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Jodhaa Akbar

Abstract

This is a review of *Jodhaa Akbar* (2008).

Located in Bombay and thus sometimes referred to as 'Bollywood', the Indian film industry is fascinating for many reasons. It still evaluates plots according to the emotional engagement they inspire, not only in terms of its slavish mimesis of 'reality'. It is so prolific that a star there will have lived two or three lifetimes' worth of film-making, within the space of a single Hollywood career. And it is fascinating for those interested in religion and the moving picture, because the Hindu eye (a feature shared with many other Indian religions) is more ready to see the divine, not just beyond, but, in the image.

In this vibrant film industry, the world's largest in terms of the volume of films released per year, the epic period drama *Jodhaa Akbar* is the latest big news. It has a muscular monarch dueling between vast armies, his battle-crazed elephants crushing his foes. It has a doe-eyed princess sword-fighting her way into a breathless corner, petals falling through her hair. It has politics, passion and... a cogent theory of a multi-faith society, with much to teach every (post)modern polity.

Following fast on the footsteps of the Hindi film industry's last box-office hit, *Jodhaa Akbar* is the grandest and most stylistically serious offering by Ashutosh Gowariker, the director of *Lagaan*, the only recent Indian film to have been nominated for a Best Foreign Film Oscar. *Lagaan* continues to be one of Bollywood's calling cards to world cinema. Gowariker's sensibility is at once

deliciously popular, and issue-driven, even if it can sometimes seem to pander to the 'issue of the moment'. Yet he excels at one of the things that Indian film does best: merging traditional religious images with the exploration of India's never-less-than-breakneck social development. These themes are replete in his previous films: in *Lagaan* villagers draw strength for their struggle against the cruelty of British colonial rule through their heartfelt plea to the gods Krishna and Radha, and in his subsequent *Swadesh* a wealthy Indian emigrant returns home to face his civic duties to his country while singing to the god Rama, the eternal exemplary sovereign.

But *Jodhaa Akbar* is more contemporary, both in its chosen political agenda and in its representation of religion. It tells the epic story of India's most charismatic and visionary Renaissance ruler, Akbar the Great – the Muslim emperor famed for his tolerant attitude towards other religions in a time when such institutionalised, proactive affirmation of other faiths fearlessly paired with Akbar's unthreatened commitment to his own, rings out as a uniquely contemporary way of thinking.

The dates of Akbar's life (1556-1605) match that of Elizabeth I (1558-1603) almost to the year, and he seems a natural subject in an age of films on the lives of great rulers, such as *Mongol*, Sergei Bodrov's recent Oscar-nominated film on the life of Genghis Khan of whom Akbar was a descendent, and the similarly Oscar-nominated Elizabeth movies made by former Bollywood director, Shekar Kapur (and also much concerned with the cultural iconography and religious life of

monarchs). But as heroic historic monarchs go, Akbar has the edge on Elizabeth: another well-educated young sovereign thrown into a conflicted religious heritage at a young age - Akbar was the classic hero. Yes, history tells us he really did tame wild elephants as a hobby. He led his armies to victory. And perhaps most interestingly, he was not the indigenous pure-blood but the immigrant of mixed Persian, Turkish, and Mongolian heritage, raised in India. In marked contrast to England's idolised Renaissance sovereign, his religio-political efforts were predominantly aimed at uniting sparring faiths into mutual affirmation: not at burning and decapitating his religious 'others'.

The film explores Akbar's journey towards religious tolerance through the love story of his marriage to a princess of the profoundly traditional Hindu royal families of Rajasthan. Through the lavish scenes of Rajasthan's palaces and deserts, and the equally stunning visual charms of two of India's most attractive actors, Aishwarya Rai and Hrithik Roshan, Gowariker imagines what this relationship might have involved and how it might have contributed to Akbar's growing awareness of the needs of the state. Condensing the courtship into three hours, punctuated by catchy songs, the film starts with proud princess Jodha's refusal to submit in body and spirit to the political alliance, and follows the gradual process by which husband and wife grow to respect, admire and finally love each other.

Gowariker uses the initial opposition between the two proud scions to paint contrasting but equally appealing pictures of Islamic and Hindu culture. The unhurried pace of the film allows the cautious but committed growth of the marriage from a mere alliance into a spiritual union, to develop into a metaphor for the ongoing rapprochement of India's conflicted Islamic and Hindu communities. By the end of the movie, via epic battles, bitter betrayals, sexually fraught sword-fighting, extravagant musical sequences, and at least one wild elephant tamed by the handsome emperor, Jodhaa and Akbar have overcome religious censure to realise their love, and Islam and Hinduism have arrived at mutual affirmations, at least temporarily. We see Hindus and Muslims govern together, dance together, and romance together – for once this is not filmy fantasy, but the truth of modern Indian life.

Fortunately, Rai and Roshan are not merely pretty faces. Their tentatively amorous but proud characterisation makes them come across as individuals who were consummate adults in the sphere of political affairs, but still children where emotions are concerned. They are still discovering what it means to vest their views (and their vows) with real sympathy. Religion has a crucial part to play in teaching them this, reflected clearly in the most explicitly religious scenes in the film in which Akbar joins a troupe of whirling dervishes in a mystical ecstasy during his wedding feast, and Jodhaa sings devotional songs to her statue of Krishna - first

when she laments her tragic betrothal (to a Muslim!) and later when she desperately prays for her husband's life.

There is much wisdom in the way Gowariker portrays the affectivity of religious life: Sufi musicians such as the dervishes were an important means by which Islam entered the cultural world of Hindus. In both musical-devotional scenes we see characters of the other faith drawn into the spirit of a foreign form of worship by the beauty of the music. As we watch we too are drawn in. No less than the attractiveness of the characters, the attractiveness of the respective religious cultures drives the plot. It is important to note that Gowariker is not merely using religion as a cultural signifier in a fundamentally secular framework: the scenes in which each character independently achieves a moment of intense and personal religious fulfillment are highlighted by the motif of a white light which floods the screen. The director is looking for a language of sincerity, spirituality. The spiritual motif culminates in the sunlight which floods the room at their romantic climax, but it is a device which would have failed cinematically if the sense of a root spirituality had not been sufficiently established by the actors.

One of the distinctively modern, break-away features of the film is the way in which it develops the metaphor of the marriage. In popular Indian film, romance is typically a matter of love at first sight, or occasionally the outgrowth of childhood friendship. But here the marital union is only the beginning of romance. The two

protagonists are so beautiful, so devout, so honourable that the audience knows they're made for each other – she sword-fights and he rides wild elephants: it's like Hollywood's *Mr. and Mrs. Smith* without the disillusionment or the guns. The romantic tension is there, but the film allows love to grow slowly, based on new insights as they discover each other's character. Each hindrance that arises is an occasion not for a heroic opposition to society or another villain, but for the protagonists' reassessment and refinement of themselves. Marriage is shown as an occasion for personal improvement through the eyes of a respected other. It is an ethical process characterised by clear-eyed admiration and respect, shaping the narrative into a spiritual quest for self-improvement. The spiritual, political and romantic are combined.

By implication this human-interest shows us Gowariker's programme for developing Hindu-Muslim relations. Religious relations cannot merely rest with a political wedding (an event which took place in 1947 in India, and proved to be a particularly violent one). They must become a successful marriage. This implies not uneasy tolerance but enthusiastic union, and it is no accident that the religious forms highlighted in the film, Hindu devotion to Krishna and Islamic Sufism, have a strong emphasis on love. A sensitive reviewer wrote that Akbar's "notion of unity was much more creative than the modern notion of unity. Akbar's idea of unity

spans food, sexuality, marriage and politics...A unity that was not erotic or mystical eventually dulled out.” (Shiv Vishwanathan, www.newindpress.com, 2008) .

Thus *Jodhaa Akbar* paints its own picture of the ongoing project of ethical self-discovery that is involved in every multi-faith community. It values religion not as cultural discourse, but as an earnest, almost childlike private space that ought to inspire respect in any community committed to that project. Despite the adventurous elements of intrigue and swordplay, it is a film about marriage and all such structures of mature relationship, not just about the first spark of romance. And as such it is a lesson for all discussions of faith, and the qualities that inter-faith communities offer to and require from it.

Yet this erotic, mystical unity evoked by Gowariker has been controversial. Echoing the sentiments which the imagined Jodhaa comes to renounce, two Indian states have banned *Jodhaa Akbar*, rejecting the idea that such a marriage could be anything other than a selfless sacrifice for a Hindu princess. But it looks like the growing international audience for Indian films will have saved the movie from financial disaster. May the world's film-loving communities continue to provide unexpected support to the creation of visual theologies such as these.