PARENTAL GUIDANCE RECOMMENDED? NARRATIVE FUNCTIONS AND CULTURAL IMPLICATIONS OF BOLLYWOOD'S PARENT FIGURES[1]

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Family matters. In popular Hindi cinema this idea turns out to be programmatic, as parent figures of all kinds – i.e. fathers, mothers and grandparents – are strikingly present in the great majority of films. Accordingly, protagonists are placed and acting within the circles of their families whose concerns prove crucial to the unfolding narratives.

Bollywood representations of the family have attracted academic interest most prominently as vehicles of diasporic identity building[2] and allegories of the nation-state.[3] In these works, dramaturgical aspects of parent figures in Bollywood have only been touched upon in passing. This article summarizes findings of an analysis of 16 very successful Indian films from the 1990s and the first years of the new millennium.[4] Concentrating on the formal level of plot-construction, these findings suggest that parent figures serve particular and recurring functions, which will be described in the following. In order to round up the analysis this article also refers to cultural and socio-demographic contexts and subtexts of the studied fictional film plots and family portraits.

It may be argued that an analysis conducted by a German can only provide a *Western* perspective on Hindi cinema, and thus a limited understanding of the discussed phenomenon with regard to the industry's many facets, its cultural and historical conditions. While this fact may be considered a flaw, this very cultural distance could also be considered productive as it allowed for a moment of surprise which ultimately became the starting point of this analysis. So, when this article describes the occurrence of parent figures in popular Hindi cinema, it does so from a distance, drawing on the work of others, who have been connected to it more closely, aiming to contribute to an understanding of the huge and diverse text that we have come to know as Bollywood cinema.

The moment of surprise that started it all was an encounter with the Bollywood remake of *When Harry Met Sally* (Rob Reiner, 1986) Kunal Kohli's 2004 *Hum Tum*. The Indian film tells the story of Karan and Rhea who meet on a plane and spend a day together in Amsterdam while waiting for their next travel connection home. Their first encounter leaves them each annoyed by the other, but when they accidentally meet again after a few years, they start to grow closer. However, the question "can men and women be friends?" remains a crucial issue in their teasing conversations. Just like in the American original, the two protagonists end up as spouses at last. Yet, despite all analogies of the two versions, one important aspect is different. In *When Harry Met Sally* the protagonists have two best friends at their side to discuss all important matters with. In the Indian version *Hum Tum* the protagonists have an equally faithful support – in their *parents*, who play key roles in the film. In *When Harry Met Sally*, as many viewers may recall, parents do not play a part nor do they even get mentioned.

It is throughout popular Hindi cinema, especially in the romantic genre, that parent figures play parts which are as essential as in the aforementioned example. From a Western viewing experi-

ence this seemed a noteworthy occurrence and inspired the following questions, which guided the analysis. Firstly, if parent figures are recurrently staged as prominently in a large number of films, are there formal or structural aspects that accompany this phenomenon? And secondly, are there cultural implications they convey or communicate?

None of the following means to say that Bollywood films reflect Indian social reality. Their artificiality and escapist nature shows throughout the sample and has repeatedly been criticised.[5] Be it the 1994 family film and worldwide success *Hum Aapke Hain Koun...!*, the romantic comedy *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* (1998) or the glamorous 2006 *Kabhi Alvida Naa Kehna* – more often than not popular Hindi films portray privileged families living in wealthy and very fashionable surroundings. Their characters remain unaffected by any of the major problems troubling Indian society, like poverty, health care problems and environmental issues. So, how may we deduce relevant information from these depictions… other than *ex negativo*?

In its approach this article borrows from the works of Sudhir Kakar, India's most prominent psychoanalytic scholar. Kakar argues that Hindi cinema can be regarded the "primary vehicle for shared fantasies of a vast number of people living on the Indian subcontinent."[6] He also concludes that "the visual landscape of these films has a strong daydream quality in that it is not completely situated outside reality but is clearly linked to it."[7] Accordingly, this article takes these popular texts as evidence of the desires, fears, but also common values and ideals of their audience.

Parents, plot-wise

A first, but crucial observation while watching the film sample was that parent figures, albeit minor characters, often serve as the main stimulators or initiators of plot development. At later stages of the narratives their interventions represent significant plot points**.** Based on the mentioned film sample, four recurring scenarios can be identified. The first is an educational one: parents or other family members realize that a child lacks manners and values, so they need to find the appropriate measures to react to this. In *Waqt: The Race Against Time* a wealthy father cuts his spoilt son off all financial support to teach him responsibility. As the father has been diagnosed with terminal cancer, this late attempt at educating his son becomes a race against time: will the father die before his son learns the lesson?

The second typical scenario is a matter of intergenerational family diplomacy: feuds in a family, like the frequent quarreling between a widow and her mother-in-law in *Kal Ho Naa Ho* or the discord between a patriarch and his adopted son in *Kabhi Kushi Kabhi Gham,* have to be resolved, as they put the whole family under a strain. There are also conflicts *between* families like in *Zamaana Dewaana* (loosely based on Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*), which need to be settled by the young generation in dispute with their parents. Often a happy marriage finally seals the peace between two formerly hostile houses, or brings together the members of a formerly estranged family. The third recurring scenario is one of obligation: on their deathbed a father, mother or grandmother make a last wish that has to be fulfilled. The latter is the case in *Veer - Zaara* in which the heroine sets out for a journey to spread the ashes of her grandmother in the country where she was born. It is on this trip that the young woman meets and falls in love with a young man which leads to further complications.

Love and marriage are the most prominent themes of popular Hindi cinema – and thus the fourth typical scenario may be identified as that of a marriage in the family. Again the parents' involvement is crucial: a large number of Hindi films begin with a parent expressing the wish that a child ought to get married. Based on this premise, the plot evolves as a quest for a suitable part-

ner in life. But it is not primarily the hero's quest. As arranged or – in their milder form – semi-arranged[8] marriages are still common practise in India,[9] this undertaking requires a great deal of involvement of the parents, onscreen as well as off-screen.

What parental or family involvement in choosing a partner may look like in real life can easily be reconstructed when paying a quick visit to the *World's Largest Matrimonial Service online – Shaadi.com*. The required registration process is telling: the first field requested to fill in is who the profile is *created for*. Applicants can choose between "Self," "Son," "Daughter," "Brother," "Sister," "Friend" or "Relative." In this aspect and with regard to the tension it comes along with, most film narratives seem congruent with reality. In many films from my sample parents and children turn out to have different preferences when it comes to the choice of a life partner and this revelation frequently represents a plot point.[10]

Such conflict, ideologically as well as financially, is one of family politics, as not only parental authority and core values, but also family wealth and status are at risk. It is still a common habit in India to pass expensive gifts or money from the family of the bride to the family of the groom at their marriage, although dowry has long been forbidden by law. Such a situation implicitly or explicitly involves demands and expectations that have to be negotiated between the families. Whenever the economic aspects of marriage create tension in the films, the issues of son preference and gender inequality are implicitly addressed. The father in *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge*, for example, when addressing his daughter's future, speaks of the widely held conviction, "that a grown-up daughter is a burden on a man."[11]

An inconsiderate choice of partner always causes tension in or between the families involved. In *Kabhi Kushi Kabhi Gham* the protagonist marries a girl without his father's consent. Thereupon, the patriarch disowns him – against the will of all other family members. On the formal level we thus find two of the aforementioned scenarios intertwined, that of a marriage and that of internal family conflict.

If we are to believe a 2009 gender equality report, commissioned by the Indian government, paternal dominance in household decision-making may be a source of familial disharmony not only in Indian cinema:

> *Although a majority of men say that husbands and wives should make decisions jointly, a significant proportion feels that husbands should have the major say in most decisions, particularly in decisions related to large household purchases and visits to the wife's family and relatives.*[12]

In most of the examined films this impression is complemented with the mother's field of agency limited to the domestic sphere. Strong paternal authority but also family interest lay the foundation for the conditions the younger generation has to adapt to. In this, we may argue, the core hierarchical structure of Indian society, as observed by Sudhir Kakar,[13] is reflected and often reaffirmed. In his works, Kakar emphasizes as typical Indian psychological traits, the "high emphasis on connectedness to others, especially family and the caste" as well as "having a hierarchical vision of social relations."[14]

Universal tales with cultural specificities

Bollywood's repertoire of plots is rather limited. Their formulaic structure[15] is reminiscent of universal folk narratives like those analysed by the Russian formalist Vladimir Propp in his study

of folktale morphology or by Swiss analytical psychologist Carl Gustav Jung in his works on archetypal forms or patterns. Typical folktale beginnings also found in Bollywood film texts are for example: "One member of the family either lacks something or desires something"[16] and "parents […] discover that their son needs a bride."[17] The last wish of a dying parent or grandparent is also motif and structural element of both folktales and Hindi cinema.

Despite these universal characteristics, the values these films communicate are more culturally specific: they often bear resemblance to episodes or characters from ancient Hindu epics – especially the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*.[18] The latter propagate the ideal of submitting or abdicating one's happiness for the sake of others, especially for the sake of the social community and in the honour of elders. In the *Mahabharata*, for example, the character Bhishma abdicates marital bliss in order to ensure his father's happiness. His king father desires the daughter of a fisherman as his bride. The fisher, however, very pragmatically, worries about the chances of their potential offspring: the king already has a son, Bhisma, who is heir to the throne and such meager prospect does not help to win his consent. So the prince Bhishma, who cherishes his father above everything else, openly declares to abjure all intentions of marrying or begetting children, to make way for his future siblings.[19]

To make way for another, to abdicate one's own happiness for the sake of others, is an ideal kept alive in numerous sacrificial narratives from Bollywood.[20] Kailash Nath, the groom's foster-father in *Hum Aapke Hain Koun…!*, once was an admirer of the mother of the bride. However, selflessly he made way for his good friend, Mr. Choudhury, who was also in love with her. The fact, that Kailash Nath remained unmarried and even decades later praises Mrs. Choudhury in a song, speaks for itself. Nath's sacrifice reverberates, when later on in the film his foster-son Prem is just as much willing to abdicate happiness for the sake of his brother…

Another prominent cultural ideal that resonates especially in the family films from the 1990s, is *Ram Rajya*. The term represents the idea of a just and benevolent patriarchal rule like that of Lord Ram in the epic text, and has served as a model for many a happy film family.[21] *Hum Aapke Hain Koun…!* most fervently celebrated the traditional joint family as such a blissful kingdom, as Patricia Uberoi has pointed out.[22] Here, parental-arranged marriage is *the* trusted source of prosperity and family well-being. At the time the film hit the screens, the ancient vision of *Ram Rajya* was also taken advantage of by the Hindu-nationalist movement, especially the Bharatiya Janata Party, which rose to power during the 1990s. It played an important part in their traditionalist campaigning rhetoric as it became their declared Hindu normative ideal of governance.[23] The emphasis on ancient Hindu traditions and values in the films from that period has to be considered in the context of this political spirit.

Family as context

In the analysed movies, traditional convictions are important motivators of the parents. These are rooted in their respective upbringing and personal experience, as each parent figure has his/her own history of pre-plot events. Occurrences that lie in the imaginative past of the main narrative are frequently referred to. The title sequence of *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* serves as a prominent example: here, the father of the female protagonist is shown (long before the hero or the heroine are introduced). He feeds doves on a deserted public place in London, while in a voice-over we hear him speak of his longing to return to India, where he used to live 20 years ago. In a daydream sequence we follow him to a rural landscape with people making music and dancing cheerfully through the fields. Being thus aligned with the parent figure's world of perception and

imagination, we gain insight into his motivation[24] and get relevant context for the main narrative. Later on in the film this will be the man who by all means tries to wed his daughter, against her will, to someone she does not love – a man in India, of course.

Kailash Nath's sacrifice in *Hum Aapke Hain Koun…!* is also an event of the past that stimulates the plot. When Mr. and Mrs. Choudhury meet their old friend and arrange a marriage between his foster son and their daughter, this marriage establishes a new bond between two parties who were separated during a pre-plot episode. It is also a sign of gratitude towards a man who once abandoned the chance of a happy marriage in favour of a friend.

There is one interesting explanation for this importance of parents as story context. One film and literary critic has pointed out that it is due to one crucial difference between Western and Indian cinema: Hollywood cinema anchors its stories in history with whole genres originating from these historical contexts (e.g. the World War II films, the Western and all period pictures).[25] Other than this, Indian screen narratives remain widely ahistorical. Accordingly, Hindi film "must create its own contexts. […] The only 'past' known to this cinema is family history, and hence the most permanent of the motifs exhibited by this cinema is that of the family and the parental figure."[26]

Family models and socio-demographic change

The presence of parent figures in Hindi film is enabled by the fact that parents and children are living under the same roof, even when the latter are grown up or in some cases already married. Two family models prove relevant here: the traditional *joint family* or *extended family* and the smaller unit of the *nuclear family*. In the joint family several generations – i.e. parents and their (male) childrens' families – live together in one household. The nuclear family consist only of a father and a mother with their children. So, naturally, a film that portrays a joint family, potentially involves more parent figures (grandparents, uncles and aunts etc.) than a film about a nuclear family.

Sociologists diagnose a constant transgression of the family as a unit in India which we may find reflected when comparing the earlier films of the sample with the later ones: the multigenerational households of the earlier films have long ceased to be the primary family model in Indian society. While it is said to maintain relevance in the country, some argue it has already almost vanished from the urban scene.[27] In contrast to later films, those from the 1990s, like *Pardes*, *Hum Aapke Hain Koun…!* or *Taal*, much more often quote the joint family as a social ideal and are frequently set in rural or suburban settings. *Chori Chori Chupke Chupke* is a late example of this idealized representation of a multigenerational household: it begins with a sequence in which the proud patriarch Malhotra is interviewed for a TV program while sitting amidst the members of his family. He introduces each of them to the interviewer, stating how they are related to each other and what their duties in the household are. After this demonstration of a successful joint family in which everyone contributes to the collective's well-being, the patriarch utters that all he remains longing for, is to see his grandchild play, a child still to be born, who would complete the family. Again it is the wish of a (grand-)parent that sets the plot in motion; *Chori Chori Chupke Chupke* continues as a story about a childless couple and their relationship with a surrogate mother…

In the later films of the studied sample, however, like *Hum Tum* (2003) or *Kabhi Alvida Naa Kehna* (2006), the nuclear family represents the norm with the 2005 *Salaam Namaste* even featuring single-person households. This is accompanied by an increase of urban settings which may

be regarded symptomatic, as the wane of the joint family has often been associated with urbanization. Many a sociologist's work has been inspired by the rather pragmatic notion that city life is crowded and requests a higher degree of flexibility which smaller social units are more capable of.[28] Others have argued that advancing westernization furthers the emergence of the (according to Sudhir Kakar rather *un-Indian*) ideal of self-realization ultimately leading to a lesser esteem of family and traditional values in society.[29]

We may find this latter trend reflected in films like the 2005 *Salaam Namaste*. Here, parent figures are only mentioned in a short and rather ironic passage that introduces the protagonists. The narrator of the film quickly summarizes how the protagonists Ambar and Nikhil have failed their parents' expectations: after having rejected 12 proposals, Ambar realized she did not want to marry in the first place, and Nikhil, who was supposed to join his fathers' architect firm, chose to become a chef instead. To escape parental resentment, they move to Australia, and live in parent-free metropolitan households, acquiring a lifestyle very much like the one displayed in *When Harry met Sally*, one may argue. A dream of independence and mobility also reverberates in the road-movie *Bunty aur Babli* (2005), a fun-version of *Bonnie and Clyde*, in which Rakesh and Vimmi run away from home and become criminals. When in both films the protagonists decide to get married, this is no longer a family matter, but an expression of *personal choice*. Amongst the numerous films of my sample which propagate and reaffirm parental authority these two may represent the younger generation's dreams of escaping the pressure caused by such conventions.

The findings of the undertaken analysis have shown that Bollywood's parent figures serve important narrative functions in most of the studied films. They initiate and stimulate plot development, while they also represent indispensable backstory to narrative. Especially in contrast to their Western counterparts, we may take this as evidence of an increased cultural and social importance of parents and family in India, which resonates in collective film fantasies. However, judging by a trend showing up in the later films of the examined sample (i.e. from 2003 on), the traditional status of parents, on- and off-screen, seems to be up for discussion. If sociologists are right, that the demands of urban life and work in India raise the necessity for smaller social units, then, how will the presence of parents in film be justified, when grown-up children no longer live with them?

Nowhere else in the world is urbanisation happening as fast as in India[30] and major social change is to be expected in the near future. To trace the narrative and dramaturgical consequences of this on-going change, however, remains a task for future investigation.

1   A first sketch of this article was presented at the 2010 annual conference of the European Network for Cinema and Media Studies (NECS) in Istanbul. This article also draws on earlier research of the author, conducted in 2007 and published in the German online journal *kultur & geschlecht*. See Sophie Einwächter, "Nicht ohne meine Eltern. Die elterliche Präsenz als dramaturgisches Prinzip im Bollywoodfilm," in *kultur & geschlecht*, no. 7, Spring 2011, http://www.ruhr-uni-bochum.de/gender-studies/kulturundgeschlecht/key_pages/eltern_figuren.html, last visit 20 September 2011.

2   See for example Vijay Mishra, *Bollywood Cinema. Temples of Desire*, Routledge, London-New York 2002 and Faiza Hirji, "When Local Meets Lucre: Commerce, Culture and Imperialism in Bollywood Cinema," in *Global Media Journal*, vol. 4, no. 7, Fall 2005, http://lass.calumet.purdue.edu/cca/gmj/fa05/graduatefa05/gmj-fa05gradref-hirji.htm, last visit 20 September 2011.

3   Such readings can be found in the following works: Sumita Chakravarty, *National Identity in Indian Popular Cinema 1947-1987*, University of Texas Press, Austin 1993; Sheena Malhotra, Tavishi Alagh, "Dreaming the Nation. Domestic Dramas in Hindi Films post-1990," in *South Asian Popular Culture*, vol. 2, no. 1, April 2004, pp. 19-37; Ritu Saksena, *Mapping Terrorism: Amorphous Nations, Transient*

Loyalties, Ph.D. Thesis, University of Maryland 2006; Patricia Uberoi, *Imagining the Family. An Ethnography of Viewing* Hum Aapke Hain Koun...!, in Rachel Dwyer, Christopher Pinney (eds.), *Pleasure and the Nation*, Oxford University Press, Delhi 2006, pp. 309-351.

4   *Bunty aur Babli* (Ahaad Ali, 2005); *Chori Chori Chupke Chupke* (Abbas and Mustan Burmawalla, 2001); *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (Aditya Chopra, 1995); *Hum Aapke Hain Koun...!* (Sooraj Barjatya, 1994); *Hum Tum* (Kunal Kohli, 204); *Kabhi Alvida Naa Kehna* (Karan Johar, 2006); *Kabhi Kushi Kabhie Gham* (Karan Johar, 2001); *Kal Ho Naa Ho* (Nikhil Advani, 2003); *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* (Karan Johar, 1998); *Main Prem Ki Diwani Hoon* (Sooraj Barjatya, 2003); *Pardes* (Subhash Ghai, 1997); *Salaam Namaste* (Siddharth Anand, 2005); *Taal* (Subhash Ghai, 1999); *Veer-Zaara* (Yash Chopra, 2004); *Waqt: The Race Against Time* (Vital Amrutial Shah, 2004); *Zamaana Dewaana* (Ramesh Sippy, 1995).

5   See for example Sheila J. Nayar, "The Values of Fantasy: Indian Popular Cinema through Western Scripts," in *Journal of Popular Culture*, vol. 31, no.1, 1997, pp. 73.

6   Sudhir Kakar, *Indian Identity. Three Studies in Psychology* (1996), Penguin, London 2007, p. 25.

7   *Idem*, p. 27.

8   Serish Nanisetti, "Semi-arranged from the start. The wedding season rings in a new way of saying the vows," in *The Hindu*, 28 December 2006, http://www.hindu.com/mp/2006/12/21/stories/2006122100130100.htm, last visit 20 September 2011.

9   Jayaji Krishna Nath, Vishwarath R. Nayar, "India (*Bharat*)," in Robert T. Francoeur (ed.), *The International Encyclopedia of Sexuality*, Continuum, New York 2001, http://www2.hu-berlin.de/sexology/IES/india.html, last visit 20 September 2011.

10 See for example *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge*, *Pardes*, *Veer-Zaara* and *Kabhi Kushi Kabhi Gham.*

11 However, the real social impact of this problem, which is still on the rise, does not show in the films. In India "females are under-represented among births" and "over-represented among births that die." Sunita Kishor, Kamla Gupta, *Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment in India. National Family Health Survey (NFHS-3), India, 2005-06*, International Institute for Population Sciences, Mumbai 2009, http://www.nfhsindia.org/a_subject_report_gender_for_website.pdf, last visit 20 September 2011, p. 12. A considerable number of Indian parents can thus be considered perpetrators in pre- or post-natal selection.

12 The mentioned data originate from a survey conducted by the International Institute for Population Sciences from 2005 to 2006, commissioned by the Indian government. See Sunita Kishor, Kamla Gupta, *Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment in India. National Family Health Survey (NFHS-3), India, 2005-06*, cit., p. 127.

13 Sudhir Kakar, *Indian Identity. Three Studies in Psychology*, cit., p. 24.

14 Sudhir Kakar, R. Jahanbegloo, *India Analysed*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi 2009, p. 67.

15 Sudhir Kakar, *Indian Identity. Three Studies in Psychology*, cit., p. 25.

16 Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale* (1928), University of Texas Press, Austin, 1968, p. 35.

17 *Idem*, p. 77.

18 For a thorough analysis of the relationship between folk tradition, epic stories and Hindi cinema, please see Gregory L. Booth, "Traditional Content and Narrative Structure in the Hindi Commercial Cinema," in *Asian Folklore Studies,* vol. 54, no. 2, October 1995, pp. 169-190.

19 Biren Roy (ed.), *Mahabharata: Indiens grosses Epos*, Diederichs, Düsseldorf-Köln 1981, p. 14.

20 Monika Mehta, "A Certification Anomaly: The Self-Sacrificial Female Body in Bombay Cinema," in *Studies in South Asian Film and Media*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2009, pp. 119–144.

21 M.K. Raghavendra, *Structure and Form in Indian Popular Film Narrative*, in Vinay Lal, Ashis Nandy (eds.), *Fingerprinting Popular Culture: The Mythic and the Iconic in Indian Cinema*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi 2006, pp. 24-50.

22 Patricia Uberoi, *Imagining the Family. An Ethnography of Viewing* Hum Aapke Hain Koun...!, cit., pp. 309-351.

23 It also served as justification for the following anti-muslim upsurge. See Anuj Nadadur, "The 'Muslim Threat' and the Bharatiya Janata Party's Rise to Power," in *Peace and Democracy in South Asia*, vol. 2, nos. 1-2, 2006, pp. 88-110.

24 Murray Smith, *Engaging Characters: Fiction, Emotion, and the Cinema*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1995, p. 41.

25 M.K. Raghavendra, *Structure and Form in Indian Popular Film Narrative*, cit., p. 35.

26 *Idem*, p. 37.

27 J.P. Singh, "Problems of India's Changing Family and State Intervention. United Nations Programme on the Family," http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/family/docs/egm09/Singh.pdf, last visit 20 September 2011, p. 2.

28 Tulsi Patel (ed.), *The Family in India: Structure and Practise*, Sage Publications India, New Delhi 2005.

29 J.P. Singh, "Problems of India's Changing Family and State Intervention. United Nations Programme on the Family," cit., p. 23.

30 Chauhan Chetan, "Urbanisation in India Faster Than Rest of the World," in *Hindustan Times*, 27 June 2007, http://www.hindustantimes.com/Urbanisation-in-India-faster-than-rest-of-the-world/Article1-233279.aspx, last visit 20 September 2011.