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Amar Akbar Anthony: Bollywood, Brotherhood, and the Nation

Abstract

This is a book review of William Elison, Christian Lee Novetzke, and Andy Rotman, *Amar Akbar Anthony: Bollywood, Brotherhood, and the Nation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016).

Author Notes

Kathryn Hardy is an anthropologist interested in language, cinematic mediation, and ideas of the 'region' in India. She is currently revising her first book, Becoming Bhojpuri, which examines new social categories that emerge through the production and circulation of films in the Bhojpuri language. Kathryn received her PhD from the University of Pennsylvania, and is now a Mellon Fellow at Washington University in St. Louis.

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Review of William Elison, Christian Lee Novetzke, and Andy Rotman, *Amar Akbar Anthony: Bollywood, Brotherhood, and the Nation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016).

In a now-classic article from 1985, Rosie Thomas urged writers to take popular Indian films seriously. Indian as well as foreign critics, she argued, used racist Western frameworks to evaluate Indian cinema as low-brow, nonsensical, and mindless. Such critics failed to take into account the films' aesthetic specificity, as well as the historical conditions and political contexts in which they were produced and consumed. By defining Indian cinema "primarily through its 'otherness' or 'difference' from First World cinema,"[1] critics ignored the logics of pleasure that governed Hindi and other Indian cinemas. In the ensuing thirty years, Indian cinema—specifically the relatively upscale Hindi cinema glossed as "Bollywood"—has become a topic of serious academic interest. The number of university courses and scholarly books on Indian cinema, often mentioning Bollywood directly, has skyrocketed since the mid-1990s.[2] The emergence of "Bollywood studies" accords with a more general academic acceptance of popular or "public culture" as a legitimate field of research.[3] This sudden respectability coincides with what Tejaswini Ganti calls the "gentrification" of the Hindi film industry, a material reimagining of Hindi cinema as hip, modern, global, and—most importantly—for the upper classes.[4] Despite this flood of publications, few texts manage to maintain analytical rigor along with the enthusiasm of the

cinephile, and fewer still are accessible to students lacking a working knowledge of Indian cinema.

Amar Akbar Anthony: Bollywood, Brotherhood, and the Nation should please both long-time Bollywood enthusiasts and those who are encountering Hindi cinema for the first time. In this delightful and adventurous new book, William Elison, Christian Lee Novetzke, and Andy Rotman bring the reader on a choose-your-own-adventure tour through the twists and turns of one of India's most beloved films, *Amar Akbar Anthony* (dir. Manmohan Desai, 1977), answering Thomas' call to approach Indian cinema within its own "terms of reference." *Amar Akbar Anthony* was described by critics at the time of its release as "implausible," (6) and "giant-sized escapist fare" (8). Even in current accounts, *Amar Akbar Anthony* has been "too easily discounted as a cheesy and cumbersome 1970s artifact" (4). Writing collaboratively, the three authors plumb the depths of their collective knowledge of South Asian history, religion, language, and politics to resuscitate *Amar Akbar Anthony* and, in the process, frame mega-entertainment as embedded social practice.

Amar Akbar Anthony, produced and released during the violence and paranoia of Indira Gandhi's Emergency, has usually been read as a parable depicting India's model of secularism as religious "unity in diversity." With symbolic echoes of India's Partition and subsequent post-colonial violence, the film begins with three young brothers whose (Hindu) family splits apart even before the title

sequence begins. In the aftermath of a series of disasters and mistakes, the boys' mother contracts tuberculosis, abandons the family, and is blinded by a falling tree; the boys' father accidentally steals a car full of gold ingots and leaves the three boys under a statue of Mohandas Gandhi in a park, and each boy is found, renamed, and raised according to a different religion. Amar is raised by a Hindu policeman, Akbar by a Muslim tailor, and Anthony by a Catholic priest. In the film's happy ending, the entire family is reunited. The religious divisions between Hindu, Christian, and Muslim are regularly revealed to be merely external artifice. In the title sequence, the three brothers are pictured in a hospital donating blood to their mother, all of them unaware of the true nature of their relationships with one another. Behind each brother is a window through which a religious building can be seen: Amar is framed by a temple, Anthony by a church, and Akbar by a mosque. This heady symbolic moment of medicalized ethno-nationalist unification is further overdetermined by the lyrics to the song that immediately follows: "blood is blood, it isn't water." Religious distinctions are perceptible on the outside, but these distinctions only serve to highlight the truth of familial connection, through which eight of the main characters in the film, in the end, come to be either consanguine or affinal kin. Can this be anything more than straightforward nationalist propaganda—albeit with an overlay of mass entertainment, catchy songs, romance, family-focused emotion, and choreographed violence?

But hold on a minute, write the authors of the book version of *Amar Akbar Anthony*: how could it possibly be that simple? *Amar Akbar Anthony* is a richly varied film, "filled with contestation and even confusion, in which the logical and illogical are in harmony" (4). How are we to account for the inconsistency of the neat nationalist metaphor? Why don't the brothers revert to the practices of Hinduism once they realize their "true selves"? Why does Bharati—the mother of the three boys, whose name references Bharat, another name for India—abandon her sons to their fates? Instead of sanding off the contradictory edges in this *masala* masterpiece, the authors choose to approach the film through a method they describe as "sibling rivalry." By this they mean allowing internal inconsistency, "offering differing and competing perspectives to create a kind of oneness—or 'three-in-oneness.' … One story is never the full story" (4). Material from Sanskrit texts, the Hindu epics, ethnographies, Sufi romances, the lives of the film's stars, director Manmohan Desai's interviews, and close readings of certain scenes are all juxtaposed in a gleeful rejection of a unitary theory of the film (or of film in general).

The book proceeds as an increasingly contentious discussion among friends, whose arguments build on one another. The authors describe their approach using the metaphor of three blind men describing an elephant entirely by feel: "Our goal is not… to provide a cohesive, noncontradictory, synthetic analysis—but to see what happens when this elephantine opus is perceived through its parts" (5). In

effect, this is the book's most forcefully argued thesis: by interpreting films (or, one might extrapolate, other works) only to extract a unitary conclusion under which other possibilities are quashed, we are doing a disservice to the complexity of cinema and society.

The first three chapters are each named after a brother, and argue in turn that the titular brother of each chapter is in fact the "hero" of the film. "Amar: Straight Shooter" argues that Amar, raised by the Hindu police inspector, centers the story (and the country) with his "unmarked but muscular form of Hinduism" (36). In this chapter, relationships are couched in terms of the "classical Hindu idea…that the 'trinity' of *dharma*, *artha*, and *kama* (that is, 'duty,' 'profit,' and 'pleasure') are the three 'aims of human life' (*purushartha*)" (46). Amar is the dutiful, *dharmik* brother, "the only one with a full-time job, the only one to dutifully follow his new father's career, and the only one to remain a Hindu" (47). Amar's lack of religious specificity—he is never seen participating in any practice of worship, though his name marks him as Hindu—is balanced by the uniform that marks him as a policeman: he "doesn't seem to have a private life separate from his role as state functionary" (54). He embodies the ideal Hindu nation—well-armed, capable of violence, but ultimately benevolent—and as such is the brother chosen as "the center of the moral universe" of the film (73).

"Akbar: *Parda* and Parody" argues that Akbar is the center around which the film revolves. Akbar is the hero of a "Muslim subplot" with parodic echoes of the

midcentury Bombay film genre known as the "Muslim social." This subplot borrows from "a fund of received images of Muslim identity" portraying an Islamic community that is tradition-bound, highly mannered, and antiquated (92). But it is Akbar's numerous song sequences that make the best argument for him as the leading man. These songs "dissolve barriers—illusory or ideological curtains—that prevent people from connecting with one another" (75). As a *qawwal*, or Sufi singer, Akbar "takes on the persona of a truth-telling poet, deploying a set of antecedents valorized in Indo-Islamic literary and mystical discourses—a persona that has already been disseminated at a popular level through the medium of cinema" (103). Not only is Akbar the hero of the film, he's the hero we've been waiting for.

Finally, there is Anthony, a hard-fighting, liquor-store-owning, Christian tough who considers Jesus his business partner, tithing 50% of what he earns shaking down his fellow citizens to the Church. Anthony is played by Amitabh Bachchan, the most iconic Indian male actor of the 1970s. Rejecting "Gandhi's vision of the nation as a community united under a benevolent 'secularized' Hinduism" (116), Anthony's Christianity represents the multivalence of the Indian nation. Anthony is read as a convert from Hindu boy to Christian man. But in India, conversion is understood to be more of "an accretion than a replacement, experienced more as an accumulation of identities than a switch from one identity to another" (149). And indeed, Anthony professes belief "in all religions" (149).

But he also believes in the alternative power structures he has created in "Anthonyville," where he provides law and order outside the purview of the state. From Anthony's point of view, "the project of national integration has been a failure…. The nation, Anthony seems to tell us, survives *despite* the failures of the state" (116).

The boys' mother provides the title for the fourth chapter, "Maa—!," as well as the center of its argument: perhaps the mother, Bharati, is a hero in her own right. This chapter moves quickly between several interpretations of Bharati's narrative: is she a bad mother who selfishly neglects her children; is she a devotee of the cinematic goddess Santoshi Maa? Or could she be a goddess herself? Layered with ethnographic and textual references, this chapter is a convincing whirlwind, suggesting that certain polyvalent signs demand multiple concurrent interpretations. In the famous "Shirdi Wale Sai Baba" song sequence, Bharati, who has been blinded for much of the film, falls to the ground in the Sai Baba temple where Akbar is singing and hits her head. When she lifts herself up, right before her eyesight is miraculously restored by the deity, her forehead is marked with blood. By turns this blood mark is identified as a Hindu *teeka,* or prayer mark (172); as a *zebibah*, the forehead bump of pious Muslims who press their heads to the floor five times a day in prayer (172-3); as the auspicious red *sindoor* applied to the forehead by married Hindu women (187); and as a mark of *balidaan* or blood sacrifice (182), perhaps to the nationalist goddess Mother India

(193).[5] This chapter makes the best argument for the book's method: strictly interpreting the blood mark as one symbol or another would have constrained the mark's ambiguity, and would further constrain the multiple readings of the film's mother that follow.

The book ends with a detailed and rollicking synopsis, which comes to the reader's aid as details, scenes, and contradictory readings of this complicated film pile up. It serves as both a helpful navigational tool and a practical guide to effective, enthusiastic film analysis. The progression of *Amar Akbar Anthony,* book version, is reminiscent of the arc of a masala film itself, complete with plot twists, a printed Interval—the intermission between acts—and an accelerated emotional climax towards the end of the "Maa—!" chapter.

The book's theoretical framework is spare, but suggestive. Each chapter traces associations between evidentiary domains usually understood as "textual" (visual symbolism, narrative analysis) and "intertextual" (connections to other films, myth, religious literature, and ethnography). Film scholars might wish for a more overt analysis of these techniques, as they draw attention to theoretical issues involved in marshaling evidence but never directly confront them. At times, the strategy of theorizing by accretion gets in the way of making straightforward claims about contentious issues. This shows up, for instance, in the short section of the introduction tracing uses of the term "Bollywood," which has recently emerged as a hotly contested analytic category. The authors explain that

"Bollywood" has been defined to include films "made for the masses," those "made for the upper middle class of the Indian diaspora," those that "represent the yearnings of lower-middle-class and slum-dwelling Indians" as well as films that "reflect the diversity of the Indian nation." "Bollywood" is shown to be a shifting discursive construction, but this does not mean that it is "something like what Benedict Anderson famously called the nation—an 'imagined community'" (17).

Similar questions emerge in the book's treatment of *Amar Akbar Anthony*'s audience. The authors state that the film "offers a glimpse into the imaginary of a viewing public, a kind of bellwether for the public mood" (25). This understanding of popular cinema echoes cinema-industry ideologies through which successful films—that is, films that do well at the box office—transparently tell us the desires of a particular audience, here coded as standing for the nation-state. Considering recent work on the social production of audience categories,[6] the "familiarity of the concoction" should not be taken to index the "tastes of the time" (25) so much as the provisional alignments of cinematic production practices (director Manmohan Desai's ideas of appropriate national fantasy, available capital, technological possibilities, and so forth) with viewers' ticket-buying practices. Any reflection of a public mood could only occur *ex post facto*, as the film was enshrined as a super-hit in the mists of cinematic history.

The above concerns pale in comparison to the overwhelming pleasure of reading such a well-informed, thoughtful, and enthusiastic book about Hindi

cinema. A delight to read, *Amar Akbar Anthony* is accessible but densely cited, especially with regard to religious, social, and cultural histories and practices particular to India. Each chapter includes ample description of terms, places, religious practices, and religious history that might be unfamiliar, but these explanations never weigh heavily on the reader. *Amar Akbar Anthony* will be an excellent interdisciplinary teaching resource, opening up the film for students and non-specialists alike, and would be as appropriate in an undergraduate course on South Asian religious traditions as in a cinema course. Reflecting the expertise of the authors, the book is particularly adept at synthesizing diverse scholarship on popular and formal religions of South Asia. For the authors of *Amar Akbar Anthony: Bollywood, Brotherhood, and the Nation*, these dense and often contradictory frameworks of Indian religiosity are all necessary in order to confront one of India's most beloved films in all its complexity, on its own terms.

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[1] Rosie Thomas, "Indian Cinema: Pleasures and Popularity." *Screen* 26, 3-4(1985): 116.

[2] The Google Books Ngram viewer produces charts of the relative frequency of words or phrases in published material compared to all other words. Using this tool to compare "Bollywood" and "Indian cinema" demonstrates an increase in usage for both terms starting in the mid-1990s. By 1996, the frequency of "Bollywood" surpassed "Hindi cinema;" by 1999 "Bollywood" is more common than either "Hindi cinema" or the more common "Indian cinema." In 2008 (the last year for which Google makes data available), "Bollywood" was mentioned nearly five times as often as "Indian cinema." See https://books.google.com/ngrams.

[3] For early examples see Arjun Appadurai and Carol A. Breckenridge, "Why Public Culture?" *Public Culture* 1(1988): 5-9, and Rachel Dwyer and Christopher Pinney, eds, *Pleasure and the Nation* (London: Oxford University Press, 2003).

[4] Tejaswini Ganti, *Producing Bollywood: Inside the Contemporary Hindi Film Industry* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 4.

[5] Spellings here and elsewhere in this review purposefully echo *Amar Akbar Anthony*'s idiosyncratic transliterations that "follow the norms of mainstream English-language Indian publications" and do not use diacritics (35).

[6] Ganti, *Producing Bollywood.*

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