

PREFACE

'lafzon ko ahtiyaat se bartaa kijiie. in meN jaan hotii haiN.

(Use words carefully because they're living beings.)

– Firaq Gorakhpuri, advising screenwriter and playwright Javed Siddiqi
many years ago, at a mushaa'iraa in Lucknow¹

I've always loved the movies. Some of my best childhood memories are of leisurely afternoons spent watching double features with friends in a small-town Texas movie theatre, a palace for me at age seven, but objectively probably rather tawdry even in its heyday. The films ran the gamut of Hollywood offerings of the fifties crime and war stories, musicals, westerns, slapstick comedies. The entertaining worlds that crossed the portal of the cinema screen totally captivated me. With the end of childhood came a dawning awareness that cinema might deserve analysis, not only reaction. However, it was only when I moved to France as a young adult that film-going became an intellectual exercise. Cinema in France, after all, is referred to not as 'entertainment' – such a crass American notion in the eyes of the French intelligentsia – but as 'le septième art,' or the seventh art. I caught the wave of the New Wave and revelled in the wide selection of films which Paris offered. The elegant theory behind the art of film criticism was as much a part of Parisian life in the seventies as baguettes and red wine. Deep inside, though, the movie-going child, the one who had danced for a week after seeing *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers*, remained alive and well, if dormant. That fun-loving child was awakened most unexpectedly in 1979. A chance encounter with Hindi cinema in Paris, more precisely with *Amar Akbar Anthony*,² soon had me dancing again.

I really had no intention of studying Hindi. Little by little, though, I found the voices I was hearing too beautiful to ignore. I wanted to understand the meaning behind those sounds. I wanted to be able to pronounce Sahir's words as sung by Lata Mangeshkar or Kishore Kumar, and what exactly, I wondered, were Gabbar Singh in

¹ From an interview with Javed Siddiqi, Bombay, April 2006.

² Directed by Manmohan Desai, 1977.

Sholay and Vijay Kumar in *Trishul* saying? Subtitles proved most inadequate. They allowed a surface understanding of the film stories, all the while hinting teasingly at cultural worlds carried within the words. What was this language? Why was the title written in three scripts? Google did not yet exist; finding answers to such simple questions took time. Urdu, I learned, was written right to left, but what about Hindi, listed as the official language on the Censor Board's title page? Indo-European root words leapt out – maiN, tuu, nahiiN, (I you, no). At the same time, a Tunisian student and fellow fan, told me he recognized many words from Arabic.

Points on the globe where very different cultures have met, overlapped, collided, and coalesced, have always piqued my curiosity. Spain attracted me enough that I lived there for over a year, in part because of the three monotheistic religions-cum-cultures, which centuries ago blended and lent each other words, stories, musical forms, architecture and ideas. In Spain that vivid past left an imprint on the landscape and produced nuggets of shared memory, the substance of which was stored away like half-forgotten heirlooms in the nation's collective imagination. Years later I was reminded of the many cultures mostly buried in Spain's past when I heard Lata Mangeshkar sing 'Maano To Main Ganga Maa Hoon Maano To Behta Paani'³ at the beginning of Sultan Amhad's 1978 *Ganga Ki Saugand* as the camera takes us down the Ganga⁴ past temples, churches and mosques, all united by a river. In India then, or at least in the movie version of India to which I had access, the linking of multiple cultures seemed to be a present – not past – reality. I felt drawn towards the language that carried this richly diverse culture.

Out of curiosity, I thumbed through McGregor's *Outline of Hindi Grammar* and soon found myself doing exercises to learn the basics of the language structure, script and vocabulary. Dabbling developed into a passion. I found myself immersed in Platts' *A Dictionary of Urdu, Classical Hindi, and English*. How, I wondered, could one language have so many terms for the concept of longing?! The notation on the origins of the words – Sanskrit, Persian, Arabic – was a rich resource and gave me a sense of the logic of this

³ Lyrics by Anjaan, 1978.

⁴ Ganga, often translated as Ganges.

blended language. I learned to decipher the publicity brochures that accompanied the fraying film prints that arrived in Paris via Cairo, various parts of Africa and the Middle East. Those brochures, which used English, Hindi and Urdu, provided both motivation and a means for further learning. Listening, though, remained my preferred entry point into the language. I played film dialogues on audiocassettes hundreds of times. This technique, I later learned, was recommended by language acquisition specialist Steven Krashen, who calls it ‘narrow listening.’ ‘In-depth listening’ would probably more aptly describe my own approach as I attempted to puzzle out sounds, words and grammar, all the while interacting emotionally with the characters whose voices became such a part of my life. Of all the films I have listened to intensively, *Shakti* (1982), directed by Ramesh Sippy and written by Salim-Javed, has held me most firmly in its aural grip. There is the sonority of the spoken word, as when Dilip Kumar pronounces *yaqiinan* (certainly). There is vivid metaphor as in Amitabh Bachchan’s *maiN ek zahriilaa saaNp huuN* (I’m a poisonous snake) monologue. There is depth of intention most simply expressed, as when Smita Patil tells Amitabh Bachchan *‘kuchh chiizeN kahne kii nahiiN, sirf samajhne hotii haiN’* (Some things need not be said, only understood.) And finally, there is the complex, ambiguous, evolving father-son relationship that had me siding now with one, now with the other. Each time I listened, I understood a bit more of the language, and I entered a bit deeper into the characters’ worlds.

Playing with film dialogue was a regular dinner table pastime in our movie-loving family. Obvious references were thrown out: ‘Toto, I’ve a feeling we’re not in Kansas anymore’ from the *Wizard of Oz*. But allusions could also be more obscure: ‘Yeah, and I’m not very tall either.’ Humphrey Bogart to Lauren Bacall in *The Big Sleep*. I would venture that Hollywood’s famous quotes, though beloved in a certain milieu, carry only a fraction of the cultural weight of Hindi film lines which provide shared references and social glue to a broad and diverse swathe of the population. *Kitne aadmii the?*⁵ (How many men were there?) *Bhaaii, tum sign karoge ki nahiiN?*⁶ (Brother, will you sign or not?) My name is Anthony Gonzalves⁷. *Aap meraa naajaaez baap haiN!*⁸ (You are my

⁵ *Sholay*.

⁶ *Deewaar*.

⁷ *Amar Akbar Anthony*.

illegitimate father.) *phir bhii dil hai hindustaanii.*⁹ (Still my heart is Indian.) The seventies and early eighties were a particularly fertile time for dialogue baazii, ‘throwing dialogues,’ that is, taking powerfully written lines and speaking them in a dramatic and/or memorable way. One line could be the crux of a movie: *mere paas maaN hai.*¹⁰ (But I have mother.) Another could be a joy to roll around one’s mouth: *roz sochti huuN re, lekin sochte sochte ye sochne lagti huuN ki sochne se kyaa faaiidaa. is liye maiN ne sochne hii chhoR diiyaa.*¹¹ (Every day I keep thinking, yeah, but with this thinking and thinking, I start thinking, What’s the point of thinking? So I stopped thinking.)

As I continued both to enjoy and to ponder Hindi cinema, an opportunity to study at the University of Texas at Austin had me delving deeper. Hindi, Urdu, language learning, sociolinguistics, theories of language acquisition and language change, multilingualism: all spoke in some way to the complex linguistic situation in which Indian cinema bathed.

I have always entered the Perry Castañeda Library at the University of Texas with a sense of awe. It is a palace of learning, filled with books on any and every subject in a vast number of languages and accessible to any who entered. So many answers to so many questions...but not to all. I was curious, for example, about language perceptions and attitudes among writers, directors and actors. I also wondered how a film in Hindi emerged from the multilingual cauldron in which it began.

It is a difficult-to-accept fact of life: we don’t always get our questions answered. Then again, sometimes we do. Following the publication of my first book, *Enchantment of the Mind: Manmohan Desai’s Films*, in early 2006, I travelled to Bombay after a long interval, and while there, was able to speak with a few people from the film industry. The stories I heard in those initial interviews were so stimulating that I returned the next year and the next, each time understanding more as people graciously shared information, personal stories, impressions and points of view.

The result is this book whose title refers to a song from the film *Aaja Nachle*.¹²

⁸ *Trishul*.

⁹ *Shree 420*.

¹⁰ *Deewaar*.

¹¹ *Parvarish*, 1977.

¹² Directed by Anil Mehta, 2007.

Though the film did poorly at the box office, it is one of my own all-time favourites. Jaideep Sahni, the dialogue writer of the film, also wrote lyrics for several of the film's songs, including 'Show Me Your Jalwa.' The son of a teacher, Jaideep Sahni sometimes shifted during our conversations into teacher mode himself, bringing me inside his layered perceptions of certain words he had chosen. 'Show Me Your Jalwa,' he translated as 'come show me your stuff.' The 'stuff' to be examined in this book is words, the process by which they make it to the screen, how thoughts, language and stories intersect, how generations tend to relate differently to language and scripts, how individual differences in temperament, background or education can affect relationships to language, and how language choice in film reflects societal changes. *Show Me Your Words*. Words are, of course, not normally 'seen,' except on the written page, unless, that is, you consider words to possess the sort of life that Firaq Gorakhpuri assigns to them, life which allows them to bounce from the writer's pen over many hurdles into the actor's mouth and out again, past the editor's scissors and into our ears, – but not only into our ears, also into our eyes as we see words mouthed and their meanings perhaps subtly enhanced by an actor's non-verbal cues. Sound and sight do meet in interesting ways.

The second part of the title comes from a young academic researcher I met at the University of Wisconsin-Madison's Annual Conference on South Asia in 2007. Jahnvi Phalkey did her university studies in Bombay, followed by a PhD in the U.S. Research grants have since taken her to various parts of Europe. Her field, the history of science, is quite unconnected to Bombay film. Nevertheless, she agreed to speak on record about her relationship to language and to the cinema she saw as a child in Nagpur, all from the perspective she has today as someone at home on several continents. Asked if she felt different connections to different languages, she answered, 'I don't quite know. I have often wanted to think seriously about this.' She went on to delineate spaces that she associates with various languages: Hindi with friends, Marathi in the home. 'English,' she said, 'is definitely the language of my professional life and the language I feel least vulnerable in.' I had never before heard this sort of formulation. 'Vulnerable? What does that mean?' I asked. What she said next has stayed with me. Like most thought-provoking statements, it is self-evident after the fact, but it had not occurred to me in those terms. She answered, 'I don't know. It would be sort of useless to pretend that I

don't know that language is power.' The power of language. The notion came up again and again among interviewees, though no one else named it as Jahnavi Phalkey did.