

Film

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As could be read in the Indian newspaper *MP Chronicle* in November 1999, the word 'Bollywood', sobriquet for the glamorous Indian film industry in Bombay, will be among several new entries of Indian origin (like *bindi* or *mehndi*) to be included into the millennium editions of famous British dictionaries. Bombay has been the centre of India's film industry since 1895, when the films of the Lumiere brothers were shown in the Watson's Hotel. Although there are studios in other Indian cities where films in various languages and dialects are produced (e.g. Telugu films in Hyderabad or Tamil films in Madras), Bollywood clearly remains the most important centre for the production of Hindi films. Many Bollywood actors are Muslim – as are important composers and lyricists – and it is therefore interesting to investigate the biographies of these stars.

Muslim Actors in 'Bollywood'

tion of their biographies. The following questions were to be answered in this research: Is it important for Muslim actors to be clearly identified as Muslim? Do they convey a particular Muslim identity? Do they come from a specific social background? As there are no published studies on this matter, one begins with surfing the Internet, which is nowadays an ideal medium for the Bollywood star cult. It was very easy to trace 183 biographies of present Bollywood stars, 50 of whom are Muslims. The most popular among them are Shah

his father's side of the family, Saif Ali Khan is related to two former ruling families of India, namely to the *nawab* families of Pataudi (Haryana) and of Bhopal (Madhya Pradesh). When asked about his *nawabi* origin, Saif Ali Khan stated that *nawabi* should stand for dignity, grace and good living, but had in recent years become a synonym for debauchery. However, he added that at the end of his film career, he plans to return to Bhopal to work for several social projects. This, in his eyes, would be a good means for using his popularity as well as his social background.

The question of education is connected to that of social origins. Is Islamic religious education a part of superstars' education? It is very interesting to see that many Bollywood actors (not only the Muslims) have a university degree, though none of them studied acting as such. Shah Rukh Khan, for example, studied mass communication at the renowned Jamiyya Milliyya Islamiyya in Delhi, Saif Ali Khan is Oxford-educated and Feroz Khan obtained a degree in business management from a university in the USA. None of them give out facts or details concerning religious education, the study of the Qur'an or the Arabic language. Bollywood stars seem to regard religious education as a private or family matter.

Inter-religious marriages

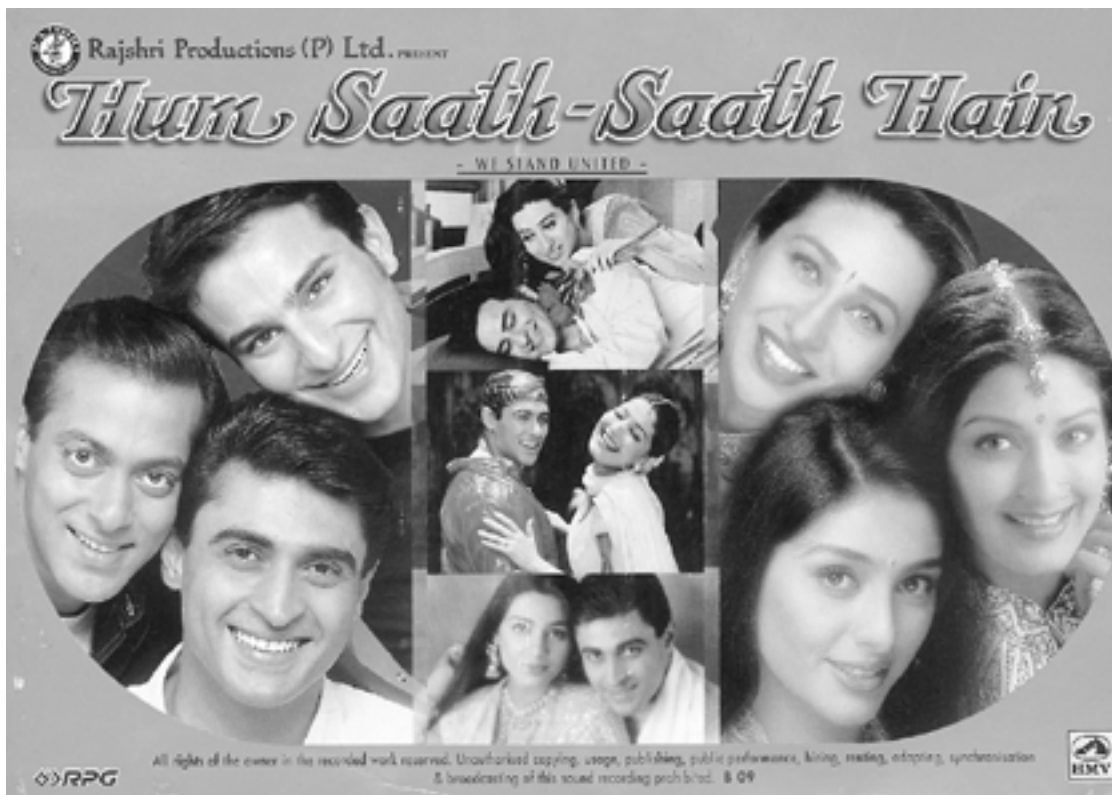
In this context it is interesting to observe the choices of spouse made by Bollywood actors. Whereas Muslim actresses in most cases chose (and still choose) a Muslim as husband, many male Bollywood stars have married Hindu women (e.g. Shah Rukh Khan, Saif Ali Khan, and Aamir Khan). In recent times, it has not been seen to be necessary for these women to convert to Islam before marriage, although even the superstars admit that they had to face difficulties with regard to acceptance of their marriages. Shah Rukh Khan, for example, has said that that his wife's family was at first strictly opposed to their marriage, because they considered him to be 'the wrong man with the wrong religion, the wrong attitude and the wrong profession.' Some Muslims also demonstrated in front of his house to protest against his inter-religious marriage. But this did not prevent Shah Rukh Khan and his wife Gauri from marrying in a court ceremony (which is obligatory for inter-religious marriages) as well as in a Hindu ceremony.

Aamir Khan said in an interview that he would not regard a Hindu-Muslim marriage as a problem in a secular state such as India. In his view, the fundamentalists among the Hindus as well as among the Muslims should get used to this fact. He further explained: 'Somehow I have a feeling that despite the attempts of fundamentalist parties to polarize communities – and to a certain extent they have succeeded in this polarization – when it comes to love, that polarization somehow doesn't work. That's what my experience is.' He added that, as in his case, it should be possible to celebrate Muslim as well as Hindu festivities together with the whole family without a problem.

It is also interesting to observe that children of these Hindu-Muslim couples sometimes have a Hindu name, sometimes a Muslim one. For example, Aamir Khan's son's name is Junaid, whereas his daughter has the Sanskrit name Ira. In their educational upbringing, Muslim, Hindu and even Christ-

ian ethics are taught, and their grandmothers play an important role in this religious education. Thus, Muslim actors seem to regard themselves as models for tolerance among all Indian religions. This can be stated not only for their family life, but also for their jobs as actors. There are many friendships established with Hindu colleagues. Further, most Muslim actors see no difficulty in playing characters from another religious community, as shown by Shah Rukh Khan, who played a Sikh in a television series (with a turban), thus exposing himself to heavy criticism from some Muslim organizations.

In conclusion, one can state that Muslim Bollywood stars stress their Islamic identity without, nonetheless overemphasizing it. Extreme attitudes in religious matters are totally rejected by them. They rather regard themselves as citizens of a secular India which, in their eyes, is a place of religious coexistence. However, only the future will show if they will be able to maintain their image as modes of religious tolerance in an Indian reality of growing religious tensions. ♦



Hindi films (which last at least two hours) are traditionally melodramatic love stories, *marala western*, or adaptations of US hits. The revival of Hindi love stories has attracted, since the 1980s, millions of viewers into at least 12,000 Indian cinemas. Spectators are terrified when a hero's life or virgin's chastity is endangered, are relieved when the hero discovers the intrigue and applaud when the heroine finally falls into the hero's arms.

Some say that these romanticized love stories are a typical expression of Indian culture because music and dance are its traditional media. Other defenders of Bollywood films add that films often propagate religious tolerance and harmony, which may be an important social function for them in India's multi-religious society. Critics, on the other hand, say that Bollywood films only support the status quo of India's social system. Whatever may be said for and against it, India's film industry produces more films than any other country in the world.

A visitor to India cannot ignore Bollywood's charm and the omnipresence of its superstars, as witnessed by huge, painted film posters and video clips on MTV Asia or Channel V. Film magazines like *G* or *CinéBlitz* provide the hottest gossip about the stars, contributing to a very impressive 'star cult'.

Watching the popular music shows on television, one can easily recognize that the essential film music is very often provided by Muslim composers and lyricists, the most famous of whom is A.R. Rahman. One also notices that many Bollywood stars are Muslims, which is what inspired the examina-

Rukh Khan, Salman Khan and Saif Ali Khan. Figures indicate that 27% of Bollywood stars are Muslims, while only 12% of the Indian population is Muslim. It is also interesting to see that only five of these superstars (e.g. Tabu, her sister Farah, and Zeenat Aman) are Muslim women, whereas some decades ago Muslim female actors were much more prevalent on screen. A probable reason for this may be that with the growth of influence of several strict religious groups, Muslim families may not want their daughters to appear on screen – an issue that requires further examination.

The social origin of Muslim actors

Having stated that the percentage of Muslims in Bollywood's film and show business is above average, one may ask about the stars' social origin. Here one can clearly observe that being a Bollywood star is (mostly) an upper-class phenomenon. Actors often state that their father was a doctor, lawyer, or restaurant owner. Some come from a family of actors, directors, scriptwriters or producers. Often, the mothers were practising professionals as well. Shah Rukh Khan's mother, for example, was a well-educated Muslim woman who had studied in Oxford and later worked in social service. The most famous example of an upper-class Bollywood actor is Saif Ali Khan: his father is the famous cricketer Mansoor Ali Khan Pataudi. His mother is the actress Sharmila Tagore (*Mississippi Marsala*), a niece of the writer Rabindranath Tagore. Before her marriage, Sharmila Tagore converted to Islam and took on the Muslim name Aisha Sultan. On