration-fight sequence not only firmly sets up the moral universe of the film but also establishes Radhe's sovereign power.

Carl Schmitt defined sovereign power as the ability to set aside laws, or decide on the state of exception. (Schmitt, (1992) (2004)) Radhe is not only outside the system (college) and thus, not bound by its rules, he also decides on the suspension of rules (cheating, harassing) and has the authority to impose his will.

This sovereignty of Radhe is extended over the very contrasting persona of Nirjara (Bhumika Chawla), a demure nineteen-year-old girl who is the daughter of a priest, fiancée of another and a devotee herself. Nirjara is a college freshman who is bullied by Radhe on the very first day of college. From the very outset, the film marks the spatial boundaries of its male and female protagonists. Radhe controls access to all the public spaces, like the college campus, railway station, beer bars etc. He also demands obeisance from the college juniors. On the other hand, Nirjara's access to space, bounded by the timings of the local trains, has been decided by the men in her life. The little access to public space that Nirjara has outside of her family, while walking across the railway platform, is also usurped by Radhe.

*Tere Naam* sets the gendered nature of access to public space in unambiguous terms. The domestic sphere is the designated space for the woman and her presence outside her home can only be in male company. As in the film, coded in terms of security and women's honor, access to urban public space has been under immense censure in India. Under the aegis of neoliberal consumption, access to public space as citizens has been reimagined as access for consumption. Writing on gender and public space, as Shilpa Ranade, Shilpa Phadke and Sameera Khan (2009) point out, the presence of women in urban public spaces is understood in only two ways – that the women are consumers and are buying things in specific public (actually, private) spaces such as malls, or that they are sex-workers and soliciting sex. Both roles follow the logic of consumption and women in public are either consumers or commodities themselves.

The Salman Khan brand of reactionary masculinity, that I have explained as having coalesced around the common predicament of having missed out on the fruits of neoliberalism, is actually weaponized here. It articulates the victimhood of working-class men in a language of misogyny. And for this articulation, it needed a figure which could be both victim as well as a sovereign power. Salman Khan's persona, built over the years through his films, lent itself perfectly to this duality. He was relatable through his ordinariness expressed through crudeness, artlessness, and lack of romantic success but he was also hypersexual, well-built, rich and famous, which put him above the rest. So, in terms of agency, the Salman Khan persona enjoys both sovereign authority as well as is the representative of masses (men).

This model served as the blueprint for the authoritarian figure that emerged later in the political domain in India. This is not to say that the political emergence of an authoritarian like Narendra Modi was actually modeled on Salman Khan. But the star text of Salman Khan does help us understand the contradictory nature of authoritarianism in India.

Crucial to this sovereign power and the complete impunity with which the rule of law is suspended, is its ability to fall back upon victimhood. It is interesting that *Tere Naam* chose to begin with an election. Given Radhe's authority, one would assume that the student body elections were not necessary. But it demonstrates perfectly, the nature of this sovereign power which uses democratic rituals, like elections, but discards them and uses brute power whenever necessary.

Radhe, smitten by Nirjara, asks her out and without waiting for a reply, narrates to her his "future plans" for them. Nirjara is dumbfounded out of nervousness and Radhe takes her nervousness and confusion for a yes and breaks into celebratory song and dance with his friends. Later, as Radhe tries to gift her an anklet and express his love in a crowded local train, Nirjara

snaps at him and calls him a goon. Radhe is shown to be shocked. The film, clearly sympathetic to Radhe's predicament, not only shows him as an unfortunate and heartbroken victim of miscommunication but also makes Nirjara call out his violent nature. This sharp reaction from Nirjara comes as a break in character for her as she was shown as a demure girl throughout the film. It not only makes it easier to build sympathy for Radhe but also brings into question her own consistency as she had earlier benefitted from those same violent methods of Radhe when she had needed favors from him. The film then keeps on building sympathy for Radhe who is shown engaging in acts of self-destruction like drinking, smoking etc.

In a later plot twist, the film takes, what I think is, a dark turn and Radhe kidnaps Nirjara. As Nirjara is tied and her mouth gagged, Radhe is shown drinking, smoking and then putting out the cigarette on his palm. (Figure 4.12)

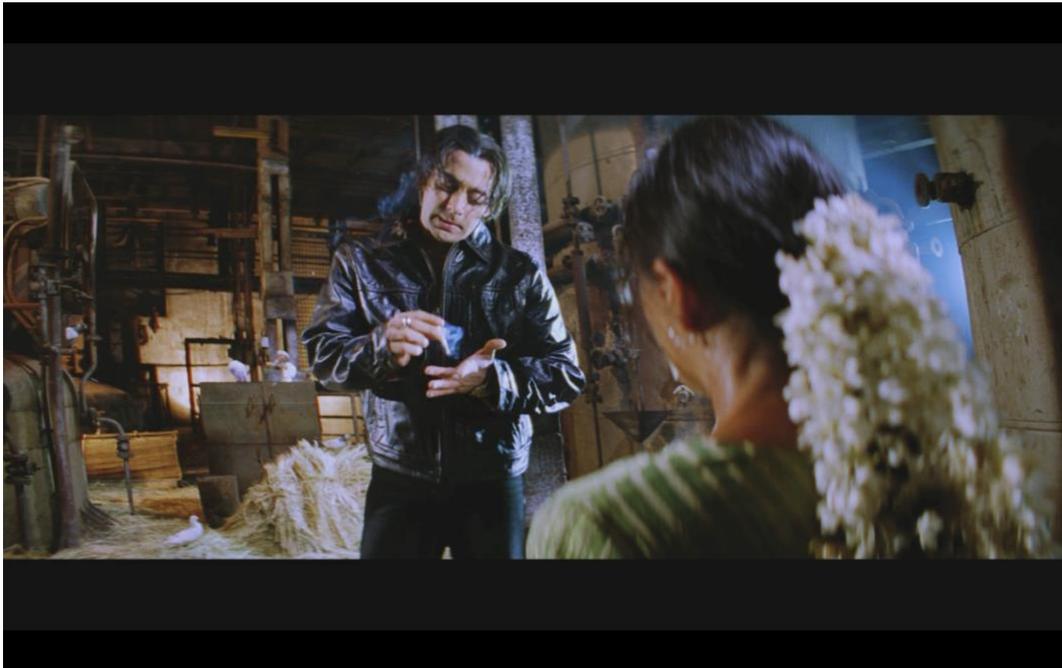


Figure 4.12: Radhe puts out a cigarette on his palm

He unties Nirjara and then smashes a chair to vent his frustration. Then the following

conversation (more like a Radhe monologue) ensues:

Radhe: “Look at me! Have you ever seen me like this? I used to be so happy. Ever since I have fallen in love with you, my bad times have begun.” When Nirjara tries to run away, Radhe catches her, tells her that he feels like hitting her (Figure 4.13) but stops and says, “I don’t want to dishonor you (euphemism for rape). I just want some time from you so that you listen to my heart. I just want you to be happy and smiling, do you understand what I am saying? Everyone in the world is in love with someone, am I the only one not allowed to love anyone? Or someone to love me? Why? We’ll treat you like a queen...me, my brother, my sister-in-law and my friends. The guy your father has chosen for you...I am not saying he isn’t good for you. He might be good for you but you make him your brother. Or your friend. I will accept your friend. Here I am trying to give life to the *pandit*’s (priest’s) daughter and he is trying to take my life away from me. If I am not a *pandit*, am I an untouchable? (that is not of the same high caste) What will your future be with him? When I think of you with him, my head starts reeling. Like this like this. (pause) After listening to this you must have realized how much I love you. But even after this if you have not understood, then I will do something (Radhe picks up a large metal equipment and raises it to hit her...he doesn’t and hits other things with it and screams) “Go away from here, go away. Go away from here or else I’ll kill you. But then what will I live for? I don’t want to live for a moment without you. Yes, I have abducted you. Yes, I am shouting at you. I am threatening you...but only because I love you...because I think you were made only for me. Ask your god...I am in so much pain! Oh god I am in such

pain.” At this point, a teary-eyed Nirjara comes up to him, and after Radhe turns around towards her, she says, “Please forgive me. Please forgive me.” And with that the strains of music start and the scene cuts to a song and dance sequence.

This scene crystallizes what is a commonly occurring formula in Bollywood – the rape-romance. On a routine basis, Bollywood normalizes men harassing women in the name of romance. The word “rape” originates from the Latin *rapere* which meant “to seize, carry off by force, abduct” and the later 14<sup>th</sup> century usage with a similar meaning of that of “seize prey, abduct, take by force.”<sup>25</sup> Several modern legal definitions emphasize on the penetrative aspect of the assault whereas various health organizations classify any coercive, non-consensual sexual act as rape. In *Tere Naam*, Radhe makes indirect but obvious references to rape (talking of Nirjara’s honor) and threatens her with industrial equipment (Figure 4.14) after kidnapping her – in effect, physical and sexual violence is used by him to censure Nirjara’s movement, consent and life, in general. It would have been unacceptable for a Hindi film hero to be shown as a rapist but Radhe’s actions here stand in for rape in real life. Hence, the archaic definition of rape is more apt to describe Radhe’s actions.

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<sup>25</sup> <https://www.etymonline.com/word/rape>



Figure 4.13: Radhe tells Nirjhara that he feels like hitting her



Figure 4.14: Radhe threatens Nirjhara with industrial equipment

The film also uses a parallel plot of a brothel owned by Muslim gangsters amidst an

upper-caste Brahmin neighborhood (the film clearly conveys the caste based outrage) and Nirjara's sister trapped in it. Radhe, who happens to be there to avenge one of his friends who was beaten by a goon from that place, meets and rescues Nirjara's sister and protects her honor and establishes his largeheartedness. The Muslim gangsters, apart from violating Brahminical control of society as well as its sexual morality, later attack Radhe Mohan and cause him severe brain damage. Through the deployment of regressive stereotypes about gender, religion and caste, *Tere Naam* tries to imagine a violent restructuring of society by using the agency of the powerful, muscular, masculine and vigilante figure of Salman Khan. Thus, apart from serving as the ideological opponent in the film's moral universe, they also serve as the villains in the film's plot and cause the necessary crisis in the film by physically transforming Radhe into a victim. The film ends with Nirjara committing suicide at her wedding with Rameshwar and Radhe returning to the mental institution after seeing Nirjara's corpse and resigned to his fate.

Radhe's institutionalization in a mental facility, run by monks instead of doctors, is visually represented in a dark, dystopic manner. Bound in chains and suffering amongst other, more obviously unstable patients, the film does everything to evoke sympathy for Radhe. The song, playing over the scenes of him suffering in the mental institution, has the lines:

*kyun kisi ko wafa ke badle wafa nahin milti?...yeh pyar mein kyun hota hai?*

(Why is there no loyalty in return of loyalty? Why does this happen in love?)

The song, while evoking sympathy for Radhe, also subtly displaces the responsibility of his suffering to his "love" whereas he had been beaten up by goons seeking revenge and his plight had nothing to do with Nirjhara and her love and loyalty.

*Tere Naam* was widely perceived in and reported by the media as a fictionalized account

of the real-life love story of Salman Khan and Aishwarya Rai from Khan's perspective.<sup>26</sup> Even though the film gave the statutory disclaimer of it being a fictitious story and the characters not being real, it had the tagline "Unfortunately A True Love Story." It deliberately made use of the controversy surrounding Salman Khan's publicized love life. Looking at the film in the light of the Khan-Rai controversy, we can see how the film overturned the alleged domestic abuser image of Khan into someone who was passionate, emotional, ruled by the heart and therefore, misunderstood. In relation to this "man's man", as Zakir Khan had put it, the woman is a site of either guile, treachery, cunning, or of victimhood who needs to be saved. Rai, who was a successful star in her own right, was thus incessantly villainized by Khan's fans as someone who had broken the heart of their favorite superstar.

### **Misogyny and the Fashioning of a New Public**

Salman Khan's later films like *No Entry* (Anees Bazmee, 2005) and *Partner* (David Dhawan, 2007) saw him emerge as a leader of men. In both films, he solves problems of sexuality for other, lesser men. In *No Entry*, Khan plays Prem, an unabashed womanizer who shows a way out (towards extramarital affairs) to his male friends who feel stuck in their marriages. In *Partner*, which is a copy of the Hollywood film *Hitch* (Andy Tennant, 2005), Khan plays Prem (Will Smith's role of a "dating coach") who teaches Bhaskar (played by Govinda) how to woo Priya (played by Katrina Kaif), the woman of his dreams. The film clearly establishes that Priya "owes" her love to Bhaskar (because he loves her) but because he is so unattractive, Prem is there to help her recognize him.

In line with the sharp misogynist turn taken from *Tere Naam*, Salman Khan's persona

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<sup>26</sup> <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/delhi-times/Tere-Naam-The-Salman-Ash-story/articleshow/65083.cms>

emerged as an alpha male who had complete power over women. He became the masculine star, the “man’s man.” Unlike the Shah Rukh Khan persona, who charmed women with mannerisms and embellishment through consumption, this alpha male had his way with women because he was powerful. This “power” started manifesting itself in different avatars in his films.

What had fundamentally changed about the nature of Khan’s stardom post-*Tere Naam* was that he was able to galvanize a mob of men (incels) who would not listen to any reason against him. Media pressure on his case shaped public opinion and possibly led public pressure on the court. (Arulseivan, 2016) He was either acquitted or given immediate bail on all cases. The narrative, developed through his films and his carefully constructed media persona, never failed to highlight him as victim. Even though his clout as an A-lister in Bollywood was firmly established and acknowledged, his alleged victimhood ran as a parallel track, available to be fallen back upon whenever necessary. But the authoritarian nature of Khan’s new stardom meant that his legion of male fans actually celebrated the fact that he could do whatever he wanted with impunity. The victimhood, that had been the common ground of identification, was called upon only when necessary. The authoritarianism was now desirable in itself.

However, Salman Khan’s impunity is not absolute. Even though he “managed” his Muslim identity in the Hinduized nation-state, his Muslimness is catching up with him. Even though his mother is a Hindu woman (Sushila Charak who later adopted the Muslim name Salma Khan), and his stardom had a mixed appeal in terms of religious rhetoric (Gohar Siddiqui (2020) calls him a “Hindu-Muslim” star), his Muslim identity gradually came to overdetermine his stardom. With Islamophobia reaching morbid levels, even Salman Khan has started to get attacked by crazed Hindu online mobs. When Salman Khan, in an uncharacteristic outburst of straightforwardness and honesty, wrote a tweet condemning the hanging of Yakub Memon, there

was a public outcry and he had to retract the tweet and apologize. The tweet was this: “Don’t hang brother hang the lomdi (fox) who ran away.” Khan indicated that Tiger Memon, the real criminal mastermind behind the Bombay bomb blasts should have been hanged instead of his brother.

This new level of stardom started to manifest itself in box-office performance too. Though Khan was always an A-list star, he became the most bankable star in Bollywood at the end of the first decade, surpassing even Shah Rukh Khan. Films such as *Wanted* (Prabhu Deva, 2009), *Dabangg/ Braveheart* (Abhinav Kashyap, 2010), *Ready* (Anees Bazmi, 2011), *Bodyguard* (Siddique, 2011), *Kick* (Sajid Nadiadwala, 2014), *Bajrangi Bhaijaan/ Brother Bajrangi* (Kabir Khan 2015) etc. smashed box office records. Salman Khan, who had been a B and C center star through most of his career has finally broken through all categories of audiences.

Sudhanva Deshpande (2005) had pointed out that the mass base of Bollywood has shrunk over the years. Contrary to popular conception, the diverse base that makes up Bollywood’s audience, has been gentrified and has shrunk as a result. Unlike films in earlier decades, when successful films would enjoy theater runs lasting months, contemporary blockbusters tend to earn their money in much shorter times. This lessening of the mass base and the quickening of the time of run is a direct result of the concentration of wealth and spending power in fewer hands in neoliberalism. Analyzing this gentrification process, Deshpande wrote,

...by targeting and catering to a niche audience, the multiplex becomes an extension of the home theatre, where the rich can watch films in the privacy of their own class. Increasingly, Hindi cinema is turning into a party of the rich, and the rest of India is invited as voyeurs. (p. 192)

The expansion of Salman Khan’s appeal needs to be understood in this context. Shohini

Ghosh (2012) had pointed out his “irresistible badness” as part of his appeal. The outlaw nature of Khan, his unpredictability and mercurial nature of his stardom seemed to be part of his appeal. His fluctuating fortunes, with his run-ins with the law, seemed to reflect the lives of risk and uncertainty of his Muslim fans. Ghosh points out that Khan’s films also started to be released during Eid (2009 onwards), started to have Muslim locations and characters etc. I think Khan’s expanding appeal is related to the gentrification of the film going audience in India. As the targeted audience became segmented, Khan’s films started to cater to the taste of this middle-class. Hence, the success. Now, his films began to be enjoyed by the rich too. It was now “safe” for upper-middle/ middle class women to enjoy his films. Salman Khan’s “working-class effect” was packaged and served in the safe environs of the multiplexes to the affluent audiences, as a novelty.<sup>27</sup>

Both the Muslim markers and the appeal to authoritarianism were part of this catering. Contradictory as it may seem, the Muslims markers in Khan’s films in the form of Eid releases, Muslim locations and identifiably Muslim people (as props and not even characters) completely unconnected to the plot, helped make Muslimness palatable to the middle-class Hindu audiences, while the roles that Khan kept playing in these films were of upper-caste Hindu characters. Khan’s masculinity had grown by channelizing the discontent of working-class men and the creation of the working-class effect. But all it had done, was take cosmetic effects from working-class culture and formulate yet another neoliberal iteration of masculinity. The opposition to the

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<sup>27</sup> Amit Rai (2009) writes about the experience of viewing cinema at the multiplex, or as he calls it, the “malltiplex,” is a different way of experiencing time. Rai develops the idea of the “filmi time pass” where time is used, spent, wasted or held on to i.e. the idea of savoring time through cinema. The malltiplex era also affords the pleasures of repeated viewing of the lengthier films of the single screen era repackaged through pre-release campaigns, cross-media promotion, and recirculation on transnational circuits such as satellite television.

cosmopolitan, suave masculinity was a faux one as this working-class effect, Muslims markers part of it, was packaged and served to that same high consumption audience that it claimed to mock.

The authoritarian appeal of Salman Khan helped tie different class desires. The cosmopolitan, upper middle-class that was also the techno-managerial class, had built its identity around consumption and Hindu nationalism. Having availed of all opportunities that the state had to give, it was reluctant to give up its privileges as the capitalist crisis deepened and the state started to withdraw from different welfare sectors. As the basic social contract was being withdrawn, this class was not ready to let go of anything that they possessed or considered their birthright. Hence, the middle-class desire for authoritarianism was the desire for the neoliberal (increasingly fascist) state to intervene on their behalf so that their interests could be protected, and the lower classes could be deprived even more.

For the lower, working-classes, welfare as well as opportunities were already lost. All they were left with was a masculine angst (because the women, who are practical pragmatic, were already subsumed under it) that Salman Khan had helped articulate. As Walter Benjamin (1935) wrote about interwar fascism,

The growing proletarianization of modern man and the increasing formation of masses are two aspects of the same process. Fascism attempts to organize the newly created proletarian masses without affecting the property structure which the masses strive to eliminate. Fascism sees its salvation in giving these masses not their right, but instead a chance to express themselves. The masses have a right to change property relations; Fascism seeks to give them an expression while preserving property. The logical result of Fascism is the introduction of aesthetics

into political life.

The authoritarian appeal, or the call for fascism, exemplified here by the figure of Salman Khan, tried to do what all fascism does – provide a solution for different class interests.

### **The Muscularity of Salman Khan**

Hindi cinema's formulation or managing of the new working-class hero needs to be understood on both the axes of capitalist abstraction where labor is relegated and pushed away i.e. made invisible through informalization, and how this relegation is gendered. The impoverishment and the extreme risk and insecurity emerging out of the vagaries of capital construct a sense of reality which is ever changing. This sense of reality as always being in flux creates an attitude towards the future which is not one of creative possibility but of risk and danger. The reaction or general attitude towards this antagonistic reality and future is gendered. Two kinds of gendered realism, "ruthless-pragmatic" (masculine) and "practical-pragmatic" (feminine), constructed out of existing patriarchal tradition, are two ways of dealing with this fraught reality. While the masculine "ruthless-pragmatic" "...requires strong arming and cheating as a way of transforming reality for self-advantage," the feminine "practical-pragmatic" "...is to accept the limits of a situation, as in, "be practical," i.e., do not dream the impossible, i.e., to change the situation." (Kapur & Pal, 2017)

This gendered reaction to an antagonistic reality framed the rise of the muscular working-class hero in Bollywood. The mid and late 1980s witnessed the rise of screen heroes with muscular, gym-built bodies, such as Sunny Deol, Sanjay Dutt and most prominently, Salman Khan. The strong arming (probably not cheating, yet) and running rough shod of the problems as a way to transform reality, was very much within the ambit of Amitabh Bachchan's "angry young man" hero. But the new generation of screen heroes were a reaction to something else: in

the new regime of global finance, capital increasingly became a function of pure speculation and “...little of it is (was) fettered by any long-term connection with actual production.” (Ahmad, 2000) This severing of capital from actual production and labor meant that large masses were left out of the profitable economic processes – these were the real consequences of capitalist abstraction i.e. separating a “higher sphere” (here, of speculative finance capital) from the material (labor).

The muscularity of the new generation of working-class screen heroes was an attempt by popular cinema to counter this abstraction. Labor had been decoupled from the formal economy and as a result, the body was invisibilized. Cinema as popular culture provided a way for the body to make a comeback. This can be called a process of re-materializing where the material stratum was the body. So, in a way, this was a return of the body but not the working body. Work had been replaced by working out. The body in labor, that is, the body that is productive and creative had been invisibilized and through popular culture, was being replaced by the body that was being exerted but was divorced from productive activity.

The nexus of working out in the gym and body building, working-class masculinity, performance of labor, and circulation of moving images have had a long and complicated history. Adam Szetela (2017) traced the emergence of modern gyms and bodybuilding to capitalism induced changes in the workplace in nineteenth century America and Taylorism, and the separation of mental and physical tasks resulting in boredom, mental fatigue and a sense of separation from one’s own body. This performative masculinity, through working out, has been exploited by rightwing movements where paranoia regarding immigrants taking over the country have been assuaged by bodybuilding and show of strength. This idea of physical activity as nation-building has also found place in several branches (shakhas) of RSS across India, a format

which was directly inspired from Mussolini's youth camps in Italy. But bodybuilding has also had a socialist, anti-capitalist thrust as it was interpreted as a way to keep the fruits of one's labor (muscle gains) in contrast to being appropriated by the capitalist.

The association of working-out is with working or labor and this activity (as opposed to passivity) is associated with male agency or masculine power. The construction of images by the Bollywood industry is attentive to this aspect of masculinity where it needed to be shown as active and hence, "in-charge." Videos and images of stars working out at the gym are widely circulated by film news and gossip outlets and increasingly, by the stars themselves. (Figure 4.15) Writing about the history of the male pin-up image, Richard Dyer (2002) highlighted the importance of muscularity and hardness in the male body (in the images) as a marker of agency, dominance and phallic power (not just in terms of a hard penis but symbolizing "abstract paternal power" (p. 136)). Highlighting the importance of work/ activity in the construction of masculine power, Dyer wrote: "...images of men must disavow this element of passivity if they are to be kept in line with the dominant ideas of masculinity-as-activity. For this reason, images of men are often images of men doing something." (p. 128)



Figure 4.15: Salman Khan working out at a gym (Image taken from

<https://www.borntoworkout.com/salman-khan-workout-schedule-diet-and-bodybuilding-tips/>

found through Google Images)

The gendered attitudes to an antagonistic reality, can thus be seen mapped onto this active-passive binary with regard to physical activity. The ruthless-pragmatic is about molding reality, which means “taking charge.” The performance of labor, in working out, and its visible results in the bulging muscles thus, go on to establish the agency of the male i.e. establish him as the subject of history. The practical-pragmatic attitude of the woman, in contrast, establish her as passive, lacking agency and hence, the object of history. Of course, this belies reality as majority of the work (more so with neoliberalism and informalization of work) is done by women. So, it could be said that the advent of muscularity in popular culture was not only a reaction to neoliberal capitalism and its regime of finance, but it also a process of exploitation of women through the erasure of their labor from history.

### **Conclusion**

The masculine appeal of Salman Khan and its evolution on the plane of misogyny to

authoritarianism, helps us understand and connect different social processes. Firstly, this masculinity is reactionary. The fundamental problem was the relegation of labor and the betrayal of the working-class by the neoliberal state. This reactionary masculinity, in the guise of attacking consumerism, attacked women and their access to public space. Capitalist modernity, through the national “solution” in India, set up an opposition between working-class men and middle-class consuming women. The reactionary masculinity inherited this legacy. The censoring of public space for women had victims on two counts: women, who were being violently ejected from public spaces through physical violence and rape, as represented in *Tere Naam*, and working-class men who were being seen as dangerous bodies.

Secondly, the masculine “protest,” of which the Salman Khan persona is only one example, created publics who were formed on the basis of misogyny. The separation of the body and mind, the abstraction of labor, and its consequent hatred of the body (as Federici had shown) (2004) had apparently contradictory consequences of misogyny (where women stood for the “body”) and the formation of a cult of the body (where muscle building came to stand in for labor).

Thirdly, desires for sovereign authority from different classes, because of different reasons as I have explained, coalesced on the body of Salman Khan. Khan’s muscularity both stood in for a sense of return of labor and it could also embody the sovereign authority that the middle-class desired. In neoliberalism, through accumulation by dispossession and exploitation of labor, more and more is pressed into the formation of capital. This is capitalism’s permanent revolution, constant adoption of new means of production, a process which quickens the experience of time (in the sense of disappearing time or loss of time). This is also capitalism’s permanent crisis, of the ever vanishing present, that Walter Benjamin has tried to define by

“wish images” through which

...the collective seeks both to overcome and to transfigure the immaturity of the social product and the inadequacies of the social organization of production. At the same time, what emerges in these wish images is the resolute effort to distance oneself from all that is antiquated – which includes, however, the recent past.

These tendencies deflect the imagination (which is given impetus by the new) back upon the primal past. (Benjamin, (1935) (1999), p. 4)

Thus, capitalist acceleration of time produces, as its Other, a yearning for a primal past that is not history but a time that is ossified, idealized and probably, a site of plenitude. I think the fascism impulse, also borne out of the sense of emergency and risk of capitalist time, is a yearning for this primal past. This yearning emerges as the Other of relentless consumption and of the ever vanishing present.



Figure 4.16: “Wish image” - Leaked image of Salman Khan’s digitally altered abs for *Ek Tha Tiger/ There Was A Tiger* (Kabir Khan, 2012) (Image from

<https://www.santabanta.com/bollywood/91500/revealed-/> found through Google Images)

This “wish image” is the image of crisis but it seeks permanence and a material basis that is immune to temporality (and thus, materiality itself). An ideal body, such as the ideal Aryan German white body of the Nazi era, that is borne out of nowhere, is such a wish image. In India, there is a new imagination of muscular images of the bodies of Hindu gods. These are wish images, ideal images that help to anchor the anxieties of the vanishing present. Salman Khan’s muscular body has approached that wish image but could never fully function as one because he is human and thus, subject to real time and decay. But these tensions and propensities have played out on the body via the manipulation of images. (Figure: 4.16)

## CHAPTER 5

### 56 INCHES OF MACHISMO: CELEBRITY AS COMMODITY AND SPECTACLE OF MAJORITARIAN VIOLENCE

With the increase of precarity and uncertainty over the years, the element of risk and desperation, and a certain defiance towards death, that had developed in the “angry young man” figure, was also managed and commodified. If the accidental nature of capitalism had given rise to a sense of fatalism, it was now being repackaged as the investor’s risk in the era of financial capital. In in the neoliberal age of product differentiation, certain stars such as Akshay Kumar, Salman Khan and Suniel Shetty were earmarked for their macho image and were used to commodify risk as a lifestyle choice. *Thums Up*, an Indian cola drink now owned by Coca Cola, known for its strong fizz and being the bestselling cola in India, built up their brand selling risk. As these actors jumped off moving trains, climbed mountains and crossed rivers for a bottle of the cola drink, the brand was built around the slogan “taste the thunder.” In an age of precarity, even risk was now being presented as a consumable item.

Even as the actual precarity in life was re-packaged and presented before the audiences to participate in as thrill – like Salman Khan’s performance of the dangerous working-class, Muslim virile body (but mitigated only as effects) for the multiplex audience, or the various gameshows that gave the live thrill of making or losing out on a fortune, the capitalist need for novelty kept ever increasing. As Amit Rai (2009) points out, the media environs of the mall and multiplex started to provide immersive experiences. This need for novelty, experienced as an acute sense of passing time, blurred the boundaries between the star and the fan. As the star (and the star making apparatus) sought to sell its charisma, appeal, qualities like aspiration (and risk), aware that it could do that only for so long, the fan also strove harder for that perfection (like

Shan Ghosh in *Being Bhaijaan*) that he saw on screen. I see in this chapter how this search for novelty and the increased need for commodification has given rise to an entire industry of celebrity.

The nature of this structure of commodification is that it is not supposed to reach a point of stasis. So, just as the Salman Khan fans in *Being Bhaijaan* adopt a severe celibate life in the hope of reaching that future perfection, of future consummation with the star image i.e. have a sense of control over their future, the possible ways in which such desire can find expression are infinite. For example, when asked if he wants to meet Salman Khan, Balram Gehani says that he is not ready meet Khan as he wants to get established (financially), build a gym sculpted body with six-pack abs and make himself presentable first. His celibate lifestyle is part of that process. As precarity and political instability increases, such modes of seeking novelty and dealing with the often-terrifying question of the future, spills out of the experience of the star spectacle and impinges on the sphere of politics. Extreme political figures now fulfill the need for spectacle. The rise of the rightwing politics of spectacle has increasingly used this deep insecurity to build its structures of violence, cultures of cruelty and restructure society itself to lead to even more precarity, in a vicious cycle.

### **Celebrity, Individualization and the Commodification of The Self**

All the major film stars in Bollywood, including the ones discussed in this work, moved beyond their film careers and ventured into various other media and business ventures. Amitabh Bachchan was the first major movie star to make a transition to the small screen in the year 2000 when he became the host of *Kaun Banega Crorepati* (KBC), the Indian version of *Who Wants to be a Millionaire?* After his golden run at the box-office as the “angry young man” petered out in the early 1990s, he met with failure both in his silver screen comebacks and his business venture

– the entertainment company Amitabh Bachchan Corporation Ltd. (ABCL). It was KBC which re-launched his career, as the television show not only garnered high ratings but also introduced the Indian audiences to star driven format of game shows and reality television.

Shah Rukh Khan followed suit when he stepped in to host the third season of KBC due to Bachchan's health problems. SRK went on to host other game shows *Kya Aap Paanchvi Pass Se Tez Hain?* (2007-08), the Indian version of the American game show *Are You Smarter Than a 5<sup>th</sup> Grader?*, and *Zor Ka Jhatka: Total Wipeout* (2011). Salman Khan also ventured as the host of the game show *Dus Ka Dum/ Power of Ten* in 2008 and has been the host of the hugely popular reality TV show *Bigg Boss* (the Indian and Hindi language version of the Dutch-British show *Big Brother*) from its fifth season in 2010-11 to the present date. Similarly, other major Bollywood stars such as Aamir Khan – as host of *Satyamev Jayate/ Truth Alone Triumphs* (talk show showcasing social issues of importance in India) and Hrithik Roshan – as a judge in dance-reality show *Just Dance* (2011) have also built successful television careers apart from their film careers.

The stars also have made forays into business ventures. For example, Shah Rukh Khan, who had already started being involved in cricket through brand endorsements, as I have mentioned in Chapter 2, now jointly owns a multi-million-dollar cricket franchise called Kolkata Knight Riders (KKR). It is one of the teams that participates in the huge money spinning spectacle – Indian Premiere League (IPL), which ranks among the highest paying sporting leagues in the world. Cashing in on his huge star value, SRK has also been expanding his KKR franchise to promote cricket in North America, primarily appealing through his diaspora fan base, but also reaching out to his fans from across the globe who live there.

Another prominent example is Salman Khan's *Being Human Foundation*, which is a

profitable business venture that also contributes to charity. *Being Human* branded merchandise, which includes t-shirts that have become a common marker of Salman Khan fans, generates millions in profit out of which 10-15% are donated to charity. Moreover, the foundation partners with governmental, private and non-governmental organizations to do work in education, healthcare, humanitarian causes such as helping lost children reach their parents etc. Some of these initiatives are spin-offs from Salman Khan films. For example, the initiative to find lost children and reconnect them with their families is called “Being Bajrangi,” after the film *Bajrangi Bhaijaan/ Brother Bajrangi* (Kabir Khan, 2015).

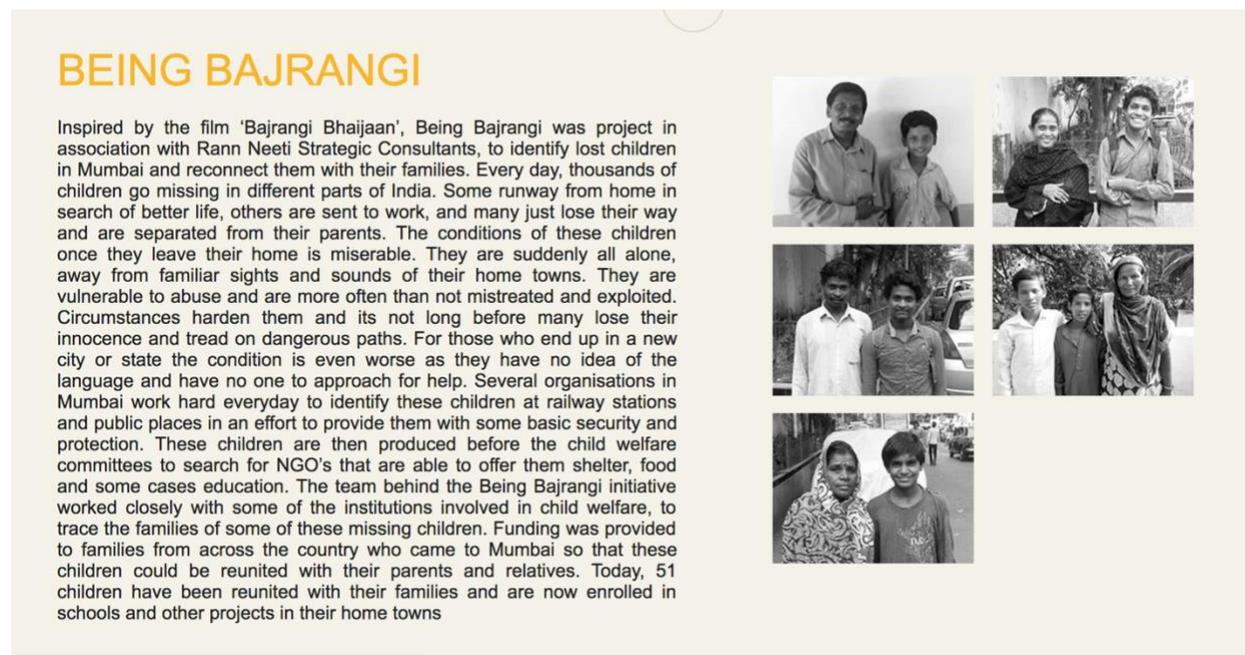


Figure 5.1: Being Bajrangi, Screenshot taken by me from the Being Human website,

<https://www.beinghumanonline.com/education.html>

The presence of these film stars extend beyond television programs to web content, comic strips, mobile apps, merchandise etc. And all these stars are also part of extensive, professional and profitable stage performance networks that produce Bollywood song and dance

stage performances in front of adoring fans across the world. Rajinder Dudrah (2012) has shown how these stage performances help build “haptic urban ethnoscares” in London by “performing Bollywood.”

All these performances, shows, business ventures, charity work etc. add up to a giant network, in which there are many crossovers. Stars regularly feature in each other’s shows and films, there are cross-promotions across platforms, and business ventures are often the extension of a film or some characteristic trait of a star. Barry King (2010) has theorized this development, where a star is not just a performer but a business person in charge all these properties which are marked by their “presence,” as a movement from stardom to celebrity. Drawing from Marx, King argues that this is further commodification of the star to celebrity, and is “an advanced expression of fetishism in the mode of *personification*.” (p. 15) Here, the celebrity is an entrepreneur who owns and manages their stardom as property and has a “personal monopoly over a vastly expanded transnational market for star-centered services.” (p. 15)

The celebrity is an example of fetishism where the fetish object is a human being. When a heterogeneous body of socially useful labor is used to create a commodity, but all its qualities seem to be originating from the commodity rather than the labor, that commodity becomes a fetish object. Here, a whole system of production, circulation, exhibition that includes film crews, other actors, publicists, television crews, crews who put up stage shows etc., work to create the celebrity.

The emergence of the pure celebrity, that King talks about, is thus the result of capitalist abstraction, which is the obfuscation of the role of collective and heterogeneous labor. As a result, the fame, charisma, influence, popularity – all appear to be the doing of the individual. This individual is the individual entrepreneur i.e. the celebrity-as-entrepreneur who is managing

the property of the “star-centered services.” This includes the notion that narratives/brands (i.e., the star and the industry around him) produces value and not labor. However, narratives have to sell something, whether it is a product or a service and these are produced by labor. For example, the Being Human brand would be nothing without the t-shirts manufactured by the workers. Thus, it is the workers who create value and ascribing creative power to Salman Khan is an instance of the star as a fetish object. The rise of the celebrity and their importance in contemporary society thus, helps to legitimize and normalize the idea that it is the individual who is in charge and is responsible for the magical phenomenon of fame and popularity.

Ulrich Beck and Elizabeth Beck-Gernsheim (2002) have written about individualization, or institutionalized individualism, as a characteristic of modern institutions under capitalism, especially, in its neoliberal phase. Capitalism perpetuates the idea of the individual as the bearer of autonomous will, just as in case of the celebrity, and in turn, the capitalist system depends on perpetuation of this idea as it helps in capitalist abstraction by obscuring the social aspect of labor.

Neoliberal economics rests upon an image of the autarkic human self. It assumes that individuals alone can master the whole of their lives, that they derive and renew their capacity for action from within themselves. Talk of the ‘self-entrepreneur’ makes this clear. Yet this ideology blatantly conflicts with everyday experience in (and sociological studies of) the worlds of work, family and local community, which show that the individual is not a monad but is self-*insufficient* and increasingly tied to others, including at the level of worldwide networks and institutions. The ideological notion of the self-sufficient individual ultimately implies the disappearance of any sense of mutual obligation... (p. xxi)

This idea of the individual as the entrepreneur of the self has gradually become a commonplace idea as jobs and income opportunities have dried up under neoliberal reforms for most of the population. Changes in labor laws, setting up of Special Economic Zones (SEZ) which further weaken the position of the working-class in favor of capital, and increased informalization of labor meant that more and more people were forced to become self-employed.

Individualization and the increased mainstreaming of the image of the “autarkic human self” has different meanings for different sections of society. In India, this could mean a rise in start-up culture for convent educated, English speaking, upper-middle/middle-class, mostly upper caste urban men, trained in the knowhow of technology, marketing, and management. For example, the successful web series, *TVF Pitchers* (2015) gives a glimpse of this new but significant urban phenomenon, showcasing both the allure and potential pitfalls that come with this entrepreneurial spirit. It is about four friends - Naveen Bansal (Naveen Kasturia), Jitendra "Jitu" Maheshwari (Jitendra Kumar), Yogendra "Yogi" Kumar (Arunabh Kumar) and Saurabh Mandal (Abhay Mahajan) who seek freedom from their time-bound corporate jobs. They search deep inside themselves and struggle to make choices in their careers, love lives, partnerships as they embark on the path of starting their own business. As they go to a business plan meet, they quickly discover that they are only one of several teams, trying to start a business and looking for investors, and the competition is ruthless. The show balances the ruthless and disheartening competitiveness of the business world by the showing dedication, soul searching and wide-eyed hope of the four friends. Their start-up initiative, though part of a dog-eat-dog world of business, is shown as the result of their “higher-calling.” The show balances the element of risk and excitement of achievement. It is ultimately a celebration of the entrepreneurial spirit among young professionals. But what the show does not explore is the immense social and cultural

capital that the protagonists enjoy and are unavailable to the vast majority of the society.

The effects of such radical individualization are far more pernicious on those without economic, social and cultural capital, and are regulated by gender, religion and caste. For example, the landmark Sachar Committee Report (2006), trying to understand the condition of the Indian Muslim, shows that the stability of salaried employment was divided along social, religious, caste and gender axes. The report clearly states, “The most striking feature is the relatively high share of Muslim workers engaged in self-employment activity. This is particularly true in urban areas and for women workers” (pp. 91) and “As is the case of SC/ST workers, the participation of Muslim workers in salaried jobs (both in the public and the private sectors) is quite low.” (pp. 92)

Extending the observation of the Sachar Committee report, and the Post Sachar Evaluation Committee in 2014, Ghazala Wahab shows that fifteen years later in 2021, the condition has only become worse. Wahab shows that the lower-class Muslim, especially, in North India, is trapped in a “pincer-like grip” between the law enforcement authorities who deem them suspected criminals based on their identity, widespread social prejudice (and increasing mob violence) from the Hindu majority society which increasingly refuses them accommodation and interaction, and drying up of stable employment opportunities. This forces them into ghettos, looking for security in numbers, but also makes the problem of lack of opportunities and basic facilities of electricity, water and sewage, worse. It also adds to the social stigma of having an address in a Muslim ghetto, leading to a worsening spiral of impoverishment, insecurity and complete social isolation (Jaffrelot & Laliwala, 2018), which has been called another, more gradual and thorough ‘partition’ of the country. (Lone, 2019)

The most significant result of the ruinous process of individualization, along with the

withdrawal of any sense of social security, or fundamental services by the state, is the increased commodification of the self. This is what connects the phenomenon of celebrity, including the loftiest celebrity like a Bachchan, Khan or Roshan, with the most destitute self-employed person. The celebrity commodity, aided with extensive and intensive networks of mass media, sells the template of the self-made individual. While the stars I have mentioned are the top tier ones, there is a whole ecosystem of celebrities, including what Chris Rojek (2001) has called “celetoids.” Celetoids are minor celebrities who enjoy short bursts of ephemeral fame, like the ones featuring in reality-TV shows like *Bigg Boss*, or the ones that go viral because of some meme or scandal or performance. But what Rojek was writing about in 2001 is a much more pervasive phenomenon now where the route of self-commodification as a way to achieve recognition, acknowledgment or just control over one’s own life, is the commonsensical way for more and more people. But this obviously does not mean that the self-commodification by Shah Rukh Khan, and the forced skill development and self-employment of a Muslim boy who lives in a ghetto, as the only means to livelihood, are the same. Questions of choice and agency (or their lack) are mediated by one’s social position, largely determined by class, location/ address, gender, religion, caste etc.

Ulrich Beck and Elizabeth Beck-Gernsheim wrote about the falling off of individuals from larger social networks as a result of individualization,

Opportunities, dangers, biographical uncertainties that were earlier predefined within the family association, the village community, or by recourse to the rules of social estates or classes, must now be perceived, interpreted, decided and processed by individuals themselves. The consequences -- opportunities and burdens alike -- are shifted onto individuals who, naturally, in face of the complexity of social interconnections, are often unable to take the necessary decisions in a properly founded way, by considering

interests, morality and consequences.” (pg. 4)

Hindutva majoritarian forces in India have used the destruction of social bonds and the acute sense of a lack of belonging to incorporate Hindu youth, mostly upper-caste men, into an active structure of hate that is used to fashion the society itself. I argue that fascist Hindutva uses the need for self-commodification, the need to establish one’s identity (by turning it into a commodity) and the desire for a sense of sovereignty, to build a system of majoritarian violence. As mentioned above, the questions of choice and agency are determined to a large extent by one’s social position. So, even though there has been a proliferation of cheap audio-visual technology of recording and exhibition, and modes of dissemination with cheap internet and mobile phones, the ends that they can be used to are very different, depending on one’s identity and position vis-à-vis the ethno-nationalist fascist state.

### **Violent Restructuring of Society in Hindutva India**

After the BJP led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) came to power at the center in 2014, the social and political climate in India changed very quickly. Violence based on religious bigotry and social discrimination increased and it quickly put India on the world map as one of the worst places in terms of religious intolerance. India was ranked fourth in the world in 2015, in terms of religion based hostilities, a sharp rise from the previous year, and only behind Syria, Nigeria and Iraq. (Rukmini S, 2017) The mode of violence that emerged prominently was mob lynching, often done in the name of cow protection (*gau raksha* in Hindi). According to the Hindu right-wing, the cow is a holy animal in Hinduism and given the status of mother (*gau mata* or cow mother). However, historian DN Jha (2009) has shown that the sacredness of the cow being integral to Hinduism is a myth, the prohibition of cow slaughter is historically contingent, and the Indian cow started to become a political tool only in the second half of the

nineteenth century. Jha pointed out the political use of the cow myth in contemporary India,

The 'sacred' cow has come to be considered a symbol of community identity of the Hindus whose cultural tradition is often imagined as threatened by Muslims, who are thought of as beef eaters. (p. 18)

The specter of cow slaughter as an assault on Hindu identity began to be deployed as a political tool to intimidate minorities, especially Muslims and Dalits. Various instances of mob lynching started to appear in which gangs of self-styled cow protectors (*gau rakshak*) would gang up against a helpless Muslim, accuse him of either smuggling or slaughtering cows or eating beef, and beat him up. The accusations have almost always been false but that rarely came in the way of this instant mob justice. IndiaSpend, a data journalism initiative, reported in 2017, that 84% of all people that died because of cow related violence since 2010 were Muslims and 97% of those cases happened after 2014 i.e. when the Modi government came to power. (Abraham & Rao, 2017)

Ziya Us Salam (2019) emphasized the central role of mob lynching in the polarization of the Indian society:

Indeed, lynching has replaced the age-old communal riot as a means of polarization. Lynching comes without the burden of guilt that used to accompany riots. It is more effective, lethal and sinister. It strikes at the very identity of the community. It is far more demoralizing than the traditional communal violence, but serves the same purpose as riots did in the years gone by: to engender a climate of distrust and fear.

Cow protection, however, has not been the only political tool deployed as justification for lynchings. The Hindu right-wing has also claimed that Muslim men have been engaging in "love

jihad.” According to this claim, Muslim men commit “love jihad” by seducing Hindu women and marrying them so that they could convert them to Islam. After the popularization of this myth by the Hindu right-wing, not only did inter-religious marriages and relationships come under severe attack, “love jihad” was used to discipline publics and fuel acts of violence. After Yogi Adityanath, a self-styled monk whose real name is Ajay Singh Bisht, became the Chief Minister in 2017 of Uttar Pradesh, he ordered “anti-Romeo” squads to counter the threat of “love jihad” and “foreign influences” such as the display of affection in public. The “anti-Romeo squads,” instruments of patriarchal control, comprising of both state (policemen) and non-state actors (fringe groups), were used to censor the mobility of women in public spaces as well as intimidate Muslim men.

The myth of “love jihad” also led to individual cases of violence. On December 6, 2017, a Hindu man called Shambhulal Regar in a town called Rajsamand in the state of Rajasthan, hacked a Muslim migrant laborer, Mohammed Afrazul Khan, from West Bengal with an axe and burned him to death. Regar claimed that Afrzul had engaged in “love jihad” and that is why he was punished. These acts, both performed by the state as well as individuals, exemplify Islamophobia and a proprietary attitude towards women. Through such acts of violence, a Hindu patriarchal state was realizing a Hindu patriarchal society.

To add to the horror, while committing the gruesome murder, Shambhulal Regar got his fourteen-year-old nephew to record the entire act. The video, shot on a mobile phone, was then circulated far and wide and it reached Indians through social media across the country and abroad in a matter of hours. The video has been a constant feature of this circle of violence. Whether it is a case of mob lynching or such individual acts of crime, committed in the name of cow protection, “love jihad” or something else, a perpetrator of the crime would record the act

being committed and circulate the proof of the crime as an act of assertion. The video is not just circulated through social media such as Whatsapp, Twitter, Facebook etc. but is also often shown in graphic detail on television channels. Ziya-us-Salam described the circle of violence and its effects on communities as follows:

The video attracts millions of eyeballs. It is raised to a work of cinema, the murder of the innocent portrayed as a spectacle to be devoured. The victim is projected like a helpless villain cornered at the end by the aggressive hero. The kicks, the butts, the slaps, the blood, the gore, all presented unabashedly, without a single cut. The word spreads: 'A Muslim cow killer has been finished off!' The friends and community of the attackers feel jubilant at their accomplishment, religion and its misrepresentation acting as a collective 'opium of the masses'. The victim's community, meanwhile, sinks into despair. There is no sense of safety and security. The message to all Muslims is the same: You could be the next one.

The staging of such violent acts, and their effects amplified by the use of media, created networks of terror that have re-structured society. For example, in a primarily agrarian country like India, where cattle are an integral part of the way of life for millions of rural people, the terror unleashed by the cow protection mobs have ruined the livelihoods of entire villages. With bans on the slaughter and sale of cows in place, along with the violent cow vigilantism, farmers in several states simply let their cows free, unable to sell or slaughter them. The stray cattle not only have become a big nuisance, entire rural economies have been thrown off balance. (Dhillon, 2018) Thus, these acts of violence have not only intimidated and terrorized Muslims, this fascist restructuring of society has disrupted the already difficult lives of rural India.

Cow vigilantism was also used to intimidate Dalits, outcastes in the Hindu caste system. In an incident in 2016, four young Dalit men were stripped, tethered to a car and beaten mercilessly in public by upper caste men for doing their caste ordained job of skinning dead cows, the skin to be used as hide in the leather business. However, the Dalit response to the atrocities was spirited. Dead cows were dumped on roads and left to rot with members of the Dalit community refusing to skin them. The argument given by the resistance, articulated by Dalit activist Bezwada Wilson, was that if the cow was holy and a mother to the Brahmins (upper caste) when alive, it could not be the responsibility of Dalits when it was dead. (Salam, 2019)

The organized violence and its entire political economy, that is, the destruction and reshaping of economic systems as well as systematic intimidation and othering of minority communities, meant that the fascist mission of creating the fascist mass now had the involvement of the full state machinery. This concerted nature of the fascist assault on the Indian polity, which also included a long-term acquiring of state power by “taking over the institutions of the state from within” (Ahmad, A conversation with Aijaz Ahmad: ‘The state is taken over from within’, 2019) had now decidedly put India on the path to becoming an “ethnic democracy.” (Jaffrelot, 2017, p. 59)

The overwhelming sense that arises in retrospect, looking at these few years of the BJP government, is the totalitarian nature of this concerted attack. The phenomenon of mob lynchings and its devastating effects on society are probably the most striking examples of it. Writing on totalitarianism, Hannah Arendt (Arendt, (1979) (1951)) argued that when reality itself is incomprehensible, fortuitous and seems to be characterized by coincidence, the masses “...are predisposed to all ideologies because they explain facts as mere examples of laws and eliminate

coincidences by inventing an all-embracing omnipotence which is supposed to be at the root of every accident.” (p. 352) This propaganda or fiction clashes with reality and common sense but common sense is sacrificed at the altar of consistency and internal coherence of the propaganda. Arendt explains that this rejection of common sense by the masses is “...the result of their atomization, of their loss of social status along with which they lost the whole sector of communal relationships in whose framework common sense makes sense.” (p. 352)

In contemporary India, lived reality is undeniably hard for a large majority of the people. There has been increasing withdrawal of public welfare, and abandonment of life to the vagaries of the market. For example, the state’s abandonment of responsibility from agriculture and its corporatization has led to thousands of farmers committing suicide in rural India. (Sainath, 2019) It would be difficult to live with this reality that is inherently devoid of sense. The “all-embracing omnipotence” that the Hindu right-wing professes, is premised on the ideas of the “inherently evil Muslim,” the “inherently inferior Dalit,” the “inherently treacherous woman” etc. The Hindu Right also views history through these fictions and so, it is possible to characterize Indian history as consisting of blocks such as a glorious Hindu ancient period, a thousand-year period of humiliation under Muslim rulers etc.

The role of violence is crucial here. Arendt argued that totalitarianism uses violence “...to realize constantly its ideological doctrines and its practical lies.” (p. 341) Thus, the killing of a suspected cow smuggler or a “love jihadi” brings these fictions into the realm of the real. Also, often the victims or their family members are booked by the law for wrongdoing, as in the case of Pehlu Khan, a fifty-five year old dairy farmer who was killed by a cow protection gang in Alwar, Rajasthan in 2017. (PTI, 2019) The convicted murderers of Mohammad Akhlaq, a man lynched for allegedly possessing beef, in Dadri, Uttar Pradesh in 2015, were garlanded by Union

Minister Jayant Sinha when they were released on bail. This kind of state sanction also gave these fictions more credibility.

Thus, the deployment of the entire state machinery as well as the mob is done to re-fashion reality itself. The fascist or the totalitarian fiction holds reality hostage. In such a system, reality must be constantly “corrected” to match the fiction. Not only does such a system not allow for dissent, it also “...does not allow for free initiative in any field of life, for any activity that is not entirely predictable.” (Arendt, p. 339)

### **Individual Narratives, Self-Commodification and Majoritarian Violence**

This breakdown of reality and the atomization or extreme isolation of the individual are the same thing. When individuals are pushed into their own private mental spaces and echo chambers, perception of reality becomes distorted. This distortion of reality by isolation is aided by the relentless propaganda circulated through electronic media. While rightwing propaganda ensures that the majority community believes in the worst stereotypes and rumors about minorities, it is the nature of social media itself (structured by private capital) that ensures that everyone can remain in their own echo chambers. This means that even people with secular ideas that are critical of the state and private capital, can often continue to be vocal and have conversations without affecting or participating in the larger conversations.

Journalist Snigdha Poonam took a deep dive into understanding the changed mindsets of the Indian youth, focusing on their aspirations and the futures they wanted for themselves, in her book *Dreamers: How Young Indians Are Changing The World* (2018). In a chapter titled, “The Angry Young Men,” she writes about young men who are involved in propaganda and violence, working from within various militant outfits like the Bajrang Dal or cow protection gangs or at the local level of the BJP, based on her interviews and participant observation over an extended

period. What comes across clearly is how association with the rightwing groups gives agency to these young men. For example, she interviewed nineteen-year-old Arun Kumar, who was painfully shy of women. Kumar joined the Bajrang Dal and would violently attack couples seen in public spaces on Valentine's Day. Kumar was a social reject and Poonam writes that, "Before he knew it, Kumar was using the Bajrang Dal's badge to deal with situations as wide-ranging as poor school attendance and street fights. Everyone backed off. Or as he saw it: 'People give you izzat.'" (p. np)

But not all men involved with the rightwing groups are social outcasts. Poonam writes about Vikas Thakur, who belonged to the dominant upper caste Thakur community. He was using his position in the rightwing ecosystem to gain back what he thought was his rightful place in society i.e. at the top, that had been sullied by Dalit politics. Part of Thakur's agenda was to re-establish the traditional caste hierarchy and Poonam makes the connection between Thakur's agenda and the region's history of caste violence inflicted by the Thakur caste militia Ranveer Sena on Dalits and Muslims. Even though Vikas Thakur was from a dominant community, there was a sense of displacement at whatever little equity that the region's Left and Dalit politics had managed to bring. Here, Thakur's individualization was experienced by him as a displacement from the top – a loss of the traditional caste hierarchy (even though the Thakurs have never actually stopped being dominant). BJP's Hindutva agenda and its infamous propaganda machine, the BJP IT cell, gave Thakur the perfect chance to gain back control. Poonam writes,

Thakur was more interested in presenting himself as an ideological warrior. 'Earlier,' he said to me one day, 'politics was a polite term for *thekedari* (political fixing) and only a certain kind of person—rough, slimy—was drawn to it. But fulltime politics is coming out of a crisis of youth indifference. We are learning about the country's past and present,

about the power of narratives. We are coming up with our own findings.’

Here, “coming up with our own findings” i.e. forging one’s own narrative is what is empowering. It should be contrasted with, say, a personal feminist narrative which seeks to present a perspective which is traditionally ignored in society. The difference here, and it is also the difference between the understanding of reality by the Right and the Left, is that the feminist narrative would seek to add to a multiplicity of voices and perspectives and that would ultimately contribute to a richer understanding of reality. On the other hand, Vikas Thakur’s “findings” would only contribute to an all-encompassing fiction or conspiracy theory that claims to explain and eradicate all that is difficult.

In all such cases, there is a crisis of the individual vis-à-vis society. The problem is of finding one’s place in society, to understand one’s part in a totality. And this directly connects to the idea of the self as commodity – a commodity whose social character is hidden in a capitalist system. The view of the self as an isolated individual then facilitates the distorted ideas and narratives as emanating from the individual as their “own findings” instead of a narrative, a perspective that is constructed as the result of the relations that an individual has with others.

It is thus, the star or celebrity which becomes the template of the individual (or self-entrepreneur) who takes control of the narrative. This template, when applied to the rest of the society, has disastrous effects. The neoliberal project of individualization, which works by obscuring and effacing the social nature of human existence, and is therefore, a process of commodification of human beings, ultimately then leads to totalitarianism. But the obscuring of social reality by processes of capitalist abstraction does not mean that social reality itself vanishes. The totalitarian fiction needs a whole machinery of violence and propaganda to maintain itself. It started becoming increasingly clear that in such an unstable socio-political

climate in India, the tensions between the star/ celebrity commodity and the veridical self of the actor/ performer had started becoming unassimilable. A look at the political economy of stardom, within the context of the fascist society, shows that the same process which enabled such massive stardom/ celebrity, had proved to be its limit when taken to its extreme.

### **The Political Economy and Limits of Stardom**

*Assalam alaikum*, I am often asked nowadays, and probably you are also asked the same, about my opinion on terrorism. I find this question very strange because there can never be two opinions on terrorism. May be because I am Muslim, people want to ask this to me and make sure that my opinion is the same as theirs.

This was the beginning of Shah Rukh Khan's speech (2009) in the program "A Nation In Solidarity Against Terror" in Delhi in front of the India Gate on November 26, 2009 to commemorate and mourn the victims of the ghastly terror attacks in Mumbai carried out exactly a year before. The attacks had been carried out by ten individuals, who had been trained by Islamic terrorist group Lashkar-e-Taiba inside Pakistan and sent to India to carry out the attacks. The attacks shook the nation by its scale of violence, ferocity and unexpectedness and it also became a huge media event with some television channels broadcasting the attacks live even as they were still happening. The attacks sparked widespread public outrage and, aided by a changing and increasingly jingoistic media ecosystem, created a public bloodlust, concentrated on the desire for the hanging of Ajmal Kasab, the lone terrorist who was captured alive. The attacks also significantly deteriorated Indian-Pakistan relations and cast aspersions on the loyalty of Indian Muslims.

That Shah Rukh Khan chose to foreground his Muslim identity right at the beginning of the speech, shows that his superstardom was ceasing to remain immune from the communal

polarization of the country.<sup>28</sup> Some of his prominent film roles also point to an increasing tension of Khan's stardom with his Muslim identity. He had played the role of Kabir Khan in *Chake De! India / Let's Go! India* (Shimit Amin, 2007), a former hockey player and captain of the national hockey team. Kabir Khan failed to score in a penalty shootout in a World Cup match between India and arch rivals Pakistan and that led to India's loss. Kabir Khan's image was tarnished and his reputation damaged as he, a Muslim, was seen to have betrayed his country in a match against Pakistan, a Muslim nation. Khan then coaches a rag tag team of talented but underprepared girls - state level hockey players - to hockey World Cup success and thus, redeems himself.

Shah Rukh Khan also played the lead role of Rizwan Khan in the film *My Name Is Khan* (Karan Johar, 2010) which dealt with the issue of Islamophobia in the United States after the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. In the film, Rizwan Khan, a victim of Islamophobic violence, undertakes an epic journey across the United States to meet the US President and tell him that he is not a terrorist – “my name is Khan and I am not a terrorist,” and redeem his personal life, torn apart by this violence, in the process.

Khan had built a successful career out of playing roles of mostly affluent, upper caste, Hindu characters in traditional Hindi families in films such as *Dilwale Dulhaniya Le Jayenge*, *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai*, *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham*, *Kal Ho Naa Ho* etc. But his Muslim identity was “catching up” with him. Khan remained articulate about questions on his Muslim identity

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<sup>28</sup> The uneasy relationship of Hindi cinema with Muslims is not new at all. Several Muslim actors have had to change their names to hide their identity and adopt a normative Hindu identity to become more palatable to the Hindu audiences. These include popular stars such as Dilip Kumar (Yousuf Khan), Madhubala (Mumtaz Jehan Begum Dehlavi), Meena Kumari (Mahjabeen Bano) etc. In contrast, the three Khans marked an era where the top three male stars in the industry were all Muslim and did not have to hide their identity behind Hindu sounding names.

and in an article (2013) pointed out that his loyalty is often questioned and that he is often “accused of bearing allegiance to our neighboring nation rather than my own country,” quite like his character in *Chak De! India*. In an incisive sentence, Khan expressed his reducing sense of freedom in the contemporary political climate because of his religious identity:

We create little image boxes of our own. One such box has begun to draw its lid tighter and tighter at present. It is the box that contains an image of my religion in millions of minds.

Shah Rukh Khan received some backlash on Indian social media after the article was published with some of his detractors saying that he was using his minority card to stay relevant even after his prime as a star was over or he was tarnishing India’s image on an international stage (the article was initially published by *The New York Times*).

This kind of backlash to any form of dissent got intensified manifold after the Hindu fundamentalist BJP government came to power in 2014. Shah Rukh Khan gave an interview to journalist Rajdeep Sardesai, on his fiftieth birthday on November 2, 2015 (2015). This interview was also a Twitter town hall – with viewers asking questions to Khan via Twitter. In that interview, Sardesai asked Khan if he thought religious fundamentalism was on the rise in India. Khan skirted the issue and replied diplomatically that fundamentalism was on the rise in the whole world and attributed that to decreased patience in people in general. But he also added that anti-secular forces were keeping India from progressing and becoming a power to reckon with. But what created a furor on social media was Khan’s stating that there was growing intolerance in India. Later, in another event, he was asked about his opinion about the artists who had returned their National Awards in protest of government interference in the administration of the Film and Television Institute of India, Pune (FTII). Khan carefully tiptoed while answering the

question – he said that he supported the artists’ right to protest and demand for more creative freedom. But he reframed the debate on (in)tolerance saying that by tolerance he understood the ability of individuals to discuss and debate their differing points of view.

Even such a mild point of view attracted venomous responses from BJP ministers and members and other prominent public figures from the Hindu right-wing. Kailash Vijayvargiya, BJP General Secretary said even though Khan resided in India, his mind was in Pakistan and that he should move to Pakistan. Yogi Adityanath, then BJP Member of Parliament and later Chief Minister of the most populous state of India, Uttar Pradesh, compared Khan to a terrorist. Others called him an agent of the Congress party and called for him to return all the money that he had earned in India. These overwhelmingly acidic comments were also somewhat offset by ones that came in support of Khan. For example, Nalin Kohli, BJP spokesperson, said it was wrong to call Khan a terrorist and that he was a loved and respected citizen. (HT Correspondent, 2015) But this storm that was created over mild comments that merely acknowledged some problems in society showed that the times had changed and there were real limits to Khan’s stardom. The reactions were so fierce that Khan had to backtrack and say that his statements were misconstrued. (HT Correspondent, 2015)

Later that month, Aamir Khan, actor and another reigning superstar of the industry, said in an event that his wife (filmmaker and producer Kiran Rao) thought that in the past six to eight months, intolerance had grown in India and she was wondering whether she (and Aamir) should consider leaving the country in future. Aamir Khan said he was shocked and devastated to hear his wife’s opinions but also acknowledged that there was growing intolerance in the country. He said that people need a sense of security and that justice is needed for that sense. He also said that the justice system was not being able to deal with growing violence in the country.

(IndianExpressOnline, 2015)

These comments from Aamir Khan put him in the eye of a media and social media storm. Hindu Mahasabha<sup>29</sup>, a Hindu fundamentalist organization, put out a statement saying that Aamir Khan should move to Pakistan and he, along with the likes of Shah Rukh Khan should be charged with treason. (Bhatia, 2015) Some fellow actors from the industry also joined in the chorus of detractors. For example, Raveena Tandon, who was a top movie star in the 90s, and had worked with Aamir Khan in several films, tweeted on November 24, 2015:

Let's cut the BS-why can't these people openly say that they weren't happy since d day Modi became PM..instead of shaming the whole country (Tandon, 2015)

Aamir Khan's comments were conflated with an insult to India and that, in turn, was conflated with an opposition to BJP and Narendra Modi. The vehement backlash against Aamir Khan took the form of mass online trolling (or right-wing "activism") in which thousands of people downgraded the ratings of the app of Snapdeal, an online shopping store that Aamir Khan endorsed, to protest against his comments. Within two days, the Snapdeal app in Google Play store had received about ninety thousand one star ratings, the lowest possible. The backlash was strong enough to force Snapdeal to put out a statement distancing the company from Khan's statements. (Joshi S. , 2015) Snapdeal dropped Aamir Khan as their brand ambassador in January, 2016. BJP's IT cell, a unit formed to monitor and shape online conversations and a tool for image building, took the lead in forcing Snapdeal to drop Aamir Khan as their ambassador. Later, in July 2016, then Defence Minister Manohar Parikkar said at an event that a certain "actor" had been taught a lesson and hinted that the party flexed its muscle to cancel an

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<sup>29</sup> Hindu Mahasabha was the first proto-fascist Hindu fundamentalist organization formed in 1916, nine years before the formation of RSS

endorsement deal. (BS Web Team, 2016) Further, Aamir Khan was also dropped as the face of “Incredible India,” a global India tourism campaign run by the Ministry of Tourism. The authorities tried to quash speculations about whether this had something to do with Aamir Khan’s comments, by saying that the contract that the ministry had with the ad agency (McCann Worldwide) in charge of the campaign had expired and this was why Khan had stopped being the face of the campaign. (Venugopal, 2016) But there was tacit and careful acknowledgement from members of the state, like Parikkar, of the fact that the state will actively intervene and censor any dissent.

These events showed the material limits of stardom vis-à-vis the state ideology. The stardom of Shah Rukh Khan and Aamir Khan are industrial products that are tied in a web of economic relations that define the limits of their agency. In an interview given to Anupama Chopra (Film Companion, 2017), Shah Rukh Khan talked about the limits and nature of stardom (not in the context of political dissent) and said that whenever he does a film, inadvertently, he becomes “the leader of the pack in that film” and that “It becomes a Shah Rukh Khan film, whether I like (or) I don’t like it.” Even when the film is being made by a big production house (he named Red Chillies Entertainment and Excel Entertainment as examples), he still becomes the leader by default. Khan further said that when people worked with a big star such as himself, in different roles such as director, cameraman, music director, singer etc. they thought of that film as their career defining one. On what this meant to him, Khan said: “The responsibility weighs heavy on me. I don’t want to let anyone down... This is an affiliated job that I have to bear the responsibility of.”

Shah Rukh Khan exhibits a sharp sense of his star image as a brand and an employer, not just for himself (as in employing him), but also for several other people. The nature of the star

driven film industry is such that the industry itself is predicated on the preservation and thriving of the star image or brand. Walter Benjamin (1936) wrote, “The cult of the movie star, fostered by the money of the film industry, preserves not the unique aura of the person but the “spell of the personality, “the phony spell of a commodity.” As Benjamin put it, this commodity is the actor’s “reflected image” that is “separable, transportable” and infinitely reproduced in the market, and also sells other commodities in turn. In late stage capitalism, as in the case of Shah Rukh Khan, this commodity is not just the cause of “estrangement” for the actor but it has been institutionalized to such an extent that it controls the life of the actor but also others who essentially work for that commodity.

That these actors’ political agency is severely restricted by the fact that they are star images or brands or industrial commodities, is ultimately founded on the threat of violence. The effect of the loss of brand endorsements is minor as compared to the potential loss that the people working on the films, that are also star vehicles, might have to endure in the face of mob violence. Hindi cinema has a sordid history of the film industry caving in to the pressure and violence or the threat of violence from fundamentalist mobs who might have taken offence at something that the films (purportedly) contain. For example, the shooting of director Deepa Mehta’s film *Water* (2005), which was about the plight of widowed women in the conservative Hindu fold, was forcibly stopped, and the film sets were destroyed by Hindu fundamentalist mobs. Mehta had to relocate her shooting from the banks of river Ganges in North India to Sri Lanka.

Aamir Khan himself faced the wrath of mobs when his film *Fanaa/ Destroyed* (Kunal Kohli, 2006) was banned from Gujarat. He had made some critical remarks on how Narendra Modi, then Chief Minister of Gujarat, had handled the construction of the massive Narmada Dam

that would displace thousands of people through flooding. Irate mobs ensured that his film was not released in Gujarat and the sole theater that ran his film was forced to take it off after a man self-immolated in the theater in protest. (TNN, 2006)

After Shah Rukh Khan came under fire for commenting on intolerance in 2015, he expressed his frustration on practically being gagged by this threat. He compared the grim situation in India with the United States and said, “America with all its issues and non-issues has slightly more leeway.” Commenting on his inability to join the artists who returned their awards, or take a more strong stance, he said that if his film is stopped on a Friday it would impact the lives of many. “It’s not a cop out, I’m being honest,” Khan voiced his frustration. (Images Staff, 2015) His next release, *Dilwale/ The Large-hearted* (Rohit Shetty, 2015) faced problems upon its release as there were protests from Hindu fundamentalist groups - “Hindu *Sena*” (Hindu Army), *Bharatiya Janata Yuva Morcha/ Indian People Youth Front* (BJYM) in different parts of the country. Even though some theaters were forced to cancel some shows, the problem was mitigated by Khan’s apologies. (HT Correspondent, 2015)

The limitations of the star were also apparent when Salman Khan visited Gujarat (which is the state next to Maharashtra, of which Mumbai is the capital) to promote his film *Jai Ho/ Let There Be Victory* (Sohail Khan, 2014) and spent the kite-flying festival *uttarayan* with Modi in January, 2014. The event was much publicized as a tacit endorsement of Modi by Khan for the upcoming elections later in May that year. Khan had a lot of praise for Modi’s work in Gujarat but stopped short of an endorsement, emphasizing on his apolitical persona. Khan was still embroiled in legal battles at that time with fresh hearings being awaited on his cases. He was also seen to be associating with other political powers such as the Congress, the Samajwadi Party, the Aam Aadmi Party etc. to remain in their good books.

In this case, the pressures on Salman Khan were both in terms of his personal future regarding the alleged illegal acts that he had committed and the future of big budget films and the people and production houses associated with them. Part of the clout and influence of Salman Khan was the industry's eagerness to bail him out of the legal quagmire so that they could earn or recover the money that had been invested in his star persona. Salman Khan had not been vocal about political opinions like the other two Khans, but this highly visible event was perceived as him ingratiating himself to Modi and the BJP, as it was becoming evident that the "Modi wave" was powerful and the BJP was set to win the May elections. (Figure 5.2)



Figure 5.2: Salman Khan flying kites with Narendra Modi to celebrate Hindu festival *uttarayan* in January, 2014 (Photo taken from <https://www.indiatoday.in/elections/photo/narendra-modi-salman-khan-kite-flying-ahmedabad-bjp-pm-race-371390-2014-01-14> found through Google Images)

Similarly, Amitabh Bachchan also ingratiated himself to the BJP establishment and Modi even before the 2014 elections, even though he had been close to the Congress establishment

throughout his life. Bachchan became the brand ambassador of tourism of Modi's state, Gujarat, in 2011. The successful tourism campaign has featured a series of advertisements over the years, featuring Bachchan, which showcase Gujarat's attractions with a focus on the state's religious heritage. Even though the campaign showcased the state's natural geography and wildlife, a significant part of it went behind establishing it as the "blessed land" or "holy land."

Stardom itself is a product of commodification by the market. The limits of stardom, defined by the market and the increasing polarization of the society, were apparent earlier but were enforced more firmly in the increasingly fascist state. Further, I show in the next section that the cinema star power, which can create narratives and control the reality of many lives (both directly associated with it or otherwise) through those narratives, was increasingly controlled and used by the fascist state. This, I argue, has only accentuated the general star driven nature of the society where, paradoxically, both the power and the limits of stardom are heightened. The taming of the stars and the deployment of their star power in the service of the official ideology is indicative of a model of governance which is driven by celebrity and spectacle. The dual characteristics of the subservience of the film stars (also, from other walks of life such as sports) and the accentuation of the star driven nature of society meant that a hierarchy of stars emerged in which the supreme leader (Prime Minister Narendra Modi) became the ultimate star (defined the horizon of stardom) – the one star to rule them all.

### **Modi's Personality Cult – One Star to Rule Them All**

BJP had constructed its election campaign in 2014 centering Narendra Modi as their prime ministerial candidate. This was a move away from the party's usual collegial character and a sidelining of the party's more senior leaders. (Jaffrelot, 2015, p. 157) It should be noted that Modi's relative autonomy from the RSS and BJP was largely due to him being the first prime

ministerial contender who was the preferred candidate of almost all corporate magnates (Ahmad, 2019) and that explains the outsized focus and reliance on Modi's personality for electoral success. The election campaign was relying on Modi's image that had been built over the past decade and a half. Modi had been the Chief Minister of the state of Gujarat from 2001, having won the state level elections thrice. Gujarat under Modi's administration, was touted as the model of development (the "Gujarat model") that the other states of India needed to follow and Modi was carefully built up by BJP's PR machinery as the "development man" (*vikas purush*). While the success of the Gujarat model was advertised successfully across the country, a closer look at the nature of that success paints a different picture. As Christophe Jaffrelot (2013) shows, Modi's policies benefited the urban middle-class more than everyone else, Gujarat was ranked tenth out of twenty-one states in the Human Development Index because rural groups were lagging far behind, and that "...development has meant socio-economic polarization, because Gujarat is a typical case of growth without development for all." (p. 87) Also, research has shown that the development of Gujarat was hyped by showing it as especially enhanced during Modi's administration and ahead of other states, both of which were untrue. (Ghatak & Roy, 2014)

On the other hand, Modi was also infamous for his role as Chief Minister, in the 2002 communal pogrom in Gujarat, in which more than a thousand people were killed, mostly Muslims, and thousands more injured and rendered homeless. Unofficial figures were much higher. The police, under Modi's control, remained inactive while Hindu mobs run amok and killed Muslims and destroyed their property. Also, there were widespread reports about active police complicity and even participation in the riots. (Human Rights Watch, 2002) Modi's popularity grew after the riots. The riots were a way to mobilize and consolidate, in his favor, the

Hindu constituencies against Muslims.

Even though such a massive pogrom was conducted under his watch as Chief Minister, Modi neither apologized nor took responsibility for the inhuman carnage, that was particularly brutal on women and children. (Sarkar T. , 2002) Contrary to a mountain of evidence that proved that the violence was planned and organized, Modi projected it as spontaneous and a reaction to injustice done to Hindus. And with the infinitely stretchable idea of revenge in the Gujarat violence, as Sarkar explains, revenge and retribution entered the mainstream political discourse and became commonsense. Untold human suffering was gloated and smirked over, and Hindutva managed to invent victimhood (or distort existing problems) and establish its brand of sadistic politics through the methodology of violent revenge. Instead of being a liability, the carnage became Modi's triumph card.

BJP's 2014 election campaign projected Modi as "...the expression of Gujarat *asmita*<sup>30</sup>, Hindu nationalism and an untiring (his word in the victory speech) search for development." (Palshikar, 2012) as quoted in (Jaffrelot, 2013)) The communalism was part of the Hindutva right-wing agenda and in a severely underdeveloped India, governed by a corrupt Congress (part of the United Progressive Alliance or UPA) government for ten years,<sup>31</sup> the promise of development had a special appeal. Modi had also styled his image as someone who gets things done. The narrative of Modi being the CEO of Gujarat rather than the Chief Minister was made popular. Modi contrasted himself and his style of functioning to that of the Congress. He was

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<sup>30</sup> *asmita* is a word in Gujarati, Hindi and other Indian languages and stands for pride, vanity, identity

<sup>31</sup> The UPA government was characterized by huge scams worth billions of dollars such as the Coal scam, 2G scam, Commonwealth Games scam etc.

portrayed as business friendly, drawing directly from his Gujarati heritage, the Gujarati community being known for its business acumen and enterprising nature. On the other hand, the Congress was portrayed as the grand old *sarkari* (official/ governmental) institution, was plagued by red tape, corruption and dynasty politics.

Modi also made machismo and bravado part of his appeal. Manmohan Singh, Prime Minister for two terms before Modi, was mocked by Modi as both weak and effeminate. Modi mocked Manmohan Singh by calling him “Maun-mohan,” *maun* meaning ‘silent.’ (PTI, 2012) Here, the implications were that Singh was silent when he should be commenting on the dire straits that the country was in, and that he was weak (as in not having a voice of his own) because he was controlled by a woman (Sonia Gandhi, was party president).<sup>32</sup> This is what Nitasha Kaul (2017, p. 524) has defined as “a systematic projection of the mythology of a new kind of leader who acts in an emotive realm of politics.” It is this emotive realm of politics in which Modi talked of development in terms of his machismo, taunting opponent politician Mulayam Singh Yadav from Uttar Pradesh, and said that to be able to develop Uttar Pradesh like Gujarat, one needs to have a 56-inch chest. (Srivastava & Bano, 2014)

The aura about Modi as being a decisive leader who cuts through bureaucratic red tape, and statements like the one about his “56-inch chest” tied the narrative of development to his persona, and even to his body. This rhetorical maneuver, built through careful image management, meant that Modi was projected as personally doing the work of development (*vikas purush*) and even, taking history forward. The BJP election campaign in 2014 meticulously

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<sup>32</sup> Sonia Gandhi is the widow of former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi. She was projected as a Prime Ministerial candidate for the 2004 elections but there was vehement opposition (primarily from the BJP) over her Italian birth.

iterated the story of how Modi was from a poor background and used to sell tea as a kid at a railway platform (Vadnagar). Though there are serious doubts about the veracity of this claim, this trope of success and the promise of social mobility that it conveyed, has stuck to Modi's persona ever since. Much like a movie star's persona built through playing characters in different films (Amitabh Bachchan's "angry young man" persona who takes charge of his compromised life through masculine agency), Modi's persona was built up as one who came from humble origins but was now carrying the burden of a country's (or a civilization's) progress.

Modi's body, in his star image, is a site of complex caste configurations. Even though he projects himself as belonging to an OBC caste, possibly to expand the Hindutva base among lower castes (a project which has met with some success), it is alleged that his OBC status is just on the basis of a certificate. Modi is from the traditional business/ trading caste Baniya. (Ilaiah Shepherd, 2020) According to Ilaiah, Modi's "support base of monopoly Bania capital is unparalleled." Journalist Saba Naqvi (2018) has argued that there were other BJP leaders in other states that were contenders for the top Prime Ministerial position but Modi won the race because he could bring the advantage of immense capital backing his political journey.

The Baniya caste, though financially powerful, is a trading community and would not be at the top of the *varna* system. Moreover, Modi himself projects that he is OBC and that he has come from humble origins of a tea-seller. So, how does he manage to project a subaltern image while sitting at the top of a political formation BJP which is essentially the political front of a fiercely Brahminical, supremacist organization that is RSS?

While Modi's era of stardom and spectacle, and projected subaltern appeal, is a new chapter in the history of the RSS, he also balances the puritanical, Brahminical masculine character of the RSS through the projection of his celibate masculinity. He was widely known to

be a bachelor until it was revealed that he was married to Jashodaben Chimanlal Modi. They got married when Narendra Modi was 17 and he left her immediately after their wedding as he was forced into the marriage by his family and he was also sworn into a vow of celibacy by RSS, of which he was a member. On being asked, Jashodaben said she did not resent her estranged husband because he followed his path and that she thought of him as Lord Ram and followed him whenever he appeared on television as he was her husband after all. (Oza, 2018)

Modi has repeatedly projected his single status as the reason for his being incorruptible. But the likely message that goes out to the millions of men, trained in various schools (*shakhas* or branches) run by the RSS, is that he is not just single but also celibate. For example, Shan Ghosh in *Being Bhaijaan* mentions Modi, along with BJP leader and former PM Atal Bihari Vajpayee, as men whose celibacy has bestowed greatness upon them. So, the information about Modi's marriage and estrangement would be perceived as proof of his resolve and commitment to celibacy. Uma Chakravarti (2000), in her analysis of the television serial *Chanakya* (Chandraprakash Dwivedi, 1991-92) argues that Chanakya, the political and economic thinker, a Hindu Machiavelli of sorts, was presented as a Hindutva hero who was the first man to have a national consciousness, or who was the founder of the Hindu nation. The exalted status of Chanakya came from his celibacy or *brahmacharya*. Chakravarti writes,

Throughout the serial Chanakya's face literally glows with tejas, the quality that comes with complete sexual control. Further, the status of a man who has renounced reproduction and the creation of a family is unimpeachable. Nothing will drag him down since such a figure has no family ties and no irresponsible and corrupt progeny to defend him from his path of virtuous action. (p. 258)

Similarly, Modi's claim to celibacy makes him unimpeachable and this fundamentally because,

as Joseph S Alter argues, the equating of semen with truth. Through the transformation of semen, the material basis of truth, into higher qualities of virility and nobility, and also a strong body (“56 inch chest”), Modi lays his claim to be the nation’s hero. Celibacy thus gives Modi a special claim to historical truth.

Chakravarti shows that Chanakya is shown to be a master manipulator, engaging in realpolitik. But because of Chanakya’s unquestionable status of being a truthful Brahmin, his means of manipulation are subsumed under his noble ends of national revival. Even though Modi is not a Brahmin, he can lay claim to Brahminical truth through his celibacy and like Chanakya, his lies and shameless manipulation of identity groups against each other, or obviously bad policy moves, is touted as “masterstrokes” or *Chanakya-neeti* (Chanakya policy).

The key success of Modi has been his manipulative ability to both abdicate the responsibility of governance (i.e. to ensure that the government is providing at least the key welfare services to the citizens) and also, take credit for development. This is possible by seamlessly shifting registers when talking about the people and himself. The sleight of hand is that Modi makes himself the protagonist of a success story that is at once individual and collective. This was on full display in a town hall style event in London at the Central Westminster Hall in April, 2017. Modi, who has not attended a single press conference during his tenure as Prime Minister, attended the event that was a carefully created grand spectacle, with advertising professional and Hindi film songwriter, Prasoon Joshi interviewing him in Hindi amidst “people of the country” – in London! This was a completely managed event with pre-selected guests attending the event, pre-selected list of people in the audience with approved questions, with the event being interspersed with carefully created videos, showcasing achievements of the Modi government, played on the giant screen behind Modi and Joshi.

A completely pliant and subservient Joshi began the interview by asking Modi how he felt about his life's journey from a railway platform to the royal palace (Modi had met the queen in his visit to the UK). Modi replied that the journey was not only his but also of 1.25 billion Indians. Later in the interview, Modi said that it is the government's job to connect people. He added that democracy is not a contract agreement on which one puts one's stamp and forgets about till the next election arrives. Modi said that he believed in "participative democracy" (he used the words in English) where people do the work and do not wait for the government to do everything (and that the government can be an obstacle at times). Explaining what he meant by that, he said that in case of a natural calamity, solutions are found when the society participates more than the government. Modi also gave the example of building toilets in India and said that the government program was a success only because people participated in it.

These examples of Modi asking people to join in the development project ("I believe in Team India," he said in the same interview) or the nation building project is characteristic of a neoliberal government which withdraws from all sectors of public welfare but couches the abdication of responsibility in the rhetoric of reduction of government interference. But Modi again tied this to his personal self. Speaking about himself in the third person, Modi said,

Modi is necessary because if they want to throw stones at someone, throw trash at someone or abuse someone, who will they do that with? I am glad that no one is throwing stones, trash or abusing my 125-crore<sup>33</sup> fellow Indians. I alone bear this for them.

The "they" in this statement is the constant threat or the enemy that Modi claims to be

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<sup>33</sup> A crore is equal to ten million

protecting the people of the country against, but what constitutes the threat or the identity of the enemy keeps changing according to context. At various points in the interview, Modi talked about the Congress (hinted at them by slyly mentioning dynasties), “critics” who level allegations against him in bad faith, people who “have made terrorism an industry” (direct reference to Pakistan) etc.

The fiction that the totalitarian regime creates needs constant enemies to bind it together. And the presence of constant threat creates the need for constant security. In this interview, Modi brought up Pakistan many times as a threat, directly and indirectly, and asserted India’s right to protect itself. While Modi, during his tenure, has managed to create a bogeyman out of Pakistan (and Bangladesh), the threat is not always a well-defined foreign country. Mark Neocleous (2008) explained that the security state emerged in the post-World War II United States, to ensure the “protection and expansion of capital” (p. 96) and that “national security...postulates the interrelatedness of so many different internal political, economic and social factors that virtually nothing is beyond its concern.” (p. 111)

Modi’s regime took charge of a country already reeling under structural inequality caused by the previous neoliberal governments and exacerbated the processes of capital accumulation and extraction, further worsening the inequality and pushing the economy towards a dead end. “Protection and expansion of capital” thus became imperative for the neoliberal regime and a security state was needed to protect capital’s edifice, which then gradually came to define all sectors of life and society. But in India, Modi made everything about himself. After there was a terrorist attack in a town called Pulwama in Kashmir in 2019, presumably by terrorists trained in

camps in Pakistan, India retaliated by conducting airstrikes in Balakot, Pakistan<sup>34</sup>. Speaking at a public rally after the retaliatory airstrikes (Hindustan Times, 2019), Modi attacked those who questioned India's claims about the retaliation and said that "they" do not want Modi to bring up India's security or talk about terrorism. Then he threw rhetorical questions to the audience, referring to himself in third person,

Should Modi keep quiet? Should Modi be afraid of the terrorists? Friends, the values that are there in this watchman of yours are not of being afraid.

Claiming to take up the responsibility of the nation's security upon himself, Modi started referring to himself as *chowkidar* (watchman) in the months preceding the 2019 central elections. He changed his Twitter name to "Chowkidar Narendra Modi" and asked all BJP members and his supporters to add "chowkidar" before their social media names, thus, conflating the question of national security and support for him and his party. The move went viral on social media and the issue of security ultimately proved to be the winning formula in the elections.

The key aspect of the right-wing BJP government's hegemonic project was to equate any opposition or dissent or criticism as being against the nation ("anti-national" became a buzzword in media debates after 2014), and being against the nation was being against Modi (and vice-versa). So, any project or mission that Modi undertook was automatically understood to be geared towards nation-building.

### **Modi as the Ultimate Commodity and the Artifice of Celebrity**

The incredible popularity and stardom of Modi meant that his outsized presence not only changed his party's style of collegial politics, but has also been undermining the federal structure

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<sup>34</sup> The claims about the damages caused by the airstrikes have been refuted by Pakistan and independent sources have expressed their doubts

of Indian politics. Both the 2014 and 2019 Lok Sabha (central) elections were fought by the BJP keeping Modi at the center of their campaign, turning India's parliamentary elections into American style presidential popularity contests. This means that instead of voting for the suitable candidate from one's constituency, many people voted for the BJP candidate based on Modi's popularity. The media has been duly calling it the "Modi wave." BJP has also used Modi's popularity to contest and win state level and even municipal elections!

Not only has the political structure been made to collapse into the star image of Modi, the Hindutva propaganda machinery, including Modi himself, has been equating him with the country itself. As I showed from the excerpts from his interview and speeches, Modi (very often talking about himself in the third person) equates himself with the nation, the people and sometimes with history itself. If commodification and fetishization is the obscuring of the socially useful labor, and pure celebrity is an advanced expression of fetishism, then Modi is the ultimate commodity and the ultimate celebrity. His constantly referring to himself in the third person is an unconscious acknowledgment of the existence of Brand Modi. One can recall Shah Rukh Khan's comment on him being employed by Brand SRK, which acknowledged the uneasy relationship between the actor and the brand/ star/ celebrity. This is something that surfaced when SRK, the actor, trained in his craft, educated in a public system, raised with certain educated middle-class values including secularism, tried to speak up.

But in case of Modi, it is hard to separate a veridical self from the brand that has been created. Every single detail that we know of Modi's life, his childhood in poverty, his low caste status, his job of a tea-seller as a kid, his education details, his adventures and so on, have either been proven false or at least disputed. His stories of using a digital camera or email when digital cameras and email facilities were not available in India or his story of having climbed Mt.

Kailash wearing flip-flops on a whim, are obviously ridiculous. But all these lies fall apart only when one is trying to make them fit into different parts of a veridical self – an actual human being. But these snippets of information make sense only when they are used in the service of the brand. The tea-seller story was used to great effect to establish his plebian origins. The digital camera and email stories served to make Modi appear a lifelong tech savvy person. Similarly, the Mt. Kailash story was used to establish his image as a *fakir* (a religious ascetic).

All this proven misinformation about his life, his constant lies regarding his promises, policies, knowledge of history (it can be safely said that Modi never speaks any truth), and the obviously fake acts that he puts up in his public performances (crying, hugging, washing feet of sanitation workers) begs the question – why do people keep voting for him and in his name? While it would be true that several people probably still believe in him, there is no way a vast number continue to believe him when Modi's artifice is clear as daylight. I think this can be understood by looking at Modi, the star, as a commodity, especially, a financial one. Barry King wrote about the increased importance of the film star with respect to uncertainty,

...the intensified focus on the star, denoted by terms such as *superstar*, is a function of increased market uncertainty. As in financial markets, where derivatives have emerged as a new imaginary money form, stars function to guarantee the flow of investment by reducing uncertainty among those “risking” funds on a future outcome. Such money derivatives exist to nurture trust among those offering and those taking a gamble and, as such, are believed to intrinsically guarantee value. (2010, p. 13)

The role of uncertainty is crucial here. Decades of neoliberal reforms have meant that life is precarious and the future is uncertain. Just as the stars guarantee return of investment in fickle and notoriously hard to predict film industries, Modi stands for the mitigation of risk in an

uncertain and precarious life.

But this still does not explain why people would trust Modi. Here, I would like to connect the element of uncertainty and risk with the divisive ideology of Hindutva. Extreme precarity and uncertainty act as reactionary forces as they help cut through solidarities. Economic impoverishment has been the fertile ground to turn one community against another. Hindutva has used it to fragment societies of different regions by playing up caste, religion, linguistic differences, ethnicity etc. The impoverishment and uncertainty under neoliberalism encourages people to think of life as a zero-sum game where one's gains (or even survival) is dependent on the others not getting those. This is an extreme form of competition too. Expressions of this worldview occurred when lockdowns were announced across the world and people stockpiled necessary items excessively knowing fully well that they are causing shortage for others. Now, if the fear of the "other" taking away my bit of resources is used by the rightwing along existing fault lines of identity conflicts, it becomes the perfect recipe for sectarian strife. The BJP and Modi promised the majority of the people that they would take care of their enemies. For this, they also kept creating the permanent danger of enemies, like Pakistan, Bangladesh, Muslims (for the Hindu majority) etc. So, for the majority who believed that Modi would take care of their interest, at the expense of others, supported him.

But the success of Modi and the right-wing was to be able to convince different identity and interest groups that it was they, and not others, that the party was supporting. Isolation, segmentation (very much like market segmentation), and focused targeting of communication let BJP win over even lower caste vote banks that have been traditionally excluded from RSS's supremacist worldview. Here, often the trick is to be able to convince people that their "others" are being taken care of without actually articulating how that would benefit them.

The success of demonetization, at least in the short run, branded as a “masterstroke” by the mainstream media, but an unmitigated disaster by all parameters (Ghosh, Chandrasekhar, & Patnaik, 2017), can be partly explained by this. Addressing a huge crowd in a public rally<sup>35</sup>, almost a month after he had announced demonetization, Modi said the following things, which reveal the cynical con game in which he made the people believe they were in on the game with him. I am presenting some excerpts from his speech:

*(kuchh log toh gareebon ke payr pakadte hain. arre tum toh kitne achchhe ho, tere dada mere yahan mazdoori karte the, teri maa mere yahan bartan saaf karti thi. arre tum toh bahut achchhe ho...dekho bachche bade ho gaye hain. aisa karo mera yeh 2-3 lakh rupaye tumhare khate mein daal do)*

Some people are falling at the feet of the poor saying things like “Oh you are so good! Your grandfather used to work at my place, your mother used to clean utensils at my place...you are so good...oh the kids have grown up! Okay do one thing...put these 2-3 lakh rupees of mine in your account.

*(main desh ke sab hi general account wale gareebon ko kehna chahta hoon...jisne bhi aap ko paisa diya hai, jiska bhi paisa aapne bank mein rakha hai woh uthaiye mat (loud cheer) ek rupiya mat uthaiye usmein se...dekhaye woh aap ke ghar roz chakkar katega, aap ke payr pakdega par aap usko kuchh mat kaho...aye dadagiri mat kar nahin ko modi ko chitthi likhta hoon (cheers)...zyada dadagiri kare toh poochho...saboot lao)*

I want to tell all the general account holding poor people of the country...whoever has

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<sup>35</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MNgqVeYkYns>

given you money or kept money in your bank...do not withdraw that money (loud cheer from the crowd). Do not withdraw a single rupee. You will see how he will frequent your house, will fall at your feet. But you don't have to tell him much...just say that "Don't bully me or else I will write a letter to Modi" (loud cheer from the crowd) If they bully too much, ask them for proof (that they had given you the money)

*(dimaag laga raha hoon abhi...main dimag khapa raha hoon...ki gareeb ke khaate mein jinhone gair kanooni tareeke paisa daala hai woh jaye jail mein aur gareeb ke khate mein jaye woh rupiya)*

I am racking my brain to figure out a way so that the ones who have illegally put money in the poor people's accounts go to jail and the money gets to the poor people's accounts

Demonetization was purported to be an attack on black money. So, the narrative that BJP promulgated was that rich people with ill-gotten money, stored in cash that would now become useless, would be afraid to go to the bank in fear of getting caught with unaccounted money. So, they would ask poor people to deposit the money in their accounts and later ask them to withdraw it when the government issued new currency notes.

There might have been instances when this had happened but the idea was to make people believe that this was happening with (other) poor people. Modi's use of the images of domestic labor (grandfather and mother being servants) invoked a sense of indignity that is a fact of life for most people in India, making it personal and real for them. Modi's asking them to then not return the money and keep it for themselves, was his open invitation to them to commit scam. But it would be a righteous scam because it would be the poor scamming the rich. Modi also provided the image of the rich begging for their money, thus giving a sense of righteous

justice against generational indignity. And crucially, he also tied it up with his own authority (write a letter to Modi) as the one who will guarantee that the scam works!

One can say that despite criticism, Modi's image did not suffer any major dent as BJP won the state elections three months later in Uttar Pradesh, India's most populous and politically crucial state, in a landslide using Modi as their campaign's centerpiece. Assessing the effects of demonetization after a year it was announced, IndiaSpend reported that despite disastrous effects on all aspects of life, poor people in rural Maharashtra continued to support Modi. The report quoted Ambika Kumbhar, a small shop owner who had suffered major losses, "I have been so angry, but what can we do? We just have to let it go. The effect is not as much on us as it would be on richer people." (Saldanha, 2017) Clearly, the sense of agency and fulfillment from the sense that she was scamming the rich along with Modi, outweighed her losses.

## **CONCLUSION**

Thus, we have an entire system of celebrities in the now advanced stage of neoliberal capitalism, that is borne out of individualization and reinforces it in turn. The self-entrepreneur idea of individual leads to commodification of the self at a social level. While the celebrity is the ultimate fetish object, it leads to disastrous effects at lower rungs of society. The self-commodification leads to radical isolation of individuals where meaningful human relations, communal ties, solidarities are destroyed. What takes over is a cynicism, life understood as an expression of instrumental rationality where the individual self is served at the expense of the social i.e. at the expense of others. I have tried to understand this instrumental rationality through the study of India's prime minister Modi as a celebrity and the financialization of politics. This understanding of politics and life as a continuous process of survival by mitigating risk and uncertainty by scamming others is the ultimate expression of neoliberal individualism. This

phenomenon explains the widespread corruption inherent in the increasingly right leaning society and the explosion of scam culture.

I think this marks a fundamental shift in film stardom and the star-fan relationship too. While the stars that first rose in the film industry were the results of capitalist relations of production anyway, contemporary stardom and its turning to celebrity is structured by financial capitalism. Though it would be difficult to empirically establish, the nature of fandom has perceptibly changed. While rivalries between fans of different stars is not uncommon, the rivalries between fans of Bollywood stars often revolve around box-office figures. Rather than comparing acting skills, dancing or action skills, good looks or voice and other attributes, fans fight over which star has earned more money at the box-office. There are entire heated conversations online around fan rivalry that do not even mention all these attributes and just talk money. It is like investors eagerly following and wanting the value of the stock they invested in, to go up. Money talk and the jargon of film trade has come to dominate conversations around stars. The “100-crore club” became a status symbol - when films, featuring big stars, earned more than 100 crore (1 billion) rupees at the box-office, they were anointed members of this club, by film trade analysts as well fans.

While the film star was always a risk mitigating factor, the turn towards celebrity meant that the “presence” of the star/celebrity was distributed across various media and platforms and the film was reduced to just one of the products in the financial portfolio. Ashis Rajadhyakshya (2007) had already argued that the Bollywoodization of the film industry meant that cinema was becoming one of the many products of the culture industry. But this process of financialization has gone so far and the celebrity has been worn so thin on so many platforms, that there is a gradual decline of aura. Fanaticism around stars surely exists but a shift in fan behavior is that

rather than the love and adulation for the star, it is the value that the star brings to the fan's own narrative, their project of self-commodification that defines fandom. And I think this marks the end of the film star as we know it, defined by the rise of this parasitic, conman, pure celebrity exemplified by Modi.

## CHAPTER 6

### CONCLUSION: MAKING LIFE THROUGH PROTEST: CARE AND LOVE AS BULWARK AGAINST FASCISM

*Atmanirbhar* (or self-reliant) is Modi's key word and the anchor of the ruthless withdrawal of social welfare during his tenure as Prime Minister (although he just comes in the line of a process on going since the 1980s). He called upon the country to practice *atmanirbharta* (self-reliance) as he announced the lockdown due to Covid-19. As jobs shut down, the most marginalized found themselves without food, money, or medicine -- leading to a mass migration of workers from the cities to their villages, not seen since the Partition.

But Modi managed the debacle by offering an empty but powerful spectacle. Responding to Modi's call to the nation, people came out in their balconies to bang their utensils at an anointed time to "cheer for healthcare workers" and on another occasion, lit candles to scare away the evil of the Coronavirus. Commenting on Modi's handling of the real physical threat of the pandemic on a mythical plane and turning administration into pure theater, Brahma Prakash wrote for *The Wire* (2020),

People loved the spectacle because it neither asks you to reveal your beliefs nor conviction towards the act. It has nothing to do with the affirmation or the authenticity of the concerns at hand. Rather, it can be argued that spectacle has completed its colonisation of social and political life. These rituals serve various purposes – except what they claim to stand for.

A friend of mine, an ardent admirer of Modi, wrote a seemingly heartfelt message on

Facebook on how he felt like he was cheering for India after a long time (alluding to cheering during cricket matches) and even though it may not mean much with regards to the actual pandemic, it felt good to be a part of a collective cheering. It was like being a part of history making.

This faux community, without any sense of solidarity or genuine care for each other, is the other side of the radicalized individualism imposed by capitalistic relations and celebrated by its ideology. As Prakash points out, all the cheering for healthcare workers was followed by attacks on them, or their evictions by their landlords, in different parts of the country, as they were perceived to be carriers of the virus and hence, a threat. The idea in capitalism that an individual is a self-sustaining unit whose sole purpose is their own survival and prosperity, ultimately weakens the bonds of responsibility and care for each other. And this happens in the name of freedom, which is the same distorted idea of freedom that Marx (1867 (1999)) talks about, as freedom in the “double sense” where a free laborer is free to sell their labor-power to the capitalist but cannot work nor sustain/ reproduce their labor-power unless employed by capital. The freedom in capitalism is the freedom to die.

However, even as capitalism colonizes every aspect of life and turns it into capital, it requires some aspects to survive so that labor, which ultimately is the source of value, can sustain itself (social reproduction in Marxist terms). For example, capital needs some form of education to survive, even if it is just technical education in a limited sense, so that it can employ capable workers, or healthcare and nutrition (no matter how privatized and deflated) so that the workers can at least stay alive. But this inherent contradiction in capitalism cannot be resistance enough. In fact, I would argue that neoliberalism is that form of capitalism which does not keep provisions for its own perpetuation. Unlike, say, the Keynesian New Deal in the United States,

which made large concessions to labor and oversaw redistribution of wealth within a capitalist system, neoliberalism is just savage plunder without checks and balances. Therefore, neoliberalism is giving rise to fascist cultures across the globe which rely on imagined, false, mythic pasts to deal with the terrifying insecurities of the present and completely lack any vision of the future. Now, with the threat of environmental disaster and planetary destruction looming large, one can say that neoliberalism is humanity's giant death wish.

### **The Fightback Against Fascism – India Finds Its Soul in Protest**

In India, the neoliberal and fascist BJP government (and the Hindutva right, in general) has been able to hack the liberal democratic system - buying out mainstream media to mold perception and understanding of reality, maneuvering elections through violence, cheating or simply buying members of the opposition parties, infiltrating all higher institutions of the judiciary, administration and education, and mostly importantly, fragmenting and restructuring society through indoctrination and violence. Even though there have been dissidents and critics, the government met its first nationwide mass resistance in 2019 after it passed the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), which mandates that refugees from the neighboring countries of Pakistan, Bangladesh and Afghanistan who are Hindu, Jain, Sikh, Buddhist, Christian, Parsi will have the opportunity to apply for citizenship in India. This conspicuously excluded Muslims. The government had also started rolling out the projects of the National Register of Citizens (NRC) and National Population Register (NPR), two nightmarishly gigantic and extensive bureaucratic projects to determine the citizenship status of the people in the country. People quickly figured out that when put in effect in conjunction, these projects would be used to exclude minorities (primarily Muslims) and be a step in the direction of a Hindu-only nation (Hindu *rashtra*). Reports of detention camps being built in Assam (a state in North-Eastern

India) added to the concerns. In fact, the home minister Amit Shah, widely acknowledged as the mastermind behind these programs, himself hinted at this, using the rhetoric of driving out the “infiltrators.”

This attracted massive protests across the country. Different kinds of processions and rallies were taken out under the banners of various organizations. Some of them were put out by opposition political parties but the overwhelming majority were the people of the country coming out to protest - students, different labor and trade unions, different citizens’ collectives of the civil society etc. cutting across lines of religion, caste, gender, ethnicity.

I went to an anti-CAA/NRC/NPR protest on December 19, 2019 in Kolkata which had thousands of people participating. The protest march consisted of several organizations with their banners with hundreds to thousands of people under each banner. The organizations were as diverse as sporting clubs, local trade associations, women’s associations, teachers’ unions, tailor’s associations, Facebook groups formed on the basis of the protest etc. (I walked under the banner of the ex-students of Jadavpur University, my alma mater). Most people, however, joined in their individual capacity. And this protest march was only one of the six big protests marches that had been taken out that day in Kolkata. It seemed as if the entire city was out on the streets. Such huge gathering of people demonstrating against the government happened in cities and towns across India. The protests saw an outpouring of poetry, music, humor, and sharp political commentary – all committed towards the idea of a secular India.



Figure 6.1: Protest poster saying “*jab Hindu Muslim razi/ kya karega Nazi*” (when Hindu and Muslim agree, what can the Nazi do) playing on the popular Urdu phrase “*jab miyan biwi razi/ toh kya karega qazi*” (when husband and wife consent/ what can the priest do) (Photo taken from <https://twitter.com/aktalkies/status/1207637710980014081>)

Though the protests started as a demonstration against CAA, NRC and NPR, the connections between different kinds of oppressions under the fascist regime were quickly established. For example, when Narendra Modi visited Kolkata in early January, 2020, a group of women joined the larger protest (that were happening daily by that time) and performed the Bengali version of the Chilean anti-rape feminist performance piece *Un violador en tu camino/ The Rapist in Your Path* (also known as *The Rapist is You*), titled *Dhorshok tumii* in Bengali. (Daniyal, 2020). The performance and the accompanying banners in the protest made the connections clear.



Figure 6.2: Banner saying “Hindurashtra is rapist” making the connection between gender oppression, sexual violence and the fascist project explicit (Photo courtesy: Scroll.in)

The most iconic form that the protest took was that of a sit-in at a relatively poor but busy, Muslim majority neighborhood in south-east Delhi, called Shaheen Bagh. Outraged over the victimization of Muslims in BJP’s rule that reached a tipping point with CAA/NRC/NPR, Muslims women blocked a busy highway and started their sit-in protest. One of the reasons that jumpstarted the sit-in protest was the shocking manner in which Delhi police entered the Jamia Milia Islamia University campus (a site of student-led Anti-CAA protests) and attacked the students with *lathis* (police sticks), tear gas canisters and eventually, bullets. The core of the protest was formed by old Muslim women, dubbed Shaheen Bagh *dadis/ nanis* (grandmothers), who came out for the sake of the younger generations, triggered by the attack on students. The protest then kept growing to the tune of more than a hundred thousand people at the venue and was replicated at hundreds of places across the country.

The protests were marked by a deep sense of history. They were framed in terms of a freedom movement, invoking India's anti-colonial struggle. Protest sites were adorned with posters of the most prominent freedom fighters of India's Independence movement like MK Gandhi, Bhagat Singh, BR Ambedkar, Subhash Chandra Bose etc. There were readings held of the Preamble of the Constitution of India. The tri-color flag of India was proudly displayed in abundance at every protest site. This also marked the protest's reclaiming of the Indian flag from the jingoistic nationalist rightwing.



Figure 6.3: Poster of MK Gandhi with Shaheen Bagh *dadis* at Park Circus, Kolkata. Picture taken by me.



Figure 6.4: Different posters at Park Circus, Kolkata sit-in protest including ones of Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose and Bhagat Singh. Picture taken by me.



Figure 6.5: Children draw and paint, overseen by posters of Dr. BR Ambedkar and the Shaheen Bagh *dadis* at Shaheen Bagh. Photo taken from a Shaheen Bagh Twitter account<sup>36</sup>

<sup>36</sup> <https://twitter.com/Shaaheenbaghoff1/status/1229764191235371008/photo/1>

Even after the government used the coronavirus pandemic to dissipate the sit-in protests, their legacy is still alive in the next wave of protests by farmers that are ongoing against the passing of three Draconian farm laws. The three farm acts (now laws) are The Farmers' Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Act, 2020, Farmers (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement on Price Assurance and Farm Services Act, 2020, and Essential Commodities (Amendment) Act, 2020. Taken together, these laws are a means to completely abandon Indian agriculture at the hands of private capital. Couched under the rhetoric of “freedom” – freedom of movement, freedom to sell to private players, freedom from government interference – these laws have been implemented to take away any protection from the already distressed agricultural community and guarantee that plunder by private capital can go unabated. Farmers, mainly from the Northern states of Punjab and Haryana, who have still been the least affected by neoliberal reforms already in place, first started protesting in their own villages and towns. When their protests were ignored, they came out in the number of hundreds of thousands and camped outside the borders of the nation’s capital, Delhi, declaring that they would not budge until the “black laws” (*kaale kanoon*) are taken back, even if it takes months or even years.

The modes and language of these protests acknowledge that the neoliberal era, especially in its Hindutva fascist form, is a return of the era of colonial exploitation. Prabhat Patnaik (2017) shows how in its destruction of agriculture and modes of primitive accumulation, neoliberal capitalism is a return of the vast economic exploitation of the colonial rule. But apart from the economic exploitation, this is also the return of the trauma of colonialism and Partition of the country. The fascist exploitation, like the colonial exploitation, is done through fragmenting the social fabric and benefiting from the divisions of religion, gender, caste. Just as European

fascism of the interwar period was the coming home of European colonialism, Indian fascism is the re-staging of its own colonization. And history is witness to the fact that the very people of the Hindu rightwing (members of the Hindu Mahasabha and Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh or RSS), who had sided with the British during the freedom struggle, are overseeing the fascist takeover of the Indian democracy.

### **Care Work as Protest**

The anti-CAA protests and the farmers' protests are the two instances when the fascist Hindutva government has faced serious challenge. The Shaheen Bagh sit-ins and their wild popularity and replication across the country was a pleasant surprise and mounted a serious opposition to the government. Even as the rightwing threw everything at them, including false propaganda, vigilante shooter, conspiracy theories, police pressure etc. they could not be evicted. It was only after the pandemic started that the protestors had to disperse.

The sit-in at Shaheen Bagh was started by elderly Muslim women and later, younger Muslim women took up the leadership as well. This did not fit the typical image of the revolutionary subject as poor Muslim women are generally understood to be too oppressed themselves to come out in protest and represent themselves and their beliefs. This also did not fit the orthodox Leftist idea of the industrial proletariat as the revolutionary subject. But what these women did over the course of around hundred days in winter was camp outside and bring their life activity to the protest. Because they were the care givers in their families, over time, small ecosystems of care for people, like places to sleep and eat or get refreshments at the protest sites, started to develop. While the women formed the core at the protests, men joined in to share the work of cooking, cleaning, washing etc. I had seen this at the protest site in Park Circus, Kolkata.

In these protests, care work did not become the background where the glamorous

resistance and insurrection would take the front stage. Care work became resistance. This has been taken to a much higher and intricate level at the farmer protests outside Delhi's borders. Thousands of farmers have set up what have become settlements with their own arrangements for cooking, sleeping, medical facilities, libraries, other entertainment like film screenings etc.

A collective life away from the usual habitat has given them a chance to rethink, rebuild and recreate the social structures that they inhabit. The farming community, like any other section of the Indian society, is caste-ridden and patriarchal. But the encampments have fostered change in these relations. As men cook meals and serve women, questions of domestic work are being re-evaluated. Dalit farmers, who perform most of the agricultural labor but own very little land, have come into leadership in an unprecedented manner as they, unlike the more well-to-do farmers, fight not to secure the present but to create a future that does not exist yet.

I think this marks a significant shift in society, though it should not be overstated, where the caring classes, who are also often the most oppressed, are taking center stage. Important feminist interventions in theory have shown us that capitalism overwhelmingly relies on outsourcing the burden of social reproduction primarily onto women through innumerable hours of unpaid domestic labor. (Beneria, 1979) (Laslett & Brenner, 1989) (Mies, 1998) The question that social reproduction theory asks is if the laborer produces value, then who produces the laborer. It shows that work, primarily done by women in schools, hospitals, homes etc. sustains the capitalist economy by doing the often unpaid or underpaid work of "people making." (Bhattacharya, 2017) This essential work of social reproduction is also caste based in India. For example, it is often Dalit women who work as cooks and child caretakers at rural child care centers called *anganwadis*. They are not only severely underpaid, but they also often face discrimination and violence from upper castes because of their caste status.

I see hope in the protests because they seem to be centering this work of social reproduction or care work and resisting hierarchical social formations as a result. This is very important because even in Leftist protests or political formations, the internal make-up is often hierarchized and the structure gets formed along lines of existing social hierarchy. David Graeber's work is important here because his focus on bureaucracy and hierarchy, and his sharp critique of the institution of the state has shown that centralization of power inevitably leads to the centralization of capital. Graeber's work is radical because it lays bare the central contradictions within political formations which have egalitarian goals but hierarchical and vanguardist means to achieve them. Graeber shows that hierarchical systems essentially end up in bureaucratic structures that are undergirded by violence or the threat of violence.

Graeber's understanding of bureaucracy as a system which is designed to maintain a social formation created out of violence (and not necessarily violent itself) and hence, characterized by structural blindness and unequal division of interpretive labor and imagination, explains a lot of the contemporary political phenomena. For example, part of what is terrible about the Hindutva government in India, apart from its goal of an ethno-nationalist state, is its authoritarianism manifest in its centralizing tendencies. Talking of bureaucracy and violence, Graeber says that violence is essentially stupid because violence is the only form of communication in which one can get the desired result without actually communicating. Violence thus bypasses the necessary interpretive labor and imagination to communicate to the other person. The person to whom the violence is being done, on the other hand, must figure out using their intelligence and imagination, how to avoid that. Violence thus creates lopsided social situations where interpretive labor is done by the ones below. Thus, a system that institutionalizes social situations created by violence i.e. bureaucracy, is institutionalized

stupidity.

Care workers are the ones who need to figure things out on a daily basis – how to handle primary school kids, how to take care of geriatric patients, etc. and actually know how the world works. But because neoliberal systems are built on violence and are gruesome bureaucracies, whose various effects Graeber examines in various works of his, they are structurally blind systems – blind to the plight of people who do all the actual work. But it is also true that the tyrants who sit atop these structures rarely have to figure things out for themselves. In fact, like Modi, they rarely even listen to anyone. Modi never even faces press conferences and always communicates one-way. I think because of this nature, people like Modi, or his supporters who might be sitting atop a smaller hierarchy, like a family, or the neoliberal bureaucratic state and corporate machinery are stupid. This does not mean that they can be defeated easily because the mess that is created by their monumental acts of stupidity is left for the people who work to clean up.

But what is radical about Graeber's work is that he shows why it is important and necessary to trust the human intelligence and imagination where human beings can themselves decide on the political structures they want to live in and not impose hierarchy in the name of a higher ideal. My own experience of living in West Bengal, under a so-called communist government for years has shown that a hierarchy in the party structure, upper-caste male in this case, has turned it into a rightwing political outfit. Graeber defines the Right and the Left as perspectives founded

...on different assumptions about the ultimate realities of power. The Right is rooted in a political ontology of violence, where being realistic means taking into account the forces of destruction. In reply the Left has consistently proposed variations on a political

ontology of the imagination, in which the forces that are seen as the ultimate realities that need to be taken into account are those (forces of production, creativity...) that bring things into being. (2011, p. 42)

The protests, and the farmers' protests are far from being done, have given us a glimpse into what can happen when centering care work becomes the way of resistance and that is articulated without a hierarchy or a charismatic leader or vanguardist class.

### **Popular Cinema, Its Limits and Towards Collective Art Practices**

In India, popular cinema has been the site to repeatedly re-stage the traumas of the collective unconscious of the society. For example, Hindi cinema has repeatedly adapted the 19<sup>th</sup> century novel *Devdas* by Saratchandra Chattopadhyay which Jyotsna Kapur (2011) shows, ultimately highlights the Indian bourgeois male's subservience to the state and patriarchy and the central tragedy of the character is his inability to act. She writes, "Obstructed from accumulating capital by the colonial state, he remains beholden to both the colonial state and his patriarchal family while the promise of freedom, of acting upon the world and changing it, was also so tantalizingly clear." (p. 206)

Similarly, the trauma of the failure of the anti-colonial dream of a socialist India, with equal citizenship rights for everyone, has been the political unconscious of a lot of cinema. As Priya Joshi (2015) shows, films like *Mother India* (Mehboob Khan, 1957) or Raj Kapoor's films like *Sangam/ Confluence* (1964), *Shree 420/ Mr. 420* (1955), *Ab Dilli Dur Nahin/ Delhi Is Not Far* (1957) or Amitabh Bachchan films such as *Deewaar*, *Trishul*, *Shakti* etc. repeatedly stage the tensions and contradictions of the nation's history displaced onto narratives of the individual and the family. Publicly experienced art such as popular cinema then becomes a means for the society to come to terms with its own problems, traumas and desires.

As I have shown in my work, cinema in its industrial form and the spectacle of stardom have reached their limits to satisfy the need for novelty and more spectacle, giving rise to repugnant political figures capable of genocidal violence. But there are always critical voices present even within the culture industry who manage to use the space provided by the system to produce a critique. For example, director Dibakar Banerjee, through films like *Oye Lucky Lucky Oye* and *Love Sex aur Dhokha*, provides a critique of our highly commoditized society through the lens of caste, class and gender. His *Shanghai* is a direct indictment of the neoliberal development project that is based upon accumulation by dispossession. Even as the fascist state uses violence to give shape to its mission, documentaries like *Reason* (Anand Patwardhan, 2018) and *Muzaffarnagar Baaqi Hai/ Muzaffarnagar Remains* (Nakul Singh Sawhney, 2015) not only bear witness to history but also articulate historical possibilities of solidarity through a deeper understanding of social relations.

Collective art practices are also being reinvented from the protest cultures that have sprung up in opposition to the fascist regime. All the sit-in protests against CAA/NRC/NPR had mobile libraries, spaces for children to draw and paint, daily poetry and singing performances, and debates and discussions on democracy and secularism. Behind this is a recognition of the fundamental human need to create art. The idea behind the protests was that the women had come out to not just participate but “live” the protests. This is a very different conception from the middle-class, reactionary protests led by Anna Hazare<sup>37</sup> in 2011 where the demand was more authority. The women (and men) who formed the Shaheen Bagh protests and similar sit-ins

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<sup>37</sup> Anna Hazare is a self-described Gandhian social worker who led the protest called India Against Corruption against the then government. Allegedly, the protests were backed by the RSS and the BJP gained a lot of political mileage from the change in public mood after the protests

could not afford to weave in and out of them as it concerned their survival. So, as they were living their life in protest, the need to create art was one of the needs that had to be met.

Even as *langars*<sup>38</sup> run all day at the farmers' protests, libraries and pharmacies have been set up, the encampments have their own newspaper too. *Trolley Times* is a multilingual newspaper available in Punjabi, English and Hindi versions and also, online. (See Figure 6.6: Multilingual newspaper *Trolley Times* website)



Figure 6.6: Multilingual newspaper *Trolley Times* website (Screenshot taken by me from [www.trolleytimes.online](http://www.trolleytimes.online))

There have also been collective screenings of films at night. National Award winning filmmaker Rajeev Kumar, who has joined the protests, screened his film on farmers' rights and struggles for land at the protest site, in an instance of life and art feeding into each other.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>38</sup> langara are a communal kitchen run by Sikh religious institutions

<sup>39</sup> <https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/chandigarh/national-awardee-screens-his-new-film-based-on-farm-labour-at-protest-sites-7112843/>

What these protests seem to be reinventing are possibilities of living unalienated life that is not bound by the spectacle. Both the anti-CAA protests and the farmers' protest have resisted being led by larger than life charismatic leaders. The demands of the protestors are collective demands which include diverse interests. This is a fundamentally different idea of rebellion than one that is led by a star. When Amitabh Bachchan, in one of his "angry young man" films, breaks down a door and beats up twenty men, we see a heroic moment, cut off from time. The spectacle fascinates and seduces us. But not only is a lone man bringing down entire systems of oppression impossible, it invisibilizes actual revolutionary work i.e. organizing, and activities that sustain life. And this is work that is primarily done by women.

Talking about "situations" that are moments of dramatic charge and hold revolutionary potential in popular imagination, Graeber (2011) reminds that,

One of the most important contributions of feminism, it seems to me, has been to constantly remind everyone that "situations" do not create themselves. There is usually a great deal of work involved. For much of human history, what has been taken as politics has consisted essentially of a series of dramatic performances carried out upon theatrical stages. One of the great gifts of feminism to political thought has been to continually remind us of the people is in fact making and preparing and cleaning those stages, and even more, maintaining the invisible structures that make them possible – people who have, overwhelmingly, been women. (p. 64)

So, anti-spectacle, anti-commodification, anti-star revolutionary work that needs everyone's participation, is therefore, necessarily feminist.

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