

THE MAKING OF A TERRORIST Through the Lens of Bollywood

by Coonoor Kripalani

Bollywood: The Voice of the Subaltern¹?

The offerings of Bollywood have frog-leaped from the “low-brow”² entertainment of yesteryear to become the cultural representatives of all things Indian in the current global economy. Popularity of these films is at an all-time high, reflecting their influence in food, fashion, music, dance, ritual, and worship to audiences around the globe.³ The patriotic fervor that runs through many of these films, both in terms of national identity and “Indian-ness” of culture, sends subliminal messages of what constitutes the national entity. To students of South Asia, viewing these films will provide a look into the Indian national psyche. The concepts of unity despite diversity, the sovereignty of territory, the sanctity of family, and sacrifice for the nation are reinforced in the popular genre of Hindi film.

Well may the student ask why these messages of national unity are pervasive in a free market, where the producers and directors of film are funded from the private sector, and the commercial success of the film is the main objective. I believe it’s what sells: it’s what audiences wish to hear. The challenge is to produce a film of universal appeal, appealing to both urban and rural audiences. “We have to cater to the Indian yuppie in New York and the man in rural Bihar. I always say the most difficult thing to do is to make a universally commercial Indian film,” says Director Karan Johar.⁴

Giving voice to the common man, the subaltern, and day-to-day concerns is one component of this appeal. Bollywood has a long tradition of this: notably, the films of Mehboob Khan, Raj Kapoor, Guru Dutt, and Bimal Roy in the 1940s and 1950s, and films of the 1970s depicting Amitabh Bachchan as the angry young man, bear this out. In the late 1990s and into the twenty-first century, Bollywood began to explore the mental makeup of terrorism.

LIVING IN TERROR — For many in the West, the Age of Terror began on September 11, 2001. Four commercial aircraft were hijacked from Boston’s Logan airport. Two were brazenly flown into the twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York City, while a third flew into the Pentagon in Washington, DC. The fourth crashed outside of Washington DC; it is generally speculated that the passengers of this plane foiled the hijackers from crashing either into the White House or Camp David. An argument can be made that the retaliatory war against terror launched by the US has unleashed even more terror. Daily the news reports incidents of car

bombs, suicide bomber attacks, and other acts of terror, which take place somewhere or other around the globe. Having moved out of the Cold War era following the collapse of the Soviet Union, we now live in an Age of Terror.⁵

Yet, for almost twenty years before 9/11, the Indian sub-continent has been the site of terrorist attacks and activity. Punjab in India in the early 1980s became a hotbed for Sikhs seeking a separate state of Khalistan (The Land of the Khalsa), while Sri Lanka was the site of Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) activity, which included guerilla warfare, assassinations, ambushes, bombings, and suicide bombings. The northeast of India has seen decades of unrest in Assam and Nagaland. Insurgency in India’s northern province of Kashmir began in the late 1980s. Terrorist activity there has since been combined with the threat of war with Pakistan, from where infiltrators trained in camps across the border came to create terror and instability in the valley of Kashmir. This struggle has been characterized by numerous border skirmishes and even the threat of nuclear weapons during the Kargil War in 1999. Hundreds of nameless and faceless youth offer their lives for these causes, and hundreds are killed in the process of defending their beliefs.

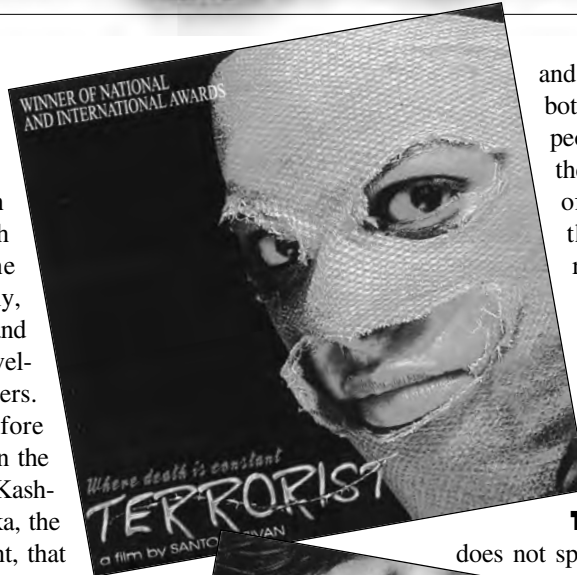
What goes on in the minds of these young people, that they are so willing to sacrifice their lives? What makes a terrorist?

DEPICTIONS IN POPULAR FILM — This is explained to some extent by the five films selected for viewing. The films provide a glimpse into the issues that create disaffection that results in youth turning to violence as a solution. The films are: *Dil Se* (1998), *The Terrorist* (Tamil:1997), *Mission Kashmir* (2000), *Hu Tu Tu*

(1999), and *Maachis* (1999). With the exception of *The Terrorist*, produced in Tamil (1997) and subsequently English (2001) for an international audience, the rest of the films are in Hindi. Although each Hindi film was released with much fanfare, and boasted major stars, none were immediate box-office hits. Gradually, however, especially after video release and their distribution overseas, each has developed a degree of popularity with viewers. The films selected here were made before 9/11, when terrorism, although quelled in the Punjab, had reached an intensity both in Kashmir in the north of India and in Sri Lanka, the southernmost country of the subcontinent, that touched the lives of ordinary people.

Elizabeth Daley, Dean of the USC School of Cinema-Television, is reported to have said, "It is just as important to study film as to study literature, math and philosophy."⁶ Viewing popular films conveys to the viewer popular perceptions, attitudes, and cultural mores. The films present a method of communication through images and narratives that is particularly effective in informing students about another culture. Apart from addressing the main issue of terrorism, teachers of South Asia will find other points of interest in these films that highlight particular cultural mores. For example, in *Maachis*, the heroine, Veera, dreams of marriage to her brother's best friend. This is considered desirable by her mother and the family elders. When she takes on the heavy tasks of farming, as well as driving the tractor in the absence of males, it is a matter that provokes comment and raises eyebrows. *Hu Tu Tu* dramatizes the nexus between power politics and rapacious business interests; it depicts the gap between the rich and the poor in the city of Mumbai and the brutality of powerful individuals. Their power can only be checked when they are assassinated.

Mission Kashmir is particularly instructive as a teaching tool, as it highlights some of the issues that made the situation there so desperate. It depicts mercenaries from third countries who care naught for stirring ill-will between the neighbors India and Pakistan, as long as they can profit from it. In the classroom, when discussing the Kashmir issue, scenes from this film neatly illustrate this point. The film also shows the humanitarian face of authority together with the terror that the authorities are up against,



and the uncontrollable damage of fire-power both on the landscape and in the lives of the people. Both this film and *Maachis* convey the view of ordinary people who are tired of the violence and wish to get on with their lives. A discussion of Sikh separatism in the classroom would be well-supplemented by clips from *Maachis*. The films collectively make the point that violence begets violence: youth who grow up in a violent milieu know no other path. The protagonists of each of the five films portray this aspect.

THE FILMS — *Dil Se* (From the Heart)

does not specify the location it portrays; it is somewhere in the hills of India, possibly the northeast. Amar, a radio journalist on a working visit to the area, comes across a beautiful and mysterious woman, Meghna. He is attracted to her, but she responds oddly. Trouble seems to dog him whenever she's around. After he returns to Delhi, she suddenly turns up at his home, seeking refuge for herself and a companion. They turn out to be terrorists, on an assassination mission as suicide bombers. In flashbacks it is revealed that Meghna lost her family in a brutal attack by the authorities. She was the only survivor and, deeply scarred, she suffers trauma from having witnessed the attack. She has now dedicated her life to subverting central rule through terrorist activity. Amar tries to talk her out of her mission, citing the virtues of India, nationhood, and unity. This segment is informative for students, as Amar articulates the values of secular India. He is successful in deflecting her mission, because of their love for each other, but at the cost of both their lives.

The Terrorist was released soon after *Dil Se* to much acclaim. Devoid of the song and dance numbers that characterize Bollywood film, it shows nineteen-year-old Malli preparing to assassinate a high-ranking official in a suicide mission. The depiction of the crisp organization of the terrorist camp contrasts with the slow pace of the film. It is useful for students to view this part of the film, to learn of the military precision with which terrorists are trained, and the pride they feel when chosen for a particular mission. Malli's pedigree as a terrorist is the highest: her brother was a valiant fighter killed in action. She

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has been raised by the terrorists (the film does not specify it, but they are easily recognizable as the LTTE), and does not flinch at any assignment. She has seen comrades executed in cold blood and lost everyone she was ever close to in the fighting, including her lover. As she trains in isolation in a remote village, she discovers she is with child. The stirring of life within her begins to weaken her resolve to carry out her mission.

Hu Tu Tu, situated in Mumbai, is the tale of a young man and woman, both children of privilege sorely neglected by their parents. Adi is the son of a ruthless businessman and Panna's mother a corrupt and ruthless politician. Adi and Panna come together working in the *bastis* (slums) of Mumbai, campaigning for the rights of the underprivileged. Of particular interest to students is the street theater, ably performed by Bhau, a leader amongst the *basti*-dwellers. Bhau uses this vehicle to voice grievances and propagate his message. Adi's father and Panna's mother unite in a community of wicked business and political interests, persecuting the *basti*-dwellers. The young couple attend a political rally called by both their parents, with bombs strapped to Panna's body. Their suicide mission ends the evil

regime of their parents and unites the young lovers in death.

Maachis (literally, matchstick) spells out troubles in Punjab, depicting police wantonly accusing youth of crimes and jailing and penalizing them without proof, post-Operation Bluestar⁷ and the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. This heavy-handed rule drives young women and men to retaliate with violence: the story line tells of Jassi, a simple Sikh youth in the village, wrongfully accused of attempted assassination. He is detained and tortured. In retaliation, his best friend Palli joins the terrorists to seek revenge. Further persecution of Jassi and his family lead his sister Veera

to also join the terrorists. She is transformed from a simple village girl who dreams of marriage to Palli, into a crack shot and explosives expert. In hushed tones, the villagers express their rising concern that the authorities are treating people like their subjects—worse than before Partition! This, they conclude, is how terrorists are born—not in the fields, but through the heavy-handedness of the authorities, particularly towards the innocent. Each terrorist has a personal grievance to avenge: they have lost fathers, brothers, and friends to unfair persecution by authorities. In an outburst, the leader, Sanathan, an older man, expresses his dissatisfaction with post-partition Indian Punjab, having been forced out of his ancestral lands on the other side of the border. The film clip of his soliloquy is instructive: the country has not become self-sufficient in nearly half a century, he says, but some people have become self-sufficient. Huge numbers live in poverty, denied electricity, water, housing, medicine, education, justice . . . , they live in misfortune. "I'm not fighting for future generations," he continues, "but to redress injustice to myself now, at this moment . . ." He believes a spontaneous revolution will arise as similarly disadvantaged people take action together. The film shows life in rural Punjab, the heavy hand of authority, the refuge the *gurdwaras* (Sikh temples) provide to the activists, and how youths seek to empower themselves through violence.

And, finally, *Mission Kashmir* shows the military gunning down a whole village in a raid to capture a leading terrorist. Khan Sahib, who commanded the raid, is filled with remorse not knowing how many innocent lives were taken. He persuades his wife to adopt Altaaf, a young boy orphaned in the raid. They help him overcome his trauma and bond together as a family, but Altaaf is haunted by the image of the masked man who killed his family. When he realizes it is none other than his adopted father, he runs away to join a gang of terrorists who employ mercenaries and seek assistance from Pakistan to create an Islamic Kashmiri homeland. He returns to the valley to carry out his deadly mission, when he reconnects with Sufi, his childhood sweetheart, and Neelima, his adopted mother.



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"BEAUTY IN STONE"—Hindu, Buddhist, and Islamic architecture of India, color photographs by Beatrice Pitney Lamb.

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Undergraduate-level CORRESPONDENCE COURSE on Gandhi (study materials from the Gujarat Vidyapeeth University in India founded in 1920).

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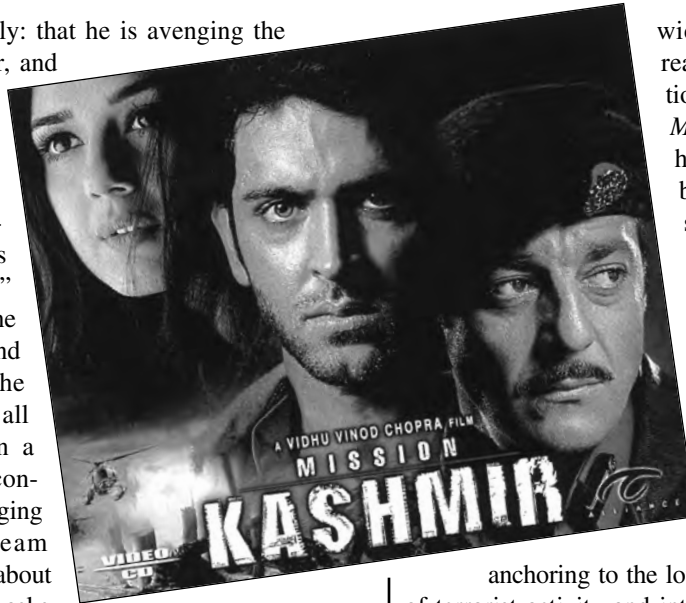
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The women see his pain clearly: that he is avenging the deaths of his parents and sister, and the liberation of Kashmir is merely the excuse and vehicle for his personal mission. The film opens with a dedication to “Kashmiriyat, the centuries-old tradition of religious tolerance and harmony.” Altaaf’s love interest, Sufi, is the embodiment of this tradition and chides him for his actions. She upholds the secular values of all religions living together in a peaceful Kashmir. In his subconscious, Altaaf knows she is judging him, and the clip of his dream sequence is instructive. “What about the people you’ve killed?” Sufi asks.

“I’m doing this for my religion,” he replies. “I’m a Muslim too,” she tells Altaaf, “and I know Islam does not permit the killing of innocent people You’re just wanting to avenge the deaths of your parents, Altaaf.” Ultimately, after a lot of action and a greater loss of lives, Altaaf gives up his deadly mission.

MAPPING THE TERRORIST MIND — Each one of the five films profiles the youthful terrorist as a rootless person. In every case, she or he has lost every living member of his/her family and is drifting anchorless—or, looking at it another way, is now liberated from emotional connections and can act without restraint. Each protagonist feels helpless against authority and searches for a voice and for empowerment through violence. Each film looks into the terrorist mind sympathetically and with sensitivity, while upholding secularism and the unity of the nation. These values triumph in *Mission Kashmir*, while in *Hu Tu Tu*, wickedness is destroyed only with the sacrifice of the lives of Panna and Adi. Similarly in *Dil Se*, the nation state and its leaders are preserved at the cost of Meghna and Amar’s lives.

Curiously, four out of the five films are about women terrorists. Meghna in *Dil Se* has witnessed her family being killed and her sister being raped before her death. She reverts to a silent scream each time her mind harks back to the trauma of those horrible events. Yet, she has the strength and resolve to avenge her loss by hitting back as a human bomb. Malli, in *The Terrorist*, is the sister of a revolutionary hero. She has no living blood relatives; her family is the terrorist organization, her siblings her comrades-in-arms. She is deemed professional and capable of undertaking the critical mission of assassination of an important personage as a suicide bomber (reminiscent of the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi). Panna of *Hu Tu Tu* similarly also seeks retribution as a suicide bomber, to liberate the city of the political-commercial stranglehold that her mother and Adi’s father have. She and Adi devise this scheme after they reach a deadlock with them. It is well worth noting that



wicked authority is personified by their real parents—a departure from the traditional view that always respects elders. In *Maachis*, Veera the quiet village belle holds the fort until she loses every member of her family. Without protection, she will inevitably become prey for the mean cop; already he has begun to pay her unwanted attention. This is the decisive factor for her to turn into a terrorist.

Altaaf of *Mission Kashmir* has to put to rest the ghosts that haunt him. It is a personal matter for him; he cannot tolerate refuge in the home of the man who has taken his family from him. Eventually it’s his emotional

anchoring to the lovely Sufi that brings him out of the fold of terrorist activity and into cooperation with the authorities. This feature is at work in each scenario: Meghna’s emotions are stirred by Amar; Malli’s resolve is weakened by her unborn child and memories of her dead lover; Panna rediscovers her lost love, Adi, and seeks her union with him in eternity; Veera and Palli find each other in the terrorist hide-out, but with the knowledge that they are unlikely to survive and make a home somewhere together, they pursue their mission.



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These films suggest that turning to terrorism is an act of desperation. It is those who feel they have nothing to lose who embark on this path. They also make the case that those who choose the terrorist response do not survive.

Together, these films make the case that feelings of alienation, being cut adrift, feelings of powerlessness, and feelings of victimization provide fodder that fuels terrorism.

CONCLUSION — While the films selected here attempt to explain factors that attract youth to terror as a solution to their problems, they do not in any way sympathize or endorse calls for separatism or autonomy. They do however explain that repression, persecution, and injustice by state authorities provoke youth to violent action. Collectively, the films convey the message that a life devoted to terror cannot find happiness and courts certain death; that the way forward is to be like Altaaf and reintegrate with secular society.

Tolerance and secularist values are upheld as extremely desirable by these films. The entity of India as a nation-state is projected as one to be protected, and the virtue of the Motherland is seen in maintaining this as the traditional and desired standard of nationhood. Religious tolerance and harmony are repeatedly invoked, and this is in fact the basis of *Mission Kashmir*. There is an emphasis on the wrongness of violence in the name of religion, particularly in the films depicting Muslim youths as terrorists. We have heard Sufi tell Altaaf that he is seeking revenge for the deaths of his parents on the excuse of religion, and that Islam does not sanction the shedding of innocent blood.

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ist response do not survive. Meghna of *Dil Se* dies, taking Amar in her embrace; Adi and Panna die the same way; Palli and Jassi also take their own lives. It is Malli with the promise of new life within her who is unable to take this step, and Altaaf who has the promise of love who changes his ways. That is to say, the message of these films is those whose lives are intertwined in society and those who have hope for the future will not choose to live as terrorists. ■

FILMOGRAPHY

All the films listed below are available in DVD format with English sub-titles from:

Laxmi Bazar
7871 Lichen Drive
Citrus Heights, California, 95621, USA
Telephone: 916-721-0666
URL: www.indiancdstore.com

Dil Se (1998)
Director: Mani Ratnam
Starring: Shah Rukh Khan, Manisha Koirala
156 mins.

Hu Tu Tu (1999)
Director: Gulzar
Starring: Nana Patekar, Sunil Shetty, Tabu
165 mins.

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Maachis (1999)

Director: Gulzar

Starring: Tabu, Om Puri, Chandrachur Singh
160 mins.

Mission Kashmir (2000)

Director: Vidhu Vinod Chopra

Starring: Sanjay Dutt, Hrithik Roshan, Preity Zinta, Jackie Shroff
157 mins.

The Terrorist (1997/2001)

Director: Santosh Sivan

Starring: Ayesha Dharker, Bhanu Prakash, Parameswaran
95 mins.

NOTES

1. Subaltern is a military term denoting subordinate ranks. It is used by post-modern scholars, notably Ranajit Guha, Gayatri Spivak, and Sumit Sarkar amongst many others, to describe sections of society beyond the pale of political representation. For further readings on subaltern studies, see Ranajit Guha, ed., *Subaltern Studies Reader, 1986–1995* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 303, David Ludden, ed., *Critical History, Contested Meaning, and the Globalisation of South Asia* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2001).
2. Ashis Nandy, "Introduction: Indian Popular Cinema as a Slum's Eye View of Politics," in Ashis Nandy, ed., *The Secret Politics of our Desires: Innocence, Culpa-bility and Indian Popular Cinema* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), 7.
3. See "Bollywood Goes Global," cover story in *Newsweek*, February 28, 2000, 42–8; Thomas Fuller, "Indian Movies Speak to a Global Audience," in *International Herald Tribune*, October 20, 2000, 2; and "The New Face of Film," cover story in *Time*, October 27, 2003, 40–7; Richard Corliss, "Bewitched by Bollywood," (*ibid.*, 48).
4. Karan Johar quoted in Nasreen Munni Kabir, *Bollywood: The Indian Cinema Story* (London: Channel 4 Books, 2001), 7.
5. See Strobe Talbott and Nayan Chanda, eds., *The Age of Terror, America and the World After September 11* (Yale, NH: Basic Books and Yale Center for the Study of Globalization, 2001).
6. At Asia Society, Hong Kong, July 6, 2004.
7. Operation Bluestar refers to the storming of the Golden Temple in Amritsar, the most sacred shrine of the Sikhs, on June 5, 1984. Punjab had become a hotbed of terror, following calls for a separate Sikh nation, Khalistan. The Sikh fundamentalist preacher, Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwake, had taken refuge in the Golden Temple and fortified his defences; the Indian troops met fierce resistance in their bid to flush him and his followers out. The bitter fighting lasted twenty-four hours, and ended only after tanks and reinforcements were ordered by Delhi. The fallout from this was devastating as terrorism and repression increased in the Punjab, and culminated in the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in October that year. For further reading, see Mark Tully and Satish Jacob, *Amritsar: Mrs. Gandhi's Last Battle* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1985), and Khushwant Singh, *History of the Sikhs, v.2 1839–1988* (rep. with corrections; Delhi: South Asia Books, 1999).

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U.S.-CHINA TEACHERS EXCHANGE PROGRAM

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