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2020

<https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/19516>

Veröffentlichungsversion / published version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

### **Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:**

San Chirico, Kerry P. C.: Dharma and the Religious Other in Hindi Popular Cinema. From Nehru through Modi. In: *Journal for Religion, Film and Media*. Science Fiction and Religion, Jg. 6 (2020), Nr. 1, S. 73–102. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/19516>.

### **Erstmalig hier erschienen / Initial publication here:**

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# *Dharma* and the Religious Other in Hindi Popular Cinema

## From Nehru through Modi

### Abstract

This essay examines common representations of religious minorities in Hindi popular cinema within the context of dominant post-Independence Indian religious and political ideologies – from a religiously pluralist secular socialist framework to a Hindu nationalist late-capitalist orientation. Since the 1990s, Hindi popular film, the Hindi *sāmājīk*, or social, has been understood to be a legitimate conveyor of middle-class Indian values worthy of critical interpretation. This essay thus begins by examining how that legitimacy occurred and how the “Bollywood” film simultaneously became legitimate in the eyes of the Indian public and fit for discursive analysis. Yet long before the heady days of economic liberalization, ascendant Hindu nationalism, and global Indian diaspora, particular notions of Hindu *dharma* (variously if imperfectly translated as “cosmic order”, “duty”, “law”, “religion”) undergirded Hindi popular cinema structurally and topically. Having explained this broader *dhārmīk*, or religious context, the essay turns to shifting representations of religious minorities, particularly Muslims, Sikhs, and Christians, by recourse to several popular Hindi films from Indian Independence to the present. Not only do newer films depict troubling representations of the religious Other, but Hindutva ascendancy forces us to reexamine past films cognizant of what is to come. Reengagement with earlier films force us to note that ideological inconsistencies, tensions, and contradictions have long been manifest on the silver screen, particularly with regard to religious minorities. The essay concludes by arguing that South Asian religio-cultural traditions in all their diversity provide filmmakers with a nearly endless treasury, would that their depths be plumbed. Meanwhile, younger filmmakers are taking Hindi popular cinema in encouraging directions, with newer films reflecting the lives, artistry, and sheer impatience of India’s younger generations.

### Keywords

Bollywood, Economic Liberalization, Hindutva, Hindi Popular Cinema, Hindi Film, *dharma*, *dhārmīk*

### Biography

Kerry P.C. San Chirico is Assistant Professor of Interfaith and Comparative Religious Studies at Villanova University, USA. He holds a doctorate in Religious Studies (South Asian re-

ligions) from the University of California, Santa Barbara. With expertise in Indian religions and Global Christianities, he has scholarly interests that include religion and film, South Asian *bhakti*, vernacular Hinduisms, inter-religious interaction and exchange, and theory and method in the study of religion. Recent publications include “Scorsese’s *Kundun* as Catholic Encounter with the Dalai Lama and His Tibetan Dharma”, in *Scorsese and Religion*, ed. C. B. Barnett and C. J. Elliston (Brill, 2019), “Between Christian and Hindu: Khrist Bhaktas, Catholics, and the Negotiation of Devotion in the Banaras Region”, in *Constructing Indian Christianities*, ed. C. M. Bauman and R. F. Young (Routledge India, 2014), and the co-edited volume, with R. G. Monge and R. J. Smith, *Hagiography and Religious Truth* (Bloomsbury, 2016), which explores sanctity across Abrahamic and Dharmik religious traditions. He is the President of the Society for Hindu-Christian Studies.

This essay examines common representations of religious minorities in Hindi popular cinema within the context of dominant post-Independence Indian religious and political ideologies – that is, from a religiously pluralist secular socialist framework to a Hindu nationalist late-capitalist orientation. Thus, we might identify the historical boundaries of this essay as the time between the prime ministership of Jawaharlal Nehru in 1947, the year of Indian independence, through that of Narendra Modi, which began in 2014 and continues today. We begin by examining the more recent turn to film as a legitimate conveyor of middle-class Indian values worthy of interpretation, and the coeval shift among Indians from embarrassment to pride in film as the industry followed the liberalizing nation-state onto the global stage. Equipped with this interpretive strategy, we turn to the *dhārmik*, or religious elements *within* the Hindi *sāmājik*, or social film, demonstrating concretely how particular notions of Hindu *dharma* (variously if imperfectly translated as “cosmic order”, “duty”, “law”, “religion”) have long undergirded Hindi popular cinema structurally and topically. Finally, and most significantly, we examine representations of religious minorities in Indian popular film against the backdrop of evolving religious and cultural ideologies up to the electoral victory of Prime Minister Modi of the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party, or BJP. It is argued that minority representation in popular Indian cinema, like other aspects of Indian public life, can be interpreted as an index of majority concerns about the religious Other. While such representations have never been static, more current depictions present the viewer with a troubling, even ominous picture of the place (or lack thereof) of religious minorities in contemporary Indian society, revealing majoritarian chauvinism and sectarian tensions that call into question the identity of the Indian Republic as a pluralistic secular nation, as well as the easy elisions between Hindu and secular Indian nationalisms. When we now look at past films cognizant of the Hindu nationalist dispensation to come, discontinuity is not the only striking feature. Ideological inconsistencies, tensions, and contradictions have long been manifest on the silver

screen, particularly with regard to the religious minorities. The present ascendancy of Hindutva (lit.: “Hinduness”), or Hindu nationalism as a national (indeed international) religio-political ideology forces us to reconsider past films and the ideologies embedded therein.

## From Meaningless Kitsch to Meaningful Export

Once upon a time, the Indian middle class as well as academic elites in India and abroad relished the denigration of popular Indian film. Branded *masālā* (spicy mixed) kitsch for the unwashed, an escapist spectacular as numbing as any opiate of the people, it was long rejected as either artistically hollow or discursively anemic. Researching in the early 1990s, Steve Derné found it difficult to find even loyal viewers giving films their due. One 29-year-old male explained, “I get nothing out of films. When I have no work, I go sit in the cinema. I spend five rupees and nothing seems good.”<sup>1</sup> Still another equated viewing with an addiction: “At first I saw [Hindi] films for entertainment, now it has become a habit (like smoking cigarettes).”<sup>2</sup> There was a certain discomfiture regarding film and a general sense that these films were morally dubious.<sup>3</sup> Embarrassment, not pride, was a popular sentiment.

But changes were afoot. Popular cinema was no longer something to be dismissed – by either intellectuals or the public. Shortly after Derné’s filmic ethnography, a change in public opinion finally made itself obvious, first to intellectuals, then among the middle class itself. Vinay Lal and Ashish Nandy attribute the new intellectual interest in popular culture and popular cinema in particular to events beginning in the 1970s, especially to the Emergency, that 21-month period when Indira Gandhi instituted martial law for the purposes of shoring up political power, suspending constitutional law and democratic norms. The press and artists were censored, political foes were jailed, and human rights violations peaked. From this time on it became increasingly difficult to understand the Indian public by means of older ideologies. Theories of secularism and Marxist historicist readings seemed to be of little interpretive assistance. Why, for example, did political parties like the Sikh Akalis, the DMK, and the RSS – all organizations labeled by modern intellectuals as “ethnonationalists”, “fundamentalists”, and “fascists” – oppose the Emergency so strongly, while Gandhian successors like Vinoba Bhave capitulate with such alac-

1 Derné 1995, 208.

2 Cited in Derné 1995, 208.

3 This was Gandhi’s judgment of popular or “social” films. Interestingly, this savvy exploiter of media only viewed one film in his lifetime; Derné 1995, 208.

city;<sup>4</sup> According to Lal and Nandy, “With many old ideas collapsing and conventional social sciences failing to respond to the changing content of Indian politics, many began to explore the myths and fantasies that seemed to shape public expectations from politics, politicians, and the state.”<sup>5</sup>

By the 1980s it had become clearer to Indian and international scholars alike that the media-exposed Indian public was accessible and in fact exploitable through use of religio-cultural symbols and structures in media such as popular cinema.<sup>6</sup> In short, popular culture, and popular film in particular, offered clues for understanding the contemporary public on the verge of a critical time in the country’s development – the shift away from socialism in favor of neo-liberal economics and concomitant rise of Hindu nationalism.<sup>7</sup>

By the late 1990s, given earlier nationalist movements, one might have expected Hindu nationalists to favor economic protectionism. Instead, the BJP governments furthered the liberalization agenda first implemented by the Gandhi and Rao Congress Party governments – privatizing many central government corporations, liberalizing trade in accordance with the World Trade Organization, opening the skies to private airlines and the country to overseas investment. It was under the BJP that Bangalore became India’s Silicon Valley and Hyderabad became “Hi-Tech City” (thanks also to Andhra’s Chief Minister, Chandrababu Naidu).

Significantly for Indian cinema, under the BJP the Government of India finally granted filmmaking “industry” status, thereby allowing it to receive, among other things, reduced electricity rates and eligibility for bank finance.<sup>8</sup> That the BJP would grant industry status is not too surprising, since, as Tejaswini Ganti notes, “the party’s support base is heavily drawn from petty trader’s and small businessmen who also comprise the vast distribution, exhibition, and finance apparatus for Hindu filmmaking”.<sup>9</sup> Filmmaking’s new legitimacy is a significant departure from the norm. For years, the government’s treatment of the industry had been paternalistic and puritanical, a medium to be monitored and manipulated. Its tax policy placed filmmaking in the same categories of “vices” like tobacco and alcohol consumption. But with its new respectability in a BJP-dominated India, popular film became an ex-

4 This question is posed by Lal/Nandy 2006, xxiii.

5 Lal/Nandy 2006, xxiii.

6 Lal/Nandy 2006, xxiii.

7 Harish Trivedi partially echoes Lal and Nandy by noting that Hindi cinema only became a respectable field of academic enquiry in the 1990s, especially with the publication of what became the canonical *Encyclopedia of Indian Cinema*, edited by Ashish Rajadhyaksha and Paul Willemen, in 1995. He notes that such interest was inspired by the common desire, exemplified by cultural studies, to understand popular and mass cultures. See Trivedi 2006.

8 Ganti 2004, 50.

9 Ganti 2004, 51.

portable cultural product, simultaneously an international money-maker and a disseminator of Indian cultural values and neo-liberal economics around the world. It should come as no surprise that Hindi films have become purveyors of the zeitgeist. Theirs is a hand-in-glove relationship.

By the late 1990s, then, with economic liberalization, globalization, and the consequent advent of satellite television, the middle class had become media-exposed, urban, and striving. Indian cinema was a popular art form reflecting middle-class sensibilities. Ganti notes, “There is in it [Indian cinema] an attempt to capture and keep the past alive, tame the new, and make a virtue out of the transient bonds that the uprooted forge between experience and hope, the past and future.”<sup>10</sup> The kitsch produced by middle-class auteurs apparently had something to teach us about the state of India, the Indian state, and the conflicted actors who animate the nation. Nandy explains with his typically insightful panache:

True, this cinema is also simultaneously a form of kitsch – albeit a powerful, pan-Indian, politically meaningful kitsch – of ideas derived from the dominant ideology of state, categories thrown up by the clash between memories of the encounters between India and the West during the past two hundred years, and the various surviving vernacular constructions of desirable life and society [... ] The kitsch is after all meant to entertain and be consumed by people who carry within themselves the contradictory pulls on the one hand, the experience of living with a functioning nation-state desperately trying to modernize itself and join the global political economy and mass culture, and, on the other, the experience of living with the myriad vernacular cultures and traditional lifestyles associated with the civilizational entity called India.<sup>11</sup>

Popular Indian film, including the Hindi variant known since the mid-1990s as the derivatively named “Bollywood”, provides the exegete a text of modern middle-class India, exhibiting ideological and sectarian tensions, imaginaries, hopes, and nightmares in the form of *prets* (ghosts) and Pakistanis. “Midnight’s children”<sup>12</sup> – and

10 Ganti 2004, xxv.

11 Ganti 2004.

12 The term “midnight’s children” refers to those Indians born at midnight on August 15, 1947, the moment of Indian independence from the British, and is taken from the 1981 prize-winning novel of the same name by Salman Rushdie. I am using it to refer to the first generation born in the Republic of India. Given these fears, there is particular irony to the popularity of Hindi cinema in Pakistan and within the Pakistani and South Asian diaspora, as audiences are willing to put up with perceived negative portrayals even as the Pakistani government is not. Apparently, Pakistanis are willing to overlook disagreeable Muslim representation in Hindi popular cinema, with enjoyment trumping offense. But a public is one thing, its government still another. In 2019, as a result of the most recent military clashes along the Line of Control and in retaliation for the revocation of the longstanding

now their children – display all these through a medium as bright and seemingly transparent as a Delhi marching band. Yet just as boisterous marching-band kitsch can blind us to the intricacies of the socio-cultural phenomenon itself – note, for example, the colonial vestige of a British marching band, the Bollywood songbook, the musicians and their ragtag dress, and the poor women and adolescents carrying fluorescent torches precariously attached to a moving generator – so too can the glare of the glossy *masālā* film blind us to the things that are. As many now take for granted, the genre has something to teach us.

The final pivot that would make pop Indian film *pakkā* (legitimate) was the growth of India's diaspora. By the mid-1990s, given years of immigration, an Indian diasporic middle class in the tens of millions reached around the globe, from London to New York to Melbourne. Bollywood films had become an important link to *janmabhūmi* (lit: "birthland"), a fact not lost on producers like Yash Chopra, founder of Yash Raj Films (YRF). According to Avtar Panesar, Vice President, International Operations, Yash Raj Films, two films made a huge impact:

The overseas success of DDLJ and HAHK became the catalyst for international business resurgence and YRF were at the forefront. It was only a natural progression for YRF to control its own destiny. YRF became the first India studio to set up its international distribution arm.<sup>13</sup>

More studios would follow suit. The result? KUCCH KUCHH HOTA HAI (SOMETHING HAPPENS, Karan Johar, IN 1998), PARDES (FOREIGN LAND, Subhash Gai, IN 1997), KAL HO NAA HO (TOMORROW MAY NEVER COME, Nikhil Advani, IN 2003), and KABHI ALVIDA NA KEHNA (NEVER SAY GOODBYE, Karan Johar, IN 2006) were written with the diasporic audience in mind. So at the same time as Indian middle-class, caste Hindus were feeling no small anxiety about their place in contemporary India, diasporic Indians were struggling with their own demons, especially the ambivalences of identity and belonging in the United Kingdom and North America.<sup>14</sup> As the first generation made

Article 370 of the Indian Constitution, a law allowing a degree of autonomy in the state of Jammu and Kashmir, Pakistan banned *all* Indian films. See "It's Pakistan's Loss, Says Bollywood on Films Being Banned Across the Border", in News 18, 8 August, 2019, <https://www.news18.com/news/movies/its-pakistans-loss-says-bollywood-on-indian-films-being-banned-across-border-2263587.html> [accessed 13 November 2019]. Historically, film bans are a regular practice of the Pakistani government, though past films were banned on an *ad hoc* basis, mostly owing to depictions of Muslims, Islam, and Pakistan.

13 With these common acronyms, Panesar refers to HUM AAPKE HAIN KAUN? ("HAHK", WHAT AM I TO YOU?, SOORAJ BARJATYA, IN 1994) and DILWALE DULHANIYA LE JAYENGE ("DDLJ", THE BIG HEARTED WILL TAKE AWAY THE BRIDE, Yash Chopra, IN 1995). See Verma 2017.

14 In 2007 a BBC poll found that 38% of all South Asians living in Britain said they "don't feel British", while half believed they were not treated as British by white Britons. "Over a third British Asians

way for the second and third generations in the United States, there was a conscious attempt to maintain a connection to a homeland perceived to be slipping away. Now there were films catering (often pandering) to these longings, all with the support of the Indian central government. Popular films like *DILWALE DULHANIA LE JAYENGE* (*THE BIG-HEARTED WILL TAKE AWAY THE BRIDE*, Aditya Chopra, IN 1995) are many things, so we should abstain from facile reductionism, but they are certainly palliatives to both national and diasporic constituencies, alternatively assuring them that Mother India is still essentially Hindu even as their new home is not (a dubious premise), that modernization and Indian-ness are *not* mutually exclusive (more on this shortly), and that Indian family values are indeed superior to those of the Other – that Other variously if mostly negatively construed. The Oscar nomination of *LAGAAN* (*LAND TAX*, Ashutosh Gowariker, IN 2001), in the category of Best Foreign Film, and the showing of *DEVDAAS* (Sanjay Leela Bhansali, IN 2002) at Cannes conferred legitimacy on both Bollywood and these middle-class yearnings. As Shahrukh Khan and Aishwarya Rai respectively *salāmed* and *namastéd*<sup>15</sup> their way down the red carpet, it might have dawned on segments of these Indian audiences, “Maybe *masālā* is acceptable after all. Maybe so are we.”

Can we assume that Hindi popular cinema broadly represents a Hindu public? I believe so. The contention itself rests on dominant and pervasive notions of the Hindu concept of *dharma* in Hindi films, the subject to which we must now turn our attention.

## *Dharma* and the *Dhārmik* in Indian Film: A Necessary Précis

While beginnings are often debated, and searching them out can be a fool’s errand, it is significant that the first (and second) Indian features were *dhārmik*, which is to say, religious in nature.<sup>16</sup> The candidates for first include *PUNDALIK* (Ramchandra

don’t feel British suggests Asian Network poll”, in [www.bbc.co.uk](http://www.bbc.co.uk), 30 July 2007, [http://www.bbc.co.uk/pressoffice/pressreleases/stories/2007/07\\_july/30/asian.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/pressoffice/pressreleases/stories/2007/07_july/30/asian.shtml) [accessed 15 November 2019].

- 15 The typical Islamic greeting or wishing of peace, *salām*, in South Asia consists of moving the open palm roughly from the waist to the brow, whereas Hindus, and religious adherents of other traditions, place both palms together in front of the chest in the *namasté* gesture. Rai and Khan greeted Cannes well-wishers using the gestures of their respective religious traditions.
- 16 I am using this term *dharma* capaciously to refer to the constellation of meanings connoted by law, moral and ethical code, right action, conformity with the truth of things, and, more common nowadays, as the Hindi equivalent of the English word “religion”. *Dhārmik* is the adjectival form of *dharma*. Admittedly, translating *dharma* as religion is problematic, a Western, reductionistic imposition, but one that is largely accepted by modern-day Hindi speakers. I am also placing *bhakti*, or devotion, broadly under this *dhārmik* rubric, fully cognizant that historically in South Asia, *bhakti* can both circumvent and reinforce Brahminical worldviews.



Gopal Torne, IN 1912),<sup>17</sup> and RAJA HARISHCHANDRA (KING HARISHCHANDRA, Dhundiraj Gopal Phalke, IN 1913). “Whichever of the two films was made first”, Rachel Dwyer explains, employing generic categories slightly different from my own,<sup>18</sup> “it is not disputed that the mythological [...] and the devotional are the founding genres of Indian cinema.”<sup>19</sup> The *dhārmik* nature of Indian film origins is itself significant, as the *Purāṇas*<sup>20</sup> and epics have framed Indian film narrative since the industry’s inception, regardless of particular subgenre. We may variously understand these classical works as “pools of signifiers” through which South Asians interpret their lives, or as Foucault’s “founders of discursivity”, which can be continuously rewritten, though not necessarily endorsed.<sup>21</sup> Vijay Mishra argues that for Indian cinema the epics *Mahābhārata* and *Rāmāyaṇa* are crucial cultural “intertexts” or “precursor texts”.<sup>22</sup> Scriptwriter Anjum Rajabali described – sans philosophical jargon – the genesis of the epic political drama RAAJNEETI (POLITICS, Prakash Jha, IN 2010):

Hey, Prakash Jha and I weren’t even thinking of the Mahabharat when we began conceptualizing *Raajneeti*. It was like “here’s this man who wants to join politics, and here’s the man he sees as his rival ... and voila!” The story came to take the same course of the Mahabharat. This shows that the stories have stood the test of time. No matter what the actual content has been, they point to how a person behaves in the face of a dilemma.<sup>23</sup>

17 Pundalik is the name of the famed saint of the Varkari sect said to have brought the god Vithoba to Pandharpur in the modern Indian state of Maharashtra.

18 Rachel Dwyer differentiates between mythological and devotional film genres, arguing that the difference lies in the relationship of the gods to the human realm. She argues that in the mythological genre there remains an impenetrable distance between divine and human, whereas in the devotional genre the deity is more approachable since the stories generally involve *sants* and *bhaktas* (saints and devotees) and the intervention of the deity in human affairs. Nevertheless, in Hindu “mythology”, an exogenous term, there is indeed devotion shown between deities. For example, one immediately thinks of Hanuman’s paradigmatic devotion to Rama, which in turn serves as models of *bhakti* for adherents. While this differentiation makes sense in terms of Western categories, where the real difference turns on modern Western notions of history and the historical, such classification does not make as much sense on Indian soil. A more indigenously appropriate designation is the *dhārmik* genre. For a discussion of generic categories, see Dwyer 2006, 1–11.

19 Dwyer 2006, 63.

20 *Purāṇa*, in Sanskrit, literally “old”, “ancient”, or “ancient story”; it is a literary genre found in Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain traditions, generally consisting of five topics: the creation of the cosmos, the dissolution of the cosmos, the world ages, the genealogies of the gods, and the history of kings. There are some eighteen Hindu *Purāṇas*, whose treasury advanced (and reflects) the development of various sects and popular Hinduism.

21 Mishra 2002, 3.

22 The *Mahābhārata* and *Rāmāyaṇa* constitute the epics of South and Southeast Asia, which for ages have existed in oral-aural, textual, and performative modalities. Traditionally they are placed in the category of *itihāsa*, literally “thus occurred” or conventionally “history”.

23 Chandra 2010, 4.

The popular or “social” (*sāmājīk*), as it has been called, has always borne the marks of *dharma* either in content or form. Much like the *Ramāyaṇa*, popular films operate on a continuum of *dharma-adharma-dharma*.<sup>24</sup> A film begins with the initial *dhārmik* state of nature, perhaps the Indian pastoral, followed by the moment of crisis (*adharma*), then concludes leaving no one fearing *dharma*’s ultimate degradation. Though the story may allow for some degree of innovation, questioning, and critique, *dharma* tends to obtain. According to Mishra,

The flexibility of the genre makes for a notion of *dharma* to be transgressed in a regular manner, as irruptions in the text, as presentiments of alternative (and even superior) critiques, rather than as the construction of a radically new world order. Suggestively, Bombay Cinema interprets to the point of change but never changes the ethical order itself.<sup>25</sup>

Film critic Shubra Gupta refers to this *dhārmik* structure when, in the context of considering the film *JOHNNY GADDAAR* (Sriram Raghavan, IN 2007), she writes:

The “greed is good” principle is still quite alien to Bollywood, though we’ve has a series of con men (and a few women). But an avaricious stockbroker (as pictured in the Hollywood *Wall Street*) will never be the central character in a Hindi film, because we are still not happy seeing amoral characters in the lead. Immorality is still all right, because we know an outright bad guy will get his just deserts in the end; but amorality, with its ambiguous outlines, is hard for us to handle. We like our movies to have emotional and moral payoffs. Anything else makes us uncomfortable.<sup>26</sup>

This “discomfort” relates to the implicit challenge to a moral universe, like a musical chord that is never fulfilled; it leaves one uneasy, even repulsed.

Brahmanical Hindu conceptions of *dharma* are thus foundational, immanent, and invasive. As such, there seem to be real ideological controls at work in Indian popular cinema, a fact to which we shall return.<sup>27</sup> We must pause here only to note two

24 This continuum signifies the depicted movement from social and moral equilibrium to unrighteousness and disequilibrium and finally to social and moral equilibrium that is part of the narrative arc of the story.

25 Mishra 2002, 14.

26 Gupta 2017, 195.

27 This is one reason why the semantic content of much Indian cinema moves along fairly traditional lines, even those films considered radical. Transgression is itself always circumscribed by that which it is transgressing. The presence of boundaries need not be understood negatively, as it has been since the Western Romantic period. Traditionally (in both the East and the West) constraints – a.k.a. that required by any “discipline” – have been understood as central to the creative project. Hence,

significant dimensions of *dharma*, the ontological and the normative. With regard to the ontological dimension, *dharma* is understood to structure the cosmos, Barbara Holdrege writes,

in an intricate network of symbiotic relations among interdependent parts, in which each part is in its proper place and ensures that every aspect of the cosmic system is properly balanced and coordinated with every other aspect and thus contributes the maximum to its own evolution and to the evolution of the whole system.<sup>28</sup>

This ontological dimension undergirds the normative dimension, in which, she notes, “the cosmic ordering principle finds expression on the human plane in the ritual, social, and moral orders, particularly as represented in the Brahmanical system of socio-cultural norms”.<sup>29</sup> For a human (other animals have their own *dharma*s), one’s *dharma* is to live commensurately with one’s inherent nature given one’s birth and social status. *Dharma* is elaborated still further: *varṇāśrama dharma* is the traditional Brahmanical social order constituted by class and stage of life and by duties and obligations attached thereto. Meanwhile, each person has his own duty, his *svādharmā*. Finally, women follow obligations commensurate with their sex – that is, *strī dharma* (literally, “woman’s *dharma*”).

With notions of *dharma* undergirding Indian filmic ideology, and the epics and the *Purāṇas* providing much narrative content and form, *dhārmik* film continued in popularity throughout the silent-film period and into the talkie period, which began in 1931. The height of explicitly *dhārmik* films was the 1930s to the 1950s, when deities, *sants*, and *bhaktas*<sup>30</sup> were enshrined in the new medium. Narratives strayed little from those handed down by the epics, various religious sects, and folk traditions. In the subsequent years, *dhārmik* films continued, but were generally considered “B movies”. A milestone occurred in the 1980s, however, with the production of the epics for television, first *RAMAYAN* (Ramananda Sagar, IN 1987–88), then the *MAHABHARAT* (Ravi Chopra, IN 1988–90). Unsurprisingly, the producers and directors are both film industry veterans. The Hindi serials boasted a multi-religious weekly viewership of

the endless fecundity of the *Mahābhārata* and *Ramāyaṇa* through the ages in performative, devotional, textual, and now filmic modalities.

28 Holdrege 2004, 213–214.

29 Holdrege 2004, 214.

30 The words *bhakta* and *sant* deserve some elaboration. *Bhakta* is typically used to describe those religious figures who were devotees of an embodied deity; *sant* is a word related to the Sanskrit *sat* (truth), used to refer to Maharashtrian non-sectarian poet-saints from the 14th century onwards and those North Indian luminaries of the late medieval period who worshipped a deity beyond or without attributes in the vernacular, while eschewing Brahminical orthodoxy. However, the words are often used interchangeably.

more than 100 million, further evidence of both the discursive role of the epics in India and the power of the television medium and the Indian film industry undergirding it.<sup>31</sup>

There are *dhārmik* films and there is always *dharma* in film. In the 1940s the aforementioned *sāmājīk*, or social omnibus genre largely subsumed *dhārmik* and stunt films to become the dominant subgenre. This is what we now know as “the Bollywood film”, and rare is the Bollywood film bearing no marks of religion, whether that includes direct references to or depictions of religious beliefs and practices or indirect expressions of religious beliefs and moral systems.<sup>32</sup> Reincarnation (Hindi: *punarjanam*),<sup>33</sup> Hindu mythological themes, worship rituals, popular festivals, characters and characterizations from the epics<sup>34</sup> and devotional tropes are common in Bollywood cinema. For example, *darśan*, the act of seeing and being seen by a deity across Hindu traditions (and those influenced by them), is implicit in the viewer’s encounter with the silver screen. All this is to say that while the genre is never referred to as the “Hindu social”, a Hindu worldview is in fact presented. As India’s dominant religious tradition or traditions, the social as Hindu is so pervasive as to be largely unnoticed. Dwyer is therefore right to assert that “Hinduism is the invisible norm, the standard default position.”<sup>35</sup> And this is a fact often lost on all but those with other religious commitments. Interestingly, the types of Hinduism presented have changed, reflecting contemporary religious and ideological motifs.

## The Religious Other, Then and Now

The so-called religious Other or religious minority constitutes no less than 300 million Indian non-Hindus. Minority religious representation has never been static since India’s independence in 1947, but some generalities can be made. First, it is a rare Hindi

31 The scope of this essay does not allow for greater explication of the phenomena that were the television serials *RAMAYAN* and *MAHABHARAT*. This is done with analytical rigor and insight in such books as Richman 2001 and Mankekar 1999.

32 Dwyer 2006, 139.

33 In *KARAN ARJUN* (Rakesh Roshan, IN 1995) obviously draws on the relationship of Krishna and Arjuna in the *Bhagavad Gītā*, while also evoking the loyal relationship of the brothers Rama and Lakshman of the *Ramāyaṇa*. In the same film the trope of reincarnation (*punarjanam*) is employed as a way for *dharma* to prevail, even as an episode of *adharma* (in this case the killing of the two brothers for the sake of inheritance) took the lives of the two protagonists. The virtuous brothers are immediately reborn, reunited, and later take revenge on their killer and defend the honor of their first mother; *dharma* has been reinstated.

34 The *Bhagavad Gītā*, or “Song of the Lord”, consists of a conversation between the God Krishna, here serving as Arjuna’s charioteer, and Arjuna the warrior, who laments the pending internecine battle on the fields of Kurukṣetra. It is in this context that Lord Krishna explains the nature of *dharma* and devotion, ultimately revealing his divine, cosmic form to Arjuna. *KARAN ARJUN* (1995) draws on the connection between these two figures to demonstrate their significant, death-defying relationship.

35 Dwyer 2006, 136.



Fig. 1: Emblems of the Nehruvian secular ideal. Three brothers save their mother, unwittingly. Film still, *AMAR, AKBAR, ANTHONY* (Manmohan Desai, IN 1977), 00:26:01.

film in which the protagonist is Muslim, Christian, Sikh, or Parsi. Second, when religious minorities are portrayed, they appear as sidekicks, or as necessary contributors for the authenticating pluralist mise-en-scène, or as poster children for Indian's sense of itself as a tolerant multi-religious nation. Finally, when minorities occupy pride of place, they do so in unthreatening period pieces or within designated niche communities.<sup>36</sup>

Of the 300 million non-Hindus in India, some two-thirds are Muslim. There was a time when Muslim actors felt it necessary to change their names to more generically Hindu-sounding ones. For example, two of the stars of *MUGHAL-E-AZAM* (*THE GREAT MUGHAL*, K. Asif, IN 1960), Dilip Kumar and Madhubala, began their lives as Muhammad Yusuf Khan and Mumtaz Jehan Dehlava, respectively. Other examples abound. Name changes can be made to mean too much, but they do signal dominant perceptions about what the Indian viewing public is thought to desire or require. They also demonstrate normative Hindu influences on the Indian public.

Beyond these broad representational generalizations, however, we can say that as national ideologies have changed, so too have minority depictions, moving from a type of secular pluralism known in Hindi as *dharma nirpekṣ*, usually translated “sec-

36 See, for example, the famous *MUGHAL-E-AZAM* (*THE GREAT MUGHAL*, K. Asif, IN 1960). Yes, Muslims once ruled this land, but that is now, safely, a thing of the past and thus fit for romanticization.

ularism”, to *Hindutva*, which understands India as innately and essentially Hindu and Hindus as deserving the prerogatives of their dominance.

To my mind, there is no better reflection of the secular, pluralist Indian ideology in film than that of *AMAR, AKBAR, ANTHONY* (Manmohan Desai, IN 1977). It is the story of the disintegration and reunification of an Indian family. Three Hindu brothers are separated in childhood and brought together in adulthood to save their long-lost mother. Significantly, each is raised in a different religion. Amar, the *dhārmik* exemplar, is raised Hindu and is, tellingly, a policeman; Akbar, the carefree tailor and Qawwali singer, is a boyish, non-threatening Muslim; and Anthony Gonsalves, the irresistible smalltime thief with a heart of gold, is raised by a Catholic priest. As it happens, their mother is named Bhārati: the female form of *Bhārat*, that is, “India”. Bereft and hopeless, she attempts suicide. In a twist of fate, all are reunited in a hospital room to save the life of a mother they did not recognize, who through injustice had become a stranger to her own children. It was the mid-1970s after all, and these were suicidal times. The idealistic dreams of independent India seemed to be fading some 30 years after its “tryst with destiny” beginning. Nehru was dead and his daughter Indira had declared the Emergency. Yes, the trains now ran on time, but at the cost of constitutional civil rights threatening to jeopardize the world’s largest democracy. Meanwhile, Pakistan, India’s shadow Other, likewise founded in 1947 out of British India, was falling into disarray. A military coup led by General Zia-ul-Haq would follow just months after the end of Indira’s Emergency.

In *AMAR, AKBAR, ANTHONY*, in a scene deliberately lacking all subtlety, the three titular protagonists offer a blood transfusion to save a blind woman they have not yet recognized as their own mother – she is no one less than Mother India (fig. 1). Like the three famed north Indian rivers forming a *saṅgam*, or confluence, at Allahabad to vivify the north Indian plains, so the sons’ intravenous lines commingle in the person of their blind, comatose *Mā*. In case anyone misses the singular point, this scene is placed in the film’s belated introduction – including the title card in the three scripts of Hindi, Urdu, and English. As the three men lie in three hospital beds, and as their blood flows into a middle-aged woman lying perpendicularly to them, Mohammad Rafi croons the moral, much like a Greek chorus:

*Mā sirf nāta nahin yeh kuch aur bhī hai.*

(A mother is not just a relationship, but something more.)

*Mā se bichad ke bhī yeh tūt jātā nahin.*

(Though you wander, the mother’s bond isn’t broken.)

*Yeh sach hai koi kahānī nahin.*

(This is true, not just some story.)

*Khūn khūn hotā hai pānī nahin.*

(It is blood, not water.)



One final tidbit about the plot and nationalistic symbolism bears mentioning: the characters Amar, Akbar, and Anthony were separated from each other as children (and thus *united* with their new adoptive families) on August 15, that is, Indian Independence Day.

Much has been written about this film.<sup>37</sup> For the purpose of this essay, it is significant that each protagonist represents a kind of ideal type. Each is likeable and somehow necessary for the country in his own way as Hindu, Muslim, and Christian. The message is clear: without their life-blood (that unique signifier of human and national identity), Mother India will die. *AMAR, AKBAR, ANTHONY* presents a religiously harmonious ideal in 1970s India. It is an attempt to summon viewers out of amnesia, to remind a country of a pluralist secular India whose cords appeared to be fraying. It is as if to say, “Underneath all our external differences flows the same Indian blood.”

There was a time, prior to that heady decade of the 1990s, when we could leave it at that. The rise of Hindu nationalism and two electoral victories for the BJP, however, require some re-engagement. Then this scene reveals problems and contradictions of Indian secularism that have long been present if held at bay. I am speaking of the common elision or interchangeability of Indian with Hindu identity. So, we note that even with this particular secular vision of *AMAR, AKBAR, ANTHONY*, what is shared is in fact “Hindu blood”, since the boys were born to a Hindu family prior to its heart-breaking disintegration. This follows a common historiography in which religions born outside of India (Zoroastrianism, Christianity, Islam) are treated as foreign species, mere implants in a common Hindu soil. The implication is that adherents of these traditions are denuded Hindus, even as their “blood” or genetic structure is South Asian. Lost in this representation is that “Hindu” as a singular religious identity is a growth of the ages, originally a geographical signifier used by Persians then Greeks then Muslim Central Asians to cover a multitude of religious beliefs and practices, and congealing as a singular religious identity in relation first to Islam and later to Christianity.<sup>38</sup> The words Hindu and Hinduism, by extension, collapse the panoply of sectarian differences existing under these abstract socio-religious signifiers. This Indian=Hindu elision is a common one, proffered (often) unwittingly by secular nationalists and explicitly by Hindu nationalists. And, it is undeniably true that Hindu traditions form the dominant religio-cultural matrix on which religious minorities dwell in India, as I hope the preceding discussion of *dharma* and some of its attendant characteristics reveals. Yet to equate Indian with Hindu and vice versa is to overlook the degree of pluralism so characteristic of South Asia, where “religious”

37 See Elison/Novetske/Rotman 2016.

38 See San Chirico 2021.

identities are but one of many identities. And yet, in the wake of Islamic and British Christian empires, when dominant religious identities were congealing around religious identity monolithically defined, majoritarian concerns and their required Others were developing.

Thus, Vinayak Damodar Sarvarkar, the intellectual architect of Hindu nationalism, and Pandit Nehru, advocate of what is often deemed Indian secular nationalism, stand in agreement, for both nationalisms tend to essentialize India as Hindu. As we can now see, Nehru's pluralist secular nationalism was fragile, its latent fissures ripe for exploitation, its connotations and elisions often lost on elites but evident to either those who did not share the vision or those whose place in India was more tenuous. Such tenuousness was made particularly evident by the end of the 20th century, when Indian life was itself changing rapidly, with the crosscurrents of economic liberalization, unmet material expectations beamed into new cable televisions, and ascendant Hindu and Islamist nationalisms. The times were changing quickly and so too were depictions of the religious Other.

We may thus characterize Muslim representation in two ways, reflecting an evolution of dominant national and subnational ideologies from Independence through the 1980s, and then from the 1990s until 2010s: the male Muslim is either the innocuous and dutiful sidekick or, more recently, the dangerous Other, a terrorist with links to Pakistan and Kashmir or, if the film is set in the West, an Islamist with links to ISIS or al-Qaida. Note the negative portrayals of Indian Muslims as disguised Pakistanis, the veiled presence threatening to destroy India from the inside out. This shift in filmic representation is marked by films like *ROJA* (*ROSE*, Mani Ratnam, IN 1992) and continues with *DIL SE* (*FROM THE HEART*, Mani Ratnam, IN 1998), *MAIN HOON NA* (*I AM HERE*, Farah Khan, IN 2004), *FANAA* (*DESTROYED IN LOVE*, Kunal Kohli, IN 2006), *DEEVAAR* (*THE WALL*, Milan Luthria, IN 2004), and *KURBAAN* (*SACRIFICE*, Rensil D'Silva, IN 2009), to bring us well into the new century.<sup>39</sup>

Ironies always attend Manichaeian worldviews. Some 25 percent of native Hindi speakers are Muslims, yet their depiction in Indian films – though not their overall industry participation – is severely skewed. More ironic is that over the last quarter century, Bollywood's leading male actors have been the Muslims Shahrukh Khan, Aamir Khan, and Salman Khan. Heroes of the box office with a global fan base, they sporadically face accusations of “anti-nationalism”, a code word generally leveled against Indian Muslims. In 2015, after Shahrukh Khan gave an interview criticizing

39 The multiple Bombay train blasts of July 11, 2006 certainly played into this characterization. It was striking how this attack was quickly interpreted along American 9/11 lines by Indian media outlets, paralleling the Indian government's adoption of the American “war on terror” hermeneutic since 2001. The date itself, 7/11 (or 11/7), suggested an Indian equivalence to many.





Fig. 2: The stranger within. Saif Ali Khan as the secret Muslim terrorist Ehsaan/Khalid, *KURBAAN* (Rensil D'Silva IN 2009), 02:17:36.

India for increasing intolerance, the BJP secretary of the state of Madhya Pradesh tweeted, “Shah Rukh Khan lives in India, but his heart is in Pakistan.”<sup>40</sup> Khan, grandchild of an anti-British freedom fighter, then felt it necessary to modify his critique and offer his nationalist bona fides.

Meanwhile, in recent years, Aamir Khan has taken on one social cause after another, especially by starring in and producing the television show *SATYAMEV JAYETE* (*TRUTH ALONE TRIUMPHS*, Satyajit Bhatkal, IN 2012–14). Named after India’s national motto, the show dealt with national societal issues – from alcoholism to domestic violence, honor killings to casteism, solid-waste management to masculinity. While widely lauded, Khan is himself no stranger to anti-national abuse, with his patriotic criticism of India and willingness to address social ills often interpreted by Hindu nationalists as Muslim profanation of Mother India. Meanwhile, Salman Khan, who has played more Muslim roles than the other Khans, has burnished his own bona fides by playing roles that fit a certain muscular Hindu mold.<sup>41</sup>

Perhaps it is also ironic, or at least merely interesting, that these “Brothers Khan” rarely portray Muslims. In fact, Bollywood seldom features a Muslim character as

40 Divyanshu Dutta 2015.

41 See, for example, *BAJRANGI BHAJAAN* (*BROTHER BAJRANGI*, Kabir Khan, IN 2015), in which a Hindu devotee of Hanuman, Salman Khan, helps a Muslim Pakistani girl return to her family in Pakistan.

male protagonist. SHAHID (MARTYR, Hansal Mehta, IN 2012), the true story of an activist Muslim lawyer, is an exceptional exception. When superstar Muslims like the Khans do play Muslim parts, their loyalty to Mother India is so clearly stressed, or their characters are so over-the-top evil, or their characterization is so at odds with their carefully crafted public personae that it is simply impossible to confuse the actors with the roles they play. Note, for example, Aamir Khan's portrayal of Islamic terrorist/Pakistani secret agent Rehan Khan in FANAA. Then there is the case of the "fourth Khan", Saif Ali Khan, playing Ehsaan Kahn in KURBAAN (fig. 2). In this film, an unsuspecting young American Hindu woman named Avantika (played by Kareena Kapoor) falls in love with the middle-class Muslim academic from Mumbai now living in Delhi. The two marry and decide to move to the United States, with Ehsaan quickly finding a job teaching "Islam in the Modern World" as they move into a New York suburb with a large South Asian population. Avantika becomes pregnant, but soon discovers that her husband is part of a terrorist plot in which she is forced to participate. Avantika becomes a victim of their scheming, as she uncovers that their marriage was part of an elaborate plot. Ehsaan, whose real name is Khalid, used her to legally emigrate to the West in order to join a terrorist cell. Suffice it to say, in the end *dharma* noticeably obtains. Dying of a bullet wound on the floor of the subway, Ehsaan professes to Avantika that he fell in love with her despite himself. Their love was real, but Ehsaan as *adhārmik* exemplar must die. Justice is restored as Avantika is left to put the broken pieces of her life back together.

And so we have transitioned from the figure of the dutiful Muslim sidekick of the pre-1990s to the anti-hero Ehsaan/Khalid in KURBAAN. In this new globalized world, where capital, terrorism, and fear can flow as one, we witness a shared American and Indian stereotype of the dangerous and omnipresent Muslim, rendered even more frightening by the fact that contemporary Muslim violence has become, given the participation of burka-clad terrorists, coeducational. In India women have long been associated with the health and integrity of the family unit, so it is especially noteworthy that not only does Avantika's character become the unwitting victim and co-conspirator in an Islamist plot, but she is in fact pregnant with this Other. Chillingly, and reflective of Indian and American anxieties, the enemy is literally growing within.

Of the actors mentioned, Aamir Khan has played the largest number of Muslim roles. By my count, Shahrukh Khan, arguably the most famous Indian actor of the last quarter century, has played a Muslim only four times over three decades in 90 films. So when he decides to play a Muslim role, that role is worthy of attention. In MY NAME IS KHAN (Karan Johar, IN 2009), the main protagonist, played by Shahrukh, has a message for US President George W. Bush, whom he crosses the continental United States to meet. The message is simple: "My name is Khan and I am not a ter-

rorist.” Khan’s epic *yātrā*, or pilgrimage, (noticeably echoing *Forrest Gump*’s) lasts so long that he ultimately meets a new president, Barack Obama – a leader more receptive to the protagonist’s plight, signaling hope that America’s new political dispensation will mark an end to Western (and, in fact, Indian) anti-Islamic prejudice.

As is often the case, the line between protagonist and Hindi-film superstar is gauzy, particularly when audiences are well aware that after September 11, 2001, Khan the actor repeatedly faced difficulties from Homeland Security when entering the United States.<sup>42</sup> By then he had become a global brand with his own production company. Apparently, even he was not immune to the ignominies of religious and racial profiling as part of the “War on Terror”.

To say that Khan’s recent roles have become self-consciously “meta”, then, would be an understatement. More recently, in *RAEES* (Rahul Dholakia, IN 2017), Khan plays the titular bootlegger who escapes poverty through a combination of brutality and savvy to become a major Gujarati kingpin.<sup>43</sup> Significantly, the Muslim anti-hero refuses to distinguish between Muslims and Hindus, seeing all members of his composite neighborhood as “my people”. This is a world in which the brothers Amar, Akbar, and Anthony would feel at home. After all, the period film is set in roughly the same time and location as the 1977 masterpiece. As Khan resuscitates an earlier 1970s’ Muslim stereotype (that of the gangster), he is likewise summoning and endorsing India’s earlier multicultural vision of itself. In the age of social media and satellite television, when Khan is pilloried for daring to speak out against intolerance, King Khan has found a way to shrewdly communicate through his characters.

While certainly the most numerous, Muslims are not India’s only religious minority. Sikhs fare better in Bollywood films, but like Muslims of old, they generally serve as sidekicks to Hindu protagonists (*THE COMPANY*, Ram Gopal Varma, IN 2002) or, more often, as harmless turban-wearing background players employed as proof of secular India’s composite religious culture, exemplified by the famous slogan “Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Īsāi Bhāi Bhāi Hain.” (“Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, and Christian are all brothers”). This is all the more surprising given the ubiquity of Punjabis in the Hindi film industry as producers, directors, playback singers, and actors. By the late 1990s, the “typical” North Indian protagonist had become a Punjabi, and the quintessential heartland, the Punjab (*DILWALE DULHANIA LE JAYENGE*; *VEER-ZAARA* (Yash Chopra, IN 2004)). By the turn of the century, a non-Indian could be mistaken for thinking that all of rural India was blanketed in golden mustard. Given the ubiquity of Punjab, Punjabis, and things Punjabi, then, one could expect to see more Sikhs in films other

42 Kumar 2016.

43 The nostalgic lionization of a pre-economic liberalization (gangster) entrepreneur can be interpreted as a not so subtle endorsement of India’s new economic regime.



Fig. 3: Actors Jeevan and Nassir Hussain as Christian sinner and saint, respectively, *AMAR, AKBAR, ANTHONY* (Manmohan Desai, IN 1977), 02:17.55.

than as sidekicks, background players, metonyms of national religious diversity, or performers in stylized Bollywood Bhangra numbers yelling “ballé, ballé!”<sup>44</sup>

Finally, we have the rather conflicting representations of Christians in *sāmājīk* films. There are, in my estimation, four ideal types: the scantily clad, denationalized Westernized vamp, the comic drunkard, the gangster, and the pious Catholic nun or priest. For heuristic purposes and commensurate with the Manichaean world in which we seem to be dwelling, we might condense these representations further into a helpful dyad: the morally dubious Westernized Other versus the pious Catholic clergyman. There has been a significant difference between Muslim and Christian characterizations since Independence. Whereas Muslim portrayals have noticeably shifted diachronically from sidekick to menace, Christian characterizations have remained relatively stable and simplistic. In fact, the latter mirror the challenges of Indian Christian identity in the wake of British *Christian* Imperialism. So, while vil-

44 There are certainly significant exceptions. In the aughts of the new century, we saw the release of two films with Sikh protagonists: *SINGH IS KINNG* (Anees Bazmee, IN 2008) and *ROCKET MAN: SALESMAN OF THE YEAR* (Shimit Amin, IN 2009). The primary difference is that these Sikhs are *keśdāri* (turbaned), whereas in previous films (*VEER-ZAARA*, Yash Chopra, IN 2004), the religious signifiers are more subtle, e.g., a character with a traditionally Sikh name or the presence of the *kaṛā*, or steel bracelet. A noticeable exception is Amir Khan’s character, Chandrashekhar Azad, in *RANG DE BASANTI*.





Fig. 4: Parveen Babi as Anita, the Westernized vamp: Christian, oversexed, underdressed, and deracinated. At the bar with Amitabh Bachchan, *DEEWAAR* (Yash Chopra, IN 1975), 01:52:03.

lains notoriously bear Christian names like Robert, Peter, or John (*AMAR, AKBAR, ANTHONY*), scenes in Christian churches have become quite popular, with Hindu characters often praying in such settings (*DILWALE DULHANIA LE JAYENGE*). (See fig. 3) How might we understand these rather conflicted representations? Here again, Hindi popular film reveals certain tensions and contradictions. As with the Muslim representations, one of the dominant Indian imaginaries is the Christian as innately foreign. To many, Christians exist as a dishonorable remnant of the British imperial past and of Western ways of life. In this rendering Christian equals Western. As with Christians in the Middle East after the American response to September 11, South Asian Christians in India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka are often treated as Western proxies. It matters not that Christianity had arrived in South Asia by the fourth century (and possibly by the first century, with St. Thomas the Apostle); and it is immaterial that those converts to Christianity over the last five centuries are in fact indigenous to South Asia (and more often from low caste or Dalit backgrounds). Conversion to Christianity in some misty past seems to erect an ontological chasm between Indian (essentialized as Hindu) and Christian – as though one's genetic structure is washed away in baptismal waters.

While it might be true that villains bear Christian names because of actual Christian involvement in the Mumbai underworld, there is a more salient reason for these stereotypes. After all, the Mumbai underworld, like Mumbai itself, is religiously diverse and cosmopolitan. More significantly, a difference in dress (the scantily clad, oversexed Westernized woman), or name (Julie, Anita, Helen, Robert, Anthony), or diet (alcohol, meat) marks one as the Other in our midst, a denatured reminder of a shameful colonial past fitting uneasily into both secular nationalist and Hindutva narratives of the nation-state (fig. 4) Every identity is fashioned by its perceived Other, and the deracinated, Westernized, Indian Christian serves to bolster what Nandy often calls the “anti-self”, through which the modern Indian self is constituted.<sup>45</sup> Obviously this leaves Indian Christians wondering where they fit in. The Christian, like the Muslim, is rendered a stranger in her own country. Indian religious minorities often look in vain for Hindi filmic characterizations that do not lazily at best and nefariously at worst hew to hackneyed stereotypes.

## Tolerant Hinduism and the Secular Ideal?

If Hindi popular film can be read as a window into the mind and soul of the Indian middle class, as this essay rather conventionally assumes, then they provide us with clues about the individual and social tensions of 1960s India as well as enduring tropes in the Indian imaginary. In light of subsequent shifting ideologies, we can say it does more. Adapted from R. K. Narayan’s novel, *GUIDE* (Vijay Anand, IN 1965) is an allegory for two seemingly paradoxical themes: India’s tryst with modern, secular nationhood, and spiritual liberation (*mokṣa*) through faith and renunciation. Starring and produced by screen legend Dev Anand, the movie has as its protagonist

45 Christian representations are neither consistent nor uniform. We might ask how to account for the use of Christian sacred space in Hindu popular film, as when the character Simran makes a special point of praying in a Swiss church in *DILWALE DULHANIA LE JAYENGE*. A clue might be found in the fact that many Bollywood filmmakers and actors were educated in Christian schools and convents run by priests and nuns, a constituency that directors seem to know and respect. Shah Rukh Khan studied at St Columba’s School, run by the Catholic Congregation of Christian Brothers, and Aamir Khan studied at the Bombay Scottish School and St. Anne’s High School. We must also recall the genuine reverence shown by Hindus for sacred space generally, regardless of sectarian affiliation, which explains the use of churches in film. So even as Christians might be scapegoated as dangerous purveyors of “Westernized non-Indian family values”, there is also a (more oblique) recognition of the influence of Christians on Indian society, particularly in the niche areas of medicine, education, and social work. I would argue further that to admit the place of Christians in the Indian social is perceived as a type of disloyalty to Indian independence, even though Christianity has played a significant role not just in the development of post-Independence India, but also in South Asia’s tryst with Western modernity. Perhaps such a role is inherently ambivalent. Suffice it to say, the taint stemming from Christianity’s relationship with British colonialism continues to negatively affect Indian Christians and Indian Christianities seven decades after the demise of British India.

Raju, a fast-talking ex-con tour guide in the lake city of Udaipur who befriends then be-loves an unhappily married dancing-girl, Rosie (note the Westernized name), played by Waheeda Rehman. The frame story concerns one man's journey from worldlying to Hindu *mukta* (spiritually liberated person) through self-renunciation and faith in God and the people; another story is the cost of the modern, fast (read: Western) lifestyle and its attendant morally compromised relationships. Through the course of the film, traditional Indian (read: Hindu) values are valorized, while a dubious eye is cast on upward, debasing, and treacherous materialism. The two narratives culminate in the final scene, when Raju, who has taken on the role of *sādhu* (Hindu ascetic) as a result of a villager's misunderstanding, fasts unto death to end a fatal drought. In an ironic twist, the ex-convict becomes the true saint the villagers always believed him to be. Despite protestations to the contrary, the villagers, cognizant of their religious history, remind him that the true Hindu *sant* (holy person) has no proper genealogy:

Swami, the path of knowledge is very crooked. Valmiki became a sage after being a dacoit. Goswami Tulsidas cut through the desire for a woman to become a sage. My faith in you has only grown stronger. After getting purified for twelve days of penance, the cry that comes from your soul will tear the skies open and the gods will be forced to cry and wet the earth to the quench the thirst.

Raju is hereby challenged to become the savior the villagers so desperately need him to be. As days pass, we witness his ascetical struggle. The vast desert skies remain barren as thousands throng the village temple to do penance and see the “*baḍā mahātmā*” (super great souled-one). Lines begin to form in order to take his *darśan*, and Raju's transformation continues through periodic moments of divine encounter, lingering doubt, enlightenment, and final *mahā-samadhi*: “These people have put their faith [*viśvās*] in me”, he tells a laughingly tone-deaf Western reporter. “Now I am growing confident in their faith.”

Just before Raju's death, Gafur, his affable Muslim business partner, discovers that the fasting *sādhu* is none other than his old friend. Seeking to reunite with his friend, he is rebuffed at the temple entrance as not one of their “*khandān*”, or family, a common euphemism for religious identity. Raju steps forward to welcome his old friend, correcting the villager: “*Pyār merā dharm hai; dostī merā imān hai.*” (Love is my religion; friendship is my faith.) Significantly, he uses the Hindi *pyār* for love and the Arabic/Persian *imān* for faith, reflecting the inclusive secularist vision for India.

Yet just how inclusive is this vision? Moments later, in one of the film's most poignant scenes, the crowds and the principal actors are seen praying according to their respective traditions for the starving hero. We briefly witness Gafur sitting



Fig. 5: Anwar Hussain plays the character Gafur, who does *namāz* under Shiva's gaze, *GUIDE* (Vijay Anand, IN 1965), 02:42:12.

in *namāz* facing Mecca within the colonnaded sandstone temple, arms stretched in prayerful supplication as his erstwhile partner lies at death's door (fig 5). One might interpret this frame as evidence of tolerant Hindu pluralism – and maybe it is. But one could also argue that a more detailed inspection reveals something else more troubling, now made clearer by the passage of time, in light of *Hindutva*. For there, to Gafur's left, is an ancient carving of Lord Śiva in his yogic posture, silent witness to the man's prayers. Although the film was released in the 1960s, perhaps this image provides an apt metaphor for a Hindu vision of contemporary India. As tolerant as it may be, the religious Other always dwells under the Hindu gaze, resting on a Hindu foundation, by the grace and beneficence of the Hindu.

This more troubling interpretation cannot be separated from later filmic representations now given Hindu nationalist ascendancy. If love is the *dharma* as Raju claimed, it is here one of the more conditional varieties, wherein the minority must never forget that they live by the beneficence of the majority. It is the kind of majoritarian love that puts the song *Vande Mātaram* ("Hail, Mother!") in a Muslim woman's mouth – as in *FANAA* – assuring the audience that she is the acceptable, *safe* kind of Muslim – even though everyone knows of Indian Muslim discomfort with of-



fering paeans to any (deity, nation, deified nation) other than Allah, no matter how sincere one's love for country. This is not the Indian ethos of acceptance of religious pluralism and the Gandhian vision of secularism undergirded by what is called *sarva dharma sambhāva*,<sup>46</sup> but a debasement of that ethos where the co-opted minority mouths the loyalties of the majority, where stooge becomes cipher. Whether that film be *FANAA* in the new century or *GUIDE* in the last, reflected here is an acceptance of the Other not on the Other's terms, or at least a kind of negotiation of these terms required of religious pluralism, but on terms set by those who hold the keys to the kingdom – and that *rāj* is Hindu. Ultimately, then, what *GUIDE* provides us, as do so many less noble films from the years that followed, is a vision as saffron as the *sādhū*'s robe and, in retrospect, as ominous as the gathering mob. Yet this film was created in the Nehruvian period and not in the age of Modi. I make this point only to demonstrate something has become even clearer now that the dominant national Indian ideology has shifted. With the recent resounding re-election of the Hindu nationalist BJP, this shift is simply undeniable. I am arguing that Indian secular nationalism has always carried, in certain respects, an uncomfortable likeness to Hindu nationalism – often despite representations to the contrary. And this is ironic, given longstanding Hindu nationalist critique of the Nehruvian dispensation as peddling a mere “pseudo-secularism”, a faux religious neutrality that in practice favors (and placates) religious minorities for the purpose of securing votes.

## Conclusion or Interval?

Since Independence, the dominant filmic ideology has roughly paralleled that of the state. While this has much to do with placating a politicized and notoriously conservative national censor board, that cannot be the sole cause. Shared corporate interests and national pride (conflated with religious pride) also play their parts. It is no coincidence that in the Nehruvian period the protagonist was a socialist-leaning artist or vagabond, while at the turn of the new century the hero had become a multimillionaire or the scion of one.<sup>47</sup> There once had been a strong if moralizing sense in pre-liberalization India that one could not serve both God and mammon, one of the morals of *GUIDE*. Cut to contemporary popular film and resolution of the God–mammon struggle comes not through sacrifice of the latter, but through

46 Literally, “equal respect for all religions”. Gandhi's understanding of secularism may be contrasted with Jawaharlal Nehru's *dharma nirpekṣ*, or “religious neutrality”, more along the lines of Western secularism, which can (but need not) be construed as government hostility towards religion.

47 Note the shift from *SHREE 420* (MR. 420, Raj Kapoor, IN 1955) and *PYAASA* (THIRST, Guru Datt, IN 1957) to *TAAL* (RHYTHM, Subhash Gai, IN 1999) and *OM SHANTI OM* (Farah Khan, IN 2008).

the actual marriage of neo-liberal economics and trademarked religion. There is, it would seem – and contrary to most *dhārmik* instincts – no struggle required at all. Capitalism has proffered its notorious choice with the ruse that such choices are basically unnecessary.<sup>48</sup> Indian capitalism and the films it spawns sing a familiar tune only in new vernacular languages. The subtext is that one need not choose between social justice and material prosperity, God and lucre. One can drive to the temple in that Corolla, emerge dhoti-clad for *pūjā* (worship), later pick up some KFC after bypassing the required low-caste security guard, and finally return home in time for a Yash Raj film on Sony TV. Rani Mukherjee may wear miniskirts, but she can still sing a heartfelt *bhajan* (hymn) to an acceptable deity. Such is the complicity of upper-middle class Bollywood elites who continually deny their own responsibility in the new economic dispensation while hiding behind stock disclaimers about what is desired by the Indian public.

Yet one must wonder whether Indian audiences really need a repetition of *Vande Mātaram*, the favorite ditty of the Hindu nationalist Vishva Hindu Parishad, when a character ventures to the exotic West (KABHI KUSHI KABHIE GHAM (SOMETIMES HAPPY, SOMETIMES SAD, Karan Johar, IN 2001))? Are Indians so in danger of forgetting their cultural moorings that they require a reminder when life in the West looks just a bit too attractive, too transgressive? And speaking of contradictions, when Hrithik Roshan dances his way through London landmarks with blonde, high-skirted European sex objects in tow in KABHI KUSHI KABHIE GHAM or when Amitabh Bacchan is thanked for his sexual prowess by a Western prostitute in KABHI ALVIDA NAA KEHNA, what is being accomplished and for whom exactly? In DILWALE DULHANIA LE JAYENGE, PARDES or in KABHI KUSHI KABHIE GHAM, British or American Indians voice their discontent with their adopted country as if to assuage Indian audiences that they need not envy these Non-Resident Indians. But why do Indian audiences require assurances that British or American Indians pine to return to the land of their forebears? What psychosocial fears lurk behind such pandering?

It is often argued by the Hindi-film industry that it is simply giving Indian viewers what they want. In fact, Indian audiences are more sophisticated than the purveyors of popular cinema as it exists in the early 21st century. The masses that threw out the BJP-led coalition in 2004 and then returned that BJP a decade later are also the children of South Asians who have long used, shaped, disseminated, and ar-

48 Take, for example, the rise of Ramdev, the leader of multibillion-dollar Patanjali Ayurveda Ltd. The hirsute yogi is the ubiquitous spokesperson for a company that sells shampoo, tea tree oil, and at least 500 other Ayurvedic products. You can find Ramdev leading thousands for national yoga day with Prime Minister Modi, or filing a report against a political leader for having the temerity to link Hinduism with violence, or firing members of his company striking for payment of the minimum wage.

gued their narrative traditions to various contested ends. The aforementioned epics themselves demonstrate the diversity of South Asian narrative traditions. Since the early 1990s, religion scholars have focused on the epics not primarily as texts, but as traditions living in oral/aural, performance, ritual, and literary modalities. As such, each epic represents a complex and dynamic web of signification through which South Asians understand their world and their place in it over millennia. So, while the epics are open-ended and polysemous organisms cutting across sectarian boundaries, Indian screenwriters and producers have only scratched the surface of the epic traditions, to say nothing of other traditions. What, for example, is *dharma* in the *Mahābhārata*? For those who encounter the *Mahābhārata* in its multiple regional, linguistic varieties and modes, there might be more than one answer. Yet one would not know that by common representations from members of the Sangh Parivar, where an often flattened, sanitized, *sanātanized*, and indeed *Vaiṣṇavized* Hindu *dharma* is presented as normative.<sup>49</sup> Thus, to write of *dhārmik* “constraints” said to pervade Hindi popular film earlier in this essay is to denigrate not Hindu *dharma* as such, but the narrow way the notoriously capacious concept is being applied. In other words, Hindu *dharma* is not an artistic, narrational, or even ideological obstacle to be abandoned, as if that were even possible. Indeed, “obstacles” – variously called techniques, norms, rules, or conventions – can provide the necessary constraint for the flourishing of any art form, even when reacted to or pushed against. This is how all traditions adapt and change. The real problem, if I may be bold enough to call it that, is that the film industry has failed to plumb the full depths of India’s *dhārmik* treasury, which is a nearly limitless repository. I am arguing that Hindu traditions have the resources *within themselves*, in interaction with the liberal ideologies of modernity, to ensure the flourishing of multiple communities in a pluralist democracy. They need not resort to the denial of these identities in the name of a secular nationalism that denies difference, or that foregrounds national identity over all other identities, or that forces persons and communities to check their ultimate commitments at the door marked “civil society”. Finally, with regard to representations of religious minorities in Hindi popular cinema, it bears repeating that even a cursory glance at the names of actors, directors, editors, composers, producers, and playback singers reveals the cosmopolitan and multi-religious (if not

49 In recent years, various Hindu groups have presented Hinduism as a largely monolithic tradition along the lines of perceived Christianity and Islam, contrary to the long history of South Asia regions, wherein a diverse collection of traditions flourished without the novel designation “Hinduism”. Historian Romila Thapar made this point in her seminal essay “Syndicated Hinduism”, which subsequently sparked further reflection by Paula Richman and others. Such authors demonstrated that among Hindu nationalists a new “normative” Hinduism was being presented as *sanātana* (eternal and unchanging) and *Vaiṣṇava* (centered around Viṣṇu, particularly Rāma, an avatar of Viṣṇu). See Thapar 1997 and Richman 1991.

multi-class) nature of the Hindi film industry. Yet this abundance still fails to make it onto the silver screen.<sup>50</sup>

Perhaps given that the film industry – be it in Mumbai, Los Angeles, or Hong Kong – is an industry privileging profits over prophets, we should be neither surprised nor sanguine about the ability of film to break free from present ideological shackles because of either commercial interests or Hindu nationalist commitments (which are now commingling as never before). While one need not close an essay with a happy ending, it is encouraging to report that one looks for signs of hope – and not in vain. Artistically rich, socially conscious, and humanistic films produced by the aforementioned Amir Khan continue to be box-office sensations. *RANG DE BASANTI* (*COLOUR IT SAFFRON*, Rakeysh Omprakash Mehra, IN 2006), *TAARE ZAMIN PAR* (*STARS ON EARTH*, Amir Khan, IN 2007), *THREE IDIOTS* (Rajkumar Hirani, IN 2009), and *DANGAL* (*WRESTLING*, Nitesh Tiwari, IN 2016) readily come to mind. Perhaps in response to the fantastic, hyper-modern, shiny (where-do-people-really-live-like-this?) Yash Raj films created at the turn of the century, subsequent films relish the authentic. One thinks of *GANGS OF WASSEYPUR* (Anurag Kashyap, IN 2012) and its more realistic regional dialogue, disorienting postmodern narrative style, and evident breaking of sacrosanct Bollywood film convention. One also thinks of *QUEEN* (Vikas Bahl, IN 2014) and its *cinéma vérité* style. We pause here only to note a message on women's agency strikingly different from that offered by *DILWALE DULHANIA LE JAYENGE* a generation earlier.<sup>51</sup> Then there is the ability to tackle edgier themes without resorting to juvenile stereotypes (like homosexuality in *MY BROTHER NIKHIL* (Onir, IN 2005)). Such films entertain while managing to refrain from shallow moralizing; they challenge social norms while calling Indians to something better, drawing upon various aspects of South Asian religio-cultural traditions to hold a mirror before Indian and global audiences. Critically, and none too late, they reflect the lives, artistry, and sheer impatience of India's younger generations.

Whether or not the industry heeds this *videśi's* (foreigner's) unbidden critique, at least this member of the audience – an unashamed, unreconstructed Hindi cinephile – awaits the time when Hindi popular cinema comes closer to fulfilling its potential in an India (and a world) marked by ideological chauvinism, distrust, and cynicism. Bollywood films are, after all, notoriously long, and who can say where we are in this particular industry's history? We might simply be at the "Interval". The lights

50 The multi-religious nature of Hindi popular cinema is demonstrated by a collection of essays in Pinto 2011.

51 Note the transition from the ultimately conservative if adaptive social vision of *DILWALE DULHANIA LE JAYENGE*, where Simran places her fate in the hands of her beloved, ultimately to be freed to love him by her father, to *QUEEN*, where the jilted fiancée finds her own way to Paris for a honeymoon without a husband. Twenty years separate Simran's and Rani's excursions to Europe, but it is Rani who demonstrates agency.

come on at intermission as we adjust our eyes, stretch, and confer. Eventually the lights will dim once more; the velvet curtains will part, prompting our rushed return to seats in anticipation of what is to come, of what remains to be seen on that luminous screen, and of what of ourselves is reflected before our eyes.

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