

The Road to *Rāmarājya*: Analysing Shah Rukh Khan's Parallel Text in Commercial Hindi Cinema

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This paper attempts to trace the construction of Shah Rukh Khan's parallel text with explicit references to the Hindu epic *Rāmāyana* through an analysis of key cinematic texts produced from 1995 to 2007. The analysis follows the development of Shah Rukh Khan's star text as a growing narrative drawn from, and interacting with, the epic and its protagonist, *Rāma*, and his idealised reign, *Rāmarājya*, which is used in India to refer to an epoch of social stability. In addition, the paper explores how the star's parallel text intersects the aspirations of a nation poised at the edge of monumental change, and the ways in which it challenges and subverts the popularly accepted notions of the growth of Hindu nationalist politics in the country in the late-1990s, finally leading to the assertion of a new, post-Hindutva, post-globalization identity as an Indian Muslim.

Keywords: Shah Rukh Khan; India; stars; Bollywood; *Rāmāyana*.

Este estudio intenta delinear la construcción del texto paralelo del actor Shah Rukh Khan con referencias explícitas al clásico épico hindú *Rāmāyana* por medio de análisis de textos cinematográficos del actor producidos entre 1995 y 2007. El análisis demuestra el desarrollo del texto paralelo de Khan como una narrativa basada en—y dialogando con—el clásico épico, su protagonista, *Rāma*, y su reino ideal, el *Rāmarājya*. Además, el ensayo explora las maneras en que dicho texto llega a representar las pretensiones de una nación al borde de cambios monumentales, y las formas en las que desafía y subvierte las ideas generalmente aceptadas del desarrollo de nacionalismo hindú en el país durante la década de los noventa. Finalmente, el artículo plantea la idea de una identidad nacional nueva, pos-Hindutva y pos-globalización encarnada por el actor y representada por medio de su texto paralelo.

Palabras clave: Shah Rukh Khan; India; estrellas de cine; Bollywood; *Rāmāyana*.

In his seminal work on film stars, Richard Dyer notes that stars “matter because they act out aspects of life that matter to us; and performers get to be stars when what they act out matters to enough people” (1986: 19). By this definition, it would not be misplaced to consider Shah Rukh Khan (hereafter SRK) as the star *par excellence*, as he is often considered the embodiment of 21st century India, and a one-man industry capable of articulating and representing the *zeitgeist* of the billion people who constitute the nation.¹

¹ The actor is known by his initials in the press and general public, partially to distinguish from the other three actors with the same last name as well as in a nod to the media, sport and business empire he has created around what is generally considered the ‘Brand SRK’.

Although reams of film press and acres of celluloid have been devoted to SRK's personal and professional life, there is little written about the ways he serves at once as a site for locating 21st century Indian nationalism, as a symbol of national aspirations, as well as the complex intersection of a parallel text—comprising not only on his film roles but also on extra-filmic information—that conflates his star persona with an epic Hindu narrative despite his self-avowed identity as an Indian Muslim. Moreover, while much has been written about the growth of a Hindu hegemonic tendency in Hindi cinema in the 1990s, little has been written about the way SRK's personal self, screen persona, and star image interact to subvert and complicate such a linear and narrow interpretation.

Dyer explains that the “star phenomenon consists of everything that is publicly available about the stars” (1986: 2). This includes not only the films themselves but also public appearances, interviews, reviews, pin-ups, product endorsements and commercials, as well as “star” and personal biographies. Of these elements, the films are the most important, providing a narrative of the star phenomenon. This constructed extra-filmic narrative may be considered a parallel text that grows out of a performer's roles, generates and feeds into a range of intra-textual, multi-media discussions, and then feeds back into the performer's role choices, screen persona as well as over all star phenomenon. This text—spread over a series of filmic narratives, extra-filmic artefacts and star biography—runs parallel to a performer's cinematic roles, creating a cinematic narrative that joins the viewer and the star through a series of filmic and extra-filmic communications, and may be termed ‘star text’.

John Ellis suggests that a star may be defined as a “performer in a particular medium whose figure enters into subsidiary forms of circulation, and then feeds back into future performances” (1992: 19). According to this definition, SRK's star text builds on a complex set of cinematic artefacts, product endorsements, print and television commercials, as well as gossip and news items in circulation, in print and digital media. Furthermore, in Hindi cinema, the “star text is created within the films themselves as vehicles for star performances which in turn build on images in other films and in other media to give them roles as national icons of beauty, desire and utopian beings” (Dwyer 2000: 118-19). Moreover, as Mishra points out, “there is something symbiotic and emotional, a form of an aesthetic relish in the materiality of the star, something resonating deep in Indian psychology that explains the initial moment of conjunction of star and spectator” (2002: 147).

Besides, as “complex signs embodying historical cultural and economic meanings, Bombay stars are cultural ‘compromises’ of a bewildering complexity” (Mishra 2002: 126). Indeed, any reading must also admit the possibility of a range of other, potentially conflicting readings. It is imperative to recognise that SRK's star narrative occupies the interstice of myth and national icon of desire, in addition to embodying multiple sites of contested identities in modern India—of language, region, caste, class, and religion. Add to this mix the struggles between urban/rural, western/traditional, feudal/modern and the entire country may appear to occupy a hotly contested liminal space.

This paper traces the construction of SRK as a star phenomenon, with explicit references to the Hindu epic, *Rāmāyana*, through an analysis of key

cinematic texts produced from 1995 to 2007, which form key moments in both the career of the performer and in the construction of his star text.² The analysis considers the development of the actor's star text as a narrative drawn from, and interacting with, the epic. In addition, the paper explores how this star text intersects with the aspirations of a nation poised at the edge of monumental change, and the ways in which this text challenges and subverts the popularly accepted notions of the growth of Hindu nationalist politics in the country in the late-1990s, finally leading to the assertion of a new, post-Hindutva, post-globalization identity as an Indian Muslim.

Yet the actor's star text, built on an interstice of cinematic texts drawing on Hindu myths, a public persona that wears a modern, urban patriotism on his sleeve, and an unabashedly cultured Muslim identity, allows the subsumption of most indicators of division including region, language, caste to make his image as a 'middle-class aspiring Indian' the main point of audience identification. Through specific cinematic texts that consistently assert a modern urban Indian identity—replete with a sophisticated nationalism and drawing on the mythical persona of Rāma—SRK's star text becomes at once representative of a wildly diverse society as well as a symbol of a nation that hopes to put aside internal divisions in pursuit of economic development and political strength. In short, his cinematic texts and personal life conflate to create a narrative that articulates the deepest aspirations and desires of Indians at the turn of the century.

Only Amitabh Bachchan's star image, as the undisputed "super-star" of the 1970s and 1980s, based on the heroes of *Mahābhārata* (Mishra 2002: 138) and constructed on an "aesthetic of mobilization" (Prasad 1998: 138-59), matches SRK's. However, unlike SRK, Bachchan's "film persona challenged the figure of the noble, transcendent Rāma as the *dhārmik* model of the hero", relying instead on the "features that belonged to the antihero Karna in the *Mahābhārata*..." (Mishra 2002: 128).³

Indeed, the star texts of the industry's two biggest stars provide a fascinating glimpse into the *zeitgeist* of each star. If Bachchan's star image is rooted in the "imaginary fulfilment of the slum dweller's own fantasies" (Mishra 2002: 128), SRK's image mirrors the rise of the post-liberalization middle class. If Bachchan's 'star biography' was constructed on accounts of a privileged childhood, a brooding, melancholy personality and rumours of liaisons with glamorous actresses (Mishra 2002: 132), SRK's emphasises his middle-class upbringing and values, his open, friendly personality and an intense faithfulness to his wife and family. Bachchan's parallel text rests on an incongruous combination of a screen persona of the disenfranchised 'proletariat' and a privileged personal life, and is thus prone to consistent destabilizations and limitations. SRK's star text seamlessly blends, especially post-1995, his personal life and screen persona.⁴

² SRK has acted in over 60 films, and plays the lead role in over 40 of these. This paper acknowledges the multiplicity of images and ideas linked to him, but focuses on films that were either his biggest career hits or in which he had exceptional personal involvement.

³ "Dhārmik" here refers to the Hindu concept of "dharma" or virtuous or correct action.

⁴ See Dyer on the "perfect fit" between the performer and star image, with special reference to John Wayne as exemplifying this (1999: 145-46).

Understanding the development of SRK's star image requires at least a cursory look at the socio-political conditions that have framed his career, including crucial political events such as Ayodhya, the 1992 Mumbai blasts, the ensuing riots, the 1998 nuclear tests and the Kargil border war with Pakistan in 1999. These events have often been linked to a generic rise of 'Hindu nationalism' in the Indian polity. Various critics have also pointed to the concurrent renewal of the *Rāmāyana* as a central subtext of Hindi cinema throughout the same period. This is often located in the "new middle-class culture of Hindu nationalism, which is currently engaged in reinterpreting Indian history to silence Muslims, denying the simultaneity of such multiple traditions" (Dwyer 2000: 16). There is, of course, little evidence of a "direct, unmediated, connection between the popular and Hindutva politics" (Mishra 2002: 233).

Moreover, such readings, focussing on the rise of Hindu nationalism, often ignore another aspect of the 1990s which was marked by economic liberalization, unprecedented economic growth and the coming of age of a post-nationalist generation which looked not at past achievements but rather the aspirations for the future.⁵ The period beginning in 1992 was marked by unprecedented contact with the world for most Indians, as satellite television, music channels and foreign brands entered the country. It was also when India began flexing its incipient politico-economic muscles in the international arena. The film industry simultaneously experienced a renaissance as new technologies and narratives lured audiences back into the theatres and the export market for Hindi cinema grew exponentially. Although this period saw the emergence of a number of other stars, only SRK has grown into a national icon as well as a formidable international brand whose name alone can guarantee a spot in the box office toppers in the UK and the USA.

Indeed, a textual reading of the actor's cinematic career along side his unparalleled brand value suggests that it is critics like Dwyer who ignore the simultaneities as well as the contradictions of Indian reality. His personal origins lie amongst the country's emergent middle-class, while his marriage to a Hindu and his assertion of his identity as an Indian Muslim, complicate simplistic readings of a hegemonic Hindu nationalist discourse in popular culture—especially cinema—of the 1990s. His parallel text further consolidates and builds on what may be termed as an 'aesthetic of stabilization', in contrast to Bachchan's earlier 'aesthetic of mobilization', drawing on images and themes from the *Rāmāyana*, and reflecting, articulating as well as helping build the *zeitgeist* of the times. SRK's image is thus to be understood trans-textually against this backdrop, as an iconic centre of aspiration and desire for not only the industry but the nation as a whole.

In discussing the construction of Bachchan's star persona, Prasad points out that the "integration of star-value with narrative" demonstrates not a particular star's mystique but rather "the demands placed upon the star image by a new form of narrative in which the innate charm of the aristocracy was no longer the obvious central content of the text" (1998: 133). SRK's star image also builds on this feature, except, unlike Bachchan's parallel text of an earlier

⁵ This period also saw the end of nearly half century of unbroken rule by the Congress Party, giving way to a series of coalition governments. The Congress party did return to power in 2004, although in an unlikely coalition with the far left Communist parties.

generation, his persona is not of a forced 'ordinariness' of characters such as porters, mineworkers or policemen along with themes of anger, rebellion and social isolation. Instead, SRK's image builds on his origins as a 'middle-class' man with aspirations to economic prosperity for himself and his 'loved ones'. This 'hero' does not let fists fly when faced with opposition or injustice; his weapons of choice are negotiation and persuasion instead. Mishra delineates the opposition between "divinity and demonization" where on "the side of truth stands Rāma, noble, sacrificial, *dhārmik* and democratic; on the side of evil stands Rāvana, dark, brooding, "*tāmasic*," and dictatorial" (2002: 205). Indeed, this sums up not only the distinctions between two star texts, but also indicates the growth of SRK's cinematic persona from that of the Rāvana-like brooding violent hero in the early 1990s, as a final extension of Bachchan's screen persona, to his post-1995 Rāma-based persona figured around the *purushottam* or the ideal man.

SRK's star image is constructed through two primary points of entry into the national imagination: the middle-class aspirant (whose affluence grows in direct proportion to his career chart and India's economic strength) who can gain success by merit and graft, and the new post-independence, post-Emergency model of nationalism that is independent of, and separate from, the trauma of Partition. SRK first acquired fame in the popular 1988 television series, *Fauji* (Soldier) as Abhimanyu, a young army officer.⁶ His role of a dedicated young man devoted to his country, loyal to his friends and affectionate towards his family was matched by the extra-textual information that soon reached popular circulation. His unusual family heritage from Pakistan's north-western region and his father's role in the nationalist struggle established the actor's worn-on-the-sleeve patriotism. His middle-class upbringing in a Delhi with few links to the film industry established him as an outsider. As it grew, SRK's success became a metaphor and inspiration for every aspiring Indian who had despaired of coteries and closed shops: if he could crack the film industry and realize his dream, so could any other Indian who wanted political, social and economic success. Fortunately, the actor's growing star status was matched by the incipient new industries—media, IT, retail—that provided an outlet for the aspirations of an increasingly young population.⁷

His first role as a leading man in Hindi cinema was in *Raju Ban Gaya Gentleman* (Raju Becomes a Gentleman, 1992) in which he plays a small-town boy who arrives in Mumbai with dreams of material success. In retrospect, this film takes on a curious significance in his star narrative, as 1992 also marked the moment when India began the process of economic liberalization and globalization. However, the following three films of his career stand out not only as 'risky' choices for an aspiring leading man but also as the final gasps of the earlier prototype of the brooding, angst-ridden, hero. SRK appeared in 'negative' roles in *Baazigar* (Player, 1993), *Darr* (Fear, 1993) and *Anjaam* (Consequence, 1994), playing a killer looking for revenge in the first, and psychotics obsessed with married women in the next two. Building on Bachchan's 'angry young man' star text, these three films marked the definitive end of that narrative. As Mazumdar points out, SRK's

⁶ The name refers to the tragic young warrior in the *Mahābhārata*.

⁷ Over 70% of the Indian population is under the age of forty. Extrapolated from figures at www.cia.gov/publications/factbook/geos/in.html [Accessed: 23 May 2008].

“attempt at destabilizing the terms of the ‘angry young man’s’ discourse is projected through a dangerous instability of desire, through a cinema of transgression....” (2000: 252-53). With the privileging of a steady social and economic growth, the ‘aesthetic of mobilization’ that had unified a frustrated nation around Bachchan’s star persona in the 1970s and 1980s became unstable and dangerous in the 1990s.

In 1995, and despite seven wildly diverse releases, SRK hit the box office jackpot with Aditya Chopra’s *Dilwale Dulhania le Jayenge* (The Brave Heart Will Take the Bride), a glossy, candy-sweet romance, with resonating references to the *Rāmāyana*. The role of the film’s protagonist, Raj (literally, royal), an NRI-with-Indian-values, begins to link SRK’s parallel text with the epic hero.⁸ Although Raj meets Simran (Kajol) on a Eurail trip, he must journey to her village in India to win her from her other, apparently more acceptable, suitor. Like Rāma, Raj first meets the woman he will love surrounded by friends and far from prying parental eyes, but surrounded by friends. Like Rāma, who arrives at Sītā’s *swaymavar* (choosing of a bride-groom) ceremony, Raj reaches Simran’s home during the preparations for her wedding. Simran, like Sītā, is not only chaste but sweet-tempered and loving, patient and determined. Like Rāma, who is garbed as an ascetic, Raj too must make his appearance in disguise. And like Rāma, he must secure his bride from an “evil” suitor. Despite the modern twists to the tale, the Indian viewer is well aware that this modern-day Rāma shall not only win the bride, but also never falter from his chosen path of moral rectitude. The pleasure of films like *Bālakānd* (from the *Rāmāyana*) is in the telling of the tale, in anticipating and savouring the twists and turns in the story until the final consummation.⁹ The film—popularly known as *DDLJ*—went on to become one of the greatest commercial successes in Hindi cinema.

Although 1996 saw four film releases by the actor, they made little impact. However, this changed in 1997 with the opening of *Pardes* (Abroad), built on the success of *DDLJ*, with SRK once again playing the righteous, sensitive suitor whose loyalties to his father-like employer conflict with his love for Ganga (Mahima Chowdhary). The protagonist Arjun, a small-town boy working for an international tycoon, articulates the desperate ambitions of a growing nation that good intentions and merit could overcome the advantages of inherited wealth and position. Moreover, the film, released in India’s 50th year of independence drew on a new globalised patriotism, with Arjun shown as comfortable in America but clearly attached to his ‘native land’.

Not only did the film build on the actor’s extra-filmic persona of the middle-class outsider, it also continued to re-enforce the theme of cultural patriotism first articulated by *DDLJ*. When Ganga is affianced to his boss’s son in the USA, Arjun must not only accompany her abroad but watch in sorrow as her fiancé proves himself selfish, unfaithful and unworthy. One of

⁸ Non-Resident Indian, a term for people of Indian descent, expatriate Indians as well as emigrants.

⁹ The *Bālakānd* (Book of Youth) of the *Rāmāyana* comprises 77 chapters and traces Rāma’s birth, his education and early exploits, tests of strength as a hero and warrior as well as the most ‘erotic/romantic’ aspects of the epic—involving his wooing and winning of Sītā. This is one of the best known and loved parts of the epic as it depicts a youthful—generally loveable and peaceful—coming of age.

the pleasures of *Pardes* derives from the play on epic images and references. Ganga is named for the sacred river that is linked to Lakṣmi who is in turn a reincarnation of Sītā. While she follows her fiancé, ostensibly believing he is her Rāma, to the USA (symbolically into exile), the viewer knows that her chosen man has feet of clay. Indeed, it is Arjun, as Ganga's devoted friend and helper, who is the 'true' Rāma, whom she must eventually recognise and love.

SRK's persona as the middle-class aspirant was further sealed during the year with the romantic comedy *Yes Boss* (1997) where he must choose between quick success-at-all-costs and a slow but steady rise based on graft. Meanwhile, the year's biggest release, Yash Chopra's commercially successful, chiffon-and-cream romance, *Dil to Pagal Hai* (The Heart is Crazy), built on the *Bālakānd*'s theme of Rāma's youthful exploits which include him realising his own strength as well as winning his true love. Interestingly, the links between the actor's star persona and a youthful Rāma had become so intertwined by this stage that *Dil Se* (From the Heart), which cast him as a man obsessively in love—this time with a female suicide bomber targeting the Indian republic day parade, failed abysmally at the box office despite much critical acclaim. Apparently, the actor's star persona could no longer bear the ruptures with the dominant popular imaginary of the youthful yet righteous hero with its corollary of emotive nationalism.

Perhaps, the next step in the cinematic narration was inevitable, and in 1998 SRK repeated his earlier successes with *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* (Something Happens), which also marked Karan Johar's directorial debut. Divided into two distinct halves, the film constructs a dream-scape India where pop-culture, international brands and increasing affluence seamlessly blend with "traditional" values of love, loyalty and family ties. The first half—set ostensibly at university—shows the actor as Rahul, a "cool" university student who passes over his tomboyish best friend Anjali (Kajol), instead choosing the glamorous, UK-returned Tina (Rani Mukherjee). The second half has Rahul—now a widower and father—re-encountering Anjali and discovering his love for her. Again, he must find his bride not only in the wilderness—here a picture-perfect summer camp in the Himalayas that allows the filmmaker to draw on a culturally resonant key trope of romance—but also win her from another suitor.¹⁰

The film is a sophisticated love story which allowed the actor's screen persona to grow from that of a romantic leading man to a mature paternal figure. It appears at an intermediate state in SRK's maturing screen persona, and is a crucial step in the cinematic and extra-cinematic construction of his parallel text. The film also resonates with some of the best loved incidents of the *Rāmāyana*, despite its overtly contemporary narrative. Indeed, the often conflicting subtext, formed by a conjunction of textual and extra-textual narratives, seems at times to take over the explicit cinematic narrative.

It is crucial to the cinematic narrative that Rahul neither recognise nor value his 'true' love Anjali at university. While the official *Rāmāyana* justifies Rāma's treatment of Sītā at various points in the epic, unofficial folk versions have long condemned what is seen by many Hindus as Rāma's main failure.

¹⁰ See Philip Lutgendorf's analysis (2004) of the classical roots of the significance of mountains in romance.

At the beginning of the film, Rahul is—like Rāma the king—a materially successful but lonely widower, all the more alone for having lost his ‘true’ love. Like the epic, it is Rahul’s child who must engineer the reunion between the couple. Moreover, in the wake of *DDLJ*, the SRK-Kajol screen pairing had been declared an audience ‘favourite,’ ensuring that audience pleasure would be heightened by the final coming together of the duo.

The film cleverly conflates Anjali and Tina into a single self: in the first half, Rahul is infatuated by a glamorous Tina only to find—in the second half—that the tomboyish Anjali has matured into a sensual and glamorous woman (clad in saris in contrast to Tina’s short skirts); upon meeting Anjali, Tina’s daughter imagines her as her mother, superimposing her image over her dead mother’s; and finally, it is Tina’s letters to her daughter that urge her to bring Rahul’s ‘true love’ back to him. In extra-cinematic terms, this conflation was emphasised by the real-life family ties between the actresses who played Anjali and Tina.

By including only sporadic references to key episodes of the *Rāmāyana*—and only to its most resonant (and emotionally moving) moments—the film taps into the audience’s pre-filmic knowledge of the myth as well as SRK’s growing parallel text. The strategy also links the actor’s cinematic image—now as a responsible father and husband rather than a youthful romantic idol—with his extra-cinematic star biography. SRK’s personal life has defied all norms of gossip press as he is known as a family man, with a personal love story rivalling the most exaggerated film romances. The film’s sophisticated references to the epic ensure that the actor’s parallel text simultaneously becomes the location of a host of familiar mythic images: a righteous but sorrowful ruler, a loving but bereft husband, an affectionate but lonely father, and a caring but independent son. This maturing from the youthful persona of his earlier films lays the foundation for the development—and strengthening—of his screen persona as intricately tied to the epic hero.

The millennial year saw a number of SRK films released, two key ones being his in-house production *Phir bhi dil hai Hindustani* (The Heart is Indian, hereafter *PBDHH*), directed by Aziz Mirza, and the year’s major hit, Aditya Chopra’s *Mohabbatein* (Love Stories). On the surface, the two films could not be more different: the first was a Chopra-signature romance while the second satirized India’s growing news media, referenced Raj Kapoor’s 1950s anthem “the Heart is Indian” and urged a political mobilization of the Indian masses. Moreover, while *Mohabbatein* went on to become a massive box office success, *PBDHH* failed both commercially and critically. However, both films drew upon and developed SRK’s parallel text.

PBDHH cast SRK as Ajay, a light-hearted cynical TV journalist who finds not only his conscience but also patriotism. Ajay not only refers to SRK’s earlier roles of the middle-class aspirant wanting success at all costs (he sells his conscience as a journalist in exchange for material trappings of success), but also cynically tells his patriotic father that there is no more room for “old fashioned” ideals. Slowly, however, Ajay not only realises that TV journalism has real world consequences but that he must make a choice between success-at-all-costs and his conscience. The film also marks a complete and final break from the 1970s ‘aesthetic of mobilization’. Ajay is no disenfranchised proletariat hero of the previous decades. He neither calls for revolution, nor struggles against the institutions of the state. Instead he

harnesses the power of digital media and calls upon the “average Indian” to support him. Perhaps the film’s greatest drawback is its inability to fully renounce the narrative conventions of the past decade while embracing the thematic developments of globalization. Walking a thin line between two eras, *PBDHH* falls through thematic and symbolic cracks. However, the film contributes another chapter to the actor’s parallel text with its anchoring narrative of the aspiring, patriotic, middle-class protagonist.

The second film of the year—*Mohabbatein*—not only developed the new ‘aesthetic of stabilization’ but also brought together for the first time the two greatest screen icons of Hindi cinema. The ‘angry young man’ of the 1970s, Bachchan, plays the autocratic, patrician, school principal that SRK, playing a young music teacher, must face and defeat. The film successfully maximizes the star values of its two protagonists: SRK is the older brother, lovingly protecting and guiding his young students to Bachchan’s patriarch, who values only self-control and ‘tradition’. Bachchan’s persona is successfully recast here from the original Karna/Arjuna to that of patrician Bhishma-pitāmah of the *Mahābhārata*. Yet it is SRK who benefits the most from this film. His ‘older’ appearance is aided by a pair of trendy spectacles, a recognisable gravitas, and a conscious attempt to distance himself from the image of a romantic leading man. Almost entirely eschewing romance (his only love interest is dead and appears only in his imagination), the actor portrays Raj Aryan as an ideal, older, fraternal figure whose only interest is to ensure the happiness of his young students. Even the protagonist’s name, a “royal elder,” resonates with mythic import. His entrance on screen is similarly mythic, prolonged by the camera peering over his shoulder as he is preceded, literally, by flowers and smiles. But it is Raj Aryan’s ability to establish more ‘just’ rules, and overturn earlier customs, that provides this particular cinematic role with immense mythic resonance. In one of the three sub-plots of the film, he encourages a student to woo and win a young widow, indicating that even age-old customs may be overturned for human purposes. However, it is the climax of the film that brings together the two stars in an antagonistic encounter that signals the shift in audience identification and preference. Bachchan’s character remains isolated, self-absorbed, and angry, recalling his earlier screen persona, except that the righteous anger of the ‘angry young man’ has now decayed into bitterness and narcissism. It is Raj Aryan, humble, righteous, self-sacrificing, who emerges as the ‘hero’. For the audience, brought up on a diet of enacted, recited and retold Rāma myth, the film provides a rare pleasure, one that the literary texts cannot provide: the spectacle of a grieving Daśarath expressing his remorse for sending Rāma into exile.

Despite SRK’s growing commercial success, the import of his parallel text was fully confirmed in the first year of the new millennium, nearly a decade after India had embarked on its project of globalization. The star’s two major releases, *Asoka* and *Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gham* (Sometimes Happiness, Sometimes Sorrow, here after K3G) built on different aspects of the Rāma persona. *Asoka*, a moderately successful, low budget, home production, was loosely based on the life of the 2nd century emperor, Asoka, who was credited with the spread of Buddhism in much of Asia. Tracing his journey from an ambitious young king seeking to create the greatest empire in the world to a just ruler dedicated to the spread of peace, the film not only

evoked history but also reminded the viewers of the virtues required for the *purushottam*—love, loyalty and inner strength. SRK, essaying the title role, played the violent king whose battlefield experiences awaken his conscience and turn him against violence. With the ideal of Rāma as the embodiment of the perfect ruler, the link to the actor's parallel text was obvious.

The same year saw the release of Karan Johar's opulent family saga, *K3G*, which again pitted SRK against Bachchan as two generations of an affluent industrialist family. When Rahul's (SRK) principles clash with his father's (Bachchan reprising a Daśarath-like role), he goes into exile with his wife (Kajol again). In a more explicit re-articulation of the *Rāmāyana* saga, the film cast the industry's latest heart-throb, Hrithik Roshan, as Rahul's devoted younger brother. The film's pleasure is located in the detailed articulation of the emotional aspects of *Rāmāyana*: the sorrow of an exiled Rāma, the lack of maternal guidance that plagues his wife who follows him into exile, the loneliness of his younger brother, the pain of his grieving mother, and the misguided pride that masks his father's pain. The film ends with the return of the exiled son into the family fold with the implicit suggestion that the 'righteous king' has been revealed and accepted. Extra-cinematically, the film's enormous success also confirmed the actor's media nomenclature of 'King Khan,' a title that references his brand value and box office strength, and name (Shah Rukh means "one with the face of a king").

It is important to note at this juncture that the development of this parallel text was neither singular nor simplistic. Throughout the decade, SRK continued to experiment with other roles, from a Hollywood-style cop and a gang leader to a Pathan caught in the violence of Partition, and an itinerant folk singer. However, these roles often reinforced the dominant parallel text by presenting him as 'on the side of truth', and "noble, sacrificial, *dhārmik* and democratic" (Mishra 2002: 205). Films that went explicitly against the grain of this narrative often floundered at the box office as did his outing as a jealous husband in *Hum Tumhare Hain Sanam* (I am yours, 2002).

A special mention must be made here of the actor's title role in the internationally successful *Devdas* (2002), where he plays a broken-hearted lover deliberately killing himself with alcohol. At first glance, the film goes completely against the established star persona, casting SRK as a weak, selfish and pathetic man who is self-absorbed and potentially violent. Yet within the historic trajectory of Hindi commercial cinema, *Devdas* is an iconic role, played only by the 'greatest' actors of the past century. The story, based on a Bengali novel, has been revived cinematically at least eleven times in various languages. The role was last played by the 1950s screen legend and 'tragedy king'—Dilip Kumar.¹¹ Not surprisingly then, SRK's *Devdas* is not really a convincing screen character but rather a rite of passage necessary for claiming the metaphoric crown as the 'king' of the industry by essaying its most iconic role. Indeed, post-*Devdas*, SRK secured the new 'tragedy king' title with *Kal Ho Na Ho* (Tomorrow May Not Come, 2003) playing a self-sacrificing lover dying of a heart condition. Unlike *Devdas*, however, *Kal Ho Na Ho* re-asserted the noble and sacrificial aspects of his growing star narrative.

¹¹ For more on Dilip Kumar's star persona, see Sardar 1998.

The identification of SRK's parallel text with Rāma was completed by three back-to-back releases in 2004: *Veer-Zaara*, *Main Hoon Na* (I am there), and the actor's deeply personal *Swades: We, the People* (Our Country: We, The People, Here after *Swades*). In the trans-border romance, *Veer-Zaara* from the Yash Chopra stables, SRK plays Veer, an Indian enduring twenty years of 'exile' in a Pakistani jail. Despite, a clear reference to Rāma going into 'enemy territory' to rescue his Sītā, the film selects specific, resonant moments of the epic to remind the viewers of the star/cinematic text conflation rather than attempting a simple re-narration of the myth. Veer, whose name means brave, enters Pakistan to rescue Zaara (Priety Zinta) from an 'evil' rival. At the crucial moment, however, he fails, not due to a lack of courage but rather from an excess of respect for Zaara's family. When his rival engineers his imprisonment in exchange for Zaara's apparent wedded bliss, Veer consciously chooses perpetual exile over personal happiness. At the end, when Veer is finally re-united with Zaara, the film again articulates for the audience a pleasure that the *Rāmāyana*'s text only allows us to imagine: the poignant moment of reunion between Rāma and Sītā after years of separation. The film also neatly overturns the textual Rāma-Sītā symmetry with Zaara continuing Veer's dream projects in his village (like Rāma) while he suffers humiliation and exile (like Sītā).

Meanwhile, *Main Hoon Na* conflates star text/epic even more explicitly by naming the protagonist Rāma. As an army officer, he must not only fight to protect his nation but in a direct reference to the epic, he must also overcome his step-mother's resentment and secure the love and admiration of his half-brother Lakśman (Zayed Khan).¹² Indeed, at the climax, the actor makes his appearance in response to the villain shouting his name and declaring "whoever seeks Rāma with true devotion finds him".

Yet it was director Ashutosh Gowariker's deeply personal homecoming saga *Swades* that completed, in a very sophisticated manner, this process of star/epic conflation. SRK plays Mohan Bhargava, an Indian engineer working for NASA who returns to rural India. Mohan is torn between a life of material success and personal isolation in USA and an emotionally fulfilled but economically straitened life in India. The film brings about the complex conflation of star persona, cinematic narrative, the audience's pre-filmic knowledge of the epic, and the Hindu philosophical concept of 'embodying' divinity in a single scene that centres on a *Rām-leela*, a ritual, theatrical re-enactment of the *Rāmāyana*.¹³ At the village *Rām-leela*, Mohan's love Gita (Gayatri Joshi) acts out Sītā's part in the epic. Enacting the episode when Sītā is held captive by Rāvana, she explains her love and devotion for Rāma while Mohan forms a part of the audience. In the song sequence, Gita sings of the troubles that beset Sītā and pleads for Rāma to come save her, simultaneously voicing Sītā's lament as a captive, her own love for Mohan, as well as symbolically embodying the call of the 'motherland' that needs Mohan's skill and expertise at home. In keeping with the tradition of the *Rām-leela*, Rāvana (played in the sequence by a minor character) makes an appearance to taunt Sītā and asks where Rāma can be found and why he has

¹² No relation to SRK, the actor is a scion of a major industry family.

¹³ By this point, it was common knowledge that SRK's "first paid role as an actor" was as a child performer in the neighbourhood Ram-Leela, helping the conflation further (Chopra 2007: 38).

not yet saved her. As Gita/ Sītā articulates her faith and love for Rāma, saying he can be found in her every breath, the camera cuts to Mohan who spontaneously takes over the narration explaining that Rāma can be found everywhere.

The sequence functions on multiple levels: assuring Gita that Mohan, like Rāma, is indeed worthy of her love, indicating that Mohan has heard the simultaneous calls from the motherland/ Sītā and ‘revealed’ himself, as well as symbolically hinting at the divine embodiment of Rāma’s virtues as the ideal man by Mohan, and by extension, by SRK. The camera focuses on him, speaking as a ruler to a crowd that looks to him for guidance and support, not only affirming Mohan’s role as a righteous leader but also indicating the similarity with Rāma. As Mohan moves through the crowd and towards Gita, the cinema audience recognises the ancient ritual of Duśsehra enactments where the actor playing Rāma is treated and worshipped as a living embodiment of the deity. This recognition ensures audience identification with the celluloid narrative as well as the recognition of the mythic reference.¹⁴ The sequence, lasting approximately 32 seconds that focus solely on Mohan, forms the most explicit articulation of *Rāmāyana* references informing the star’s parallel text. At the end of Mohan’s explanation, the camera cuts back to Gita who expresses recognition and acknowledgement of Mohan’s embodiment of Rāma-like qualities. The sequence works on three simultaneous levels of identification with Mohan articulating his devotion for Rāma and the crowd on screen identifying him as the momentary embodiment of the deity, while the cinematic audience recognises SRK’s extra-textual possession of the qualities intrinsic to the deity, thus establishing the inextricable identification of SRK’s parallel text with Rāma.

After such complete identification between the star and epic personas, one could legitimately wonder: what next? What can be the next stage for a star whose cinematic narrative has reached its mythic culmination? The answer is partially found in 2006 with *Don*, a remake of a popular Bachchan-starrer from the 1970s and *Kabhi Alvida Naa Kehna* (Never Say Goodbye, hereafter *KANK*). Both films achieved relatively strong box office results, mostly due to actor’s unparalleled star value despite his role as the eponymous aspirant to the underworld in *Don* and as an embittered, unfaithful husband in *KANK*.

Don, despite its theme of crime, built on actor’s off-screen persona and showed him loyal to his lady love despite his flirtations with other women, kind to children and even engineering a family reunion for a supporter, albeit for purposes that suited him. The notion of a *doppelgänger*—in the original *Don*, the crime boss is replaced his ‘good’ look-alike—allows the film the necessary ambiguity to counter the actor’s parallel text. With the film privileging his point of view, *Don* commits numerous crimes—including murder—but these are presented as reflections of a greater aspirational, empire-building strategy. Taking a leaf from the classical political strategy text, Chanakya’s *Arthashastra*, *Don* may punish ‘traitors’ but this is depicted as an appropriately strategic decision. The film ends with him as the undisputed ruler of the

¹⁴ It is a measure of the seamless strength of SRK’s star narrative that his self-professed Muslim identity does not disrupt audience identification although it definitely complicates the reading of the sequence as an assertion of ‘Hindu nationalism’.

criminal underworld in Asia, cockily declaring “I am the king”, the dialogue playing on the actor’s name as well as title within the industry.

KANK, directed by Karan Johar, was a problematic attempt to move beyond the established parallel text with the actor playing Dev, an embittered former footballer trapped in an unhappy marriage. Dev falls in love with Maya (Rani Mukherjee), who is similarly trapped in an unhappy marriage. Both characters are shown as deeply flawed with Dev’s professional failure making him bitter while Maya’s unhappiness is rooted in vague sexual and personal discontents. The film was a relative success but fell well short of the commercial success expected from a Karan Johar/SRK venture.

In the wake of these two releases, it seemed that SRK’s star text would imprison his cinematic narrative, where his star stature would insist on roles that referenced the Rāma myth even though the cinematic narrations had outgrown the epic’s textual frame. However, his 2007 releases point to interesting ways that a parallel text may grow and evolve. *Om Shanti Om*, an over the top satirization/tribute to Hindi cinema utilises SRK’s star status to good effect. He parodies not only other actors but also his own films and roles. Playing an innocent junior artist in the first half (set in a gloriously retro 1970s) and a contemporary super-star in the second, he unabashedly plays to the gallery. From parodying his most famous roles to a much publicised appearance as a ‘sex symbol’ in an ‘item’ song, the film treats the audience as knowing parties to an inside joke. The inside joke of course is the actor’s star persona and his audience’s intimate knowledge of it.

The more interesting film of the year was an explicitly nationalist one released on the occasion of India’s 60th independence anniversary. *Chak de India* (Let’s Go India) features the actor as Kabir Khan, the coach of the national women’s hockey team. Playing a Muslim character for only the second time in his career, SRK brings the gravitas and authority gained from the preceding parallel text that references the *Rāmāyana* to confidently assert a new Indian Muslim identity. At the beginning of the film, as the national hockey captain, he loses a crucial match and his loyalty to India is questioned. His religion marks him suspect in such a nation and he is condemned for treason by popular opinion and the media. This theme has been a common one in Hindi cinema since the 1950s as it has tried to articulate the situation of Indian Muslims as the country’s most significant minority in the aftermath of the Partition. Indeed, cinematic representations of Muslims have veered wildly between the sympathetic but marginal character, the victim, and, more recently, the terrorist.

Chak de India is the first film to calmly accept the uneasy situation of Indian Muslims with no attempt to justify or exonerate either side. It makes no attempt to avoid the shocking fact that Kabir, as a Muslim, does not have the luxury of making an honest mistake. However, the film also points to a different path other than that of perpetual victimhood for the community. After seven years in ‘exile,’ Kabir makes his way back to the hockey association, determined to prove his loyalty to the nation by helping the women’s team achieve the gold medal he had lost. For the film, it is not enough for Kabir to expect to be believed; he must prove his loyalty, and repeatedly if necessary. Kabir must gain his place in the nation, not by simply demanding, but achieving it with hard work and determination. The film re-articulates an earlier theme that has long informed SRK’s parallel text as an aspirant

determined to reach success. However, this time, the goal is full inclusion into the nation's modern fabric and the aspirant is cast as a member of a contentiously regarded minority community.

In conclusion, an analysis of the actor's parallel text provides interesting clues to Indian aspirations at the turn of the century. Although some critics may read his oeuvre as an affirmation of middle-class, Hindu hegemonist discourse, a more liberal reading may instead disclose greater unities as well the complexities of embodying a nation's desires and aspirations. While at a first glance, the close identification of his parallel text with the *Rāmāyana* may appear to reflect a rising Hindu nationalist trend, it is complicated by other factors, including his personal identity as an Indian Muslim.

Indeed, SRK's parallel text owes more to the rapid growth of economic affluence and social aspirations of the country over the past two decades than to any unmediated, linear or simplistic rise of Hindu nationalist politics. Moreover, it may be asserted that it is the actor's close identification with the *Rāmāyana* over the past decade that provides the star with necessary credibility to begin the construction of a collective identity for Indian Muslims as divorced from the wounds of Partition. His personal family history within the nationalist movement and linked to Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan (known as the Frontier Gandhi), as well as his worn-on-sleeve patriotism, allow for the construction of a Muslim identity that is de-linked from both the trauma of the Partition as well as any potential charges of anti-nationalism. Indeed, it is the actor's parallel text as the embodiment of the contemporary Indian that indicates the potential for articulating post-Hindutva, post-globalisation for Indian Muslims that may finally begin to refute the wounds of the past and move towards a non-denominational national identity.

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