Educators as Tropes of the Nation- Mediators of Nation-State’s Ideological Discourses in Popular Hindi Films

Samarpita Ghosh Ray
Assistant Professor in Sociology, Rani Birla Girls’ College, Kolkata.

Abstract
Teachers are active human agents of educational system through whom knowledge is imparted to learners or recipients. This paper seeks to explore how the popular cinematic domain, qualitatively divergent from the prosaic pedantry and pedagogical gravitas of the educational system, have deployed heroes functioning as tropes of the nation who have articulated, or mediated ideological discourses in the roles of teachers, albeit in popular idiom. In other words the paper explores the narrative discourse of some chosen commercial Hindi films in which the role of the teacher acts as agents, embodiments or ‘speaking subjects’ of certain discourses of inclusive policy of education and secularism. These roles have become particularly significant as they are reminiscent of statist commitment to the ideals of inclusive welfare policies, democratization of educational opportunities, and an unified nationalist identity based upon secular ethos. These having been avowed political or Constitutional ideals at the statist level have waned under a retreatist state in its trajectory towards a neo-liberal regime or have been rendered fragile by political mobilization of religious identity. Resuscitating these ideals cinematically through the agency of star-power of the heroes allow them to assume a certain proto-statist status of guardianship.

[Keywords: Discourse, Articulation, Inclusion, Secular, Teacher, Mediator]

Introduction
A semiotic reading of heroes allow us to read them as signs who are discursively constructed or are located within the cinematic texts as tropes or embodiments of the nation’s discourse. As tropes these heroic bodies have a trans-temporality that are discursively constituted, re-constituted and grow by accretion across an inter-textual domain wherein a tropic hero is uncontrollable within films rather its discursive constitution place it in an inter-textual trajectory.(Mac Canell, 1982:10,27,62). The discursivity of the nation have sought personified articulations through valorised masculinity of heroics roles wherein heroes have been tropic devices or templates shaping the nation’s history or fighting its enemies.(Virdi,2004:8-11;87-8) The mediation of the nation-state’s discourse through the hero /stars (playing role of teachers, trainers or mentors or educators) are argued as per following analysis as embodiments of nation’s discourses marked by its spatio-temporal verities and contingencies.

The paper discusses the role of Amitabh Bachchan in ‘Black’ (2004), as a maverick educator of a differently- abled girl, teaching her to cope with her limitations and circumvent those challenges, while in ‘Mohabbatein’ (2001) he is a disciplinarian, patriarchal neo-conservative institutional head and in ‘Arakshan’(2011) seen as an educator empowering the socio-
economically disadvantaged learners impeded by hierarchical and elitist educational system. It also explores the role of Aamir Khan in ‘Taare Zameen Pe’ (2008) as a capacity builder of a student with innate learning deficiency of dyslexia enabling him to hone his talent in art. Shah Rukh Khan’s role in ‘Chak De India’ (2007) as a sports teacher/hockey coach act as a secular, altruistic, pivotal force behind integration of a plural and heterogeneous team fractured and fragmented along parochial lines, personalised considerations and recurrent past failures. Exploring the roles of these characters allow us to read them as veritable heroic embodiments of nation’s variegated discourses, though not in tandem, they act as tropes mediating on an enlargement of a progressive, inclusive, empowering and secular democracy addressing, through cinematic narratives, issues of special education, affirmative policy in education, incursion of right wing conservatism and reclaiming of a metaphorical secular, unified plane or a collective nationalist egalitarian competitive (sporting) space.

As human embodiments or agents of discourses these educators appear to act as invested ploys a ‘tactical elements or blocks operating in the field of force relations.’ (Foucault,1979, 101-102). Discursively constructed cinematic texts embedded within the larger socio-political and economic framework are genealogical accounts of power that inform the narrative, whereby in the Foucauldian sense these educators as enunciators functioning within the field of discursivity are governed by historically contingent rules of formation. (Foucault, 1970, xiv) and act as ‘Speaking Subjects’ (Foucault, 1981,61-62) who through their actions validates their roles as carriers or embodied agents of a certain discourse within a particular ‘discourse community’. Hegemonic agents mostly, these roles as educators, while affirming the dominant politico-economic discourses have often espoused and articulated alternative discourses that are either ‘inter-discursive’ or ‘intra-discursive’ strands (Foucault, 1972, :45). Hence, these discourses mediated through the performative rendition of heroes as agencies of education in certain films also quite differently espouse an alternative ideal within the popular cinematic domain; and emerge as registers of spatio-temporal realities or contingencies of the nation in the contested terrain of popular cultural space of commercial cinema- a site of interplay of competing discourses-hegemonic and contra-hegemonic as well.

**Mohabbatein (2000)—Contested Governmentality of Authoritarian Institutional Head and Rise of Free, Liberal Forces—Parallels to the Retreatist State and Neo-liberal Market-Driven Regime**

Mohabbatein opens a field of discursivity within the popular domain allowing for a hegemonic contestation between conservative patriarchal agent seeking to repress and regulate sexuality of young students, wherein the role played by Amitabh Bachchan as the disciplinarian educationist and institutional head-master of a residential high-school represents the embodiment of a neo-conservative Right wing force. Uday Shankar, the role played by Bachchan wields and exercises authoritative, stern, coercive and disciplinary control over students, and his investiture with supreme institutional power and his hierarchical world-view along with his ageing monumental corporality function as a metaphor of the statist phallic regime zealously poised as a vanguard of institutional and
The grandeur and majesty of his persona corresponded to the architectural magnificence of the elitist institution ‘Gurukul’, and also represents the anxiety of a conservative discourse counterpoised against errant, transgressive and rebellious masculine bodies (of students) whose sexuality the master seeks to discipline through a vigilant governmentality by rendering them into ‘docile bodies’ in Foucauldian sense (Foucault, 1977:194). The fast declining phallic state regime comes under the two-phased challenge of Aryaan, (Shah Rukh Khan) who rebels as a student by asserting his libidinous freedom by romancing Uday Shankar’s daughter Meghna while he was a student at ‘Gurukul’ and refused to be reined by institutional discipline and later he graduated to become a teacher in the school allowed his transgressive strategies to enable students in romantic escapades. Aryaan’s masculinity defined by the free, liberal spirit of an open market economy seeks to circumvent the rigidity of the statist/patriarchal discourse and usher a more liberated institutional regime and the school acts as a metaphorical site in this popular cinematic aspiration or impulse. The hegemonic conservative patriarchal statist force represented by the ageing head-master encounters an ideological assault and is seen ceding ground to a more liberal, uninhibited pliant and acquisitive masculinity played by the new-generation teacher representing the market driven socio-economic neo-liberal regime invested with the permissiveness of market-driven capitalism and its seductive power of consumption. Aryaan represents the market forces that favours gratifying impulse of a consumerist society and signals the state’s trajectory towards the neo-liberal regime. The latter’s market driven imperatives corresponded to his attempts first as stealthy and clandestine ones that got foiled by the disciplining proto-statist regime of Uda Shankar and finally a more assertive and confrontational challenge emerged before a waning and retreatist statist regime which it no longer could contain. Aryaan’s triumph vis-à-vis the conservative patriarchal Head Master is analogous to the protectionist Indian state reconciling to liberal democratic economic changes. Instead of disgracing the noble patriarchal stature of the proto-statist head-master, figuratively expressed and privileged by the towering symbolic star-power of Bachchan, is finally reconciled and negotiated with and with the mantle of guardianship bestowed upon Aryaan at denouement allow for an irretrievable retreat of the state and the pre-eminence gained by the liberal market driven forces. This also enables an articulation of the two ideological strands of Hindu conservatism and neo-liberal democracy. The conjoining of the two discursive strands was secured to give credence to the liberal policy of the Hindu –Right Bharatiya Janata Party- led government in the early 2000s and represented a re-invented reconciliation of Hindutva conservatism to align with the liberal regime. (Sen, ibid). The apparent contingent re-aligning and articulation of the two apparently antithetical discourses is best explainable by the ‘overflowing infinitude in the field of discursivity’ where there is no ‘closure’ and the ‘surplus of meaning secures partial fixation’ through such articulations. (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985 :110-11, 113)

**Taare Zameen Par (2008) and Aarakshan (2011)-Teacher as a Capacity Builder and Crusader of Change** - Parallels the call for an Inclusive Educational Agenda within an Expanding Democracy of the Nation-State
The film Taare Zameen Par allows for a re-reading of Paulo Freire’s celebrated work ‘Pedagogy Of The Oppressed’ (1970) wherein the little boy suffering from learning disability is the oppressed one within the discourse of mainstream school education and is subject to institutional and parental reprimands and sanctions. The mainstream system represents the ‘structure of domination’ (ibid,:29) Aamir Khan playing the role of Nikumbh an instructor for young children with developmental disabilities, has a teaching style that is markedly unconventional and his sensitivity allows him to motivate the reticent learner who suffers from dyslexia and as a good teacher he discerningly discovers the bo’s extra-ordinary artistic brilliance. Rejecting the conventional notions on academic merit and proficiency, Nikumbh explains the syndrome not as a sign of poor intelligence rather a different ability of processing information that is distinct from other children. Mentioning names of several famous personalities who suffered from it, he brought to fore the extra-ordinariness of the child in his creative abilities despite his cognitive inability to cope with the demands of school curriculum. Seeking permission from the Principal Nikumbh tutors the child to improve his reading and writing skills using remedial techniques developed by dyslexia specialists. Ishaan, the boy, responds to this mentoring through enhanced grades and growing interest and win laurels for his artistic talent and finally his parents take pride in him.

Dyslexia and other learning disabilities are not just mentally pathological but also social constructions of assigning a label or stigmatizing those who suffer from the same. Learning disability is a measure of the advanced capitalist society geared towards producing citizens who can effectively contribute to the capitalist society and its material gains. A cultural premium is ascribed to efficiency and scientific ability and commensurately those displaying a proficiency in associated skills remain valued and rewarded in the prevalent knowledge regime. Such a rational and calculated measure of learning abilities or disabilities is attributable to an American obsession with individualistic self-reliance and success. (Ranganathan, 2014,:33). Such a concern for learning disability in post-liberalization popular film is indubitably a testimony of the middle-class parents’ obsession with their wards’ future prospects and their apprehensions or fear of them being excluded by its competitive parameters. Here the role of the new teacher who challenges the parameters of conventional pedagogy of evaluating the differently-abled and his attempts directed at liberating the child from the oppressive schooling regime and enabling him to resurrect his creative abilities closely corresponds to Friere’s idea of an escape from a dominant ‘de-humanising’ education and an experience of liberation for both the teacher and taught. Unlike a teacher who is complicit with the oppressive system the teacher charts a ‘pedagogy of liberation’ through a ‘critical discovery’ of the child’s other abilities. (ibid,:30) Charting a different ‘praxis’ (ibid,:33) of teaching and engaging the learner in a dialogical relation the teacher provides an ‘affirmation of the need for critical intervention’. (ibid,:35).Unlike treating the child as a ‘receptacle’ or a ‘depository’ of the ’banking’ system of education to be ‘filled’ by knowledge disseminated by the teacher (ibid,:53), Nikumbh acts as a catalytic agent to ‘stimulate’ Ishaan’s critical faculties’ (ibid.:55,65,). without alienating and objectifying his learning experiences.
Here parenthetically mention of the film ‘Black’ (2005) is necessitated where the personal trainer/mentor/teacher of a visually challenged girl enacted by Bachchan re-affirms the salience involved in the role of a teacher in enabling a differently-abled student. The teacher here seeks to render the girl self-sufficient in terms of her livelihood skills and transcend her marginalization within her family. Bachchan as an empowering agent is himself ailing and is parallel to the limitations of waning welfare programmes of the state.

‘Aarakshan’ as the name suggests supports affirmative policies to enhance the educational prospects of the socially disadvantaged groups. In this film the role of Amitabh Bachchan is akin to that of a crusader and the ideological support extended via the role of the non-partisan educationist re-affirmed the political correctness in the policy of reservation and the agenda of inclusive education. The success of the teacher in equipping backward students who otherwise lacked the means to afford a capital-intensive education re-kindles faith in affirmative actions provided through supplementary support or remedial classes. The success of the poor working class lower caste students tutored by the master interrogates the linkages between differential educational attainment and class and ethnic subcultures. The success of backward class/caste students devoid of ‘culture capital’ (Bourdieu, 1977) under the able tutelage of the master liberates academic ability from ascriptive, hereditary caste moorings. The film deploys the ‘tabela’ or cowshed (where the master fighting odds taught the backward caste/class students), as a metaphorical ploy to uphold the relevance of equalising educational opportunities for social mobility and by what may be also described as making it possible for all those who have the desire to be educated and the ability to benefit by that facility. (Gore, 1994:29)

The presence of parallel educational system in the form of expensive coaching centres and its collusion with political groups while cinematically explored provides powerful insights into the power structure maintaining caste-class nexus and the various illicit practices that seeks to defeat inclusive education by propping the privileged and entrenched groups (upper caste/class) with an unfair competitive edge obtainable through financial prowess alone. Dr. Prabhakar Anand, the committed educationist played by Bachchan crusades against this collusion of power and capital risking his own job and finally stood vindicated in his combative stance with his mentored students succeeding and him resuming his lost position.

In both the films like ‘Taare Zameen Par’ and ‘Aarakshan’ we see the two teachers speaking against social exclusion, discrimination and indirect deprivation of two different categories of learners, viz. differently-abled and socio-economically disadvantaged respectively. The consequences suffered due to such exclusion in our society are inimical as ‘...discouragement and lower self-confidence results in poor performance, or through direct routes that limit access to income or education that is mobility enhancing’. (Rao, 2010: 3). The everyday forms of exclusion in Indian society are institutionalized and have deeply entrenched forms manifest in behavioural practices and attitudes (Darapuri, 2010,:32-33). And in these two films there is a call for an inclusive education couched in a popular idiom, envisaging the possibilities of inclusion via positive actions to achieve equality, improved rights of access to the social and economic world, new opportunities, recovery of status,
reduced impact of disability, participation, social justice and so on. (ibid). The teachers in these films as redemptive agents or capacity-builders actively seek to challenge the stigma suffered by the excluded as ‘inferior’, ‘incapable’ or lower

The near-idealization of the teacher/mentor/educator across three films ‘Black’, ‘Taare Zameen Par’ and and ‘Aarakshan’ is that of a facilitator, a capacity-builder and communicator who signals a distinct departure from the earlier paternalistic type. This becomes significant against the backdrop of liberalization in India with the retreat of the state from its paternalistic welfare policies and its role as a basic provider or guarantor of entitlements. The state does not cease to be important, instead in a neo-liberal regime it has re-negotiated with the varied expectations of its constituencies of citizenry and acquired a re-defined role. (Kaviraj,2012 :45-6). The teacher here like the neo-liberal state bound by its trans-national financial commitments has no monopolistic control over its actions but rather copes and negotiates with multiple actors to secure the interest of its learners and the teacher here, is also in consonance with the attempts of the state and its expansive democratizing mandate as it seeks to secure for the weak, vulnerable and excluded viz. weaker sections, and differently-abled in ‘Aarakshan’, and ‘Taare Zameen Par’ respectively.

Chak De! India (2007)-Mentor as an Unifying Agent and Mobiliser of an Unified National Identity-Parallels the Resuscitating Impulse of Secular Discourse

The sports coach or mentor in Chak De India, played by Shah Rukh Khan, seeks to redeem and exculpate himself and exonerate his nationalist, secular and patriotic credentials after a long exile and ostracization of seven years which he suffered for aspersions cast on him as a Muslim traitor, who as a coach of the national hockey team treacherously allowed Pakistan’s victory over India. Taking up the challenge of coaching an under-performing and squabble-driven woman’s’ hockey team, the coach-mentor seeks to first unite the internally discordant fractious group by mobilizing it on the strength of national identity in a competitive bid against other nationalities. The marshalling of the team and forging of an unified spirit-a pluralist composition and a microcosmic nation was enabled through the pivotal role of the coach who came to re-affirm the idea of national community and unified national identity constituted through shared belief.( see,Miller2000, :27-8) His unifying and motivational role allowed to envision the collective goal of securing victory of the national team in an international sporting arena and it corresponds to the principle of ideal nationalism where the national and the political units are congruent.(Wayne , 2006,:24). The hero is an ideological antidote to the resurgent exclusionary rhetoric of Hindu revivalism or Hindu religio-cultural nationalism as it sought to de-escalate the brazen ness of majoritarian hegemony and introduced a revised secular-nationalist rhetoric that seeks to assimilate the alienated, vilified and ‘othered community’ of Muslims. The assimilative tenor embodied by the trainer gives credence to what is ‘....in more progressive was that invite individuals from minority communities to integrate into cultural mainstream, perhaps by modifying or thinning out the majority identity in what that make it possible for all citizens of the state to feel a part of the national community.’ (ibid) In this project of (popular) cultural politics played upon the cinematic site we see how the nation expands its secular borders and
nationalism in a bid to redeem and reclaim and dis- alienate the marginalized ‘muslim other’- via the hero. As international sporting events invoke nationalist sentiments and are sites to bolster national self-image, the hero emerges as a narrative ploy for the globalizing nation to imaginatively reproduce a competitive self-image in sporting arena in the guise of a renewed secularism.(ibid:25). Invested with agency the hero seeks to combat stereotypical construction of Muslim as potential terrorist or traitors and threat to the state. Fighting a battle of recrimination, suspicion or even accusation of transnational religious loyalties, the hero through his actions claims the centre-stage in the narrative of national identity building and reclaims the role of Muslims as equal stakeholders in nationalist secular projects, The film was a rebuttal to the contemporary spurt of cinematic narratives aimed to demonize Muslims as suspects of terror or treachery or constructed around Hindu/Muslim dichotomy or Indo-Pakistan discourse of animosity. In fact the ascendancy of Hindutva politics further bolstered by the electoral victory of the BJP in 1998 provided the right kind of political discourse that produced jingoistic films premised upon ethno-nationalism. Cinematic texts like ‘Roja’ stood as a precursor to this trend and later a continuum of narratives evolved on anti-Pak discourse beginning with Border (1997) and Sarfarosh(1999) and an exacerbated minoritisation and ‘othering’ of Muslims as terror suspects and the role of the anti-terror repressive and belligerent state became subsequent thematic concerns of films the followed like ‘Mission Kashmir’ (2000), Fiza(2000), Khakee’ (2004), ‘Fanaa’ (2006)(Singh, 2008,114-15)

Opposed to the non-secular right wing rhetoric of militaristic films avenging terror unleashed by Muslim as alleged traitors or agents of Pakistan, the film made under a changed political dispensation, with the nationalist Congress Party at the Centre was a significant departure towards a re- secularization of cinematic narratives. Shah Rukh’s role although focuses on the vulnerability and marginalization of the community emerged as an embodiment of the secular discourse, albeit fragile and assumed an agentic role or a mobilizer for forging and reprioritizing national identity over all fissiparous tendencies expressed via other identities-religious, linguistic and regional. (Wayne, ibid 25-6)

The patriotic discourse in this gravitates from warring aggressive belligerence or militarism to a celebrator sporting prowess of the nation via the role of the mentor-coach. Nationalism, nation-building and national identity had now an altered space or locale within cinematic discourse- as the hero transported it from the borders and the battle field to the sporting arena. Re-visiting the post-colonial pride of defeating the ‘White Team’ of Australian women the hero figuratively de-colonized the game of hockey on White Man’s colonized soil. Celebrating the national team’s victory under the able guardianship of a patriotic Muslim coach, fictionally though, the film resurrected secular ideology within the diegetic scope of commercial Hindi films. Chak De reinvokes the collective memory of India’s victory in 1983 at Lords in Cricket World Cup enabling a triumphant assertion of national victory in colonial sports to inform the cinematic text. The coach-mentor as an agent of this victory in the film rejuvenates this preserved memory of the nation in a global moment of nation’s competitiveness and seeks to reclaim the unflinching integrity of Muslim subject/citizen.
Conclusion

The discussion on the roles of educators positioned within the rubric or grid of power and knowledge, as invested with epistemic knowledge and acting as an agent or disseminator of knowledge either dominant/hegemonic or alternative/oppositional across several films as embodiments or ‘speaking subjects’ of discourses allow applying the Foucauldian frame of analysis. The argument of this paper is best captured in quoting the following passage: ‘...it is in discourse that power and knowledge are joined together. And for this reason, we must conceive discourse as a series of discontinuous segments whose tactical function is neither uniform nor stable. To be more precise, we must not imagine a world of discourse divided between accepted discourse and excluded discourse, or between the dominant discourse and the dominated one; but as a multiplicity of discursive elements that can come into play in various strategies....Discourses are not once and for all subservient to power or raised up against it, an more than silences are. We must make allowance for the complex and unstable process whereby discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power. But also a hindrance, a stumbling block. A point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy. Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it. (Foucault 1979:100-1).

The role of the stars/heroes as educators, trainers or mentor within the popular domain of cinematic space as ‘speaking subjects’ or embodiments of the nation’s discourses are either hegemonic or contra-hegemonic and while being complicit to power structure in some cases also produces alternative discourses or exposes the fissures within the power structure. A discursive interplay of two discourse-receding and emergent discourse on state’s role is played in the film Mohabbatein wherein the authoritarian and coercive state-hood is embodied by Amitabh Bachchan and conversely the role of Shah Rukh Khan in the same film is resonating in favour of the gratifying, uninhibited and acquisitive impulses of market-driven neo-liberal regime. The role of Aamir Khan and Amitabh Bachchan in ‘Taare Zameen Par’ and ‘Aarakshan’ respectively are embodiments of inclusive state policies and affirmative actions as part of an expansive democratizing mandate. The fragility of the secular agenda in face of secular-nationalism’s failure to erase trauma of partition and mitigate communal animosity does not preclude the imaginative transcendence of communal divides through the role of Shah Rukh Khan in Chak De as he is seen to mediate the attempt of the secular discourse to re-occupy the political/statist ground ceded to right-wing parties and recuperate the secular credentials of the Muslims by contesting the appropriation of the patriotic nationalist discourse by Hindutva led religio-nationalists.

References


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Filmography- includes films discussed within the scope of this paper.