

Bollywood takes a U Turn

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IT ISN'T NECESSARILY the taming of Bollywood but it is a metamorphosis, nevertheless!

Now Bollywood has been the epicenter of the Indian film industry since 1913, when the first Hindi movie, Raja Harishchandra was made. Since then, it has blossomed into a presence on the world stage with Bollywood stars enjoying a global following. New releases now routinely open in New York and London and Indian film makers keep one eye firmly fixed on the Indian Diaspora.

The industry has always had a strong Punjabi (including Sikh) presence: actors like Raj Kapoor, Dev Anand, Sunil Dutt, Dharmendra, Kabir Bedi, Simi Grewal, Neetu Singh, Poonam Dhillon and now Kirron Kher, Mandira Bedi, Gul (Kirat) Panag, Akshay Kumar and Ranbir Kapoor; singers like Mohammad Rafi, Mahender Kapoor, Jagjit Singh and writers like Rajender Singh Bedi and Gulzar.

Despite a strong Punjabi presence, Sikhs (barring Dharmendra Singh Deol who is “Sikh” only by courtesy!) were never portrayed in a lead role – until now. A string of recent movies like *Singh is King*, *Love Aaj Aur Kal* and the current *Rocket Singh* appear to be breaking new ground.

For much of Bollywood's history, especially since 1984, Sikhs have rued the caricature of Sikhs that Bollywood has polished to a fine art. Few Sikh characters were portrayed, usually in marginal roles. Fewer still – rarer than hen's teeth – were portrayals that didn't show Sikhs as buffoons – loud, boisterous, uncultured and in love with the bottle.

We can count on our fingertips the rare exceptions to this monotonic image of Sikhs. Over three decades ago, there was a brief respite in Bollywood's caricature of the Sikhs - the result of Sikh gallantry that protected India and its territorial integrity in the wars with China and Pakistan. But that did not last.

Change may be in the air. It may be something that we need to monitor and perhaps celebrate. *Singh is King* – or so it seems.

We saw two movies back to back – *3 Idiots* and *Rocket Singh*.

3 Idiots has turned out to be a blockbuster. Although it did not have any major Sikh characters, the few walk-ons were not placed in the scene to be the butt of the quick and easy joke or of banal laughter. They were a dignified part of the scene. We were pleasantly surprised. What a relief!

Just tells you how sensitive we have become to being reduced to a caricature.

The name *Rocket Singh* had us wondering, but the watching experience dispelled any misgivings we may have had. The movie has a Sikh, played by Ranbir Kapoor, as the hero - not a sidekick or joker. He looked like an authentic Sikh: the beard looked real, not pasted on; in fact, we are told that he actually grew it over a period of time. The turban was

wrapped with care and lent dignity, as it well should. Perhaps having a Sikh mother had something to do with the extra care Ranbir gave to the physical appearance of the character.

Apart from a flattering image, the young Sikh character is urbane, well adjusted, restrained and purpose driven – in stark contrast to the bucolic, hard drinking, boisterous, joke cracking and violence prone image of Sikhs we have become accustomed to viewing. Ranbir Kapoor does it justice.

At times, the character might appear a bit too bright, somewhat ritzy - as many young people are - but with strong fundamentals and roots derived from Sikhi. In one scene, when he is down on his luck, a non-Sikh extends a helping hand with the comment that he had never seen a Sikh who was a thief and so the hero could be trusted. There wasn't a single joke on Sikhs and Sikhi.

Many Sikh friends would feel uncomfortable with the scene showing the hero and his grandfather praying to a picture of Guru Nanak. We, too, would wish it out of the movie if we could. But we also note that such practices are not uncommon in our community and the scene only reflects the reality around us.

Despite this false note, given Bollywood's track record, this movie was like a breath of fresh air.

We are also old enough to be cynical - so the natural question was why the change in Bollywood and will it last? Is this a new direction or a flash in the pan? Is it just a passing fad?

Perhaps we should cautiously consider these as the first hesitant steps of someone learning to walk and reflect on some possible triggers for this change.

Money talks, and as always, appears to be the big game-changer here.

The evolving culture in India stems less from its deeply rooted tradition and more from the global connectivity of the youth. North Indians – particularly Punjabis and Sikhs – form a major part of the Indian Diaspora that wishes to remain connected to India, but not the India they left behind - with all its idiotic superstitions, biases and prejudices.

These young Indians – and Sikhs – are not afraid to put their money where their mouth is. They celebrate movies like *Water* and even *Slum Dog Millionaire* which many traditionalists view as insults to Indian culture. Diaspora youth also rejects the formula movies of 20 songs and dances with no connection to reality and not a grain of thought underlying the plot.

We hope that this segment of Indians may have forced Bollywood into making more meaningful movies.

Sikhs in the Diaspora are seen to actively promote movies of Harbhajan Singh Mann, for instance. The popularity of Punjabi film makers like Gurinder Chadha (*Bend It like Beckham*, *Bride & Prejudice*) Mira Nair (*Monsoon Wedding*) and Geeta Mehta in the West speaks volumes. Look at how Sikhs and non-Sikhs react to shorts like "The Widow Colony," "Amu," "Kambdi Kalai", and the many Sikh Film Festivals that have sprung up outside India. Compared to Bollywood extravaganzas they may not have the fan following, but they try to address in a serious and dignified fashion the matters that affect us.

Nor are Sikhs in the Diaspora afraid to boycott or protest movies and political shenanigans that diminish them. Sikh groups have lobbied against the Sikh stereotype in movies and successfully lobbied against the appointment of Jagdish Tytler as Minister for Non-Resident Indians a few years ago.

Bollywood obviously sees no profit in angering an affluent set of expatriate Sikhs. The revenue stream follows east from North America and Europe to India. Bollywood businessmen are savvy enough not to close down the spigot. This is where the money is.

Another reason, and this is strictly theoretical with little evidence to back it, is that the positive trend might be a reaction – stemming from a covert realization – to the grave injustices meted out to the Sikhs, particularly in the past 25 years and longer in free India. The Indian government had defined a culture of ridiculing and demeaning Sikhs and manipulating them politically. The results were disastrous both for India and the Sikhs.

But governments all over the world are similar. They are most reluctant to acknowledge errors and, when they do, the admissions are both niggardly and late. Before apology and redress, the ground has to be prepared by incremental steps that are not seen as an about face. Witness the fact that the admission of wrongs done to Japanese-Americans in the United States during the Second World War officially came about 60 years later. But in the interim, all discriminatory symbols and laws were rescinded; policies and practices were changed, and Japanese-Americans rose in government, and even got elected to Congress.

We see in similar terms the appointment of Manmohan Singh as Prime Minister. It so happens that he is also the ablest and has carved out a unique place for himself in India and the world. And don't forget another Sikh at the helm of the Planning Commission, overseeing India's growing economic muscle – Montek Singh Ahluwalia.

In recent years, the appointment of the first Sikh, General J.J. Singh, as Army Chief is a similar reminder – since 1947, the officer corps of the Indian army was dominated by Sikhs, but outstanding Generals like Harbaksh Singh or J.S. Aurora never made the cut.

Success has also been visible in showbiz as recent second place finish in the Mr. India contest of Jaspal Singh Sehgal, the voice of India Ishmeet Singh (who died young), not to mention the self promoting Navjot Singh Sidhu in the Great Indian Laughter.

These are small, but significant steps that deserve to be noted and even celebrated.

Even if Bollywood's motivation is the Almighty *Rupiyah* (or is it \$\$\$\$?) – and we know Bollywood Moguls are shrewd businessmen with an eye for profit - it is a fantastic opportunity to help demolish a stereotype and shape a more positive portrayal of Sikhs – at least one that is closer to reality.

We confess that in a piece we jointly wrote not long ago, we lamented the fact that Bollywood was dumbing down Sikh culture and practices and complained that Sikhs, (even if unconsciously) contributed to that watering down by swallowing Bollywood's message - hook line and sinker.

Our bias is unmistakable - we are not fond of Bollywood's Sikh stereotype. But if these two movies were eye-openers and anything to go by, we have our respective wives for nudging us – oh! Not so gently – to give Bollywood another chance.

Be patient if Bollywood and the Indian cultural stream take ever so long to turn. These are like ocean liners, not speed boats.

Like Rip van Winkle, Bollywood appears to be tossing and turning, preparing to wake up to Sikh reality. It is about time.

