The Secret Politics of Our Desires

Innocence, Culpability, and Indian Popular Cinema

edited by
Ashis Nandy
This book is dedicated to Chidananda Dasgupta, pioneer in reflective film criticism and one of the first to attempt serious social studies of films, and Iqbal Masud, who has made social and political criticism of films an important component of Indian public life.
How angry is the Angry Young Man? ‘Rebellion’ in Conventional Hindi Films

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Hindi commercial cinema is usually considered purely escapist fare—a view that has strengthened prejudices against the genre to the point where it has been neglected not only by the intellectuals, who deem it trivial, but also by serious film critics. Implicit in such a view is the belief that these films are not only kitsch, devoid of any aesthetic value, but that they are fully divorced from reality, existing in a fantasy land created by themselves. They are at best exotic products of another world, patronized by people of inferior intellectual capabilities.

This condescension of elite critics and the resolute indifference of the academic community are slowly coming to an end. Many are realizing that in a country like India, where more than one-third live below the poverty line, where nearly half the population is non-literate, where private radios and TVs are a luxury, the cinema is the cheapest, most accessible and effective medium of mass communication and image building. Psychologists, political scientists, sociologists, anthropologists, folklorists, structural linguists, for long cocooned in their disciplinary orthodoxies, are now being forced to come out and take note of this ‘strange’ and ‘curious’ medium. For it is becoming clear that, whether one likes it or not, a large part of the Indian consciousness is shaped through these films. ‘Now that we are more secure in the consensus that the mainstream Hindi film is to Indian art what the urban marriage band is to Indian music,’ says Ashis Nandy, ‘perhaps we can turn our attention to what society’s biggest and most influential mythmaker seeks to communicate about the problems of living in this corner of the globe.’

Any serious study of popular cinema in India must first acknowledge its multi-dimensional structure. No mass medium is simply a sum total of all the actions it portrays or the messages it beams through these actions; it includes layers of meanings superimposed on one another, all of which contribute to its effect. In fact, some of the hidden messages may be more important than the overt ones, since such hidden messages often escape the controls of consciousness; they can less perceptibly sink into the spectator’s mind.

This is consistent with the assumption made by some social scientists that some of the political and social trends of our times feed on irrational, often unconscious, motivations. The hidden messages frequently reinforce conventional, rigid, ‘pseudo-realistic’ attitudes, similar to the accepted ideas propagated by more ‘rational’ surface messages. Conversely, a number of repressed messages, which play a large role, manifest themselves on the surface in jests, suggestive situations and other similar devices. For instance, Satish Bahadur argues that songs and dances in Hindi films are generally used as substitutes for kissing and sexual intercourse. Such interactions reflect attempts to channelize audience reaction in particular directions and ways, and for particular purposes. To understand these, it is important to understand the role and function of ideology.

Ideology here is an ensemble of various representations which produce an appropriate consciousness. It signifies the way men and women live out their roles in class society—the values, ideas and images which tie them to their social functions—and prevent them from a true knowledge of society as a whole. The ideology of a social formation not only reflects the economic processes of the society, but also, more significantly, of embedding this economic process in the psychological structures of the people who constitute the society. This way every social order produces in its members the structure it needs to achieve its main aims. This is made possible because ideology, by projecting itself as ‘lived experience’ and therefore ‘artless’, manages to ‘naturalize’ itself. This is where its seductive power lies. It makes everyone...
feel at home in his or her world by insisting, first and foremost, that that world is in fact the world, the world which is the natural order of things, is preordained by God and physical laws to be just the way it is.

However, ideology does not descend upon the populace from some demonic politics. In the contemporary world, it is usually an impersonal system which produces reality for every subject of a culture. And it does this not so much by filling everyone’s minds with the objectives and values that make up the culture as by shaping the very forms of organization by which the subject constructs reality for himself or herself.

II

From such a point of view, we can begin to see the specifically ideological functions of conventional cinema in India. All films are particular ways of seeing the world and, therefore, as I hope to show, have a relation to that dominant way of seeing the world which is the ideology of an age. In the cinema, audiences are in the first place assigned the role of spectators beneath the narrating authority of the film. Straining to totalize the world they inhabit, struggling to achieve a sense of personal unity, they submit willingly, even passionately, to the experience of cohesion which the film delivers to them in the beautiful composition and content of its images and in the exhilarating ‘logic’ of its tale. Inside the movie theatre there unrolls a spectacle in which human beings are the centre of attention, a narrative in which knowledge finally graces the enigmas of the plot and in which an ending, whether tragic or comic, is always attained. In a cinema, the viewers experience themselves as the totalizing agents of whatever appears before their eyes.

Thus the machinery of cinema, in this case one that relies literally on intermittent motion and on the operations of laboratories and chemicals, comes to take on the function of producing reality for its spectators, a seamless, coherent reality both in image and story. This underwrites in each spectator the belief that life itself, no matter how fragmented it may appear, is finally coherent and that his or her own position in it is fully accounted for. It shows that the world we live in is already a closed, destined universe. In the words of Umberto Eco,

A perpetual labour quietly and surreptitiously adjusts human subjects to the machine of cinema and, through this machine, to a cinematized version of reality. While advertising itself as fully open to the open world, cinema is a highly delimited conventional emitter of messages about how things look and how they should be treated.

At this point, a clarification. I do not subscribe to the musty concept of ideology which tends to see art merely as a reflection of dominant ideologies in a crude one-to-one correspondence between the ‘base’ and the ‘superstructure’. Such a concept is unable to explain why so many works of art actually challenge the ideological assumptions of their time. Nor is it sensitive to the concept of ‘unevenness’, Karl Marx talked about in the context of ‘unequal relationship of the development of material production to artistic production’. Building upon Leon Trotsky’s belief that ‘Art has a high degree of “autonomy”’, I believe criticism should seek to explain a work of art in terms of the ideological structure of which it is a part, and which it transforms in art. In other words, it should search for the principle which both ties the work to ideology and distances it from it. In fact, this is the hallmark of a great work of art. Though held within ideology, it manages to distance itself from it to the point where, according to Althusser, it permits us to ‘feel’ and ‘perceive’ the ideology from which it springs. By doing this, it allows us to ‘see’ the nature of that ideology, and reveals to us its limits. In this way, art, as Pierre Macherey claimed, contributes to our deliverance from ideological illusion.

Conventional Hindi films, unlike great works of art, become subservient to the dominant ideologies since they fail to distance themselves from such ideologies, and instead of challenging the ideological assumptions of their times, tend to reinforce and perpetuate them. In India, the mass media are primary technologies of ideology, with the Hindi conventional cinema standing in the forefront of them because of its remarkable ‘illusionistic’ guise and totalitarian framework and because of the enthusiasm with which it is received by the people.

This can be shown in various ways and at different levels, though such an analysis is clearly beyond the purview of this
chapter. What this chapter seeks to do is to focus on the myth of rebellion as projected in the most successful films of the last decade. The choice is not arbitrary.

On 15 August 1975, a film called Sholay was released. Within a couple of shaky weeks, it set about resolutely to create a new film history. It became the first film in the entire history of Indian cinema to gross more than a crore in every single territory in which it was released in its initial run (normally calculated for the first eighteen months after release). Since Sholay, in the fifteen years between 1973 and 1987, twelve other films acquired what in trade circles is called the 'Big C' mark—a film which grosses more than a crore in at least one territory. Of these thirteen films, rebellion has been the recurrent theme in as many as ten. Not included in this list are films like Zanjeer, Deewar, Meri Awaz Suno, Aaj ki Awaz, Trishul, etc., which though they failed to make the 'Big C' mark, nevertheless were superhits and had rebellion as their central theme. Precisely because of this, as anyone even remotely familiar with the world of Hindi films would know, for nearly two decades the 'in' phrases that became clichés in any discussion of such films were 'angry young man' and 'anti-establishment films'.

These films have had a phenomenal effect on the minds of millions of people who willingly received and greedily consumed their message. The success of the genre can be gauged in another way. Of the two superstars thrown up by the industry, Rajesh Khanna (who had dominated the scene before the entry of these films) remained at the top for between four and five years, in a career spanning 86 films. Khanna was the hero in three superhits, none of which could qualify for the 'Big C' category. On the other hand, Amitabh Bachchan, the actor who has been the most consistent and successful symbol of the genre we are discussing, has been at the top for more than fifteen years, and as many as nine of his films were 'Big C'. It is obvious that any study of Hindi conventional films must come to terms with such phenomenal success. But before doing that, we must locate the context in which Bachchan entered the Indian political and social scene.

By the 1970s the euphoria of the post-independence era had evaporated. The contradictions of the capitalist development which India had opted for at the time of independence had sharpened and become evident. The consensual politics of the Congress Party could no longer manage these contradictions, and had broken down. In fact, a majority of the states in the 1967 general elections had opted for non-Congress governments. The legitimacy of the different agencies of the state like the legislature, judiciary and administration was in a crisis. The marginalized had long been alienated from the official-legal machinery. The ruling class, living in a period of general capitalist decline in a backward society, did not have the ability to solve the fundamental problems of society. Its policies only aggravated the social crisis, sharpening class and other social conflicts, polarizing different classes and intensifying the economic and social misery of large sections of the masses, especially of the lower-middle classes. Unemployment and inflation were on the rise and the standard of living was falling. Urban processes in the major metropolises have already produced cities within cities. For instance, in Bombay nearly one-third of the population lived in slums or on pavements, with minimum civic amenities; they were displaced from their original social milieu, without being integrated into the city. Even this animal-like existence was not secure; their slums were treated as illegal occupation of urban space and they had to pay a fine every month. While they lived in constant fear of eviction from or demolition of their urban huts, they could expect no support from the official-legal machinery.

It is in this context that Amitabh Bachchan's persona as an angry young man should be understood. Bachchan in his films is always one of the oppressed. In Deewar, he is a coolie in the dockyard who later on becomes a kingpin of the underworld. In Sholay, he is a petty crook, in Coolie, a coolie, in Adalat, a simple villager who is forced to flee from his village, in Kalna, a taxi driver, in Mard, a tangewala, in Naseeb, a waiter, in Amar Akbar Anthony, a bootlegger, in Namak Halal, a family servant, in Akhri Raasta, a small-time party worker, in Don, a village simpleton. In all these films the hero, though he belongs to a subordinate class, rises to equal his exploiters. His image is of one who can give justice to his class when the police cannot. He protects them from official tyrannies like the demolition of their huts (consider the innumerable scenes where the demolition of slums is stopped by the hero in the nick of time) and he functions as a private adjudicator dispensing instant justice which the official-legal system fails to deliver. His system of justice and his role as an underworld don are therefore projected as a means of
redistributing power between the legally recognized city and the marginalized city.

It is the articulation of the anguish of this marginalized sector that largely explains the phenomenon of Amitabh Bachchan. Significantly, except for Sholay, almost all films in our list crossed the ‘Big C’ mark in the Bombay territory. And in Bombay, as anywhere else, it is basically this segment of the population which sees films repeatedly, literally again and again.

The protagonist is not merely a subaltern; he is a much wronged and exploited person. He has suffered physically, emotionally and or psychologically. The members of his family have also suffered; even when they belong to the police, they are not spared. In Sholay, the entire family of Baldev Singh, the police officer, is massacred; in Zanjeer, Vijai’s parents are gunned down in front of his own eyes. In Deewar, Vijai’s father deserts the family, so they have to face immense problems merely to survive. Vijai has to live throughout his life with ‘Merā-bāp chor hai’ (My father is a thief) unjustly tattooed on his hand. In Amar Akbar Anthony, Coolie, Naseeb, Mard, a happy home is torn asunder and the family members separated. The mother either becomes deaf, dumb (as in Mard) or blind (as in Amar Akbar Anthony) or is reduced to a vegetable. In Muqaddar ka Sikander, Sikander is a poor orphan who is treated shabbily by society; in Andha Kanoon, the parents of the two protagonists (one of whom is a police officer) are murdered and their sister gang-raped and murdered in front of their own eyes. In Meri Aawaz Suno, police officer Sushil Kumar’s pregnant wife is punched and kicked in front of him until she aborts and dies a terrifying death; in Mard, the hero’s parents are captured and imprisoned in a concentration camp and systematically tortured. In Pratighat, the female protagonist is publicly stripped and humiliated.

The protagonists may belong to the oppressed classes, but they do not take things lying down. They are fully capable of making their oppressors bite the dust. All these conventional films project an aggressive, activist image of the individual, whether he be a silent, smouldering loner (Zanjeer, Deewar, Sholay, Trishul) or a dancing, singing, comic hero (Amar Akbar Anthony, Laawaris, Naseeb, Sharabi, Namak Halal, Don, Mard) or a combination of the two (Muqaddar ka Sikander, Andha Kanoon, Shahenshah) or an ordinary next-door man/woman (Ek Duje ke Liye, Pratighat). The protagonists are always doers, achievers, always on the move. They never sit or meditate, but fight their own battles or those of others. And the fight is never in vain. There is no hesitation either, no moments of self-doubt; they are quite clear about what they want and how to achieve it.

The revolt in these films is not directed against the nature and structure of institutions fulfilling specific social roles according to the demands of a larger social system, but against the character disorders of the personnel manning these institutions, who actually are themselves victims of the system. The given of the system are never brought under question; they are not even raised.

In each and every film, the hero takes up a problem, either voluntarily or out of compulsion, and solves it successfully at the risk of his life. The protagonist may or may not be alive at the end of the film; it is not considered important. For what ensures viewer identification is the certainty that in the end the problem would be solved. None of the conventional films disappoints its audience on this score. Thus, in Zanjeer the hero takes on a gang of smugglers and drug traffickers and liquidates them; in Sholay, the dreaded dacoit Gabbar Singh and his gang is wiped out; in Muqaddar ka Sikander, Sikander spurns the love of Zohrabai, kills Dilawar and even sacrifices his own life to make his ‘memsahib’ happy; in Amar Akbar Anthony, the three heroes not only restore the original dismembered family but in the process do away with gangs of smugglers and urban hoodlums; in Andha Kanoon, the protagonists systematically kill the murderers, rapists and racketeers while exposing the inadequacy of the judicial process; in Meri Aawaz Suno, the hero wipes out an entire crime syndicate including the cabinet ministers and police officers participating in it; in Ek Duje ke Liye, the young lovers sacrifice their lives but successfully fight irrational prejudices, linguistic and regional chauvinism; in Coolie, the hero, aided by the heavens, successfully fights against corrupt politicians, the local mafia and other racketeers; in Mard, he takes on the might of the British Empire and its compradors and vanquishes them; in Ram Teri Ganga Maili, corrupt politicians and profiteers are made to bite the dust; in Namak Halal and Laawaris, the evil designs of the managers and other deceivers is exposed and defeated; in Pratighat the heroine takes on the powerful politician-police-goonda combine and liquidates it.

Also, before the end is reached, the villains in these films are taunted, humiliated, battered and generally cut down to size.
ignore or break the law with impunity. Actually, from the beginning, there is no clear moral distinction between the heroes and the villains, since these films often portray the hero in a sympathetic light, and the villain as a personification of evil. The sympathetic light, and the villain as a personification of evil. The sympathetic light, and the villain as a personification of evil.

In Agneepath, for example, the hero is portrayed as a man who is forced to take up arms against the corrupt and the powerful, and who is ultimately victorious. The villain, on the other hand, is shown as a ruthless and power-hungry figure who will stop at nothing to achieve his goals. But even this distinction is blurred, as the hero is sometimes shown to be morally ambiguous, and the villain may have moments of humanity.

These films often use the devices of the conventional cinema to create a sense of suspense and excitement. But they also have a deeper meaning, often reflecting the social and political conditions of the time. For example, Sholay, which was released in 1975, was set in the backdrop of the Naxalite movement, and it is said to have influenced the Maoist movement.

In short, the films of the 1970s and 1980s are a reflection of the times. They are a part of the history of India, and they continue to be watched and enjoyed by people of all ages.
hero’s who merges his in that of his mother, who in turn merges her identity in her husband’s. The father, however, is usually quite insignificant, having only a very small role. In this merry-go-round, there is no full-bodied, independent individual. All are pliant, submissive, dependent; all smoothly and willingly fit into the social roles assigned to them. Thus, though overtly we have an aggressive, activist, radical image of the individual, the hidden message is that the individual is unfree, dependent, malleable, dominated. He or she is a passive object, not an active subject.

This neutralization of all potentially subversive and oppositional messages operates in yet another way — through the ‘de-classification’ of the protagonist. He may be a subaltern, but the focus is never on his social role or on the problems arising out of his socio-economic position in society. The narrative draws out the protagonist from his specific class position and presents him in such a way that he could belong to any class, even to the dominating classes. This is done by glamorizing his lifestyle so that even if he is a coolie, the life he leads could be the envy of even the privileged classes. He wears the best of clothes, moves around on macho motorbikes or exotic tongas, has beautiful girls falling all over him, lives in a comfortable house, never having to worry about his or his family’s daily bread, has a healthy family life and staunch friends willing to lay down their lives for him. The corrosive effects of poverty are never portrayed. The animal-like existence which the deprived lead is alien to our protagonist. The fact that the proletariat must work is suppressed; the fact that this work is alienating and deadening is ignored. It is precisely because of this that all these films depict living with danger and surviving through personal skills as an emblem of social independence. Hence the focus on action, adventure, romance and edge-of-the-seat excitement. It is a daydream response to the real problem of the nature of work in industrial capitalist society. It is a fantasy displacement that accounts for the ambiguity in these films: they recognize a working-class problem, but postulate only a defensive, apolitical, asocial, individualist escape.

The message, from both the angry young man and the comic hero, is simple. The deprived should be content with whatever they have; armed with a smile and some personal combat skills, one can face all problems. Given the right kind of temperament life can be a song, the moral of which, following the song sung by Amitabh Bachchan in *Toofan*, could be: ‘Don’t worry, be happy.’ This is what comic heroes in films like *Amar Akbar Anthony, Naseeb, Namak Halal, Mard, Coolie* and *Laawaris* are also waiting to say.

One correlation of this message is the near-absence of any depiction of the protagonists in their place of work. Except for a couple of shots where the hero would be shown doing what he is supposed to do — being a coolie, a tangewala or a lecturer — in the rest of the film it is hard to tell their profession. They could be anyone. The entire characterization locates the hero or the heroine in a non-productive, non-class position. This way their possible socially/creative role is ignored, their specific class-related problems displaced by their isolated, individualized problems, and all social issues depoliticized. Marx suggested that human labour — in human practice, conceived of as a process in which humanity transforms the objective reality — is a process of self-creation. By diverting attention from the hero’s productive role, these films seem to foreclose any possibility of these heroes fully realizing their uniquely human attributes — self-creation, self-realization and freedom.

The attitude to authority in these films follows a similar pattern — acknowledging a genuine problem but proposing an ambiguous solution. Central to the films is the battle against some injustice or oppression. It is this which propels the narrative forward, provides the mainspring for the development of the plot, and interpellates the audience. Thus not only do the protagonists adopt a seemingly aggressive, oppositional stance towards the authorities, but the entire narrative is steeped in radical discourse and rebellious posturing. What is significant about the films of the 1970s and the 1980s is that the target of attack is not merely the villain but also the state and its institutions, especially the police and the judiciary. The dominant image that is sought to be projected is that the state and its institutions are weak, ineffective, and incapable of protecting its members and the goals and values of the society.

Overtly, it is a scathing attack on the state and its institutions. The police are corrupt and toothless, the legislators self-seeking and unscrupulous, the judiciary blind and vulnerable to clever lawyers and moneyed litigants. The stance is so oppositional that these films are known as ‘anti-establishment’. Their super-heroes are matched by their super-villains, embodiments of all that is evil and authors of all that is wrong in society. They are privileged,
powerful, and till the hero arrives, invincible. They hold the society to ransom and everyone is vulnerable to them. As someone says in Zanjeer, ‘In insaniyat ke dushmanon ko agar khatam na kiyā gayā to har angan mein maut nāchegi’ (‘If these enemies of humanity are not liquidated, there will be a dance of death in every courtyard of every house’).

But the conventional institutions of law and order cannot bring them to book, because of the rules under which the police have to operate. Even if the criminals are arrested, there are enough loopholes in the judicial machinery to ensure their acquittal. This gives ample scope to the narrative to be highly critical of the police and the judiciary. The choicest invectives are hurled against them: ‘Court ke chāron taraf kutton ki tarāh daudte rahoge tabbhi insāf nahn milegā’ (‘Keep on running around the courts like dogs, even then you will not get justice’); ‘Kanoon aur police ke upar se merā vishvas bachpan se hi uth gayā thā’ (‘Ever since childhood I have lost faith in the police and the legal machinery’); ‘Kanoon ki ānkhon ko koi ache doctor ko kyon nahn dikhāte’ (‘Why don’t you show the eyes of the law to a good doctor?’); ‘Kanoon itna gandha hai ki main apane hath is me gandhe nahn karna chahta’ (‘The entire legal machinery is so dirty that I do not want to soil my hands by participating in it’).

Thus, effective action is possible only by operating from outside the institutionalized framework of law and justice. In Zanjeer, Vijai, a police officer, is able to capture the villains and bust their vice dens only after he is thrown out of the police force. In Sholay, Baldev Singh, a police officer, takes his revenge and captures Gabbar, not with the help of his colleagues but by hiring two crooks, Jai and Veeru. In Andha Kanoon, thanks to the police force and the judiciary, the criminals roam about scot free while an innocent Jan Nisar is convicted for a murder which was never committed. Rajnikant, with the help of Jan Nisar, both of whom continuously make fun of the judiciary and the police, kill the villains. On the other hand, Rajnikant’s sister, a police officer, not only makes a fool of herself at every step but also fails to get the criminals convicted. In Deewar, the smuggler Sawant is killed by Vijai and not by Ravi, a police officer. In Meri Awaz Suno, the protagonist is a police officer, dismissed from his service despite all the sacrifices he has made while fighting the villains. It is only after he has been thrown out of the police force that he manages to kill the villains. He then packs their dead bodies into a van, drives right into the courtroom, as an affront and a challenge to the judiciary, while from the background come the words ‘Is case kā faislā ap ke hāthōn main hai’ (‘The verdict of this case is in your hands’), presumably in defiance of the verdict of the court. In films like Muqaddar ka Sikander, Coolie, Mard, Namak Halal, Laawaris, Naseeb, the war between the heroes and the villains is fought out in the open without the police or the judiciary coming anywhere in the picture. In Pratighat, Kali, after defying and holding to ransom the entire establishment and after killing a police officer in front of everyone, is ultimately liquidated by Lakshmi Joshi, an ordinary college lecturer. The message: it is not in the courts that convictions are obtained but in the face-to-face world of heroes and villains; the hero is the agent of immediate, self-sufficient justice.

Not only are the police and the judiciary ineffective but the establishment itself is villainous. In the films of the 1980s, the stereotypical villain is not the smuggler or dacoit, but the politician acting in collusion with the police and the mafia. It is this combine of politicians, police and the mafia that is projected as the scourge of society against whom everyone is vulnerable (Pratighat, Aakhri Raasta, Ram Teri Ganga Maili, Meri Awaz Suno). This criminalization of politics is aptly summed up by the minister of Pratighat, when he candidly admits, ‘Apne dane rāj se mil rahā hai paisā aur sattā’ (‘Our rule of might has ensured us money and power’), or when the goonda Kali rhetorically asks ‘Ek bhi netā kā nām batāo jo hamāre madad ke bagair chunāv jīta ho’ (‘Tell me the name of even one minister who has won an election without my help’). A fight against the villain then, in these films, is a fight against the establishment itself.

In sum, these films construct a coherent version of social reality by playing out and grappling with social contradictions, either by defining them in such a way that their absence does not question the authenticity of the representation, or by redefining them within the film in such a way that they could be papered over. This explains the apparent dualism of the films. For instance, if the major contradiction of policing is conflict with various subaltern groups, at a time when such conflicts are becoming more ‘public’, the films must reproduce that contradiction in their fictional world. That is, the ‘deep structure’ of the films must refract social reality to ensure that the public tensions structured within it do not
threaten the apparent logic and coherence of the structure itself. The fictional world must construct, if not an ideal world of policing, at least a world that can be, as Richard Dyer has argued in relation to Hollywood thrillers and westerns, experienced ideally.

The need to interpellate the audience demands the incorporation and projection of the perceived inadequacies, deficiencies and ills of the institutions of the state, to be reconciled and resolved in such a way that any radical structural attack on these institutions is absorbed and referenced out. The result is that these institutions, though under apparent attack, emerge stronger and more powerful than ever before. The main technique used for this purpose in conventional films is the centred biography of an isolated hero which throws him into an anomic social world where individual action is the only guarantee of effectivity. It is a world which works with a notion of individuality which is at once mythic and ideologically powerful in its implicit dismissal of collective aspirations and actions. Thus policing is projected not as an institution of social control, but exclusively as a set of face-to-face relationships, of eyeball-to-eyeball confrontations. Whereas in some films individuality is sufficient indemnity against bureaucratic rigidity, in others (for instance, in the multi-starrers) it is the group that subverts that bureaucracy by virtue of its humanizing intra-relationships. Such groups in a mass society have been called by Theodor Adorno and Erik Horkheimer ‘synthetic’—they are planned from above as cushions between the anonymous collective and the individual.13

Secondly, what is attacked in the stereotypes of the arrogant rich man, cruel landlord, police officer and the politician is not their social roles, but their personal traits—their ruthless arrogance or plain sadism. There is, in Theodor Adorno’s words, ‘a spurious personalization of objective issues’. For instance, a film about a corrupt politician shows him in a moment of crisis; and the content of the film is his inner and outer collapse. The impression created is that all flaws in society grow out of his character disorder and he is defeated by the honesty, courage and warmth of those with whom the audience is supposed to identify. This not only divides society into black (out-groups) and white (in-groups), but also suggests that the solution of the problem lies in killing/reforming the person, not in interfering with the structures of society. The assumption is: if there is a change of heart, the politician will still deliver the goods; the rich industrialist will distribute benefits all around; and the landlord will be liberal and generous in his dealings with his subjects. The moral is clear: the people must forever be dependent on and grateful to the masters for the mercies showered on them from time to time. This is what the radicalism of the hero and his revolution ultimately amount to. As Mani Kaul would say,

The hero may be conducting a revolution but the sensuousness of the image is such that it conforms to ideas of loyalty and conformism. In the end, after making the revolution that he had set out to make the hero will still be supporting the order and justice of the existing system.

The overt criticism of the state and its institutions has another purpose—it is a safety valve. The pattern is simple: take the established value which you want to restore or develop; brutally expose its inadequacies, the injustices and violence it produces; and, then, at the end, save it by curing its blemishes. As if the aim were to inoculate the public with a contingent evil to prevent or cure an essential one. To rebel against the inhumanity of the established order and its values, according to this way of thinking, is a common illness, natural and forgivable; one must not collide with it head on, but exorcize it like a possession. The patient is made to give a representation of his illness, he is made familiar with the appearance of his revolt, and this revolt disappears when the rancour of the audience is directed against ‘persons’ and away from the objective issues involved. As Roland Barthes in his inimitable style puts it, ‘admitting the accidental evil of a class-bound institution is the best way to conceal its collective evil. One immunizes the content of the collective imagination by means of a small inoculation of acknowledged evil; one thus protects it against the risk of a generalised subversion.’14

It is significant that Hindi conventional films usually structure their discourse around a ‘law and order’ problem. Most of the films have at least one protagonist in the role of a police officer (Zanjeer, Deewar, Andha Kanoon, Meri Awaz Suno, Amar Akbar Anthony, Pratighat, etc.). In those films in which the police are conspicuous by their absence, the hero himself functions as policeman, fighting the law breakers and restoring social order. The device employed is fairly straightforward. The ‘order’ of the society is first presented. Everything is right. Everyone is happy. This order is then destroyed by a group of individuals (villains). They do so not because of any ideological difference with the existing state, but because of certain character disorders they have.
In film after film, the same images appear. The state is weak, ineffective; its police and law enforcement machinery are hopelessly inadequate to check crime. There is a gang of villains having a powerful criminal organization who prey on society; small helpless people are the victims of the gang. The heroes are good people with exceptional abilities. When they are policemen, they are constantly frustrated in their struggle against the criminals. Since the state is ineffective, they move out of its wings and form an alternative state. They get into action only because they have been directly harmed. The futility of seeking redress through the institutions of the state turns them into ruthless avengers. In seeking revenge the heroes become much like the villains they are pursuing. They turn violent and ruthless, ignoring or breaking the law without a second thought. The scourge that was plaguing society, which had in the first place destroyed the original order, is destroyed. Order is restored. The hero now surrenders or is caught by the ‘legal state’.

There is also a basic dualism in the films. On the one hand the police are projected as corrupt, inefficient, toothless, and the judicial system as tardy and bureaucratic. However, by defining and articulating the problem within the discourse of ‘law and order’, the films emphasize the primacy and indispensability of these institutions which they apparently attack.

What exactly is the message here? It is not the institution of the police which is attacked, but the fact that some of its members are corrupt and have sold out. Similarly, the institution of the judiciary is not attacked but the fact that it has so many loopholes that criminals are rarely convicted while innocents are often made scapegoats. In other words, the conventional films advocate a system where retribution is swift and justice is instant. This is possible only in a centralized, authoritarian state structure, with more power in the hands of the police, a fetishization of duty and a total dedication, in fact an inhuman obsession, with law enforcement. In all these films the stage is set for an epic confrontation between the private and the official, between love and ‘duty’.

In this struggle duty always wins, and those people who have dedicated everything to their job are projected as the real heroes. For instance, in Meri Awaz Suno, the hero Sushil Kumar is introduced at a function held to felicitate him as ‘Yeh hain Sushil Kumar—bahádur, nidar police inspector’ (“This is Sushil Kumar—a brave and fearless police inspector”). And Sushil Kumar predictably enough says ‘Vardi ki izzat par kabhi áanch nahin áne dunga’ (“I shall see to it that the honour and dignity of the uniform is never compromised”). Deewar is dedicated ‘to those police officers who work for law by keeping it above personal interests’, and Rajiv Kumar the protagonist is honoured. In Pratigya, Karamvir the cop is, as his very name indicates, ‘farz aur imándári ki jíti jagti misál’ (“a living example of duty and honesty”). This is what police officers should be like: superheroes, heroes who could be honoured and revered. Even the precincts of the police station are sacred; in Zanjeer when Sher Khan is about to sit down, Vijai, the police inspector, kicks the chair from under him and shouts, ‘Yeh police station hai, tumhare baap ka ghar nahin’ (“This is a police station; not your father’s house”). In fact, the notions of law, duty, and uniform are turned into fetishes.

The assumption is that, armed with absolute powers, the police would be in a position to wipe out the criminals, and solve all the problems to ensure law and order in society. By the same logic these films argue that the judicial process should do away with the long drawn out trials of the criminals, should supply ‘instant justice’, without insisting on evidence and witnesses. Ultimately, what is being attacked are the checks and balances of the liberal framework of society, and the limits imposed upon these institutions to restrain them from arbitrary functioning. It is as though by attacking liberal and democratic values, the ground is being prepared for an authoritarian police state.

How can we account for the tremendous popularity, in the 1970s and 1980s, of films dealing with crime and law and order issues? One explanation is the vilification and criminalization of the abnormal, the deviant and the unusual. It encourages us, from the safety of our armchairs, to share vicariously in the experience of the deviant and watch as remorseless pressures to conform are brought to bear on them, in the neatly constructed fictional world of the film. It is a fictional playing out of the limits of tolerance.

Our fascination is not with crime but with the construction of a disruption, for if crime were presented in the abstract—devoid of personality, motivation and resolution—it would lose much of its popular appeal. In crime fiction, the audience is positioned in a narrative which explains the actions of its characters, and constructs an outcome that we ‘expect’ from the unfolding of the tensions in the narrative. The murderer is caught, the dacoit killed,
the smuggler and his vice den wiped out—never is villany allowed to go unpunished.

These general arguments are heightened by the specific context in which the crime films were viewed and produced in the political climate of the 1970s and the 1980s. As the tensions and contradictions of Indian politics increased and became more visible, they could not be contained within the consensual politics that was the hallmark of the Nehruvian era. The only alternative was crude populism. When even that failed, brutal repression and naked violence were unleashed during the Emergency of 1975. With the loss of legitimacy, the Indian state increasingly relied on its coercive might and on the lumpen elements of the kind that were mobilized by the tactics of Sanjay Gandhi; politics began to become criminalized. Simultaneously there was an increase in crimes against the marginalized and the dissenting.

Within this surcharged atmosphere, the soft romantic films of the 1960s had little chance of success; to survive at the box office, conventional films engaged with the ideological tensions in society and incorporated its contradictions. Simultaneously grew the psychological need to identify the villain(s) responsible for the wrongs in the society. Since the structural defects of the system were too abstract and vague a target, there rose the need to have identifiable enemies. The conventional films provided its viewers with just that—smugglers, dacoits, goondas, corrupt politicians and policemen, terrorists and foreign conspirators. Having identified the enemies, they proceeded to define them exactly the way they were being defined in the dominant language of politics. Since these villains were the source of all problems, they had to be projected not only as the ‘ultimate bastards’ but also as channels of ultimate catharsis. The villain became a folksy devil representing the decay of society. Themes of lawlessness, violence, vandalism, oppression, exploitation were all articulated around the villain. He became the centre of various strands of criticism aimed at strengthening the whole of society, a vehicle to call for the restoration of standards, discipline and consensus.

As these assertions became a part of public ‘knowledge’ or ‘commonsense’, they also began to become the basis for a hardening of political attitudes and editorial statements on social problems, legitimizing authoritarian solutions to social problems which had been redefined as law and order issues. The argument had become self-fulfilling.

How angry is the Angry Young Man? • 153

It is this ‘complex network’—combined with industrial troubles, political instability, the rise of the movement led by the late Jayaprakash Narayan—that underwrote the Indian state’s inability to rule through consent and the introduction of repressive laws like the Essential Services Maintenance Act (ESMA), National Security Act (NSC), Terrorist and Disruptive Activities (Prevention) Bill (TADA), the 59th Amendment to the Constitution, Hospitals and Other Institutions Bill, Trade Union Act and Industrial Disputes (Amendment) Act.

Apart from the growing authoritarianism and the almost unlimited powers given to the police by the Terrorist and Disruptive (Prevention) Bill, there was a growth in private gangsterism and parallel government. Historically, the concept of parallel government represented a challenge to the established government with which it was necessarily in an adversarial position. Now, however, it became a parallel government supporting existing authority. It seems that the attempt was to source all problems to clear-cut villains (terrorists, extremists, anti-nationals, foreigners, etc.) and then let loose the entire state machinery to wipe them out. As if the goal was to justify all murders, massacres, suppression of rights, by taking recourse to one basic idea: the need to protect the country from disruptive and anti-national elements. For instance, there were photographs in the newspapers showing the Director General of Police, Punjab, handing over guns to boys barely out of their teens. The reported purpose of this highly publicized exercise was to make these youth an auxiliary force, capable of fighting terrorists. Similarly, during this period, the Andhra Pradesh government announced a plan to arm villagers against armed Naxalite guerrillas. The chief minister recommended that two guns be issued to the president and vice-president of each village protection committee. So keen was the government to see Naxalites killed that it was prepared to provide loans to those wanting to buy weapons. In Bihar, there were already private senas, or armies, tacitly approved by the state.

In other words, citizens were being encouraged, sometimes with financial and other inducements, to take the law into their own hands. The state itself was supporting vigilantism to fight its enemies. This became a recurrent theme in conventional films. The basic assumption of the films too was that if the ‘legal state’ was as strong as the ‘alternative’—read vigilante—groups, there would be no problem in society. Hence, once the heroes
(vigilantes) restored the original order, they either surrendered or were caught by the legal state. The reason why the alternative groups could achieve what the legal state could not was because the former had a greater degree of manoeuvrability—they did not have to conform to the various restrictions imposed on the legal state in terms of rules, regulations, laws, rights of the individuals, and public morality; they could ride roughshod over such minor irritants. Since the legal state, for obvious reasons, could not do so, it required the services of the vigilante groups to do its work. The state and the vigilantes, though legally and formally opposed to each other, actually needed and complemented one another.

The political and cinematic discourses paralleled each other.

NOTES

2. Satish Bahadur, in a lecture at the Film Appreciation Course conducted at the Film and Television Institute, Pune, June 1984.
3. Traditionally, Marxist theories of ideology were centrally concerned with 'determination'. Indeed, the preoccupation with the relationship between economic base and ideological superstructure led to the problems of reductionism in Marxist analysis of popular fiction. Changes in Marxist theories of ideology, initiated largely through the works of Louis Althusser, led to some crucial reformulations in this area. Althusser's 'structuralist' reworking of Marxist theory stressed ideology not as a distortion, involving false consciousness, but as constituting the forms and representations through which persons 'live' in an imaginary relationship to their real conditions of existence. Althusser's work, with its concept of ideology as determined only 'in the last instance' by the economic base, in conjunction with developments in semiology, refocused attention on the autonomy and materiality of the ideological and on 'articulation', the relationships between parts within a structure rather than determination only.
9. *Pratighaat*.
10. *Andha Kanoon*.
11. *Andha Kanoon*.
12. *Andha Kanoon*.
15. A similar kind of deification of the supercop phenomenon is also seen in real life, as is evident in the discourse of Indian politics. Consider the superstar police officers like Julio Ribeiro, Kiran Bedi, K. P. S. Gill, at different points in time fighting the enemies of the Indian state.
Official Television and unofficial fabrications of the self: The Spectator as Subject

4
ANJALI MONTEIRO

The encounter between the discourse of the state, beamed by India’s official television, and communities of viewers occupying specific social and political spaces have thrown into relief new forms of negotiation of meanings and subjectivities. This chapter uses these forms to question the concepts of subjectivity in the development projects of the state and to offset them against the interpretative strategies that viewers apply to televisual discourse. The ‘ways of seeing’ that inform the export of televisual technology from the First to the Third World, as part of the package of development, is the starting point for this inquiry. What new ways of seeing does this technology entail? What forms of subjectivity does it assume? How do the ‘targets’ of this package constitute their identities in response to the developmental messages in television?

The Politics of Development Communication
In the writings of those who pushed for the expansion of the Indian broadcasting media network in the 1950s and 1960s, television and radio were considered key elements in the package of modernization that would propel the country from under-development to development. These new technologies were seen as a means of collapsing the stages in the evolutionary path