

Participation of Bollywood Film Stars in Indian Politics- A Recent Phenomenon

Polly Datta

Department of History, South Asia Institute, Heidelberg University¹



The participation of political leaders in film is relatively rare, however, the emergence of film stars in political life has become endemic not only in India but in most parts of the world. The former President of the United States, Ronald Reagan, was a well-known actor while Arnold Schwarzenegger was recently elected to the Governorship of California, a post once held by Ronald Reagan. In India there have been many more examples while film as an entertainment medium occupies a major role in Indian society. If one considers elections as a battle, it is often thought that people with charm and good looks would have a natural ability to attract voters. But the question remains whether political battle is a mere spectacle or has a greater role to play. If we consider that politics, like other professions, has its own decorum and depth it is expected that political leaders would perceive politics beyond this narrow role of a spectacle which is attached to it.

The 14th Lok Sabha poll (Parliamentary election) of India held in May 2004 appeared to have become a film stars war. India, the world's biggest democracy, had an overwhelming share of glamour from Bollywood during the past election. No less than seven actors/actresses stood as candidates holding either the Congress or the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) tickets and as many as 29 stars were engaged in campaigning for mainly these two parties. Even a small party like the Samajvadi party led by Mulayam Singh Yadav in Uttar Pradesh also had its fair share of film stars as candidates or campaigners. The victorious candidates from Bollywood also include as many as 6 candidates who contested from different parts of India for either the BJP or the Congress.

Recruiting film stars as another means of attracting voters.

Usually during the election time political parties gear up to attract voters by all means and electoral battle is fought on various issues. Recently all political parties except the Left block seem to feel that their politics alone is insufficient to get their message across to the voters. Thus recourse to recruiting film stars to get votes has become another important phenomenon in Indian politics. With every election such urgency of having to resort to add some glamour to the campaign process was felt increasingly necessary as not many politicians could hope to attract people to their election rallies unless major leaders from their party are in attendance. Thus it seems that political appeal generally has reached a plateau and fails to attract voters which means political parties like the BJP and the Congress need to rely on apolitical means such as recruiting film stars from Bollywood.

¹ The author has completed a Ph.D from the South Asia Institute, Heidelberg University, Germany.
Email: pollydatta1@yahoo.com

Evidently, it is the BJP that seems to have gone overboard in its drive to cash in on the popularity of the cine-stars and initiated the process of inviting Bollywood film stars in massive numbers. Therefore, the recently held 14th Lok Sabha election of India experienced a huge participation of Bollywood stars, and filmstars were also recruited to campaign for the BJP and the Congress in different State elections held in 2002 and 2003. Although the BJP seems to have initiated the process of engaging film stars for their own political campaigns, the beginning of such a phenomenon started much earlier. The former Congress Prime Minister late Rajiv Gandhi, asked his friend and legendary figure of Bollywood, Amitabh Bachchan to join the Congress and fight as a Member of Parliament (MP) from Uttar Pradesh as far back as in 1984. During the last two decades few Bollywood film stars joined either the Congress and the BJP and integrated themselves into these political parties. Nevertheless, the Indian political scene has never been so over-crowded by Bollywood stars as has been the case during the last two years particularly since the 14th Lok Sabha poll. This trend of massive and sudden participation of Bollywood stars has brought about both a qualitative and quantitative change in Indian politics.

The greater urgency felt by the BJP to recruit film stars in massive numbers for political campaigns, however, indicates the emptiness of their political appeal to the electorate. The BJP seems to suffer from lack of issues to be raised to attract voters. Since the late 1980s the BJP, a well known Hindu fundamentalist party relied largely on the politics of hatred towards other minor religious groups, mainly Muslims. The BJP started upholding Hindu religion, traditions and proclaimed the monolithic structure of Indian civilisation by discarding the contribution of other religions in Indian civilisation particularly Muslims. It thus established a pro-Hindu stand by also committing violence against other minority religious groups which was so far mainly directed against Muslims and to certain extent Christians. The riots in Gujarat, in 2002 is one of the examples in this respect. International as well as all national media and also the recent verdict of the Supreme Court of India stated that the riots in Gujarat were an act of genocide that evidently tarnished the image of the BJP and seemed to have depleted their support base.

However, moderates within the BJP argue that if the party has to rule a country like India which is the largest and the biggest democracy in the world and consists of many religious groups, then it has to soften its anti-Muslim rhetoric as well as opposition to other small religious groups. Thus pragmatic considerations of being in the Central government limit the BJP in pursuing policies such as the complete Hinduisation of India and committing violence towards other religious groups. But important allies of the BJP like Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangha (RSS) and Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) which are hardline Hindu organisations, constantly put pressure on the BJP to continue a hardcore stance against other religions, particularly on the Muslim question. The BJP seemed to have caught between these two compulsions and was in a great dilemma. On the one hand it had to play a role of responsible government while on the other hand it had to satisfy its Hindu supporters by relying more on an anti-Muslim line. In course of time the BJP could neither satisfy its Hindu supporters who expected more hard lines from the BJP, nor did its image in the eyes of democratic and secular sections of people get better. Instead, the BJP was accused of patronising Muslims by Hindu fundamentalists while on the other hand democratic forces condemned the BJP as a Hindu communal party. Thus the BJP, a single issue party, appeared to be suffering from a lack of issues and policies which were required to engage the electorate in the

recently held Parliamentary election. It appears that a vacuum in their political philosophy has led them to resort to recruiting film stars.

Although initially the Congress was not so keen on recruiting film stars they responded quickly with the changed political situation and started inviting Bollywood stars to campaign for their party while they were afraid of falling far behind in the race to attract the electorate. According to some Congress convenors the reason why they did not get actors and actresses to campaign for them was because their policies speak for themselves therefore they do not need crowd pullers. But, many feel that one of the main reasons for showing less interest in inviting film stars to promote Congress, however, could be that Gandhi family still has charm and acceptance among the Indian masses. Sonia Gandhi, the Italian-born widow of Rajiv Gandhi, former Prime Minister of India, was said to have brought fresh breeze and enthusiasm since the late 1990s to the moribund Congress party. Political analysts feel that a touch of 'Gandhi' name still works wonders in Indian politics. In addition, the participation of the daughter and son of late Rajiv Gandhi, Priyanka and Rahul, in the Congress party appears to add much glamour in recent times and has thus made the Congress leaders less enthusiastic about wooing film stars to the Congress banner. One Congress leader said "we were not keen to recruit filmstars. But when the BJP began roping in them we were compelled to take them"¹ and added that stars add colour to the campaign. S Vishwanathan, a well known sociologist, observes that "this is all about reducing politics to a spectacle. This election is like a plot-less message-less political movie which needs extras (politicians) to liven up the proceedings"²

The political commitment of these stars and their political durability have been doubted by many while both politics and acting are assignments of full time engagement. Consequently, one may have to choose only one between these two either to serve politics or continue the profession as an actor or actress. Most film actors, however, have been reluctant to quit their profession. As Dharmendra, a legendary actor in the Indian film world who was elected MP in the Lok Sabha election on a BJP ticket, said to the press: "films had made me what I am"³ and therefore, he refused to quit film after having joined politics. According to some, these film stars bank largely on their Bollywood glamour and this seems to be their main asset to attract crowds and hence voters. Thus quitting the film industry would make them valueless and ordinary to the voters. They are reluctant to take risks and instead would like to strike a balance between the two. Politicians would utilise their glamour and conversely they would utilise politicians in order to secure their interests. Thus there are advantages for both the actors and the political parties in this arrangement. For the film stars, they can keep themselves in the public eye, boost their profile and strengthen their appeal. Meanwhile, political parties can attract crowds due to the presence of the film stars. Thus it appears that many of India's top film stars are associated more with an image than any firm political convictions.

Are film stars an integral part of Indian politics?

The recent trend of the participation of Bollywood stars in Indian, particularly north Indian, politics aroused scepticism among many, but almost all political analysts seem to agree on the important role played and considerable contributions made by many film actors and actresses of southern India in the political

development in that region. Thus when political analysts are sceptical about Bollywood film stars joining politics and expressed doubts about their political sincerity, at the same time they admit that the situation prevailing in southern India is strikingly different from the rest of the India. In southern India the line between politics and cinema has been traditionally blurred and film is both entertainment and an indicator of political movements. In fact political movement often takes precedence. Contrary to the situation in south India, political analysts are unsure how long Bollywood film stars would stay in politics. Amitabh Bachchan, former Congress MP and legendary figure of the Indian film world won a parliamentary seat in Uttar Pradesh in 1984. Eventually he found the world of politics too murky and now keeps a safe distance from it.

We may recall the comments made by Vishwanathan “A Bollywood star joining politics is more of a spectacle around a charismatic personality. He or she is not a catalyst of change”⁴. Thus analysts like Mr. Vishwanathan have no doubt that the majority of these stars will vanish into thin air once elections are over, even though almost all film stars insist that they will remain in politics. History, however, says otherwise. West Bengal, one of the important centres of the Communist movement, has not so far witnessed the emergence of film stars into politics in a big way. However, in the last Legislative election held in 2001, the Trinamul Congress led by Mrs. Mamata Banerjee, an important ally of the BJP, invited a number of Bengali film stars to join politics. Those who managed to win remained in politics but those who were defeated quit politics immediately. In the recently held Parliament election the same trend has continued; two famous Bollywood film actresses were invited by the Congress to contest with their ticket; both of them lost the election and left Calcutta shortly after their defeat was declared. However, there are couple of other film actors and actresses who managed to become committed politicians like Raj Babbar (Samajvadi Party), the late Sunil Dutt (Congress), Vinod Khanna (Congress), Shatrughan Sinha (BJP). And well known film actress Shabana Azmi has taken up many social issues from time to time and before eventually being nominated as a member of Rajya Sabha, the upper chamber of Parliament.

Nevertheless, “Bollywood stars still have a long way to match their counterparts in south India, especially Tamil Nadu, where the main political parties were founded by actors and scriptwriters of the cine-world. Former Tamil Nadu Chief Minister C.N Annadurai , founder of DMK, was a popular scriptwriter. He was succeeded by M.K Karunanidhi who was also a powerful scriptwriter. The rival AIADMK was also founded by screen idol M.G. Ramachandran and on his death in 1988, there was a tussle for its leadership between two actresses, Janaki Raamachandran, his widow and Jayalalithaa, his co-star and protege. In neighbouring Andhra Pradesh, matinee idol N. T. Rama Rao founded the Telugu Desam Party and was elected twice until he was toppled by his son-in-law Chandrababu Naidu”⁵.

Are film stars really vote catchers?

The question, however, arises as to what extent political parties can profit from recruiting these stars i.e., the extent to which they are successful to transform their glamour to votes. Over the past few years, the BJP and the Congress have both been recruiting a number of Bollywood film stars to add fizz to their campaign. But after the first phase of the campaign was over many BJP leaders admitted that their

stars were in poor demand. Many BJP candidates simply refused to take film stars as campaigners; instead every BJP candidate had put in request for rallies to be addressed either by the then Prime Minister Vajpayee or Deputy Prime Minister Advani. Seemingly, leaders were in much greater demand than film stars. It was also argued by many BJP activists that the campaign value of leaders like Vajpayee and Advani cannot be compared with those of film stars. As a BJP leader bluntly said, the stars are beauties without brains. They hardly help in getting more votes and also do not increase chances of winning elections by adding star value to the campaign. The BJP election strategy team has also observed that the voters do not always connect with many film stars and their presence in the political campaign may not translate into votes⁶. Considering the opinions of some voters, it was also revealed that most Bollywood stars draw crowds, not necessarily voters.

Illusionary images created by Bollywood film stars

However, it is felt that there must be some appeal of the Bollywood stars to the electorate, or else they would not in demand from political parties. A large section of uneducated and/or ill-educated poor and middle classes in a developing country like India, largely depend on the film industries as their cheapest source of entertainment. These films also project their earnest desire to escape from their daily struggle for existence and work as massive outlet for their anger caused by injustices they experience in their daily lives for reasons varying from weak law enforcement, to corruption and administrative patronage. Thus film stars not only entertain them by arousing their fantasies, sexual and otherwise, but also seem to embody their salvation and protection from these injustices, leading them to their dream world of wish fulfilment and material abundance.

Dharmendra, one of the most popular film stars elected as BJP MP recently said. "I do not know anything about BJP's political philosophy, all I know is that if I were to be dictator for five years I would clear up this mess".⁷ Seemingly, the BJP leaders were quite embarrassed. But Dharmendra argued that part of his appeal was the way the public perceived him, in his career roles as an effective law enforcer who clears up the mess of society. In fact, he emphasised this aspect in contrast to most politicians, some of whom are widely distrusted.

Most Hindi films are based on the story of one man's heroism in fighting against injustice and odds that common people have been facing every day. In contrast, politics seems to be a more complicated process and they cannot see an immediate solution to their problems, as one level of (the State) government can hold a higher level of government (the Centre) responsible for any crisis, thereby washing their hands off it. Therefore, it often becomes difficult for common people to identify 'culprits'. Hindi films ignore such complications and provide easy solutions to the immediate problems faced by the people, particularly people from the lower middle classes and poorer sections.

Often in Hindi films the police, mafia and political leadership form a nexus which tarnishes the image of politicians; the hero often fights these evils alone without any mass mobilisation under any political banner. Instead, the film hero establishes justice by the dint of his courage and showmanship. One such Hindi film made in the mid-1980s portrayed a hero entering the Parliament building in the middle of a session and killing parliamentarians, eventually destroying the whole parliamentary

system in order to establish 'justice'. People begin to identify with the hero who can fight against corrupted politicians and can bring justice to their lives; such expectation can spill over to real life when the hero himself joins politics. Thus the difference between fantasy and reality gets increasingly blurred.

Since the mid-1990s, with the emergence of Hindu fundamentalism under the banner of the BJP and the RSS, Bollywood stars and also some television stars seem to play another important role in Indian politics. Needless to say, religion has almost always been a determining factor in Indian elections. Almost all political parties from extreme Hindu or Muslim right wing groups to moderates like Congress and other regional parties, including Communist parties like CPI and the CPI(M) play the religion card for their own political gains in different degrees. Thus it is no wonder that the BJP, would utilise the mass entertainment media such as TV channels and films for their own political interest. From the mid-1980s, Indian films and television channels were overflowing with Hindu mythological stories as an act of reinforcing religious beliefs in lives of the people. Interestingly enough, the actors and actresses of such films and religious operas of TV have almost all, subsequently, joined the BJP. It is, however, difficult to say whether these were spontaneous acts by these stars or the result of a conscious endeavour of the BJP to bring them into their party. It was widely reported that many of these actors and actresses who portrayed screen gods and goddesses were eventually identified with these Hindu gods and goddesses and were worshipped by rural crowds whenever they campaigned for the BJP. Thus film stars, in recent times, have been able to widen their appeal and are identified not only as saviours, protectors and entertainers, but also as (largely by poor people), gods and goddesses. This is how film stars are increasingly becoming more effective in their role of pulling crowds and translating their appeal into the ballot box.

Are film stars well informed about Indian politics?

Some film stars display immense ignorance of recent Indian politics and basic Indian history and this has become a major concern of political parties who are keen on recruiting them. Some Congress leaders felt that film stars do not add to the votes as many of them are ignorant of the basic tenets of the Indian Parliamentary system. Therefore, a section of Congress leaders feared that film stars who campaigned for the party's candidates, might sometimes become an embarrassment for the party rather than an asset. Many stars who have joined different parties have sometimes shown ignorance about not only Indian history and important events of Indian politics, but lack of clarity even about their own party's political stand.⁸ Some BJP leaders too believe that most stars are not familiar with the realities of Indian politics. In contrast, however, stars like Shatrughan Sinha and Vinod Khanna who have been in the BJP for a long time, have been known to articulate the party's position well to the electorate and both of them are, consequently, in great demand.

Many politicians do not agree that film stars cannot play any serious and effective role in Indian politics other than attracting voters through their charm and illusionary images. A Congress party parliamentarian and film producer who claimed to have signed 14 film stars to his party said that the actors are more politically conscious today. Previously film stars did not read about and show interest in politics. Today they are educated and understand politics. Later on though he candidly admitted that every star can attract crowds this is why they are

mainly in demand. In the same article, an actress emphasised that "...stars can motivate people, highlight a cause, or raise funds for a project easily because people love us. We can be so much good use"⁹.

The recent influx of Bollywood filmstars in the Indian political scene is a phenomenon that has surprised many and eventually given rise to a number of questions. Although the phenomenon of Bollywood stars joining politics is not completely new and film stars have joined politics from time to time, mostly with the Congress and the BJP, Most of these stars-turned-politicians have eventually strengthened their position in politics by articulating their political stand well. Nevertheless, such trends were a marginal phenomenon of Indian politics rather than a central one, and did not attract the considerable attention that it has recently.

The situation, however, prevailing in southern India is quite different from the situation prevailing in the rest of India. In the south the difference between politics and cinema has become increasingly blurred over many years. Many important film personalities have played critical roles in south Indian politics. Their commitment to politics has gone beyond the act of spectacle, and has been a reflection of their conviction to remain in politics for a long time, unlike their counterparts in Bollywood.

Thus while there cannot be an argument against Bollywood stars joining politics like other people from other professions, the use of film stars by politicians for their immediate gains in attracting crowds is a matter which gives rise to concern. As does the tendency among film stars to use politics as a platform of enhancing their charm and appeal in the public eye. It is only in the future that we shall know if Bollywood stars play as important a part in Indian politics as their counterparts in southern India, instead of confining their roles to mere crowd-pulling.

References

- Bollywood to Spice up Polls in Meghalaya*, The Indian Express, 12 June 2004
Bollywood Glamour in Indian Politics, BBC News, 6 May 2004, www.bbc.co.uk
Bollywood Stars Enliven Indian Polls BBC News 11 February 2002, www.bbc.co.uk
Star Campaigners from Bollywood Set to Storm Orissa, Deccan Herald, 12 April 2004
Stars to Light Up Poll Campaign, Deccan Herald, 2 November, 2003
Movies are a Dream World, Politics is Tough Work, Deccan Herald, 22 April 2004
Indian Elections: Good Day-Bad Day, BBC News, 2 June 2004, www.bbc.co.uk
Bollywood Stars Draw Crowds, Not Necessarily Votes, The Hindustan Times, 26 November, 2003
Bollywood Stars Take New Roles, www.news24.com, 18 May 2004
Lok Sabha Polls or Star Wars?, www.smashits.com, 8 June 2004
Bollywood and Politics: Marriage or an Affair, BBC News, 1 April 2004, www.bbc.co.uk
Stars are Beauties without Brains, 19 April 2004, www.rediff.com
Star Wars, www.Indian-elections.com

Notes

- ¹ *Stars are Beautiful Without Brains*, www.rediff.com, April 19, 2004
- ² *Bollywood and Politics: Marriage or An Affair*, BBC News, April, 1, 2004.
- ³ See *Movies are a Real World, Politics is Tough Work*, Deccan Herald, April 22, 2004
- ⁴ *Bollywood and Politics: Marriage or an Affair*, BBC News, April, 1, 2004
- ⁵ *Lok Sabha Polls or Star Wars?*, www.smashits.com, June 8, 2004.
- ⁶ *Stars are Beautiful Without Brains*, www.rediff.com, April 19, 2004
- ⁷ *Bollywood glamour in Indian Elections*, BBC News, 6th May 2004.
- ⁸ *Stars are Beauties Without Brains*, www. rediff.com, April 19, 2004
- ⁹ See *Bollywood and Politics: Marriage or An Affair?*, BBC News, April 1, 2004