

India, Higher Education and Bollywood

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The Mumbai film factory has transformed itself from an escapist to a more insidious entity, and the State now conspicuously approves of its “messages”. The film *3 Idiots* proposes that children of household employees can become inventors without being able to imagine the journey from their origins. It thereby imagines higher education without considering the level of primary education made available to children of such a class. This mirrors the disproportionate attention given to higher education by the government, which regards the public increasingly as a clientele, segments of which can be served “viably”.

The manner in which the nation chooses to bestow awards and honours upon its citizens is a useful way to understand the priorities of the State at any given moment. The Padma Bhushan, for instance, is a coveted award and a comparative list of awardees in the earlier decades and today reveals that wherein the earlier period people were rewarded for working in fields where material success might be elusive, the State today rewards the wealthy (in “trade and industry”) much more readily even if it has to accommodate them in some other way – perhaps “social service” when the wealthy indulge in charity. An explanation is that pursuing wealth has become a legitimate and even noble pursuit today with “trickle down” economics being most favoured as the answer to the problem of inequity.

The State and Bollywood

In the arts, film personalities from Bollywood waited a virtual lifetime before they were rewarded. Actor Dilip Kumar received the Padma Bhushan when he was 69 and Dev Anand when he was 78. If Raj Kapoor received the award much earlier (he was 47), it was perhaps because of the “socialist” messages his films were believed to propagate. It is in this context that the Padma Bhushan to Aamir Khan in 2010 – when a more phenomenal star Shahrukh Khan has had to be content with a Padma Shri – deserves interpretation. Aamir Khan made a film about primary education (*Taare Zameen Par*) in 2007 and is associated with another about higher education – Rajkumar Hirani’s *3 Idiots* in 2009. Aamir Khan is so closely identified with “education” that visiting United States (us) Secretary of State Hillary Clinton even shared a platform with him on the subject last year, and this could not have happened without some consultation with the Indian state. Even if the Padma Bhushan has not been awarded to Aamir

Khan for his “efforts in education”, there is still the likelihood that they have contributed to it.

3 Idiots has been eulogised in the media as an “assault on our apathetic education system”.¹ Rajkumar Hirani’s *Lage Raho Munna Bhai* (2006), also in the public eye for bringing Gandhian values back into focus was screened at the United Nations and its message apparently heartened the prime minister.² Both Hirani and Aamir Khan are, therefore, involved in entertainment considered “meaningful” by the State. This essay proceeds from the proposition that since the State has conspicuously approved of these “messages” from Bollywood, the films and their viewpoints perhaps share an ideology with the government in some way. *3 Idiots* being a film about higher education may, therefore, lead us into understanding something about the State’s attitude towards education, or at least provide us with a broad ideological perspective.

The Plot: Past and Present

3 Idiots begins with two former classmates Raju Rastogi (Sharman Joshi) and Farhan Qureshi (R Madhavan) going in search of Rancho, whom they lost touch with after graduating as engineers from the “Imperial College of Engineering”. The college is an elite institution which admits only the brightest students. Although its ownership is not specified, Raju comes from a poor family and is also not doing well enough for a scholarship, which suggests a government-run institution, perhaps modelled on the Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs).³

The film alternates between the present and the past. Rancho comes from a wealthy business family in Shimla and was the non-conformist, while the other two were inspired by him. Another classmate was Chatur Ramalingam – less inventive but openly ambitious – and the three friends often clashed with him. At the conclusion of their course, Chatur openly challenged them on the success of their future careers. When Farhan and Raju return to their alma mater after 10 years Chatur joins them, fresh from the us and full of his achievements and possessions. He is now concluding a business arrangement with a great inventor named

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Phunsukh Wangdu, which will make him successful beyond their wildest dreams. It is Chatur who now reminds the two of his challenge 10 years back.

Many of the flashbacks in the film deal with the figure of authority in the Imperial College – Professor Viru Sahastrabudhhe (Boman Irani), whom the boys had nicknamed Virus. The Professor was a hard task master who believed in competition and success at any cost. Virus had been so unsparing, that his implacability led to a boy committing suicide. Virus, nonetheless, remained unmoved and cited his continued dedication to work after his own son's death. Particularly, galling to Virus was the fact that while Rancho was always playful, it was still he who stood first while Chatur came only second. Because of Rancho's influence Farhan eventually abandoned engineering as a career and became an international wildlife photographer; while Raju, despite his poor showing in the final examination, impressed potential employers with his confidence, and found employment.

Raju, Farhan and Chatur now set off for Shimla to meet Rancho. Rancho's name is actually Ranchoddas Shamaldas Chanchad and they find the enormous Chanchad mansion without much difficulty. When they find Ranchoddas, however, they discover that he is not their Rancho at all but someone else. Their graduation photograph hangs on the wall – with this man's face on it instead of Rancho's. Who was Rancho really, they wonder, and it comes out that "Rancho" was a servant's child in the Chanchad household who showed an aptitude for learning. Since the boy wanted "learning" and the actual Ranchoddas only a degree, the boy was admitted to the Imperial College as Rancho. When they finally locate Rancho, he is teaching local children in Ladakh's wilderness, bringing creativity to his "model school". The crowning bit of information is that Rancho is actually Phunsukh Wangdu – with hundreds of patents in the US – and Chatur is, thus, humbled.

Portraying Reality or Fantasy?

The fact that *3 Idiots* has a large number of comic moments does not detract from it being a film with a serious message on education. The message pertains to higher learning in India being rendered painful

because of the emphasis placed on competition and the rat race. Creativity is the casualty, the film says, because of people having to submit to a straitjacketed notion of education. This is the apparent message – but *3 Idiots* nevertheless relies on Rancho coming first to fully convince us of his abilities. His doing so effortlessly has a parallel in the dyslexic boy in *Taare Zameen Par* demonstrating his prowess in the subjects he was hopeless at – without us knowing how he achieves it so easily. "Dog eat dog" and "rat race" are disparaging terms for market-induced competitiveness but the films show little faith in the possibility of bypassing the market in any circumstance. For all his affinity to the poor children of Ladakh, the former servant's boy Phunsukh Wangdu can only be judged on the basis of his American patents.

Films like *3 Idiots* are strangely positioned inasmuch as while they endeavour to deal with the "real issues" of today, they still depend on elements of the Bollywood fantasy. Since they conveniently shift from the one mode to the other, it is difficult to say what aspects should be taken seriously. For instance, Rancho/Wangdu has established a school in Ladakh. Anyone who has seen Ladakh and knows its terrain understands the difficulty that finding drinking water – let alone establishing a "model school" – represents. The film shows the protagonists driving from Manali to Leh as easily as one might from Churchgate to Chowpatty, perhaps taking its notion of the Manali-Leh highway from an automobile advertisement. If *3 Idiots* is a film with a social concern it can be criticised for not being adequately concerned with the actual circumstances. If it is a "fantasy", then it shows itself incapable of imagining existence in a far-flung corner – except as extensions of upper class city life.

An Unimaginable Journey

It is perhaps in its failure to imagine, that *3 Idiots* reveals its hidden self eventually. Most of the protagonists in the film are given families and pasts that help us to understand and locate them. Farhan is a middle class boy and Raju's father is a lowly paid white-collar worker trying to put his son through college. Even Pia, as the daughter of a professor in an elite institution, is a credible figure. But there is

an evident "absence" in the way Phunsukh Wangdu is imagined because the film does not give him any kind of recognisable past. He is simply a "servant's child" and we get to see nothing of his background. Even when Phunsukh Wangdu (as Rancho) arrives in college he has a confidence far beyond that of someone accustomed to the life of a servant's child entering an elite institution in India. Also, Phunsukh Wangdu has "hundreds of patents" to his credit but there is not even a hint about how he acquired them. Bollywood abounds in fantasy but in this inability to imagine Wangdu is an uncomfortable truth – that such a person is unimaginable. It is unimaginable that a servant's child in India will become a celebrated inventor. Elite educational institutions are not for his kind even when the institutions are publicly-owned.

3 Idiots proposes that household employees and their children can become inventors without being able to imagine their journey from their origins. It supposes higher education without considering the level of primary education made available to their kind. Still, the film does not stand alone, and is from a milieu in which "education" is synonymous with elite education. The rat race in education is the preoccupation of only a small segment but it gets the attention of the State. If one is unconvinced one needs only to look at the reported statements of the human resource development (HRD) ministry. Here are some of them: in June 2009 the minister suggested foreign direct investment in education to make it easier for those intending to go to Harvard or Yale to avoid visa problems. "India has the potential to be a global provider of quality graduates", Kapil Sibal reportedly added.⁴ In August 2009, his proposed plan to introduce grades instead of marks at the class 10 board exam level in central board of secondary education (CBSE) schools caused consternation, and some wondered what would happen if 90% and 99% were bunched together. How would the schools differentiate merit⁵ since higher education depended on it?

In February 2010 Kapil Sibal discussed a plan for an education finance corporation which would extend loans for higher education.⁶ By Kapil Sibal's own admission,

only around 2.5% of schoolchildren pursue higher education in India⁷ but the HRD ministry appears to be giving a substantially larger proportion of its attention to it. Primary education is nonetheless still being attended to because a report says that with the passage of the Right to Education Act, the expenditure on primary education is estimated at Rs 70,000 crore per year.⁸ But the dissimilarity in the attitude towards higher and primary education is significant. While attention is given to *issues* in higher education, primary education is regarded generally in terms of outlay. The government seems to be asking the question: As long as money is spent, will a difference not be made? This is perhaps like assuming that household employees' children can become inventors only through a love of learning, without even imagining the kind of system this would call for.

Sharing Asymmetrical Concerns

If the recipients of the concern in *3 Idiots* are mainly those who have scraped together enough finance for their children to get into higher education, many of the HRD minister's statements address the same issue. One of the most recent statements was the decision to put IIT fees on hold until the government had a mechanism in place that would provide students

with access to funds.⁹ Considering that Kapil Sibal has also been appealing to parents to stop pressurising children,¹⁰ it would appear that the government and Bollywood have virtually the same concerns. This is strange because a commercial venture like a film addresses a chosen clientele but an elected government must serve the public at large. In addressing its clientele, *3 Idiots* is not obliged to imagine such children to grow up to be Phunsukh Wangdus but that is not an exemption available to the government. An explanation for the HRD ministry's preoccupation with higher rather than primary education may be that with the government's commitment to the market economy, it regards the public increasingly as a clientele, attending disproportionately to segments which can be served "viably". This is perhaps the outcome of attending overly to the notions of profitability and sustainability.

It is necessary to dwell at such length on state interventions in education in a film review because Bollywood, in its newly found avatar of concern, is a more insidious entity than when it was merely escapist. Where popular cinema was once treated with contempt, its success as a form of global entertainment has seen it being received with great respect by the State. The Indian state is becoming more and more attentive to discourses in the

business world to guide it on matters of policy and it is here that the attitude of *3 Idiots* can be influential.

Well-intentioned influence from cinema might have been acceptable – in some sense – when the popular film had a broader mass base, but its preoccupation with the lives of a more affluent class makes its concerns narrow and suspect. It is not enough for the State to imagine a fully made servant's-child-as-inventor – it must also contribute to his making. It cannot adopt an attitude of indifference to the actual process by which children from the lower strata may be made capable of reaching higher levels of excellence. The fact that it does suggest that the Indian state today is ideologically close to mainstream cinema and that its social concerns are as asymmetrical as those of Bollywood.

NOTES

- 1 Baradwaj Rangan in *The New Indian Express*, 27 December 2009.
- 2 Prime Minister's speech at the Satyagraha Centenary Commemoration at Kingsmead Stadium, Durban, available at <http://pmindia.nic.in/visits/content.asp?id=123>.
- 3 The film was shot at the Indian Institute of Management, Bangalore, which is as glamorous a government-run educational institution as any.
- 4 *Times of India*, 25 June 2009.
- 5 Mansi Sharma, CNN-IBN, 31 August 2009.
- 6 *DNA*, 1 February 2010.
- 7 *Ibid*.
- 8 *Mint*, 9 February 2010.
- 9 *The Hindu*, 5 February 2010.
- 10 1 February 2010, <http://www.newkerala.com/news/fullnews-42627.html>

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