

DELHI-6 AND THE BATTLE FOR INDIA

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Delhi-6 by Rakesh Omprakash Mehra (2009) is an example of the new globalized Indian cinema, otherwise known as “Bollywood,” at its best. It is popular and puzzling, conventional and sophisticated, providing all the satisfactions of contemporary Bombay cinema, including technical slickness and the integration of the diaspora within it as subject and audience and yet remaining multilayered and critical. It carries different messages at the same time so that it might be received differently by different reception communities: it uses the conventions of popular cinema in a self-conscious way and places a layer of signification for those who wish to see it through the gap created by the self-consciousness. As such it runs the risk of puzzling and disappointing a section of the audience it addresses that fail to respond to the challenge of seeing it through the breaks in the conventional surface it artfully constructs. Addressing a heterogeneous audience within India and the diaspora, such films take the risk of falling between two stools—and are often attacked from both sides—but their success exceeds their share of the market.

At the basis of this new cinema is a substantial script that distinguishes it from the unscripted films that are the norm in Bombay. They achieve a density of signification through the interplay of image, spoken word, narrative, drama, song, music, and dance, as only film can offer, but carry a depth and semantic complexity that only writing enables. Grounded in strong writing they call for not only filmic but literary reading. Though such a claim seems excessive in regard to any commercial cinema, to say nothing of the entertainment products of the Bombay industry, it is justified by the successful reconciliation of art and commerce achieved by a large group of contemporary Indian filmmakers who address a growing Indian middle class and a large diasporic market. Films such as *Mangal Pandey*, *Paheli*, *Dor*, *Eklavya*, *Guru*, *Chokher*

Bali, and *Omkaara* direct themselves primarily to an educated, urban elite from whom a considerable repertory of filmic, literary and political information might be expected while their popular format keeps them available for consumption as entertainment. The new Indian cinema at its best could be seen as one of the beneficial consequences of the neo-liberal globalization that has had many dire effects on Indian life. Within cinema India's globalization has opened the possibility of a counter-hegemonic discourse.

Delhi-6 selects a small section of Old Delhi, the densely populated area of Chandni Chowk with the Jama Masjid and the Ramlila Grounds at its end as the symbolic site for an allegory of India. It is an appropriate site for the embodiment of the composite culture of India in which Hindu and Muslim faiths and cultures mingle and live side by side, a point emphasized by the repeated juxtapositions of the images of prayer at the mosque and the performance of Ramlila at the Grounds and rituals at homes and temples. As such the site itself, as a metonym for India, is already engaged in one of the most urgent political issues in India today, the conflict between the founding idea of India as a secular nation with a composite culture and the forces of *Hindutva* (or Hinduness) that have been trying to redefine India as a Hindu nation through violence against persons and property, and symbolic violence against knowledge. Annapurna Mehra's decision to return to India from the USA in order to die at her home is, therefore, not arbitrary: it opens the door (as Roshan opens the door of his ancestral home) to the profound conflict over India.

The conflict is thematized in the film with the running performance of the Ramlila that is repeatedly cut into the diagesis. The editing is obtrusive but motivated because the performance characterizes the location—Ramlila Grounds—and is integrated into the narrative, and yet its excess breaks narrative illusion and draws attention to

the film as artifice. It points to some significance beyond the narrative function, to a filmic performance above the story it tells. The Ramlila is a popular performance of the epic-religious story that has been politically appropriated: this is made explicit at the beginning when the performance is suspended to allow an MP to appear on stage to promote *Hindutva* politics. The same MP will later claim that the disruption of the performance by the Black Monkey that has been terrorizing the city is a Muslim attack on Hinduism. At the end of the film the mask of the Black Monkey will be thrown at the effigy of Ravana that is burnt at the conclusion of the traditional performance to be absorbed into its significance as the victory over evil. In other words, the ending of the film reclaims the Ramlila in an act of counter appropriation, burning the politicized Black Monkey of *Hindutva* with Ravana.

The Ramlila also has a metafictional function: it is a popular art form that is not only alive but has a relation of continuity with the popular Indian film with all its differences. *Delhi-6* self-consciously affirms its affinity with the Ramlila, which it represents both in a traditional performance and in a modern ballet. The audience of the Ramlila and Indian cinema are the same: they bring to both the same conditions of reception and make Indian cinema the distinctive entity that it is, with its blend of illusionism and magic. The continuity of the stage and the screen is signified through Hanuman, who flies across the stage on wires and across the screen by cinematic magic. Also, though the technology of the popular stage and the screen are different, both stage and screen are bound by the audience's expectation of a didactic fiction in which good triumphs over evil. The film stages the location of its conventions within the popular art of India and fights its political battle on the very ground of the Ramayana/Ramlila that *Hindutva* has chosen as its stronghold.

The film has a spare narrative outline that allows

the construction of a dense picture of a complex, multi-temporal society in transition. Its minimal plot is a means of narrating a place. Annapurna Mehra, living in the US with her son's family, is diagnosed with a heart problem and decides to return to Delhi to die in her family home. She is accompanied by her grandson, Roshan, who has never been to India, so that what unfolds is a diasporic story of return and discovery. Annapurna resumes the life she had left when she joined her son in the US following his marriage to a Muslim woman and his decision never to return to India. Roshan discovers his roots as a tourist, taking pictures of everything with his cell phone, seeing the world in the clichéd frames of the sentimental traveller (presented in the film through the subjective camera), discovering the familiar horrors such as police brutality and untouchability with his newcomer's eye, and falling on his face in his naive attempts to redress entrenched wrongs. He is enamoured of what he sees and wants to stay, is rudely disillusioned and decides to leave (as does his grandmother), and finds himself falling in love with Bitto, preventing her attempted elopement at the near cost of his life, and producing the happy ending required by Bombay cinema. Within this structural narrative are a number of smaller narratives that one might call ethical narratives of place that establish the character of the place: Annapurna's home has been locked up because her son married a Muslim woman and had to leave home for ever; Ali Beg lives in the house of the Muslim woman he loved but did not marry because she married Annapurna's Hindu son and had to move away; Madan Gopal Sharma lives in a house split in two by a wall that separates him from his brother on the other side, across which he hurls volleys of invective; Jalebi removes the trash from all the houses and serves the sexual needs of the men in them but remains untouchable; a money lender loan-sharks and buys up property while his wife sleeps with one of his clients; the policeman parades his power and is appeased through bribes;

everyone laughs at the expense of a mentally weak person. Two narratives weave through the main one and come together at the end to create a blatantly improbable happy ending: a black monkey terrorizes the city, bringing the superficial harmony of the community into a crisis and Bitto pursues her dream of appearing in the Indian Idol program as the only means of escaping a narrow life with an arranged marriage.

The Black Monkey that is everywhere but is never visible except in his effects—a power outage, a wife's infidelity, a goat's disappearance—is what Structuralists called a "floating signifier," something that points to a meaning that is an empty place that can be filled with any number of things: Muslim mischief as the Hindu chauvinists claim, or a Hindu strategy as the Muslims say in retaliation; the evil outside us that Shani Baba promises to exorcise, or something inside us as the mad man who holds the mirror up to the crowd suggests. The Black Monkey is also a fact: in May 2001 Delhi was saturated by reports in the media of a black monkey terrorizing people and of people dying in panic over its appearance. The film uses this actual and a media event as a floating signifier that can be used to disrupt the fragile harmony of the nation but may also be counter-used in the contest for the ownership of the nation. The monkey is what people make of it, and the non-affirmative madman with his mirror might be closest to its truth.

The mysterious Black Monkey at the centre of the narrative, however, belongs within a set of three monkeys. At one end of the set is Hanuman, the monkey god of the Ramayana, who not only appears on the stage of the Ramlila but also flies over the city on the screen of the film. He is the symbol of Hindu devotion that the Hindutva fanatics want to establish by exploiting the Black Monkey scare to destroy Muslim property. At the other end is King Kong, the monkey god of Hollywood, who embodies a transformation of meaning, since he begins as

an image of terror and ends as an image of love destroyed by exploitative civilization. Kong appears toward the end of the movie in his last moments on the Empire State Building as New York and Delhi merge in digital space (an interpenetration of space previously signified by the cell phone's ability to transport Delhi to New York and New York to Delhi). The challenging ending of the film, with Roshan implausibly and without any motivation wearing the Black Monkey costume to prevent Bitto's running away and being nearly kicked to death in the process, needs to be read in the context of the transformation of Kong and the play of monkeys. Roshan's wearing of the monkey costume reverses the Black Monkey from a signifier of terror to a signifier of self-sacrificing love. But the love at issue is not merely of the love of Bitto, whom Roshan is trying to save, but the wider love of the entire community for whom Roshan assumes the role of the scapegoat. The episode is challenging because it is not motivated within the narrative but it is far from arbitrary. Rather, it is determined within a scheme of signification in which the Black Monkey is placed between Hanuman and Kong and is transformed from a malign antithesis of Hanuman to the Kong who dies for love. Appropriately, what remains of the monkey, the mask, is thrown on to the burning effigy of the Ravana at the end of the film. In that gesture the film self-consciously affirms itself as a didactic production continuous with the Ramlila.

Delhi-6 presents itself as operating within the conventions of popular Indian cinema, with a love story, song and dance, comedy, stock characters and cliché images, heightened emotions, a happy ending, and blatant didacticism. But it does so with a subtle distance from what it presents, leaving a gap through which emerges a significance that is other than the one on the surface. The theme of the diaspora's return to the home it had left behind or the journey to discover its roots is presented with

a narrative and filmic sentimentality expressive of the subjective experience only to be undercut with the reality that had made and continues to make emigration desirable in the first place. As Ali Beg explains to the starry-eyed Roshan, the warmth and generosity he witnesses is the compensatory behaviour needed to make the narrow and crowded spaces habitable. Annapurna's glow of homecoming dissipates when her grandson is violently thrown out of the temple because he is the product of a mixed marriage. The teeming streets that had seemed so friendly turn violent when the superficial harmony is shattered, and people who had spent their lives sitting in Mamdou's shop loot and wreck it at the first opportunity. All attempts to remedy the apparent inequity are exposed as the naive and ineffectual response of the visitor from the West. Once the glow of sentimentality is lifted what is revealed is religious intolerance and political violence, fraternal hostility, forced marriage, untouchability, brutality, corruption, and usury. All answers are negated, with the silly happy ending undercut by its presentation as a mere contrivance made for satisfying the cinematic convention. All the darkness is real but the happy ending can only happen in a Bombay film. What remains is the sense of the reality of the problems that call out for real solutions.