

## FOREWORD

Clearly, the re-assessment and insightful commentary on Manmohan Desai was long overdue. After all, his films stemmed from a concern with the way people live together and how this co-existence could perhaps even come close to a state of utopia. At the heart of Manmohan Desai's immense oeuvre was an affirmation and celebration of struggle.

Manji, as he was called by those who loved and admired him, would perhaps balk at any cerebral analysis or research about his films. Without knowing it—like all great masters—effortlessly he had posited significant sub-texts into his hyper-fantasies, which to the superficial eye seemed like fleeting, will-o'-the-wisp entertainers.

Somewhere within, he was quite prescient about the fact that his films, as a collective whole, would be ultimately accorded their just estimation by the critics, thinkers and academicians. 'Laugh at me today,' he would tell his detractors good-naturedly, 'but mark my words, you'll appreciate my work some day, even if it's too late.'

It's never too late. Indeed it's a matter of personal pride for me that at long last, Manmohan Desai has been given his richly deserved stature in the pantheon of film greats.

In film after film, he had set his own rules of right conduct, a fierce sense of loyalty towards fellow-beings and above all, a deep veneration of the mother figure. At a time, around the 1970s, when families all over the world were splintering and it had become fashionable for young people to go independent, he insisted that parents came above God and of course, above self. Hurt them and you hurt yourself, was his simple, oft-repeated credo which continues to echo in the techno-savvy cinema of today.

Needless to say, Manji has been frequently imitated but never quite equalled. Not by a long shot. Because part of the distinctive drive and brio of his work came from his instinctive belief that movies are a temporal as well as a spatial medium. He loved flamboyant colour, costume, and décor, but he never allowed these elements to freeze into static compositions. A genius of changing patterns and complex movements, he filled his pictures with swooping crane shots, voluptuous displays of story telling, dance-music-action, superbly colloquial dialogue and spontaneously orchestrated background detailing.

Stylistically and thematically, Manmohan Desai's films might be described as 'fantasticated' expressions of romantic idealism. In fact, love, honour, separation, vindication and reunion were his abiding obsessions. While recounting those deceptively believe-it-or-not stories, he retained that key element of wonderment. He was akin to a child who had lost himself in a fairground, had clambered onto a Ferris-wheel and could have enjoyed the ride till kingdom come. He never betrayed the slightest sign of exhaustion; he continued to be an irrepressible *ranconteur* even when a chronic backache confined him to a hard board chair.

The diverse personalities of the dramatic director and the extravagant producer coalesced in Manji. His films generally took place in scenic outdoor locations or in

studio-manufactured settings, where the boundaries between fantasy and everyday life could be transgressed.

Maybe it was the shortsightedness of the film commentators of the time that drew the simplistic comment that his work was absurd, far-fetched, incredible and unreal. Compared to the inter-planetary adventures of Steven Spielberg and George Lucas, Manmohan Desai's foreverland was familiar and as authentic as the people living next door. 'See, people praise Spielberg's imagination but have problems with mine,' he would declare with bemusement.

Rationalists quibbled but audiences adored him. They wanted more. The criticism that Manji belted out films which were so fast, furious and funky that the viewers were not allowed any time to think, just doesn't hold any water today. The fact is that several of his films—*Sacha Jhutha*, *Aa Gale Lag Jaa*, *Amar Akbar Anthony*, *Naseeb* and *Coolie* to name a few—have achieved cult status, constantly inviting thought, discussion, and most hearteningly, hosannas of approval.

Any list of films which have advocated secularism is now topped by *Amar Akbar Anthony*. When it was released, its full-throttle message of communal harmony wasn't perceived, but it is acknowledged unconditionally today. True to his nature, Manmohan Desai never spoke about his films' agenda because he didn't have to.

Stories came to him naturally, inspired infallibly by the conditions and people around him. Anthony was a drunken lout he had encountered oftentimes in the back alleys of Khetwadi, a cramped city area where Manmohan Desai felt completely at home. No wonder, he retreated back to the congestion and the crowds after shifting for a short while to the upscale Malabar Hill.

To know Manmohan Desai was to know a man of compassion. Despite the tremendous success of his films, his feet never left the ground. His screenplays often germinated from major and minor incidents, which he may have read in the newspapers or heard about from his neighbourhood gully cricket pals. He belonged to an era when the director was an *auteur*, imprinting a firm signature on every frame of his films. And his signature was of a spry wizard who coaxed the audience towards a wild and improbable realm, and yet remained strongly rooted in the soil. A paradox yes, but a splendid, unparalleled one.

The story ideas of *Amar Akbar Anthony* and *Coolie* were inspired by real life. If they seemed like fantasies, it was because his USP was to make the tough reality palatable, underscored by optimism. His valorous protagonists did not die in his movies; they lived even after they had been riddled with bullets. The most obvious example of this was the recovery of the eponymous Coolie, attacked by gunfire at the Haji Ali durgah. Miraculously, in real life too, I survived a serious physical injury on the sets of the same film. His concern and prayers were always with me, as they were indeed with all the actors and technical crew whom he treated as an extended family.

Whether it was at a music sitting, a script brainstorm or a shooting schedule, Manji was the livewire. His enthusiasm and self-belief were immediately infectious. Nothing was impossible for him to conceive and execute, from a helicopter flight over the London skyline, a shootout in a revolving restaurant or a chase atop a speeding train. He encouraged actors to delve deeper into themselves, and discover facets they didn't know existed.

From my personal experience, I can say the drunken act, which I came to be associated with, was tossed off by him—in the snap of a finger just as the camera was about to roll. The soliloquy addressed to my mirror image is remembered to date for the hilarity that Manji invested in a sequence that everyone thought was unimaginable.

From his first film on, the black-and-white *Chhalia*, featuring the stalwarts Raj Kapoor and Nutan, it was evident that the young man in his 20s then, would redefine Hindi cinema. He did just that, unfazed by the fluctuating trends and fads right till *Gungaa Jamunaa Saraswathi*. Eventually he handed over the reins to his son Ketan, but there were still many more films that were ticking in his heart and mind. Everyone who knew him was convinced that he would be back in action, with renewed vigour.

Manji was full of surprises. He suddenly upped and decided to go, he left just as a fist disappears when we open our palm. He had the last laugh.

A study of his incalculable cinema was pending for decades. I am deeply grateful for the painstaking years that Connie Haham has spent on the book. Her dedication, understanding and appreciation of Manmohan Desai are palpable in every page and word.

The author has been one of the earliest and unwavering supporters of popular Indian cinema. With this book, she has contributed immeasurably in preserving the memory of the great director and the great man. A humanist who never said he was one.

Thank you Connie. On behalf of Manmohan Desai, myself and the undiminished legion of admirers of the Manji of real miracles.



**Amitabh Bachchan**

