

## PREFACE

1 March 2004 marked the tenth anniversary of the death of Manmohan Desai. A fall from the terrace of his Khetwadi home brought the 57-year old filmmaker's life to an end in the spring of 1994. The suspected suicide came as a shock both to those nearest to him and to the film world as a whole, as testified in countless articles and tributes in the Indian and international press in the month following his death. The articles that appeared spanned the gamut of reactions: praise for Desai as a man and as a filmmaker, heartfelt remembrances from those who had worked with him, indignation and disbelief over the circumstances of his death, and speculation over possible motives for suicide—depression over severe backaches being most frequently offered as an explanation.

At that time, I could not help feeling a personal sadness over his death. I had, after all, spent the better part of four years studying Manmohan Desai's work before completing an initial version of this book in 1987. It was, therefore, consoling to have immediate and direct evidence of Manmohan Desai's work living on beyond his death, as happened one day in 1994 when I walked into an Indian carry-out restaurant in Paris and saw a colorful dance scene from *Dharam-Veer* playing on the conspicuously placed VCR. Those waiting in line stood transfixed before the screen, their faces radiating joy. Curious to know if Desai's work had crossed the generations, I asked a young man in his twenties if he knew who had directed the film. 'Manmohan Desai,' came the answer without hesitation. Now, movies, we know, come and go. Only the best remain in the public memory. Just as in the West each new generation has rediscovered *Casablanca*, *It's A Wonderful Life*, or *The Wizard Of Oz*, so in India, there are examples—*Shree 420*, *Mother India*, *Mughal-e-Azam* and *Sholay*, among others—that have come to be classics. Some of Manmohan Desai movies have joined that select group of films that never die, that remain etched on so many individual psyches that they become a part of a shared collective memory.

This book covers Manmohan Desai's filmmaking from 1960 to 1988, but with special emphasis on what might be called the 'Desai years,' a time when Manmohan Desai was a major trendsetter and the biggest moneymaker in the film industry, a time when younger directors measured their own success against the Desai standard. In a fit of fevered activity between 1975 and 1985, Desai made nine movies, all very successful, with *Coolie* and *Amar Akbar Anthony* reaching Platinum Jubilees, *i.e.*, 75 weeks' continued showing. Following the release of *Gangaa Jamunaa Saraswathi* in 1988, Desai left active directing. He continued his involvement with the film industry more indirectly through his son Ketan's *Allahrakha* (1986), *Toofan* (1989) and *Anmol* (1993). But by that time, the 'Desai years' were over; unfortunately, so too was Manmohan Desai's life one year later.

That an American teacher of English in Paris would come write a book on Manmohan Desai's cinema probably raises questions. In partial explanation and as an introduction, let me relate my discovery of Hindi popular cinema.

Generally speaking, I enjoy coming in contact with different cultures. I am also a fervent moviegoer. Living in Paris has allowed me to combine these two interests quite conveniently. Here, I have been able to roam new worlds from the comfort of motion picture theatre seats. With a selection of over 300 films per week, Paris offers journeys through time and space for relatively modest sums—with the added benefit of freedom from jet lag. During the 1970s I saw films from China, Senegal, Mexico, the U.S.S.R., Japan, Poland, Italy, Iran, and many countries more. Yet I remained dissatisfied . . .

Among those who are attracted to cultures other than their own, it is common to find individual preferences in favour of one country over others. An affinity can spark curiosity or curiosity can reveal an affinity. Which comes first is often difficult to say. In my case, it is clear that India always interested me. Fiction and non-fiction reading had opened the doors to the country. I was disappointed then that Paris, even with its abundance of films, offered no cinematic trips there . . . or so I thought. In 1979 in one of the theatres in town, the first International Third World Film Festival was organized with an impressive selection of Indian films on the programme. I went off in high hopes of seeing what Indian cinema was about. I had only an inkling. In the Algerian film *Omar Gatlato* (by Merzak Allouache, 1976) the hero Omar watches *Mangala El Bedouina* (what I later learned was *Aan*, Mehboob Khan, 1952), and for several seconds we watch the film along with him. I wondered why the Algerians were permitted to see these delightful and colour-filled films while we in Paris—by many standards the film capital of the world—were not. However, the festival left me not only with images of the red soil of Burkina Faso but also with a teasing and intriguing printed list of the programmed Indian movies Synopses of *Mother India*, *Pyasa*, *Do Ankhen Barah Haath* and others whet my appetite. India obviously had a long cinematic heritage and boasted a wealth of films. It seemed all the stranger that we in Paris did not see them. At that point I could not have guessed that Indian movies had already been playing regularly in town for some time.

There was no way to know about the Avron Palace or the Delta unless one happened to pass by or to learn about them through the immigrant communities' grapevines. These two cinemas never had their films listed in the weekly movie line-up magazines. One week, though, an exception was made. The name *Amar Akbar Anthony* appeared on the same footing as the new French, American, Japanese and Italian films released that week. Though I was eager to see the movie, I could not help feeling a bit uneasy as I imagined possibly finding myself the only woman in the midst of an all-male audience at the Avron Palace. Pushing these doubts aside, I gave rein to my curiosity.

The exact time of each show was not listed in the cinema guide. I tried to gauge my arrival to coincide with the second Sunday showing. Of course, since I was using European time logic, I miscalculated. My initial error was to suppose that the first show would actually begin as announced, at 2:30 p.m. In fact, I later learned, a 2:30 show could begin any time between 2:30 and 3:15. My second mistake was to suppose the film would be two hours long. In reality, it lasted almost three hours. Finally, I did not take into consideration the intermission time, as I had never seen a movie with a twenty-minute break that allowed the audience to stretch their legs and eat *samosas*. The sum of my faulty assumptions led me to arrive before the intermission of the first show.

I need not have worried about the proportion of men to women in the audience. Entire families filled the screening room. The seats were wooden. I managed to find one

of the two vacant ones on the front row, and for the next few hours, I more or less stopped breathing. In spite of some 15 'No Smoking' signs posted around the hall in French and in English, cigarette smoke enveloped the audience in a thick haze. Normally, I would find any sort of enjoyment impossible under such conditions. A part of me (my lungs) wanted to head immediately for fresh air, but another part of me was instantly enthralled. My lungs lost.

I had not the slightest idea what was happening in the story. The characters were many and confusing. I thought the one called Salma was several different women because in one scene she was singing and dancing, in another scene, working as a doctor, in another, being chased into the house by her tyrannical father, in another, wearing a black robe and veil, in another, working as a seamstress with her husband. There was a rich man who became poor and a poor man who became rich. There was a mother who started out with tuberculosis and then spent much of the film blind until a miracle restored her eyesight. The miracle took place in front of a statue to which the Muslim Akbar was singing, something that I found unthinkable, given my previous exposure to Islam through the Arab world. The one called Anthony was unmistakable even in all his disguises, but I could not understand how he sometimes could be so tough and sometimes so silly, even stupid. He seemed to be involved in all sorts of illicit doings, and yet on Sunday he was all dressed up, playing the organ at church. I think that following the story would have been impossible in any circumstances, but my confusion was confounded because I saw the second half of the film first and, likewise, because the French subtitles were not at all synchronized. I could never be sure if what I was reading was what was being said, what had just been said, or what was about to be said.

I would not have been capable of retelling the story after I left; nor did I understand why the characters on screen had acted and reacted as they did. However, my perplexity did not dampen my spirits. On the contrary, it further kindled my interest. And the song, dance, colour, and comedy enchanted me, even left me bubbling for days. I felt I had reentered the magic world that cinema had represented for me as a child when I had wholeheartedly participated in each movie, leaving myself behind for a few hours in order to live fully with the characters on the screen. I knew that I had to see more such films, both for the pleasure of the viewing and also to satisfy my curiosity about the logic of the genre.

As I tried to grasp what I had seen, naturally enough, I made analogies with what I already knew. Thus, *Amar Akbar Anthony* seemed to be a mixture of Shakespearean comedy with unlikely chance meetings and situational turnarounds, of Elvis Presley fight-sing-and-dance films, of Yiddish stories with touching mother-son scenes, of cowboy or gangster bad-guy sequences, of Tarzan-style rope swinging to save those in danger, and of a Three Musketeer spirit of camaraderie—the whole spiced with what I supposed to be a very Indian view of mystical healing and religious tolerance.

Seeing *Amar Akbar Anthony* proved a lucky encounter. I could have happened upon some violent, plotless, badly acted film and never wanted to see another Indian movie again. Thanks to *Amar Akbar Anthony*, I was back at the Avron Palace the following week to see *Trishul*. Fascination flamed. And I decided, as I later learned millions of others around the world had done, that the actor who had played Anthony in *Amar Akbar Anthony* and Vijay in *Trishul* was absolutely electrifying. Studying the film posters, I deduced his name to be Amitabh Bachchan.

I began to see one or two films every week. Some films I saw again and again, each time they were programmed. Gradually, the stories that had seemed so exotic that I had had trouble following them began to make sense. I could guess in advance the reactions the characters were likely to have. The element of repetition from scenario to scenario made the stories more understandable but also removed some of the initial pleasure of the discovery. It became clear that quality was uneven in Indian cinema. I became more discerning, my tastes more defined in actors, directors and scriptwriters. I reached a point at which I would not see just any movie that was playing. But I tried never to miss an Amitabh Bachchan starrer, a film with Raakhee, a film scripted by Salim-Javed, or any film made by Ramesh Sippy, Yash Chopra, or Prakash Mehra. A visit to London brought me in contact with a slightly more highbrow Hindi cinema. Seeing *Junoon* was a new and passionate experience. Afterwards, I made a point never to miss a Shyam Benegal film at film festivals I attended. The uncertainty of the subtitling led me to study Hindi. Little by little, on video and at the theatre, I became acquainted with classics such as *Diamond Queen*, *Mother India*, *Shree 420*, *Awaara*, *Gunga Jamuna*, *Pyasa*, and more. I found them all interesting. But Manmohan Desai's films, I slowly realized, held a very special attraction.

Initially, Desai's name was not a drawing card for me. After all, I had seen only his *Amar Akbar Anthony*. A few months later I watched *Dharam-Veer*, unaware of who had directed it. The period, the costumes, and the style were unlike anything I had seen to date. Throughout the viewing, I felt the story was being told on two levels at once—in dead earnest and with tongue-in-cheek. I laughed and enjoyed the film, but I also felt a bit puzzled, as though a key necessary for understanding was just beyond my reach. Studying the publicity poster outside after the show, my glance fell on Manmohan Desai's name and the key clicked in the lock. Of course, I thought, here again was that same speed, that same colour and liveliness, that same marvellous sense of humour, and that same theme of fate first separating and then reuniting a family. Though *Dharam-Veer* seemed unique, it nevertheless carried marks of the guiding hand responsible for *Amar Akbar Anthony*. Manmohan Desai's name went on my list of directors to watch for. Still, I thought, his films were not worthy of serious consideration. They were too much fun.

One day *Sholay* was billed with *Amar Akbar Anthony* in a double feature. I preferred to see *Sholay*: first, because I had already seen *Amar Akbar Anthony* three times while I had only seen *Sholay* twice, and second, because *Sholay*, I felt sure, was a more estimable film. The schedule at the Avron Palace was extremely flexible. What was programmed for 2:30 often ran at 6:00 and vice versa. So it is that I saw *Amar Akbar Anthony* by chance for the fourth time and missed *Sholay*. My reaction at the beginning of the film was both disappointment and a bit of scorn. After all, *Amar Akbar Anthony* was nonsense. No matter that I had shaken with laughter the first three times I had seen it. *Sholay*, on the other hand, was dramatic and thus important. We cry at the end when Jai dies. Obviously, sorrow weighs heavier in the balance than mirth.

It was not until several months later at the end of my fifth viewing of *Amar Akbar Anthony*, when I was still laughing, still having my fancy tickled and still seeing details I had missed in earlier viewings, that I realized what some geniuses of the medium had already learned: comedy well done has a nobility of its own. A film with a serious content may actually take less effort to make into a success because of the basic bias of

the public who enjoy a good comedy but who refuse to respect it as highly as a good drama.

By now, I have seen *Amar Akbar Anthony* more than twenty times and listened to its sound track at least fifty. The initial joy remains. It is this joyful response that has led me to explore Manmohan Desai's work ever more closely, to view all of his films, to travel to India's Hollywood—Bombay as it was still called in 1984—in order to interview the director himself and to see him at work. Finally, it was the continued enthusiasm I felt over my discoveries that prompted me to write this book.

*Paris, 2005*