

Imaging Marriage and Family in Popular Hindi Film

By Coonoor Kripalani



Still from *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham* (K3G). © © 2001 Sony Music Entertainment (India) Pvt. Ltd.

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THE IDEA OF MARRIAGE AND FAMILY — In India the words “joint family,” “arranged marriage,” and “dowry” are shorthand references to a wide spectrum of social norms that apply almost universally throughout the country, regardless of religion. Living as a joint family is generally understood to be three or four generations living under one roof in a family home. While nuclear families are increasingly the norm in the metros, the joint family offers protection of wealth and property for large business families, former royal or aristocratic families, and a scale of economy for poorer rural families, agricultural workers, and less socially-advantaged urban families. These families are generally headed by a strong patriarch, and involve compromise and tempering of individual desires from each member, male or female—for the well being of the social unit.

Arranged marriages, seen in the West as peculiarly Indian, bring together two people of common background, caste, and interest. In contrast to “love marriages,” which begin with romance and love, it is assumed that love will follow after an arranged marriage. Traditionally, such a marriage is as much a union of two families as it is a union of two individuals. High value is placed on chastity, and the virginity of brides is assumed. A woman’s “purity” is extremely important. In urban metro areas, where young women and men study at universities together and have opportunities to meet in the workplace, arranged marriages are becoming less common. Metro area young people increasingly tend to choose their own mates across regional, linguistic, caste, and community lines.¹

Marriage in India is generally an expensive business, especially for the bride’s family. In an arranged marriage, they not only bear the expenses of the wedding, but are frequently obliged to pay a dowry to the groom’s family, and may be called upon to pay for or provide luxury goods and amenities when and as needed by the groom’s family.

“The traditional patriarchal system is truly reflected in marriage. The family of the boy dominates and dictates over the girl’s family, which always remains at the receiving [*sic.* giving] end. This is evident the day the marriage negotiations begin and continues for the rest of life.”²

While dowry may be interpreted as “*stree-dhan*,” the personal wealth of the bride (to fall back on should she be in need), in practice is wealth used to marry off the groom’s sisters or for the groom’s

family to enjoy. Reports of families becoming impoverished by daughters' weddings led to this practice being outlawed in newly independent India, but the practice has not been entirely eliminated. With rising consumerism and the demand for luxury goods, the practice of dowry has reared its ugly head again.

Women are generally the custodians of the knowledge of ritual and customs. It falls on them to ensure that they are properly observed during festivals, marriages, births, and deaths. Thus it is women who safeguard caste and purification structures, and ensure that future generations live by these rules.³ In view of this important role, it is no surprise that depiction of marriage and family on celluloid revolves so much around women.

In recent years, the biggest hits of Hindi popular cinema have all had a big marriage scene.⁴ Audiences both in India and abroad are fascinated by spectacular depictions of the traditional marriage, as well as the modern urban one—popularizing traditional rituals (particularly of the Punjab) and, in the process, creating new rituals. For students and scholars wishing to better understand marriage and family in India, it is instructive to view selected popular films. A deeper look at the films goes beyond the marriage rituals and provides insight into family structure and mores—both as they exist, and as they are ideally portrayed in film.⁵

THE IDEAL WIFE: MOTHER INDIA — The landmark 1957 film of Mehboob, *Mother India*, laid a benchmark for the ideal wife. Radha, the heroine, is presented as a woman of the soil. Her qualities of fortitude and sacrifice personify the nation: Mother India. As a new bride, Radha assumes her wifely duties immediately, cooking and cleaning the house, taking lunch to her husband in the field, working alongside him, massaging his feet at night until he falls asleep, and bearing him three sons. It is indeed a realistic depiction of the burden of work on rural women: she not only takes care of the household chores, looks after her mother-in-law, husband, and children within the home, but she also engages in the varied tasks of agricultural production.

Radha is the ideal wife, mother, and daughter-in-law, as well as community worker. She preserves her chastity when it is under threat, and retains the “purity” of her womanhood. Ultimately, Radha, the mother, is strong enough to kill her own son—sacrificing her own happiness in the process—when his actions threaten the community. The celluloid Radha epitomises the ideal of Indian womanhood (rural or urban)—and this role model continues to remain very strong in popular imagination and depictions of women in Hindi film.

ARRANGED VS LOVE MARRIAGES: DILEMMAS OF THE DIASPORA — Fast forward to the 1990s, and another path-breaking film, *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (DDLJ), exceeds all box-office hits. DDLJ is the love story of two Indian youngsters, Raj and Simran, both raised in the UK,



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who find each other independently. Baldev Singh, Simran's father, appears in the first scene feeding pigeons in Trafalgar Square, lamenting his alienation from the land where he has spent the last twenty-two years. He has other plans for Simran, having promised her in marriage to the son of his childhood friend in the Punjab. Though dissatisfied, Simran accepts this arrangement as the Indian way. Raj does not, and follows the family to India, where he inserts himself into the bridegroom's family, while trying to befriend and impress Simran's father. With the wedding preparations underway, Simran contrives to avoid all the pre-nuptial rituals that would bind her to her betrothed, who is portrayed as an unworthy character. As Simran and Raj steal precious moments alone in the bountiful fields of the Punjab (a sharp contrast to the barren fields that Radha tilled in *Mother India*), Simran suggests they elope. Raj will not agree to marry her without the blessing of her father, and renews his efforts to win him over. Even when Simran's mother (a victim of tradition herself, having lost out on education to further that of her male siblings, and subsequently married off as her father thought best), after seeing her daughter breaking her *karva chauth* fast with Raj, suggests to the young couple that they elope with her assistance.⁶ Raj does not agree. He will marry Simran only when her father willingly gives her to him—and in the proper Indian tradition, he seeks the blessings of the family elders, particularly the patriarch.

DDLJ portrays the hankering of the diaspora community to stay connected to its Indian roots. Baldev Singh's way of doing so is to frown upon Western music and dance and to inculcate Indian values in his daughters. When his daughter runs to her room in disappointment after learning he has arranged her



Courtesy of the National Film Archive of India, Pune, India.

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Publicity photo for *Dilwale Dulhania Leh Jayenge* (DDLJ).
Image source: <http://www.yashrajfilms.com/> / www.yashrajfilms.com.

The film (DDLJ) provides a visual feast of Punjabi wedding rituals, but simultaneously provides the sub-text of attitudes and mores of Indian family values.

important exchange shows the moral uprightness of both protagonists in the Indian context—love must grow and be consummated only after marriage. Another indication of Simran’s Indian-ness is her attire—as a footloose and free student traveling around Europe, she wears dresses and Western clothes. Once she is about to be married, she is demurely turned out in Indian costumes.

This film provides a visual feast of Punjabi wedding rituals, but simultaneously provides the sub-text of attitudes and mores of Indian family values. Baldev Singh portrays the patriarch, dictating the family’s code of behaviour—how they dress, what music they listen to, etc. It is he who decides to marry off his daughter to his son’s friend, without consulting his wife or daughter. It is he who decides that the family leave for India, and when they do so. Yet, his dictatorial ways are borne out of affection and his desire to protect and provide, in the best way possible, for his family.⁷



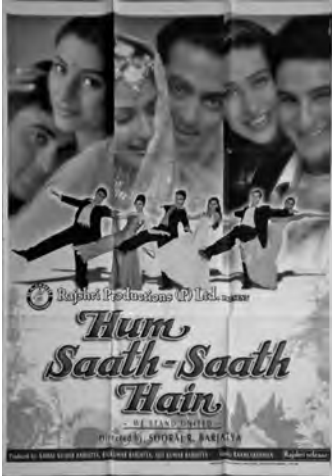
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More than a decade later, the 2007 film, *Namaste London*, with a poster byline describing it as “a British brat meets a Funjabi boy,” touched a chord with audiences around the globe. Repeated once again is the theme of a British-born Indian girl, Jazz (for Jasmeet), being taken to India to marry, against her will, a Punjabi boy, Arjun (the “Funjabi”), who is portrayed at first glance as somewhat of a country bumpkin. Jazz’s sole aim is to reunite with and marry her British boyfriend, Charlie Brown. She tricks Arjun into going with her to London after going through with the wedding rituals, but without consummating the marriage. In the end, we see the triumph of Indian values, as Charlie Brown reveals himself to be unworthy of her—he is racist, snobbish, and feels insulted when denied pre-marital sex, in contrast to Arjun, who respects and treasures Indian values, and agrees not to consummate their legitimate wedding until his bride consents to it. When Arjun finally wins her over, he turns out to be an English-speaking sophisticate!

Here, too, we see an idealized contrast between Jazz’s Indian and British suitors. Arjun is always there for Jazz, protective of her, and anxious to win back his bride rightfully. He treats their marriage as sanctity, even though Jazz informs him it has no legitimacy in England, so she does not consider herself married to him. Like Simran in DDLJ, Jazz conforms to Indian dress once she moves from frivolous girlhood to married woman status—an idealized image of womanhood, repeatedly reinforced in film. *Namaste London*, once again, treats the audience to a portrayal of an idealized marriage—for an Indian woman, no matter where she is in the world, her best partner is the superior Indian man—only he can respect her and Indian tradition.

UNITED WE STAND: GLORIFICATION OF THE JOINT FAMILY— The next two films, *Hum Saath Saath Hain* (HSSH) and *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham* (K3G), portray joint families and the strains within them. Both portray a highly idealized joy within the joint family household, and leave the audience with the fulfilment of a continuing united and happy family.

HSSH is the story of a joint family whose three sons live happily with their parents and work together in the family business. The women in HSSH are well-dressed and go about their household duties. These duties mainly center around serving meals to their husbands and the rest of the family and performing religious rituals. The eldest son is married, and a good part of the film is devoted to the middle brother’s wedding; typically, elaborate rituals are captured on-screen. A married sister, also living



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in a similar joint family, attends her brother's wedding. After the wedding, the mother sends away the eldest son and his wife (her stepson, reminiscent of Kekai sending Ram into exile), in order to secure the future for her own sons.⁸ With their departure, the former happy home dissolves into a gloomy one. The gloom descends into despair with the news that the daughter and her husband are sent away from their family home and business. The eldest brother helps the ousted couple resettle, and eventually the family is reconciled



Still from *Hum Saath Saath Hain* (HSSH). © 1999 Digital Entertainment, Inc., Rajshri Production (P), Ltd.

when the mother relents her unfairness. Joy returns, as the family prepares for the wedding of the youngest son. Apart from the rituals of the wedding ceremony, HSSH depicts the pivotal role of the mother, while suggesting that total joy can be had only when the family stays together. Filial loyalty and the sacrifice of individual pleasures for the greater good of the family are shown as noble actions.

Similarly, the 2001 blockbuster K3G, with its leading stars, suggests the strength of the joint family. When Rahul, the adopted son of the Raichand family, against his father's will marries Anjali, a girl of lesser social status, his father disowns him. His mother, Naina, remains supportive, but has to stand by her husband, Yash. Rahul leaves the family home for England, with Anjali, her sister Pooja, and his family *dai*, his nanny who raised him, and to whose care Naina entrusts this breakaway family unit. In England, they have a happy Indian home and raise their young son with Indian values, but the viewer is given a sense of incompleteness of family, with the lack of the family elders. In India, the Raichand home is strained, as Naina goes about her wifely tasks grudgingly, making clear her unhappiness at the patriarch's decision to send away their older son.

With the departure of Rahul and his bride the Raichand home becomes dark and unhappy, as the grandmothers whisper for the return of their grandchildren. Naina does not agree with her husband's decision to disown his son, but feels powerless to overrule him. Rahul and Anjali's home

in England is a happier one, full of young people—their son, Pooja, and later Rohan—adding some zest, while *dai* plays the role of the family elder.

Eventually the younger son, Rohan, brings about reconciliation with the collaboration of Pooja. Joy returns as the family is reunited. Naina once again performs her wifely rituals with affection, and a smile returns to Yash Raichand's face.

The stresses and strains of family members falling out with each other, or refusing to obey the head of the family, is a real enough problem. Indian audiences relate to such issues, but also recognize the value of family.⁹ Therefore, it is no surprise that Hindi cinema resolves all these issues with a "happily ever after," depicting young daughters-in-law who are delighted to stay under one roof, and repentant elders who have erred in their harshness while attempting to keep family honor and solidarity. The reality is not quite so simple, but in a perfect on-screen world, audiences are pleased to see these reconciliations.

Both (HSSH and K3G) portray a highly idealized joy within the joint family household, and leave the audience with the fulfilment of a continuing united and happy family.



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Still from *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham* (K3G). © © 2001 Sony Music Entertainment (India) Pvt. Ltd.



THE FATE OF THE ELDERLY — *Baghban* focuses on the breakdown of the joint family and its accompanying values. Upon retirement from his comfortable bank job, Raj Malhotra and his wife Puja decide to live with any one of their four sons on whom they lavished education and privilege, to the point they are now unable to support themselves in retirement. It turns out that none of the sons or their families welcome this, so they devise a plan to each keep one parent on a rotational basis. Raj and Puja are pained at this suggestion, but decide to live with the separation, enduring much mistreatment at the hands of their sons. Finally the retired couple elope. Fortunately, they are given refuge by their adopted fifth son (Salman Khan), whom they helped with education, and who appreciates and is genuinely fond of them. Meanwhile, during his unhappy months of separation from his wife, Raj publishes a book that wins him popularity and success as an author. His four sons come forward to share in that glory, but the older couple now recognize the opportunistic nature of their real sons.

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***Baghban* focuses on the breakdown of the joint family and its accompanying values.**

Typical scenes of her lack of care show the daughter-in-law, a smart-looking city girl, not serving Raj his morning tea or breakfast, in contrast to the loving manner in which his wife always served him tea. Raj befriends the owners of a cafe nearby, who give him company and feed him during the day. The young couple don't give him spending money or fix his broken reading glasses, as their priority is to buy their son sporting equipment. In the other son's home, Puja stays in the maid's quarters after she agrees to take on the household chores for the son's family. She prepares meals for an unappreciative family and watches with concern the errant behavior of their teenaged daughter, who never addresses her grandmother directly, but refers to her in the third person, even while she is in the room. Puja's ministrations are construed as interference, and her son has harsh words for her. She is told to keep out of their affairs. Eventually, she proves her worth, as she saves her granddaughter from a nasty boyfriend.

To address the problem of neglect of the elderly, the Indian government has recently passed a law to punish and jail people who do not look after their elderly parents.

In reality, this type of mistreatment and neglect of the elderly is not uncommon in families living together (although splitting the older couple may be bit far-fetched), despite being in sharp contrast to the Indian tradition of revering elders. To address the problem of neglect of the elderly, the Indian government has recently passed a law to punish and jail people who do not look after their elderly parents.¹⁰ In *Baghban*, the retired couple is still able enough to take independent action and rebuild their lives together, but in reality this may not always be feasible.

CONCLUSION — Popular Hindi cinema provides a look at family structures and perceived traditional roles of males and females within them. While women are shown as the backbone of the household unit, and Radha in *Mother India* was an exceptional example of this, the males are shown as the patriarchal heads. Their children are suitably filial and obedient, and deeply bonded with their grandparents. This is considered an ideal family situation, and perhaps explains why audiences receive these films so enthusiastically.

The reality could be quite different. There are usually strains within joint family households between mothers-in law and daughters-in-law, and between daughters-in-law and daughters of the household, as well as competition and stress between wives of brothers, fathers and sons, and so on.

It could be argued that it is with an eye to the box office, as well as the Censor Board, that film producers and directors offer audiences these idealized scenarios of Indian family life. However, it is not as if the industry has stayed totally away from the stickier issues of separation, divorce, and extra-marital relationships of present-day society, though they are few and far between. The 1995 film *Akele Hum, Akele Tum* looks at clashing career aspirations of both husband and wife, and how these lead to the break-up of a marriage, while more than a decade later, *Kabhi Alvida Naa Kehna* (2006) depicts a man, unable to come to terms with the success of his wife's career, falling into an extra-marital relationship.

While romance is generally not encouraged in practice, and "ideal" matches are sought through arrangement, Indian folklore is replete with legendary stories of romantic couples (much like Romeo and Juliet) such as Heer-Ranjha, Laila-Majnu, Radha-Krishna, Rana Ratan Singh, Rani Padmini of Chittor, and the Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan, who built the Taj Mahal for his beloved wife, Mumtaz Mahal. In view of this idealization of romance in the popular imagination, and the idealized message in popular Hindi films that love conquers all, it is not surprising that celluloid romances are a big draw. ■

FILMOGRAPHY

Most of the films listed below are available in DVD format with English subtitles from The Indian CD Store at www.indiancdstore.com, 2345 Trace Ridge Drive, Weatherford, TX 76087, 817-594-6678, with the exception of *Namastey London* and *Akele Hum, Akele Tum*, which are available from amazon.com.

Akele Hum, Akele Tum [I'm Alone, You're Alone] (1995),
165 minutes
Director: Mansoor Khan
Starring: Amir Khan, Manisha Koirala, Master Adil.

Baghban [The Reaper] (2003), 170 minutes
Director: Ravi Chopra
Starring: Amitabh Bachchan, Hema Malini, Salman Khan,
Mahima Chaudhury, Lilette Dubey.

Dilwale Dulhaniya Leh Jayenge [Bravehearts Win the Brides]
(1995), 189 minutes
Director: Aditya Chopra
Starring: Shah Rukh Khan, Kajol, Amrish Puri, Farida Jalal,
Anupam Kher.

Hum Saath Saath Hain [We Are Together/We Stand United] (1999),
177 minutes
Director: Sooraj R. Barjatya
Starring: Salman Khan, Sonalie Bendre, Mohnish Behl, Tabu,
Karishma Kapoor, Saif Ali Khan.

Kabhi Alvida Naa Kehna [Don't Ever Say Goodbye] (2006),
193 minutes
Director: Karan Johar
Starring: Shah Rukh Khan, Preity Zinta, Rani Mukerjee,
Amitabh Bachchan, Abishek Bachchan, Kiran Kher, Arjun
Rampal.

Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham [Sometimes Joy, Sometimes Sorrow]
(2001), 210 minutes
Director: Karan Johar
Starring: Shah Rukh Khan, Kajol, Hrithik Roshan, Kareena
Kapoor, Amitabh Bachchan, Jaya Bachchan, Farida Jalal.

Mother India (1957), 172 minutes
Director: Mehboob
Starring: Nargis, Rajendra Kumar, Sunil Dutt.

Namastey London [Greetings London] (2007), 132 minutes
Director: Vipul Amritlal Shah
Starring: Akshay Kumar, Katrina Kaif, Rishi Kapoor.

NOTES

1. Ranjana Kumari, "Indian Marriages—Economic Independence and Changing Power Relations," in Gavin Jones and Kamalini Ramdas, *(Un)tying the Knot, Ideal and Reality in Asian Marriage* (Singapore: Asian Research Institute, National University of Singapore, 2004), 108.
2. Ibid, 93
3. Leela Dube, "Caste and Women," in M. N. Srinivas, ed., *Caste, Its Twentieth Century Avatar* (Delhi: Viking by Penguin Books India (P) Ltd., 1996), 8.
4. All the films described in this article deal with Hindu weddings; depictions of weddings of other religious groups, while not totally uncommon, are less frequently seen in popular Hindi films.
5. Coonoor Kripalani, "Coming of Age: Bollywood Productions of the Nineties," in *Asian Cinema*, 12 (1): 2001, 42; Veena Singh, "Towards the Radicalization of the Indian Family," and Bandana Chakrabarty, "Questioning the Confines of Marriage: *Khushboo* and *Arth*," both in Jasbir Jain & Sudha Rai, eds., *Films and Feminism, Essays in Indian Cinema* (Jaipur and New Delhi: Rawat Publications, 2002), 94–105, 163–169; Rachel Dwyer, "Yeh Shaadi Nahin Ho Sakti! (*This Wedding Cannot Happen!*): Romance and Marriage in Contemporary Hindi Cinema," in Gavin Jones and Kamalini Ramdas, *(Un)tying the Knot, Ideal and Reality in Asian Marriage* (Singapore: Asian Research Institute, National University of Singapore, 2004), 59; Patricia Uberoi, *Freedom and Destiny: Gender, Family, and Popular Culture in India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006), 169.
6. *Karva Chauth* is a ritual fasting and *pooja* observed annually by Hindu women (mainly in the Punjab), for their husbands' well-being. The fast is broken only after the women see the moon.
7. For a fuller discussion, see Chapter 6, "The Diaspora Comes Home, Disciplining Desire in *DDLJ*," in Patricia Uberoi, *Freedom and Destiny: Gender, Family, and Popular Culture in India* (New York: Oxford University Press: 2006), 180–216.
8. This alludes to a crucial part of the story of the Hindu epic, the *Ramayana*, when Ram is banished to the forest for fourteen years by King Dushrath, his father, on the behest of his stepmother, Kekai.
9. On this point, see Geetanjali Prasad, *The Great Indian Family: New Roles, Old Responsibilities* (New Delhi: Penguin India, 2006). Surveys done by Prasad reveal that young professionals put a great deal of store on the contributions of the older generation, particularly in their role of overseeing the children, while they (the parents) are at work.
10. Agence France-Presse, "India Passes Law to Punish Unfilial Children," *The Straits Times* (Singapore: 8 December 2007), 28.

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