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DREAMING THE NATION

Domestic dramas in Hindi films

post-1990

Hindi cinema has functioned as a site for the production and exploration of national identities and ideologies in the popular imagination. An examination of some of the most successful films of the 1990s (Hum Aapke Hain Kaun, Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge, Pardes, Kuch Kuch Hota Hai, etc.) reveals the emergence of the domestic drama as a highly popular genre wherein a troubling new construction of Indian identity emerges. This new construction is one that considerably narrows the diversity, multiplicity and secular constructions of Indian identities in previous decades. We argue that this trend in Hindi cinema post-1990 reflects the significant socio-political (rise of the Hindutva movement) and economic changes (liberalising of the economy) that have taken place in India during this time.

Domestic Hindi film dramas post-1990 display a remarkably consistent pattern in producing a monolithic Indian identity that is Hindu, wealthy and patriarchal in nature. We find that the terrain of who gets included in the signifier 'Indian' has shifted significantly. The wealthy among the diasporic Indian community now find a prominent place within that signifier provided they conform to a particular articulation of Indian identity and traditions. Consequently, certain minorities like Muslims and Christians find themselves excluded and increasingly erased from this terrain. We argue that this cultural conflation (of Indian with Hindu and wealthy), the product of particular socio-political and economic trends (Hindutva, global capital flows and regressive gender politics), further marginalises and often erases the experiences of religious minorities and the poor who do not fit this constructed norm, a trend that is indicative of the restricting of the national imaginary.

Introduction

Hindi films have a predominantly formulaic tradition (Lutze). At the centre of the plot is often a love story, wherein lovers overcome great odds to be together. Sometimes the love story ends in tragedy, when the odds are too great to overcome.¹ A variation on the theme shifts the focus from the love story to a 'revenge' saga, often based in the struggle of 'the common man'² wronged by a powerful villain (often represented as a corrupt politician or policeman, underworld don, etc.) who must fight this evil to avenge himself, his family and/or his love, or who justifiably crosses over to the underworld until he sees the light or is killed himself.³ The uniqueness of the Hindi film is often located in the fact that most Hindi films are musicals,⁴ a fact sometimes

attributed to the linguistic diversity of the country (Barnouw and Krishnaswamy). What has changed in recent years is neither the formulaic plot constructions nor the musical aspect of Hindi films but rather the settings of those love stories, the socio-political make-up of the characters and the issues being articulated as conflicts that keep the lovers apart.

In this paper, we examine these shifts and other emergent trends in popular Hindi films within the genre of 'domestic dramas', a new trend ushered in post-1990. We are identifying a new subset of films that locate themselves within the private sphere of home and family, within the world of Hindi film. The critical narrative trajectory is to unite boy and girl but, unlike earlier 'socials', these films are largely devoid of the tensions within the public sphere and focus solely on the love story within a familial setting. The domestic drama trend in Hindi cinema is one wherein some of the biggest blockbusters of the past decade⁵ located themselves in the 'private sphere' (in Partha Chatterjee's 1993 use of the term), creating a world of domestic felicity and extravagant bliss that continued undisturbed by events in the larger social sphere. As Madhava Prasad argues, Hindi cinema has always functioned as a site of production and exploration of national identity and ideology. This is particularly true in the emergence of the domestic drama as one of the most powerful genres after 1990. We argue that this trend in Hindi cinema post-1990 reflects the significant socio-political changes that have taken place in India during this time. Unfortunately, we find the diversity, multiplicity and secular constructions of Indian identity being systematically narrowed into monolithic portrayals of rich, Hindu, and patriarchal cultural identity. This cultural conflation further marginalises and often erases the experiences of religious minorities and the poor who do not fit this constructed norm. The recent writings on Hindi films and their growing significance on the global scene (Dwyer and Pinney; Nandy; Prasad) often make assumptions about these problematic trends. Our paper analyses different texts and therefore provides grounding for those claims. We will examine these broad trends by highlighting significant Hindi films of the last decade and unpacking implications for how the Indian nation is imagined.

Contextualising the nation: significant socio-economic-political changes in India post-1990

It is important to ground cultural critiques in political and economic realities.⁶ The 1990s were a decade of significant change in India with three dominant, noteworthy trends:

- (1) Economic liberalisation policies: radical economic restructuring since the mid-1980s led to the opening of Indian markets to foreign investment and multinational corporations in 1991 (Joshi).⁷
- (2) New media technologies and television: the 1990s marked the time that foreign and private Indian satellite television networks began beaming television signals into the country (Ninan; Rajagopal). This brought a plethora of channels to urban audiences in India, heralding a significant cultural shift in those markets (Malhotra and Crabtree).⁸

- (3) The rise of the *Hindutva*⁹ movement: as economic and cultural changes made India's borders more porous and called into question previous notions of an authoritative Indian identity, there were violent ethnic struggles to locate a sense of national self. Perhaps not coincidentally, the 1990s have also been a time marked by the rise of Hindu fundamentalism.¹⁰

The ruling party, the BJP,¹¹ is a Hindu political party, and advocates *Hindutva*, or a non-secular Hindu way of life, as its vision for India (*The Economist*). In the 1990s it revived the religious divide over a holy site in Ayodhya,¹² leading to the destruction of the Babri mosque.¹³ This was a time when fears were running high that national identity would be eroded by the fast-encroaching Western world. The BJP gained strength by presenting itself as the truly 'Indian' party through a conflation of Indian and Hindu. This move, echoed by many popular Hindi films we examine below, manipulates the national imaginary to move Indian identity away from being anchored in a physical location on Indian land to a Hindu-based cultural identity, not bound by location, reminiscent of Anderson's 'imagined community'. This branding of 'Indian as Hindu' is sold to a growing diaspora of well-heeled Indians across the globe through the lens of Hindi cinema, washing the secular republic into a saffron hue.¹⁴

Dreaming the nation: three dominant trends in domestic dramas

Contrary to the claims of nationalists, the cultural identity of a nation is neither immemorial nor naturally given. It has to be fabricated, most deliberately so under the auspices of the nation-state.

(Chatterjee, 'Introduction' 18)

The construction of the Indian nation and national identity through one of the most influential culture industries (Hindi films) has taken the form of three dominant trends post-1990. The first trend is a Hinduisation of Indian identity. The second is an engagement with the Indian diaspora in ways not previously seen in Hindi films. The third is the re-valorisation of a benevolent patriarchy in new forms and contexts. All three trends occur within the context of domestic dramas and are unfortunately indicative of a further contraction in the possible diversity of Indian identities.

Conflated identities: the Hinduisation of Indian identity

In direct contrast to the social tensions experienced by a society where there is an ever-widening gap between the haves and have-nots, and rising communal tensions, the post-1990 domestic drama Hindi film has located itself in a world of plenty, choosing not to focus on disparities or marginalised populations but rather to valorise an affluent and harmonious universe inhabited almost exclusively by wealthy Hindu families.

Domestic dramas of the 1990s are quite unlike earlier family dramas or 'socials'. The tendency of earlier eras was reformist, focusing on social ills and generational or material conflicts within the Indian family to raise awareness through popular

culture.¹⁵ Alternatively, films of earlier decades used the inclusive, secular Indian identity as an expression of national pride. *Amar Akbar Anthony*,¹⁶ for example, was a 1970s commercial blockbuster film that was based on the subject of national harmony exemplified by the friendship between separated brothers who grow up to be the Hindu, Muslim and Christian heroes of the film. Similarly, many successful films in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s located themselves in a secular public sphere. They used characters and symbols from a wide range of cultural material to weave a multicultural picture of society. For example, the 786¹⁷ badge that protects the Amitabh Bachchan character in *Deewar* ('The Wall') or his identification tag which coincidentally happened to be 786 in *Coolie* ('The Porter') were Islamic symbols essential to his Indian identity. These were seen as indivisible from each other and had a significant narrative purpose. Bachchan played Hindu characters, but his identity was influenced by these symbols. While these representations may have been part of a strategy to appease and appeal to a Muslim audience, as the rather broad-based aim of many Hindi films, there was an effort to include all 'Indians' into a pluralist secular society. This opened up a space for representations of Muslim culture and populations and allowed them to be drawn into the imaginary of a secular Indian identity. So even though Hindi films maintained hegemonic goals and continued to perpetuate the social status quo (with the hero very often coming from a northern Indian Hindu background), Indian identity was carefully and broadly defined.

However flawed their secular enterprise, blockbusters like *Amar Akbar Anthony*, *Bobby*,¹⁸ *Naseeb* ('Fate'), *Yaadon Ki Baraat* ('A Procession of Memories') *Qurbani* ('The Sacrifice'), and the Muslim socials like *Nikah* ('Marriage') made by top Bollywood directors (both Hindu and Muslim themselves), did have strong Muslim/Christian characters. Film after film stressed that all Indians were equal and equally committed to the project of a fair and just society. By contrast, the 1990s films have presented us with very superficial representations of secular India, presented in a perfunctory way to maintain an illusion, but only to return us to the moving moment that is in articulated in Hindu terms.

A glaring example of this trend can be seen in the prayer sequence of *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai*. The Shah Rukh Khan character in the film is racing to meet his daughter who has gone off to summer camp in Simla. This is also the moment in which the audience awaits the reunification of the hero and heroine of the film who have been separated for nine years. At the camp, his mother has 'persuaded' Mr Almeda, the Christian director of the summer camp, to bring down a painting of Queen Elizabeth and has put up a portrait of Durga, the benign form of the militant Hindu goddess, Kali. The action takes place through a song sequence which inter-cuts Shah Rukh's journey to the camp with the women and children at the camp singing *Raghupati Raghav Raja Ram*, a favourite prayer of Mahatma Gandhi. A young 'hippie' group that is travelling with Shah Rukh is singing a more Westernised version of the same song.

The song starts with a flourish as the camera zooms in from the top of the flagpole with the Indian flag to Mr Almeda wringing his hands in agony. The mother, dressed in white, starts the prayer and slaps Almeda on his arm to stimulate him into joining in. He does so with a dazed expression on his face. The next cut is to a portrait of Durga/Kali, in her benign avatar, as she sits astride a tiger carrying in two of her hands a trident and a sword. Her portrait has replaced the portrait of Queen Elizabeth. The empire, in this cut, is literally being replaced by Hinduism. Perhaps

even more perniciously, Christianity in India is portrayed as praying to a false deity (by setting up Queen Elizabeth as a deity). So the film, in fact, never interrogates the religion of Christianity, but rather shows the comical Indian Christian character as ridiculous in its belief and longing for a colonial past. This allows for an almost justifiable replacement of the Queen with a Hindu Goddess. In that move, the film marries nationalism and religiosity.

The colour scheme in the song reflects the colours of the national flag except that the green (the symbolic colour of Islam) is a yellowed-out paler version. In the camp, the Shah Rukh character's daughter, Anjali, has befriended a young Sikh boy. This child is shown nodding off on Shah Rukh's daughter's shoulder and she elbows him awake rather violently. He joins in. Effectively, then, all the minority characters in the song are being disciplined into the Hindu/nationalist discourse with a nudge and a whack.

Cut to the hippie crowd jamming at the station, their musical mode obstructs the Shah Rukh character's path to the train and he goes through bumping and apologising, a startled expression on his face. This articulation of the West appropriating Hinduism was seen as extremely problematic decades ago with films like *Hare Rama Hare Krishna* ('Praise Rama, Praise Krishna'), which portrayed the Westernised hippie crowd as drug addicts and amoral. Towards the end of this shot, the lead guitarist brings down his guitar, effectively holding the Shah Rukh character in, or preventing his movement further. Interestingly, the Shah Rukh character gets stranded when he is driving on his own and *has to* hitch another ride with the cell phone toting hippie crowd. Reconciling himself to the exuberance of his companions, the Shah Rukh character taps to the music at one point. As Hinduism is being exported out to a global diasporic audience today, there is an interdependence that the hero accepts, albeit grudgingly. Hinduism, then, is able to articulate itself in more popularly acceptable terms, being marketed as a hip, young religion, fluid in its different manifestations. Cut to Almeda weeping as he sings along, the portrait of Elizabeth lying askew on the ground. The disciplining continues.

As Shah Rukh arrives at the gate of the camp he pauses and then runs across a meadow and then a bridge. The subsequent shots have been taken from every conceivable angle and completely circumscribe him as he runs across the bridge to a chorus of '*Raja Ram, Raja Ram*', which translates literally to 'Ram, the king' and anoints Shah Rukh as such. All of this becomes even more troubling when we read the film extra-textually. Shah Rukh Khan, who plays a Hindu character in the film, is an Indian Muslim in real life. The sequence conflates religious and national identities urging minorities to fall into line with the mainstream religion and identity. It does so with taps and nudges to the Christian and Sikh male characters. However, there is no acknowledgement of the Muslim Other. He exists only in the body of Shah Rukh Khan extra-filmically. Within the song he is repeatedly blocked, pushed and intruded upon by the hippies singing the Westernised version of the song. However, the final sequence on the bridge is important in that it manages to completely capture and circumscribe the male Muslim body that is Shah Rukh Khan and overlay it with a chorus of *Raghupati Raghav Raja Ram*, in effect erasing the threatening 'body' and replacing it with an appropriat(ed) and newly revised/Hinduised Muslim/Hindu man. The question remains, however, whether Shah Rukh Khan is being appropriated by Hinduism or whether he manages to appropriate that agenda by, in effect, becoming the embodiment of the ideal 'man' within his Muslim body.

The song itself is one that could be read as preaching tolerance of different religions. However, it has been appropriated into a completely Hindu space in this sequence, as the rituals that accompany it are symbolically Hindu (idols, *aarti* and *puja*). The chorus begins with the line '*Ishwar, Allah tero naam*',¹⁹ which is always picturised on the older Anjali (played by Kajol), singing with devotion as she performs a Hindu ritual movement (such as an *aarti*). As women are seen as the upholders of tradition, she is able to both show benevolent tolerance for the 'Other', even as the concentrated devotion on her face for Durga appropriates the secular meaning of the words into a Hindu space. On one repetition of that particular line, everyone is throwing petals at the Goddess, but the Sikh boy is throwing petals on the younger Anjali. The girl gives him a stern admonishing look. Again, there is a moment of the 'Other' not taking the prayer seriously, and being rebuked for it. Within the space of the film, all these rebukes are given by the female characters, locating the continuation of tradition on the female body. However, more disturbingly, these rebukes are portrayed as playful modes of disciplining within the Hindi film space, whereas in reality the disciplining of minorities in India has taken on extremely violent forms in the public domain.

In fact, the films produced post-1990 in the genre of domestic drama show a distinct lack of central minority characters and portrayals, unless the films have a focus on terrorism or on the Indian border. It is noteworthy also, given the socio-political times, that when Muslim characters are present in this genre they are often there in the form of 'domestic' or glorified servants. Minority characters populated the world of the Hindi film in supporting/character roles in the 1970s. Rahim Chacha, the older worker and adviser in *Deewar* ('The Wall'), Abdul the informer in *Shaan* ('High Status'), and Jack and Usmanbhai Batliwala in *Yadon Ki Baraat* did not get large chunks of screen-time but they were crucial to the story and helped move it forward. Such characters have either disappeared or been transformed into comedic sidekicks such as the comical Muslim doctor couple in *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun* ('Who Am I to You?' or HAHK). Muslim women do not fare much better as they are increasingly relegated to mammy roles playing ayahs. These portrayals are exemplified in the two highly successful blockbusters made by Karan Johar; *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai*²⁰ ('Something Happens'), where the loyal Muslim supervisor of the dormitory becomes a surrogate mother-figure to the heroine, coaching her on how to be feminine, and *Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gham*²¹ ('Sometimes Happiness, Sometimes Sadness'), where the loyal self-sacrificing Muslim ayah puts the family she works for above her own. In the world of the domestic drama these women are seen as 'incomplete' since they are bereft of 'family' which they either sacrifice physical proximity with or lack completely, finding fulfilment in nurturing the more important Hindu family. When present as the love interest in films like *Bombay* and *Gadar*, Muslim women lack agency or their actions lead them into trouble from which they need to be rescued by their Hindu/Sikh husbands to be finally re-appropriated into the more accommodating Hindu family/home. The exception to this trend has been a recent spate of films that examine issues like terrorism, such as *Fiza* ('The Seasons'), *Mission Kashmir*, *Dil Se* ('From the Heart') and *Maachis* ('Match'), and another prominent group of films focusing on historical and present issues along the Indian border with Pakistan (such as *Gadar* ('The Unrest' or 'The Rebellion'), *Border* and *Refugee*). In many ways, the burden of proof is always on Muslim Indians to prove their Indianness, often having to perform this Indian

identity through their acceptance or embrace of Hindu norms and rituals, leading to yet another level of cultural erasure or the tokenisation of their own traditions. It must be noted that these portrayals across different genres, and more specifically in domestic dramas, constructed a soothing, non-threatening brand of Hinduism which filled the screens across India even as hysterical anti-Muslim speeches and orchestrated riots accompanied the BJP leader L. K. Advani's Rath Yatra in 1990–1991 in northern India (Hansen).

Thus there are fewer and fewer minority characters as class, caste and religious differences have almost disappeared from this domain of domestic dramas. When differences are visible as the markers of different characters, they serve merely as a prop for the dominant hegemony of the valorised upper caste/upper class Hindu family with little or no reflection of the tensions that exist in contemporary society. In the most popular films post-1990, there is a superficial articulation of order and harmony between all beings and almost no serious exploration of social injustices.

Diasporic dreams and ubiquitous wealth

The setting is a second-run theatre²² in the suburbs of Los Angeles. On a weekend night, *Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gham* ('Sometimes Happiness, Sometimes Sadness' or K3G) is playing to an almost packed auditorium in the fall of 2001. The audience, made up primarily of South Asians, watches the film with rapt attention, tapping their feet to some of the popular film songs, with many audience members unabashedly crying in the more emotional scenes of the film. The screenings of this much-awaited Hindi blockbuster in a theatre represent a growing phenomenon in the US (Shome and Hegde 183) of ethnic/racial visibility and integration. What used to be a monthly ritual in many homes in the South Asian diaspora is now a routine weekly social tradition in US urban centres. Going to the theatre to see the latest Hindi film at the weekend has translated to a community space for gathering, reconnecting with other South Asians and reasserting Indian identity, even as the diasporic Indian community increasingly sees itself reflected positively in the stories being told by Hindi films. Indian films, ranging from independent features like *Fire* and *Monsoon Wedding* to more mainstream Bollywood productions like K3G and *Kaante* ('Thorns'), have greatly expanded the space they occupy in the popular US imaginary post-1990, thereby making the South Asian diasporic experience a more visible one in the US.

The increasing visibility of diasporic Indians in Hindi cinema is also an important trend to explore because it is intimately connected to Indian identities being transformed and differently imagined. The portrayal is narrow in its articulation but has important implications for the project of Indian nationalism. There has been a significant departure from how Hindi films characterised wealth in previous decades. In a nation newly independent from colonial rule that had used the concept of economic self-reliance or *Swadeshi* to win independence, wealth was linked directly to the corrupt, exploitative and dissolute world of old money or the landowning classes who aligned themselves with the colonial masters. Gandhian values of renouncing wealth and serving the nation were both popularly accepted and often celebrated as the right lifestyle choice.

This coupling of wealth with immorality was often articulated through love stories set between working-class protagonists and characters from the moneyed

classes. Redemption for the moneyed class was possible only through the acceptance of the working-class person/world into what then became a reformed and newly enlightened world of a spiritualised and sanitised wealth. *Naya Daur* ('A New Era'), *Taxi Driver*, *Aah* ('Sigh'), *Aan* ('Pride'), *Awara* ('The Vagabond'), *Jaal* ('The Net'), and *Namak Haraam* ('Ingrate') all articulate similar value systems. Rich girl/boy in love with poor boy/girl was the most common theme set in a variety of different social spaces as seen in *Hum Dono* ('The Two of Us'), *Awara* ('The Vagabond'), *Bobby*, *Yaadon Ki Baraat* ('The Procession of Memories'), *Hum Kissi Se Kam Nahin* ('We're Second to No One'), *Mr. Natwarlal*, *Naseeb* ('Fate'), *Deewar* ('The Wall'), and *Trishul* ('Trident'). The exploration of social conflict between different classes was not limited to love stories. Films looked at close friendships between men, who grew up in different strata of society. Thus, while earlier films showed the trials and tribulations of love or friendship between the haves and the have-nots, the trend in the 1990s was to focus on the joys of having ... more!

Previous articulations of 'Indians abroad' were scripted to portray a materialist subject who had left home in the pursuit of greater wealth. The non-resident Indian (NRI) was therefore considered a bit of a sell-out as s/he had supposedly abandoned his/her homeland, culture and family in order to get ahead in life (as seen in *Des Pardes* ('Homeland and Foreign Land'), *Hare Rama Hare Krishna* or *Purab aur Paschim* ('East and West')).

One could argue that globalisation and liberalisation necessitated the expansion of the middle class and the encouragement of middle-class consumption to support the liberalisation project. As the diasporic market grew and its consuming power started to be felt by the Indian film industry, the traditional Indian identity, which espoused spirituality over materiality, had to be reconfigured in the Hindi films of the 1990s to embrace both sides of the coin.

In fact, if films could provide an ideology of Indian identity that appealed to Indians in India as well as Indians outside the nation's borders, the project of nationhood could be embraced through the imaginary of both groups and then used as a common tie to unite them. We find that one articulation of this 'common' identity is through ubiquitous wealth; desirable as an escapist fantasy for much of India, it allowed the diasporic Indian who had been chastised for amassing wealth in earlier film eras a way to become the celebrated hero of the 1990s saga.

These confluences of wealth and happiness, Hindu traditions and rigid heteronormative and conservative values with Indian identity have become increasingly prevalent in the domestic dramas of the 1990s and 2000s. Desirable wealth is visually present in the choice of location, the size and style of the homes, the personal aircraft and helicopters, the cars, the clothes, the food, and the celebrations where abundant gold jewellery and tables overflowing with luxurious food all signify the possibilities of plenty within this happy world (amply exemplified in *K3G*).

Earlier films like *Yaadon ki Baraat*, *Deewar*, *Trishul* ('Trident'), *Parvarish* ('Upbringing'), *Don* ('The Don') and *Mr. Natwarlal* articulated strong ideas about hard work and equality and were committed to the project of a more equitable and egalitarian society. Although toppling the existing social order was never the aim of popular cinema in previous eras, revolutionary impulses were at least articulated and visualised, even if they were almost always co-opted by the end of the film.

Though a spate of films in the 1990s told stories of NRI life, the success of these films has been limited to portrayals that address a very select segment of diasporic Indian communities. Films, such as *Aa, Ab Laut Chalen* ('Come Let Us Go Home'), that look at the lives of working-class disenfranchised Indians abroad have not succeeded at the box office despite being produced by prominent production houses like RK Studios. Ironically, Hindi film welcomed the NRI into the popular imagination long before the physical celebrations of Privasi Bhartiya Divas, the 2003 extravaganza, where the Indian government officially welcomed 'home' all its diasporic peoples, particularly the wealthy ones from North America and Europe with a promise of dual citizenship. Contrary to Ashis Nandy's assertion that Hindi films can be understood through the metaphor of the urban slum wherein both (Hindi films and slums) stress lower middle-class sensibilities and shock the elite with their 'directness, vigour and crudity' (Nandy 2), we would argue that the most successful Hindi films of the 1990s have been glossy, easy to digest, eye-candy versions that make those sensibilities palatable (HAHK, DDLJ, K3G, *Yaadein*). In fact, there has been an alarming erasure of all but the upper and wealthy classes amongst popular protagonists in the 1990s, a far cry from the angry young man of the 1970s.

Perhaps this point is best articulated in the 2000 hit film *Yaadein* ('Memories'). The class conflict of an earlier era (1970s), which was often portrayed within the context of a love story between a rich girl and a poor boy or vice versa, moves to very different ground in *Yaadein*. Instead, it is between the super-billionaire and the very rich, where conflict comes in because the patriarch of the billionaire family wants to use the marriage of his grandson as a merger with another billionaire family. Therefore, the grandson's love for the daughter of their family friend, who is merely a millionaire, becomes problematic, and the central plot of the film. In the end, the patriarchal grandfather realises the error of his ways and embraces the match. The film, reinforcing the 'unchanging' nature of 'good Indian values', is based upon love and honour and reiterates 'eternal' 'Indian' 'values' while completely glossing over how radically the categories that define rich and poor have changed.

Based upon the box-office popularity of *Yaadein* and *Pardes*, a spate of films in the 1990s portrayed either rich NRIs or wealthy Indians who were good-hearted and well-meaning, even if sometimes misguided. Prominent examples are films such as *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* ('The Large-hearted Take the Bride' or DDLJ), wherein Mr Malhotra, the London-based business tycoon and father of the hero, is portrayed as loving, humorous and generous-hearted, and *Hum Saath-Saath Hain* ('We Are Together'), wherein the entire family is portrayed as consisting of loving people, are prime examples of this trend. This new imaginary in turn opened up the space for the diasporic Indian subject to be included within the articulations of an Indian identity and indeed become valorised for his/her wealth, mobility and global presence.

Sympathetic characters are portrayed as having maintained their 'Indian values' despite having grown up in the West. One example is the character of Tina in *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* (KKHH), who returns to India after her schooling in England and demonstrates her purity and nationalism by singing *Om Jai Jagdish Hare*, a Hindu devotional song, when she is undergoing 'hazing' in college. She finishes the song and adds that no matter where she has grown up, she has not forgotten her Indian roots. This demonstrated nationalist Indian identity wins her acceptance at the college and

endears her to Rahul, the hero of the film, who falls in love with her. That these 'Indian values' are most often Hindu in their expression and carry with them regressive baggage is an increasingly normative trend in Hindi films.

The converse construction of negative characters is portraying them as overly Westernised 'bad Indians', and as having forgotten their Indian heritage. For example, in *Pardes* ('Foreign Land'), the heroine of the film is arranged to marry a rich NRI who turns out to be too 'Westernised' and therefore ultimately villainous. His over-identification with the West is portrayed in his excessive drinking, womanising and his selfish individualist traits. His ultimate attempt to rape his fiancé conflates those practices with the supposed lack of morality in Western cultures. By contrast, the space occupied by the hero of the film is one of the 'true Indian', embodying innocence and a willingness to sacrifice himself for love and his familial obligations. As one of the characters of the film comments, even though Arjun, the hero, has lived in the US, 'he still has the fragrance of Indian soil' in his values and in his ideas about love (*Pardes*, 1997). Therefore, as this film and others in this trend demonstrate, the articulations of Indian national identity are no longer tied to location. Both protagonists in *Pardes* are NRIs. But Arjun's character embodies the identity that is being valorised as 'truly Indian'. Hindi films in the 1990s are thus able to deal with diasporic subjects by attempting to reinscribe Indian identity within the space of the pure and the spiritual, even as Indian filmmakers deal with audiences that are 'deterritorialized', in Arjun Appadurai's terms (Appadurai 4), wherein Pakistani cabdrivers in Chicago listen to sermons recorded in mosques in Pakistan or Iran, or South Asian audiences in New Jersey find 'home' in the Hindi film songs playing at their local Indian movie theatre.

This trend towards an increasing engagement with the diasporic Indian subject in Hindi films is motivated by recent trends in migration and globalisation. As Appadurai argues, the 1980s and 1990s were decades of increased migration and mediation with an unprecedented simultaneity that has profound implications for how we imagine the nation and modernity. Globalisation has, in effect, 'Obscured the lines between temporary locales and imaginary attachments' (Appadurai 10). The Indian film industry has understood that Indian diasporic communities (particularly Indians residing in North America and Europe) represent an important audience in that these diasporic Indians not only have wealth to invest in India but also constitute a very important market for exploitation. Therefore, it is important to re-appropriate these Indians into the dream of the Indian nation.

Dreaming the same old dream in different colours: benevolent patriarchy

With the advent of satellite television in India and the liberalisation of the Indian economy from the 1990s, there was a moment of rupture in the fabric of society that could have been used to forward a progressive agenda and make changes that were far-reaching and important (Malhotra and Crabtree). However, Hindi films have been reactive and reveal only cosmetic changes of appearance within globalisation in order to work against progressive values to reconstruct a patriarchal agenda. For example, the patriarchal agenda is furthered with misguided but benevolent fathers, reinforcing marriage as the foundational institution of society, maintaining traditional and sexist family values and abnegating individual identity for collectivity in favour of enlightened self-interest.

As women in real life try to negotiate personal and professional lives in a patriarchal society, the women in these films seem to manoeuvre this terrain effortlessly as they are almost always upper class, educated or possessing the virtues necessary for upward mobility. Education does not lead them to individual Westernised identities or create notions of emancipation in the public sphere. Instead, they put it to good use within the family, teaching domestic help to speak and write English (HAHK), run the home efficiently (HAHK, KKHH, *Yaadein* or 'Memories'), or to further the knowledge of the ancient Indian language Sanskrit, or of the Hindu Vedas (*Yaadein*). Women serve as vehicles to increase the presence of Hindu deities, rituals and festivals in these films with a corresponding but converse absence of Muslim symbols. The defined conflicts in films within this genre focus on love and marriage, the stability of the home and perpetuation of family.

Partha Chatterjee speaks of the 'new woman within the new patriarchy', who was born through a series of mediations between the selective nationalist reform of the old Hindu tradition and the colonial critique of the same. The domestic drama is interested in its women characters only in relation to its male characters.

Once the essential femininity of women was fixed in terms of certain culturally visible spiritual qualities they could go to schools, travel in public conveyances – in time even take up employment outside the home. But the 'spiritual' signs of her femininity were now clearly marked in her dress, her eating habits, her social demeanor, her religiosity.

(Chatterjee, *The Nation* 130)

In HAHK, the mother figure is an ideal Hindu woman. She is the virtuous wife, albeit beautiful and devout. Mrs Chaudhary, the mother of the two sisters around whose marriage and love the film revolves, is never referred to by name, and is introduced to us only as a woman who keeps religious fasts and goes to the temple early each morning to pray. But she is also educated and so represents the ideal picture of Indian womanhood, modern without being Westernised. Her perfection is of course blessed with a caring, understanding and loving husband. One entire song in HAHK is devoted to explicating the virtues of an ideal woman and is sung on the occasion of the first engagement in the film to praise the beauty and purity of the prospective bride's mother. The singer envies 'the father of the bride-to-be' who he says 'is lucky and fortunate to have a wife who is like *Lakshmi* [the Hindu goddess of wealth and good fortune] whose presence makes the home heaven'. As the mother responds the camera zooms into her face. She bows her head, lowers her eyes and the camera zooms in to the photograph of her daughter that is placed along with the gifts on a table; her presence there represents her status as yet another 'gift' among the other princely goods that are exchanged before, during and after the wedding.

The film weaves all three female characters – Puja, Nisha and their mother – into a single replicable and easily interchangeable 'picture of perfection' with several characters in the film repeating how alike the sisters are in their possession of virtues. Nisha is finally seen as capable of 'replacing' her sister almost immediately after her death. The women in these films are the embodiment of female virtues of 'chastity, self-sacrifice, submission, devotion, kindness, patience, and labors of love' (Chatterjee *The Nation* 130).

An interesting example of benevolent patriarchy is *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun* (HAHK), the largest grossing film in Indian film history through the twentieth century. In locating itself completely within the private domain, it attains a soothing blandness and perfectly utopian model of family – with its emphasis on ‘simple values and guileless people’ as described in an interview (*Filmfare* 4, 1995) by Madhuri Dixit, who plays the female lead, Nisha, in the film and is one of the most celebrated heroines of the Bombay film industry. HAHK conveniently obscures the power hierarchies and traumas that beset gender and class relations in this construction of family and serves as a model for many other films in the 1990s. In creating an excess of felicity through an overt dramatisation of simplicity and fun, the film normalises the existing inequalities, and creates a world which is completely de-politicised and disconnected from the socio-political realities of India in the 1990s. Even stressful relationships such as the traditional tension between wives and mothers-in-law (the subject for many Hindi films in the past) are obliterated from view. In DDLJ the hero is motherless, in *Pardes* and HAHK he is an orphan. Whenever the mother is present, she is entirely supportive of her son’s plans. In DDLJ, there is an interesting scene between the mother and daughter, Simran, when the mother chances upon the young lovers on the terrace. She urges them to elope while articulating the thought: ‘My daughter will not give up her dream like I had to give up mine.’ It is telling that even in this day and age both women in the film see Simran’s dreams being limited to achieving marriage to a man with whom she is in love. There is no exploration of her ‘desires’ as an individual with ambitions in the public domain. Film after film in the domestic drama genre reiterates marriage as the limit of desire for a woman.

An exploration of the construction of the patriarch provides interesting insights into how conservative values get upheld and maintained. In films such as *Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gham* (K3G), *Yaadein*, and *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (DDLJ) there is a very strong patriarchal figure that opposes the marriage of the couple that has fallen in love, often for reasons that lack moral authority. The films insist that the patriarch is really acting out of a misguided sense of love for his family, and, therefore, he cannot be completely dismissed or vilified. Eventually, he will see the error of his ways and embrace the clear moral choice. Patricia Uberoi (‘The Diaspora Comes Home’ 332) argues that the romantic happy ending in both *Pardes* and DDLJ require reconciling paternal authority and individual desire.²³

In DDLJ, for example, the plot develops to a crisis point where the young lover is ready to give up and leave if the patriarch of the family does not give his blessings to the match between the main characters, Raj and Simran. The explicitness of the message is captured in the speech that the hero, Raj, delivers towards the end of the film:

Simran: I told you, Raj ... I told you ... take me away from here. There is no one here who will understand our love.

Raj: No, Simran, no. You can run away from outsiders. If you run away from your own ... where would we go? These are our elders ... All our lives, they bring us up, give us a lot of love. They can make the decisions for our lives much better than we can. We have no right to hurt them and build our lives on that. ... Love is not everything, after all. Your father is right. ... Here, father, take her. She is your wealth. Father, I did not come here to break anyone’s heart. I came to

win hearts. There must be something lacking in me because I couldn't win your heart ... What is good or bad for Simran ... you know best of all. Please forgive me.

(*Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge*, 1995)

Making these declarations, and totally subjugating his agency to the will of the patriarch, Raj walks away. In the final scene, Raj gets on the train moving away from Simran, refusing to take her away from her family without their blessings. On the platform, Simran's father watches as the train starts to move away, and when Raj stays on it, proving his intention not to go back on his values and word, the father lets go of Simran's hand. He allows her to join Raj, for he has come to the realisation that no one can love Simran better than Raj. And Simran is pulled on to the moving train just as it leaves the station, she stands by Raj's side as her whole family waves her away, crying, but happy that she is going to be with her true love, a man who has won the blessings of the entire family. Tears flow and all is well that ends well. Benevolent patriarchy is once again valorised at the expense of any agency that the characters may have. In the final analysis, then, these films recast the patriarch as the ultimate 'head' of the family and place the women back into the home.

The films produced post-1990 in the domestic drama genre manage to normalise distinctly Hindu families as the universal 'Indian family'. This leads to a Hinduisation of Indian identity as the represented family is decidedly upper class, upper caste and Hindu. The shift is a sly but powerful one, narrowing the frame within which the 'ideal' Indian family can even be imagined. The terrain has been shifted from an inclusive one to one of Hinduness, wherein Hindu symbols are all-pervasive and colour the lives of both Hindu and non-Hindu characters.

Concluding dreams of a nation: troubling terrains

In conclusion, we have attempted to ground many assumptions made by recent writings on Hindi cinema in a broad macro-level textual analysis which argues that the productions of Indian identity in domestic dramas post-1990 have moved remarkably consistently towards the construction of a monolithic Indian identity that is Hindu, wealthy and supports a conservative patriarchy. The terrain includes only those that it can project as the 'good' example of the signifier 'Indian'. The wealthy diasporic Indian community now finds a prominent place within that signifier provided it conforms to a particular articulation of Indian identity and traditions. Minorities like Muslims and Christians find themselves excluded and increasingly erased from this terrain. Given the stupendous success these films have enjoyed, we could safely say that this construction has found a resonance in Indian audiences – an indication of the conservative trends across the globe.

As the field of research on Indian cinema grows and Indian films become increasingly recognised as a site of production for national identity, we believe it is important to continue analysing these texts at both a macro and micro level. However, we should add that although these trends are broad and important indicators of the mood of the nation at this time, there are always moments of rupture and

possibility articulated through films that break out in different genres, such as *Fiza*, *Laqaan*, *Monsoon Wedding*, *Mr. and Mrs. Ayer* and *Saathiya*, that do not conform to these trends. Even amongst films that do conform or present regressive and jingoistic agendas from a religious/nationalist perspective (e.g. *Gadar*, KKKG), or feminist perspective (*Raja Hindustani*, KKKG), the polysemy of these texts simultaneously allows a space of contestation on other issues, such as class. In the words of Appadurai: ‘the work of the imagination is neither purely emancipatory nor entirely disciplined but is a space of contestation in which individuals and groups seek to annex the global into their own practices of the modern’ (Appadurai 4). A suggestion for future research would be to examine ‘exceptions’ within this genre and without, in order to highlight the possibilities presented by the non-normative articulations of Indian identity. Perhaps they could provide insights into subversive possibilities for the future.

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Notes

- 1 *Ek Dujhe Ke Liye* (‘Made For Each Other’) and *Qayamat Se Qayamat Tak* (‘From Judgement Day to Judgement Day’) are commercially successful examples of this theme from the 1980s.
- 2 This persona was first made popular by the film *Zanjeer* (‘The Chains’) and is most often associated with the film star Amitabh Bachchan, who became a superstar in the 1970s through his portrayals of the ordinary man (Prasad).
- 3 *Parinda* (‘The Bird’) is just one example of this popular plotline.
- 4 Most Hindi movies have five to six songs written for the film that actors lip-sync and dance to (or otherwise emote to) in the story.
- 5 *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun* (‘Who Am I to You?’), *Dilwale Dulhaniya Le Jayenge* (‘The Large-hearted Take the Bride’), *Pardes* (‘Foreign Land’) and *Yaadein* (‘Memories’) and others are just some examples of this trend.
- 6 This discussion is necessarily reductionist in nature. It is impossible to reduce a decade of complex social and political realities to a few paragraphs. Therefore, we have focused on the broad strokes of those facets of the Indian context in the 1990s that are necessary to understanding the arguments in this paper.
- 7 See Agrawal and Khusro for a further discussion of economic restructuring, structural adjustment policies and the impact of liberalisation on poverty.
- 8 The public discourse articulated a fear that India was being neo-colonised by Western imperialist agendas. Many of the private Indian networks that survived past the early 1990s did so by returning to regressive articulations of Indian identity and gender roles in highly rated television series such as *Kyunki Saas Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi* (‘Because the Mother-in-law was Once a Daughter-in-law’) and *Kahani Ghar Ghar Ki* (‘The Story of Every House’) after a period of experimentation with more Westernised portrayals of women.

- 9 *Hindutva* is Hinduness or a Hindu way of life (Hansen).
- 10 For the first 50 years of the Indian state, the political scene was dominated by the Congress Party, which had a secular and socialist agenda (Hansen). During this time, separatist struggles in India (the call for *Khalistan* or a separate Sikh state, the struggle in Kashmir for independence, and the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka are just some of the ongoing communal struggles in the region) were countered by a public discourse about the greatness of the Indian nation lying in its ability to accept diversity. The ‘*Mera Bharat Mahaan*’ (My India is Great) campaign that ran on national television in the 1980s featured prominent artists (writers, poets, musicians, actors and even cricketers) from different religious, ethnic and regional backgrounds singing a song that argued that ‘my India is great’ because of its ability to accept people of different backgrounds living together in harmony.
- 11 The BJP (the Bharitya Janata Party) is the electoral wing of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), which is a paramilitary Hindu nationalist organisation started in 1925. The vision of the right-wing RSS is for a ‘Hindu India’, which would entail the exclusion of Muslims, Jews, Christians, Parsis, Sikhs and Anglo-Indians, some of the more noticeable minorities. The VHP (World Hindu Council), another wing of the *Sangh Pariwar* or United (Hindu) Family mobilises international financial and political support for the activities of its allies in India. Religious fundamentalism in India, then, has been championed by a Hindu right composed from the alliance of the BJP with the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) and the RSS. They capitalised on the backlash against policies of ‘Reservations’ or affirmative action which is similar to the anti-Affirmative Action backlash in the US.
- 12 In September 1990 a prominent BJP leader and current Home Minister of India, L. K. Advani, undertook a *Rath Yatra*, or chariot procession, traversing much territory in Northern India (Hansen). This campaign by Advani was a religious tour to mobilise grassroots Hindu support across the nation. But clothed in this religious garb is a highly planned political programme that seductively uses symbols like the *rath* (chariot) to allude to the mythical journeys like that undertaken by Ram in the *Ramayana*, an important Hindu religious text that tells the story of the mythic character of Ram. Many Hindus consider Ram, a historical figure from the royal family in Ayodhya, a reincarnation of God. This political pilgrimage was used to mobilise widespread support to tear down the Babri Masjid and build a Ram Temple in its stead. This journey became a catalyst for serious communal violence, with many minor and major anti-Muslim incidents being reported in its trail (Hansen). The campaign was repeated in other parts of northern and western India in December and January 1992–1993, after the demolition of the Babri Mosque in Ayodhya – an orchestrated destruction of a historic old mosque, despite the Indian Supreme Court’s strictures, based on the claim that the mosque was constructed on the birth site of Ram. The symbolic significance of this demolition must be understood. As ethnographer Thomas Blom Hansen argues, Ram was made into a metaphor of the essential Hinduness of Indian culture.
- 13 Films like *Bombay* and *Fiza* (‘The Atmosphere’ or ‘The Weather’) examine the resulting tensions between and within communities.
- 14 *Khiladi*, *Soldier* and *Gadar* are all examples of this trend.
- 15 Films from this genre and era often dealt with issues such as dowry, child marriage, ill-treatment of old parents, new daughters-in-law, and the education of women, as exemplified in the film *Unpadh* (‘Illiterate’).

- 16 Amar, Akbar and Anthony are the names of the three main protagonists. These names are identifiably Hindu, Muslim and Christian, respectively.
- 17 For Muslims, 786 is seen as a sacred numeric symbol which is the numerical representation of the Arabic words '*Bismillah ir rahman ir rahim.*' These words translate to 'I start with the name of God, the most merciful and most benevolent.' Thus 786 is a very recognisable indicator of Muslim identity.
- 18 Bobby was the name of the female protagonist in the film. She is portrayed as coming from a Christian and distinctly lower class family which provides much of the conflict in the film because her love interest is an upper class Hindu male. Bobby is the grand-daughter of the young man's childhood nanny.
- 19 Ishwar is the Hindu call to God, Allah is the Muslim call to God. So the line translates to 'It does not matter by what name we address God.'
- 20 *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* ('Something Happens') is also referred to as KKHH in this paper.
- 21 *Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gham* ('Sometimes Happiness, Sometimes Sadness') is also popularly referred to as K3G.
- 22 Second-run theatre refers to a theatre that screens mainstream Hollywood films after they have finished their first run at the local multiplex theatres. The tickets to see films at this theatre are usually a third the price of regular movie tickets. However, when Hindi films are screened, they cost full price (usually \$8 unless it is a blockbuster film like *Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gham* which cost \$9 per ticket).
- 23 See Uberoi ('The Diaspora Comes Home') for a detailed discussion of how these two films articulate an Indian culture that disciplines desires, yet allows the diasporic subject to 'come home'.

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Appendix

Film names with translations

<i>Aa, Ab Laut Chalen</i>	Come, Let Us Return
<i>Aah</i>	Sigh
<i>Aan</i>	Pride
<i>Amar Akbar Anthony</i>	(Proper names connoting Hindu, Muslim and Christian origin)
<i>Awara</i>	The Vagabond
<i>Bobby</i>	(Proper name of female protagonist in the film)
<i>Bombay</i>	Bombay
<i>Border</i>	Border
<i>Coolie</i>	The Porter
<i>Deewar</i>	The Wall
<i>Des Pardes</i>	Homeland and Foreign Land
<i>Dil Se</i>	From the Heart
<i>Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge (DDLJ)</i>	The Large-hearted Take the Bride
<i>Don</i>	The Don
<i>Ek Duje Ke Liye</i>	Made for Each Other
<i>Fire</i>	Fire
<i>Fiza</i>	The Seasons, the Weather or the Atmosphere
<i>Gadar</i>	The Unrest or Rebellion
<i>Hare Rama Hare Krishna</i>	Praise Rama, Praise Krishna
<i>Hum Aapke Hain Kaun (HAHK)</i>	Who Am I to You?
<i>Hum Dono</i>	The Two of Us
<i>Hum Kissi Se Kam Nahin</i>	We're Second to No One
<i>Hum Saath-Saath Hain</i>	We Are Together
<i>Jaal</i>	The Net
<i>Kaante</i>	Thorns
<i>Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gham (K3G)</i>	Sometimes Happiness, Sometimes Sadness
<i>Khiladi</i>	The Player
<i>Kuch Kuch Hota Hai (KKHH)</i>	Something Happens
<i>Lagaan</i>	Tax
<i>Maachis</i>	The Match
<i>Mission Kashmir</i>	Mission Kashmir
<i>Monsoon Wedding</i>	Monsoon Wedding
<i>Mr. and Mrs. Ayer</i>	(Proper names)
<i>Mr. Natwarlal</i>	(Proper name)
<i>Namak Haraam</i>	Ingrate
<i>Naseeb</i>	Fate
<i>Naya Daur</i>	A New Era
<i>Nikah</i>	Marriage
<i>Pardes</i>	Foreign Land
<i>Parinda</i>	The Bird
<i>Parvarish</i>	Upbringing
<i>Purab aur Paschim</i>	East and West

Qayamat Se Qayamat Tak
Qurbani
Refugee
Saathiya
Shaan
Soldier
Trishul
Unpadh
Yaadein
Yaadon Ki Baraat
Zanjeer

From Judgement Day to Judgement Day
The Sacrifice
Refugee
Companion
High Status
Soldier
Trident
Illiterate
Memories
A Procession of Memories
The Chains

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