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Madhuri Dixit

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Madhuri Dixit

Abstract

This is a book review of Nandana Bose, *Madhuri Dixit* (Bloomsbury, 2019).

Keywords

Bollywood, Star system, Indian film, Indian Nationalism

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Bose, Nandana, *Madhuri Dixit* (Bloomsbury, 2019).

If Bollywood is the religion of modern India, the power of Indian film stars is no less than that of mythical gods. There are legends about star worship of actors Dilip Kumar, Dev Anand, and Amitabh Bachchan in North India and Rajnikanth and Mohanlal in South India. But most of the superstars of the Indian film industry which command such cult status have been male. No doubt female stars such as Suraiya, Meena Kumari, Madhubala, and Rekha enjoyed phenomenal success in the past but these actresses have not been able to rival the stardom which remained the preserve of male actors. But all of that changed with Madhuri Dixit (b. 1967). By the late 1980s and mid-1990s, a few years before the world of Indian stardom came to be dominated by the three Khans (Salman Khan, Amir Khan and Shah Rukh Khan), Madhuri Dixit burst on the stage of superstardom with the song “Ek, do teen (One Two Three)” from N. Chandra’s *Tezaab (Acid)* (1988). The fans of Madhuri’s rival, Sridevi, are likely to dispute this claim. But this much is undisputed: Madhuri Dixit emerged in the 1990s as the first female superstar who was often the main ‘attraction’ in a film. By the time of the release of *Hum Aap Ke Hain Koun..!* (*Who am I to you?*) (1994) that infused the aesthetics of the Indian middle-class wedding video into the genre of the melodrama musical, Madhuri Dixit in her iconic blue satin sari had become as much a cult figure in the Indian film industry as Amitabh Bachchan with a *beedi* in the 1970s. The Madhuri cult was so all-pervasive that one of India’s great artists, M.F. Husain, directed a film, *Gaja Gamini (Woman with an Elephant's Gait)* (2000), as a tribute to her ubiquity in Indian popular visual culture. Only Madhuri Dixit in the 1990s could command the same salary as male superstars—an incredible achievement in a male-dominated film industry. Yet Madhuri’s journey to the top had not been easy. Many of her early films had flopped at the box office. But after a string of these early flops, Madhuri delivered a hit almost every year from 1988 to 1995. Filmmaker Chandan

Arora's tribute to Madhuri's stardom—*Main Madhuri Dixit Banna Chahti Hoon (I Want To Be Madhuri Dixit)* (2003)—and Madhuri's most recent return to acting playing a famous actress in the Netflix series *The Fame Game* (2022), are a living testament to her superstardom nearly forty years after she first faced the camera in Rajshri Productions' *Abodh (Innocent)* (1984).

What contributed to Madhuri Dixit's overwhelming success? How did an ordinary Maharashtrian girl who was not from a film background (almost a *sine qua non* for success in the Hindi film industry) become a superstar? Nandana Bose's *Madhuri Dixit* (Bloomsbury, 2019), a new contribution to a series on Star Studies, gives us some tentative answers to this intriguing phenomenon. *Madhuri Dixit* is an outstanding study of Madhuri's stardom and a significant contribution to the neglected subfield of Star Studies in Indian Film Studies. Most studies of movie stars published in recent years in India have been biographical but Bose's book offers a nuanced analysis of Dixit's stardom. For Bose, the primary reason for Madhuri's stardom was that she was a dancing star (2). This insight is developed by the author by taking into account earlier studies of the Dixit phenomenon by film scholars, Shohini Ghosh and Usha Iyer. Bose writes:

Known as the finest exponent of Hindi film dance, 'Dixit's dance numbers marked a redefinition of choreographic styles and radical changes in the movement vocabulary of the dancing heroine'...even in conservative films, Madhuri could 'prise open spaces for the play of women's sexuality...Madhuri reveled in the subversive potential of erotic song sequences representative of spaces of resistance for Indian women surviving in a repressive society... (3)

The assertive boldness of characters played by Madhuri Dixit was also often coded in religious terms in films such as *Beta (Son)* (1992) and *Khalnayak (The Villain)* (1993). Madhuri Dixit also emerged as a star at a time of great transitions in Indian society, from a commitment to socialist values to a modern liberal economy inflected by Hindu religious nationalism. Nandana Bose supplements these political approaches to the study of Madhuri Dixit's stardom with what she calls, "the industrial approach, exploring the hitherto understudied yet crucial role of mentors,

collaborators and industry personnel (such as director, co-star, manager, choreographer) and interpersonal relations and contacts in the construction of a Hindi film star” (4). No surprise then that famous choreographer Saroj Khan’s contribution to Madhuri’s stardom receives the attention that it deserves. If there is one aspect of Madhuri’s persona that propelled her to stardom, it is her dancing skills, and these had to be adapted for the silver screen. Madhuri had to work hard on her traditional dancing as *filmi* dancing was dictated by the camera. This is what Madhuri learned from the brilliant Saroj Khan. The popularity of Madhuri’s erotic dance numbers such as “Dhak dhak karne laga (My Heart is Beating Fast)” from *Beta*, “Choli ke peeche (What is Behind your Blouse?)” from *Khalnayak*, and “Channe ke khet mein (In the Chickpea Field)” from *Anjaam (Consequence)* (1994) had not only to do with sensual appeal but also the way they played out Indian “women’s growing disenchantment with sexual conformity along with a desire to celebrate sexual assertiveness” (6). This sexual assertiveness, however, emerged within a religiously-coded nationalist context framed against a supposedly decadent West. For instance, Madhuri Dixit’s character rejects the ‘foreign-returned’ Debu in Subhash Ghai’s *Ram Lakhan* released in 1989 when the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) registered its first serious electoral win in India’s parliamentary elections. The turn to religious nationalism in India took place against the backdrop of economic reforms which for the first time created a large aspirational middle class in urban India. It is the coming together of religious nationalism and the new economy which helps us understand 1990s Hindi cinema and the Madhuri Dixit phenomenon. Madhuri Dixit could easily metamorphose from the ideal Indian woman of the middle-class imaginary to a seductive vamp of the collective unconscious.

Economic liberalization in India also transformed India’s media landscape. Bose’s book deftly situates the rise of Madhuri’s stardom in material transformations in the Indian media sphere

such as the rise of film promotionals on television, cassette culture, and the emergence of video technologies (Madhuri's 1994 film, *Hum Aap Ke Hain Kaun..!*, was a tribute to video aesthetics).

She notes:

The Indian mediascape transformed dramatically between the 1980s and 2000 with the exponential development and growth of the audio and video-cassette industry and the spread of commercial television as a consequence of economic liberalisation, privatisation of media and a gradual turn towards the implementation of neo-liberal policies by the state in the early 1990s (43).

These are not the only material processes that Bose locates in situating the Madhuri phenomenon.

In Chapter 1, Bose writes:

...Madhuri's star phenomenon should be examined in terms of a collaborative process of assemblage involving several influential male mentors and personnel (namely, the director/producer and 'star-maker' Subhash Ghai, producer Boney Kapoor and his brother, the star Anil Kapoor, and her manager Rakesh Nath), and creative collaborators (choreographer Saroj Khan) who took a keen personal interest in the advancement of her career, and closely collaborated with each other to relaunch, nurture, and produce a star who eventually became short-hand for 'Bollywood' glamour, box-office success and mass appeal. (18)

The strength of Bose's book is that it focuses on Madhuri's star persona by exploring relations between her personal history, ethnicity, class, education, and larger political and social processes in 1980s and 1990s India. What contributed to Madhuri's rise is her conservative Maharashtrian Brahmin background at a time when the right-wing political party Shiv Sena was increasingly asserting itself in Maharashtra politics in the name of Maratha pride and Hindu nationalism. But Bose also takes such contingencies of Madhuri's personal life as her early marriage, the relation to her family and a constant indifference to film gossip as significant factors in shaping her public persona as the good middle-class girl (the media never tired of recalling her interest in studying microbiology) just as Aamir Khan's star persona was built around this time as a good middle-class boy. Bose also foregrounds the role of mentors such as Subhash Ghai and credits her managerial staff such as the ever-reliable Rakesh Nath (Rikkuji), as well as her hairdresser, Khatoon, as having

contributed immensely to her success. Surveying Madhuri Dixit's film-making career, Bose concludes that Madhuri represented a wholesome and traditional figure of Hindu femininity in the 1990s that resonated across class hierarchies at a time of great economic and social change. As

Bose puts it:

Extra-textually she projected the squeaky clean image of a stereotypical 'Pavitra Hindu nari' (pure Hindu woman) of popular Hindi cinema – thereby conforming to regressive, neo-conservative Hindu nationalist ideologies of denying/controlling/erasing manifestations of female sexuality that had gained populist and political momentum at the time (42).

For instance, Bose points out that many of Madhuri's memorable characters had names shared with Hindu goddesses such as Gauri in *Khalnayak* or Mohini in *Tezaab*. Madhuri's only memorable role as a Muslim is as the cunning Begum in her late career, *Dedh Ishqiya* (2014). The Hindu religious nationalism of Madhuri's films is less obvious in *Tezaab* and more so in *Khalnayak* (it was a key element of her mentor Subhash Ghai's cinema in the 1980s and early 1990s). One of the key insights of Bose's understanding of the rise of the Madhuri phenomenon is her study of its connections to the rise of Hindu religious nationalism. Yet Madhuri's success also depended on subverting religio-cultural stereotypes through the frames of masquerade and erotic dance sequences. Bose's approach in situating Madhuri Dixit's stardom in the larger cultural and political processes, however, runs the risk of undermining Madhuri's film performances and the roles individual films played in her stardom. Madhuri's acting is one aspect of her career which is neglected in this book. So is a discussion of the films which made her such an iconic star such as *Tezaab*, *Khalnayak*, and *Hum Aapke Hain Koun*. That is another book on Madhuri Dixit waiting to be written. As Bose points out towards the end of her study, Madhuri Dixit of 1988 is not the same as the Madhuri Dixit of 1994 or even 2022. Madhuri Dixit's celebrity persona has transformed over the decades and is likely to keep changing into the future.