

Food and fasting: Representing the traditional role of women in Hindi cinema

Sabrina Ciolfi
Università degli Studi di Milano

Food and Hindi cinema

Food and movies have always been closely related from the very beginnings of cinema. This decidedly happy ‘marriage’ has seen the birth of some authentic masterpieces to which various studies have been dedicated, mainly in relation to western cinema,¹ while hardly any studies have dealt with the relationship between food and Indian cinema.

Actually food has rarely been used as a central theme in Hindi cinema;² it often appears in bizarre movie titles and song lyrics, as well as in odd item numbers, but without playing a prominent role in the film.

Generally speaking, the scenes showing preparation of food tend to represent the woman busy in the kitchen as an obedient and loving wife. But in the commercial production of the last few years, by contrast, scenes are not infrequent, and not without a touch of exaggeration, of an elite of young, urban, upper-class and extremely cosmopolitan men and women showing off their modern attitudes as they breezily potter about in their highly technological, fully equipped kitchens. Indeed, in a number of popular and very successful Hindi films of the last few years the male protagonist plays the role of the chef. Of these, the most famous are Saif Ali Khan in *Salaam Namaste*³ (2005) and Amitabh Bachchan in *Cheeni Kum* (2007). The choice of the profession is

1. See in particular Bower 2004, Keller 2006, Zimmerman 2009, Hertweck 2014.

2. An important point to make here is that for the purpose of analysis in this paper we will not be referring to Indian cinema in general, rather to Hindi cinema, both mainstream and independent films. The whole Indian film industry includes other production centres which make films in more than twenty Indian languages. However, Hindi cinema is the largest and most popular sector of Indian cinema, having the biggest budgets and stars and worldwide circulation.

3. Names and titles are spelt as in the credits and advertisements for the films. For the benefit of the readers, dialogue quoted from the films is translated from Hindi to English. All the translations are ours. A number of relatively common words in Indian languages are written here in their familiar forms and without diacritical marks.

clearly due to the fact that it has recently become very glamorous and, moreover, serves a purpose in the plot, but in reality, despite long sequences taking place in the kitchen or restaurant, food never becomes the true protagonist of the film.

Scenes of food being consumed, too, generally serve to celebrate the values of tradition or, in other cases, of modernity. Family unity is celebrated, above all in the commercial films, on the occasions of the great Hindu festivals, when all the components of the joint family gather; it is a moment of great joy and serenity, usually underlined with a tracking shot over the best dishes of Indian cuisine, rigorously vegetarian. At the same time, and often in the same film, once the young heroes of Indian cinema have shed the traditional costumes worn for festivals and abandoned the formal air they assume to bow low and touch the feet of the elders as a sign of respect, they become the very embodiment of modernity. Always well-off and westernised, they are great connoisseurs of the most refined delicacies of international cuisine and go to the most fashionable restaurants.

In the 'art', more realist cinema, generally recognised as more committed, often exposing social ills, representation of abundance or want of food usually serves to evoke the extreme inequalities characterising Indian society, above all when it comes to caste.

In this paper, however, we will be focusing on the way food is represented in relation to Hindu women's feelings and duties in certain films of Hindi cinema.⁴ The analysis will take into account some particular situations in different stages of women's life course, in relation to love and marriage.

Karva Chauth: fasting for the desired husband

The plots of the most successful and representative popular films released between the 1990s and the 2000s always revolve around romantic stories developing between teenagers. Here we are referring to Bollywood films and, following the practice of Rajadhyaksha,⁵ we use the term Bollywood to define a reasonably specific narrative and mode of presentation that emerged in the early 1990s: a particular genre of glossy 'feelgood-happy-ending' romance, family-centred, packed with songs and dances.

Although the film that pioneered this genre is *Hum Aapke Hain Koun..!* (1994), *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (1995, also known as *DDLJ*) is often considered the film most representative of Bollywood. It was the first of a long series of films representing the Indian diaspora. Written and directed by Aditya Chopra, making his debut in direction at the tender age of twenty-three, and

4. For the purpose of analysis, I will consider some of the most successful films belonging to both mainstream and independent cinema released in the last two decades.

5. Rajadhyaksha 2003, 28.

produced by his father Yash Chopra, the film is one of the most successful films of all time in India.

It tells the story of two young British Asian people, the wealthy spoiled Raj (Shah Rukh Khan) and tender, romantic Simran (Kajol), who meet and fall in love during an inter-rail trek across Europe. The girl's father, having emigrated from Punjab twenty-two years before, dreams of a future for his daughter and marriage far from the corrupt West – in his native land, in fact, where, he is convinced, the old moral values still hold. So it is that he arranges her marriage with the son of a childhood friend of his in Punjab, Kuljeet. Born and bred in London, and now in love with Raj, the girl tries to resist and wants to run away with the boy she loves. But he surprisingly shows far more virtue and respect for the traditional Indian values than even his Indian rival, and agrees to marry Simran only on obtaining her father's consent. In full respect of the happy ending that characterises this genre of film, at the end the young couple will win the family over.

As the story implies, a characteristic ingredient of Bollywood films is continual celebration of Hindu family values. As Dwyer puts it,⁶ these values include great respect for religion and the family, evoking domesticity and morality in new perspectives. Religion and traditions remain a part of everyday life, but with a new consumerist turn, appealing to India's new middle classes. Religiosity is highlighted with elaborate celebration of festivals, with the virtual invention of a new tradition.

Of particular relevance to our analysis is the portrayal of Karva Chauth in the films. This is an important Hindu festival, in which married women fast from sunrise to moonrise, praying for the welfare, prosperity and longevity of their husbands. After a day's fast the woman views first the rising moon through a sieve, and then her husband's face. He then gives her the first sip of water and morsel of food.

Originally the festival was practised by married Hindu women in North India, in particular in Punjab and parts of Uttar Pradesh. It is now gaining tremendous popularity among women of all classes and regional communities across the country.⁷

Karva Chauth owes its recent popularity to the cinema of Bollywood,⁸ and in particular to the film *DDLJ*, which marked a real turning point in Karva Chauth celebrations, prompting increasing participation all over India. As in the film, unmarried women have increasingly taken to fasting and praying for their boyfriends or desired husbands. By now it has become an extremely popular

6. Dwyer 2006, 155-56.

7. Karva Chauth also features widely in advertising campaigns in India. For example, a TV commercial shows a husband buying his wife a Chevrolet with a sunroof, perfect to go for a drive on the night of Karva Chauth until she glimpses the moon rising above.

8. We have seen Karva Chauth scenes in many Bollywood movies, although it appeared even before, in the 1980s.

romantic festival, rather like Valentine's Day, with couples dining together and exchanging presents. Media publicity becomes all pervasive as the festival approaches, attention also turning to the latest fashions and *mehndi* patterns. Austerity gives way to the pleasures of dressing up, shopping and having a good time.

In *DDLJ*, at the end of the beautiful Karva Chauth sequence, the married women are given water by their husbands to break the fast, and Simran decides to play out a scene. She pretends to faint in order to avoid drinking the water offered to her by Kuljeet, the groom chosen for her by her father. Raj promptly intervenes reviving her with a sip of water, and so she breaks the fast, with a significant wink for him. Simran and Raj later complete their bonding rite in the moonlight, exchanging food with each other, and Simran learns that Raj has reciprocated with a day's secret fast, demonstrating just how much he feels for her.

A decidedly odd feature of this movie is the fact that a ritual symbol of patriarchal society is used here by two young lovers to declare to each other their eternal love and, exceptionally, I would say, with Raj's fast, promoting a sort of gender equality.

The duties of the ideal Hindu wife

To describe the typical situation in Indian cinema where preparation of a meal is represented as one of the first duties of the ideal Hindu wife we have chosen a very particular film, namely *Jodhaa Akbar* (2008). This is an extraordinary epic historical drama played out in Bollywood style: a box-office hit in India, it has turned out to be an award-winner at many of the most important Indian and international film festivals.

Jodhaa Akbar recreates the ascent to the throne of the young Akbar (Hrithik Roshan), the first Mughal emperor born on Indian soil, as the film's hero proudly declares in the movie. The plot centres on the romantic love story that blossoms between Akbar and the Hindu Rajput princess Jodhaa (Aishwarya Rai Bachchan), who becomes his wife following a marriage of alliance. According to tradition the princess is a historical character. The daughter of the Maharaja of Amber, the emperor Akbar married her to extend his empire in Rajasthan,⁹ a fate which befell many Rajput princesses.

9. She was the mother of Salim, Akbar's first-born son and successor to the throne. In actual fact, the princess is known to scholars by the name, or rather the title, of Maryam-Uz-Zaman, that is 'Mary of the Age' while the name 'Jodhaa' only appeared in the 18th or 19th century. Jodhaa, however, remains the name with which the legend of the princess has been handed down to the present day, reinforced by the enormous popularity of the film *Mughal-E-Azam* (1960).

To begin with, the princess refuses to enter into the marriage which her father has arranged for her, and above all she is not prepared to have a Muslim as husband. She sets two conditions for her marriage: that she is not forced to convert to Islam and that she is allowed to continue to practise her faith.

Various episodes combine to touch the princess's heart, and gradually the two young people get to know each other and fall in love, despite intrigues and plots designed to lead Akbar to suspect that his wife is betraying him. The turning point in their relationship comes when Jodhaa is at last able to perform the duties of a true Hindu wife, cooking for her husband. Akbar orders that a great Rajput feast be held in the palace in honour of the princess, and sends her a precious necklace as a gift. To show him her profound appreciation, Jodhaa decides to attend to the cooking herself. When a maid in her service objects, peremptorily reminding her: 'You are the Empress of Hindustan!', Jodhaa answers: 'Then I shall cook as a wife, not an Empress!'

The cook and his assistants are astonished to see a princess in the royal kitchen, but at the same time honoured by the presence, they collaborate with Jodhaa in the preparation of a marvellous lunch consisting of various traditional dishes of Hindu cuisine, served to the guests in the traditional *thali*. Akbar is delighted with the surprise that Jodhaa has prepared for him and, even more, with the food – a veritable declaration of love.

As the food is being prepared, and even while the emperor is consuming it, an extremely tense confrontation is played out before us between Akbar's wet-nurse, Maham Anga who, claiming to be like a mother to him, exercises considerable influence over him, and the young bride, each intent on winning the Emperor's absolute love and so controlling him.¹⁰

The battle, or at least the skirmish as lunch is being consumed, sees Jodhaa triumphing. The old lady tries to ruin the feast, insisting that, according to the law, food served to the Emperor must first be tasted by the cook, thus spoiling the splendid presentation of the dishes. Lovingly, however, Akbar demonstrates his devotion to his bride by asking to eat from the same plates that Jodhaa had tasted from. In Indian tradition this is a gesture indicating intimacy and bonding, and in general a prerogative of married couples, as evidenced by the practice of sharing food from each other's plates in the first lunch by newly-weds. And indeed at the end of the splendid, fantastically colourful lunch sequence, romance starts to blossom with a beautiful love song sequence, showing touching moments of tenderness between the young couple.

Actually, as Dwyer points out,¹¹ in the film vegetarianism is clearly equated with Hinduism, while in reality it is just a practice of some high castes

10. As Dwyer (2014, 46-47) points out, here the evil wet-nurse plays the wicked mother-in-law in a manner familiar from the popular *saas-bahu* (mother/daughter-in-law) genre of Indian television.

11. *Ibid.*, 246-47.

(Brahmins and merchants in particular); nevertheless, it is certainly no secret that Rajputs are non-vegetarian. The 'vegetarian Rajput meal' that Jodhaa prepares for her husband should in reality be called a Marwari (merchant) feast and not a Rajput one. It is clearly fictional, a choice made by the director for obvious narrative purposes.

Another element clearly serving the purposes of the plot but hardly reflecting historical reality is the representation of the marriage between Akbar and Jodhaa as monogamous. Although the film covers a very brief period in the couple's life, the plot leaves us in no doubt that there will never be room for another woman in the heart or the bed of the emperor. Their relationship is strong, unbreakable and exclusive because it has overcome severe trials that have changed them both profoundly. In the cinematic fiction the princess contributes to the development of the enlightened vision that will make Jalaluddin Muhammad 'Akbar', that is 'the Great,' respectful of all religions, and above all of the Hindu religion.

From housewife to entrepreneur

English Vinglish (2012) is a comedy-drama film, written and directed by Gauri Shinde, who began her career as an ad-film director, this being her feature film debut. It was premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival and earned global acclaim there and at several other international festivals across the world. In India, too, it was enthusiastically acclaimed by the critics, and had enormous success with audiences.

It is a crossover film: we might define it as socially progressive, but at the same time it is very entertaining and has continued to enjoy commercial success worldwide. Very distant from the traditional romantic plots of Bollywood, it is one of the most female-centric films to come out of Hindi cinema in decades. Not only does *English Vinglish* have a female lead, but the protagonist is actually in her late forties. Starring Sridevi, the film marks the return of this Indian superstar to the screen after fourteen years. She got a standing ovation in Toronto, where she was hailed as India's Meryl Streep by the local media.

The film revolves around Shashi (Sridevi), a middle-class Maharashtrian housewife. She is a caring mother, a devoted wife and a dedicated homemaker, yet she is taken for granted by her family. Her poor English exposes her to the derision of her husband Satish (Adil Hussain), a busy executive, who has little respect for her, and her teenage daughter, who is ashamed even to introduce her mother to her school friends and teachers. She is a great cook and she runs a small home-based business making *laddoos* and delivering them in the neighbourhood, which gives her great satisfaction. However, her husband

doesn't understand how important it is for her; he belittles her work, deeming it a frivolous waste of time, and discourages her from going on with it.

When her sister, who lives in the USA, tells her about the upcoming wedding of her daughter, Shashi, at first she is reluctant, but eventually agrees to go and help out with the preparations. Far from her family and trying to overcome her insecurities, Shashi secretly enrolls in an English class. She is now set on a path that will lead her, step by step, to become a new woman, self-confident and trusting in her skills. Thanks to her small *laddoo* business her teacher describes her as an 'entrepreneur'. Suddenly, this English word gives new, higher significance and value to her work, making her feel important. The scene where we see the new Shashi walking proudly, head held high, along the streets of Manhattan in her marvellous *sari* repeating this word constitutes the emblematic image at the heart of the film. The film ends with Shashi giving a lesson in humility to all, surprising her family with the progress she has made in speaking English; a little step forward on the way to self-determination and emancipation.

The extraordinary figure of Shashi, as created by the director taking inspiration from her mother, is played with authentic feeling by Sridevi, at the same time humble and full of dignity, fragile and determined, very feminine and uniquely Indian. In New York Shashi never abandons her *sari* and *mangalsutra*. She does not destroy her marriage yielding to the advances of Laurent, a sensitive French fellow student on the course who has much in common with her; indeed, she has no hesitation in rejecting his advances. She has become a new woman, but without foregoing her traditional role as wife and mother.

The film exposes the real conditions of women in the domestic and social spheres in India. In the film Shashi's frustration is all too evident. When Laurent, also a cook, tasting her *laddoos* says 'You are an artist', Shashi brusquely replies: 'when a man cooks, it is art; when a woman cooks, it is her duty'. And it is precisely this element that makes the film so interesting: Shashi finds her path towards emancipation through the very duties her role forces on her – in cooking. She plumbs the depths of humiliation when her husband sneers: 'My wife was born to make *laddoos*'. And yet, paradoxically, Shashi is able to transform what sounds like condemnation into a great opportunity.

We see that, if her progress with the English language was the main element leading Shashi to become more self-confident and win the respect of her family, her realisation of her great potential as cook and entrepreneur was ultimately no less important. A number of articles in the press describe how the huge success of this film has prompted many women in India to enrol in English courses, but one cannot help wondering how many of them have found the right motivation to assert themselves at the personal level, transforming their pursuits into small or big businesses.

The way to a man's heart is through his stomach

Food is a central theme in *The Lunchbox* (2013), an innovative independent Hindi film, written and directed by Ritesh Batra and jointly produced by various studios. This talented Indian filmmaker's feature debut has been successfully presented in many international film festivals and has been released in India and in many other countries in Europe and North America, enjoying great success with critics and public alike.

In present-day middle-class Mumbai live Ila (Nimrat Kaur), a neglected young housewife, and Saajan Fenandes (Irrfan Khan), a widowed clerk approaching retirement. The two seem to have nothing in common apart from the utter solitude to which both appear to be condemned until, by a twist of fate, their lives meet.

With the precious advice of 'Auntie', the neighbour living in the apartment above hers, with whom she converses shouting from the kitchen window, Ila decides to rekindle attention and interest in her husband, ever more distant and cold with her, cooking special new and increasingly tasty dishes for him. 'One bite of that, and he'll build you a Taj Mahal', 'Auntie' tells her, lowering a basket full of spices down to her through the window on a rope. Ila laughs and reminds her that the Taj Mahal is a tomb. This gets her nowhere; her husband remains totally indifferent to her attentions and, as she is about to learn, is having an affair with another woman.

Ila lovingly prepares the lunch and entrusts it, as she does every day, to the *dabbawalla*, one of the famously efficient men who deliver hot meals in Mumbai. However, due to an unaccountable and, as the old man proudly points out, statistically impossible error, from that day on he delivers Ila's lunchbox to someone else, Saajan. The latter realises he is eating another man's lunch, and so slips a note into the tin when it goes back, complimenting the cook. This is the beginning of a long and often confidential exchange of messages hidden in the lunchbox, destined to change both their lives forever. At first Ila's curiosity is aroused; then, gradually, she becomes increasingly involved and gratified by the attention the stranger shows in her, putting ever more passion into the daily preparation of the lunch.

For Ila it is no longer a matter of normal routine among her duties as a housewife, but a veritable act of love, initially aimed at her husband, to rekindle his deadened feelings, then at Saajan, who is attentive and urges her to react against her unhappy condition and, ultimately, at herself, in a rediscovered vitality.

The list of the protagonists of this film is rather longer than the credits would suggest. The cooking and the eating, the foods themselves, become the main characters in the movie. The film also pays tribute to the *dabbawalla*, an army of two hundred thousand men who collect hot homemade lunches from kitchens all over the city every day and, transporting them by bike, train, and

handcart, deliver them to the workplaces in time for lunch. Indeed, Batra's original idea had been to make a documentary on them, and the inspiration then came to make this feature film. 'They are very accurate and take a lot of pride in their job', the director says, 'the statistic is that one in six million lunchboxes goes to the wrong address. If something is happening one in six million times, it's a miracle, not a mistake, so the story to me is about the miracle of the big city that connects these lonely souls'.¹²

Particularly interesting is the special relationship – a sort of complicity – that develops between Ila and 'Auntie', the elderly neighbour who remains for us only a voice coming in through the window, dispensing wise, and not only culinary, advice. The two women hit it off and communicate through aromas – they both understand the power of food.

Worth noting, finally, are the extremely limited proportions of Ila's kitchen, which the director insisted upon, practically constituting a metaphor for her life and marriage. The point was made very eloquently by the actress herself, Nimraut Kaur, in an interview: 'The kitchen where I was shooting in the film was so cramped up that I would find it difficult to move (...) despite the suffocation I had to face, it actually translated beautifully onscreen, and displayed Ila's claustrophobia in her marriage'.¹³

Conclusions

In this paper we have taken four recent Hindi films of different genres but all enjoying popularity and success with audiences and critics alike, to see how food is used in the narrative of films to represent Hindu women's feelings and duties.

We must, however, point out that the films analysed here are not representative of the Hindi film scene – apart from *DDJJ*, which in many respects we may define as emblematic of the most widespread genre, characterised as Bollywood – and are therefore not taken as models. Nevertheless, they depict particular situations which Hindi cinema evidently felt the need to evoke and which, in any case, have had considerable impact on popular imaginings. Thus they constitute for us a particularly apt starting point for a series of reflections on the condition of women in India in relation to love and marriage.

It is worth noting, in the first place, that in none of the films taken into consideration is the preparation of food experienced by women as an unwelcome obligation, but rather as a right, in *Jodhaa Akbar*, if not actually a pleasure and form of expression of personal qualities, as in *English Vinglish* and *The Lunchbox*. And in all the cases, albeit in different ways, food is used as

12. *Chicago Tribune*, May 15, 2014 (see Sitography).

13. *The Times of India*, February 13, 2015 (see Sitography).

a means for women to assert their will. In *DDLJ* a young woman, while respecting the rules laid down by a patriarchal society, hits on a ploy to exploit a traditional custom to declare her love to the man she adores and wishes to marry, and is then surprised and delighted when he reciprocates with the same means. In *Jodhaa Akbar* the Hindu woman asserts her role as wife through food, once and for all winning the love of her husband, and from then on actually achieving a certain degree of control over him and his empire. In *English Vinglish* Shashi's food becomes a means of emancipation and, finally, in *The Lunchbox* Ila, who knows the power of food, uses it in an attempt to win back her husband, only, to her great surprise, to encounter the man who will encourage her to change her life for good.

References

- Bower 2004 = Anne L. Bower (ed.), *Reel Food. Essays on Food and Film*, Routledge, New York 2004.
- Dwyer 2006 = Rachel Dwyer, *Filming the Gods. Religion and Indian Cinema*, Routledge, London–New York–New Delhi 2006.
- Dwyer 2014 = Rachel Dwyer, *Picture Abhi Baaki Hai. Bollywood as a Guide to Modern India*, Hachette, New Delhi 2014.
- Hertweck 2014 = Tom Hertweck (ed.), *Food on Film. Bringing Something New to the Table*, Rowman and Littlefield, Lanham, MD 2014.
- Keller 2006 = James R. Keller, *Food, Film and Culture. A Genre Study*, McFarland & Company, Jefferson, NC 2006.
- Rajadhyaksha 2003 = Ashish Rajadhyaksha, *The 'Bollywoodization' of the Indian Cinema: Cultural Nationalism in a Global Arena*, «Inter-Asia Cultural Studies» 4, 1 (2003), 25-39.
- Zimmerman 2009 = Steve Zimmerman, *Food in the Movies* (2005), McFarland & Company, Jefferson, NC 2009.

Filmography

- Cheeni Kum* (Less Sugar), dir. R. Balki, MAD Entertainment Ltd., 2007.
- Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (The Braveheart Will Take the Bride, also known as *DDLJ*), dir. Aditya Chopra, Yash Raj Films Pvt. Ltd., 1995.
- English Vinglish* (English, Whatever), dir. Gauri Shinde, Hope Productions Pvt. Ltd., 2012.
- Hum Aapke Hain Koun..!* (Who Am I to You?), dir. Sooraj R. Barjatya, Rajshri Productions Pvt. Ltd., 1994.
- Jodhaa-Akbar*, dir. Ashutosh Gowariker, Ashutosh Gowariker Productions Pvt. Ltd., 2008.
- Mughal-E-Azam* (The Greatest of the Mughals), dir. K. Asif, Sterling Investment Corporation, 1960.
- Salaam Namaste* (Salute [in Urdu and Hindi]; lit. Peace and Welcome), dir. Siddharth Anand, Yash Raj Films Pvt. Ltd., 2005.
- The Lunchbox*, dir. Ritesh Batra, Sikhya Entertainment, DAR Motion Pictures *et alii*, 2013.

Web sources

http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2014-05-15/entertainment/ct-chicago-closeup-lunchbox-20140515_I_dabbawallahs-ritesh-batra-the-lunchbox
(last access on January 2016).

<http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/entertainment/hindi/bollywood/news/Nimrat-Kaur-It-is-a-bitter-sweet-love-story-perfect-for-V-day/article-show/46216701.cms>
(last access on January 2016).