



Did Bollywood write India's growth script?



FILMS DEPICT CHANGING ATTITUDES TO WEALTH



by Dr RAJ PERSAUD

EXACTLY why did India's economic miracle occur? Could the answer lie in hit Bollywood films?

An academic from the US has recently published a study which statistically analysed the most popular films in India each year since 1955, and found that characters of rich merchants have changed dramatically, from being portrayed as villains to now being heroes.

Nimish Adhia from Manhattanville College, New York, argues that the shift in who were villains and heroes in popular cinema is linked to a profound change in Indian society. It was this fundamental transformation in attitude to commerce, in the decade before liberalisation of the Indian economy, which might explain India becoming the economic powerhouse it is today.

Adhia contends that previously there was a deep Indian antipathy toward "trade", with deep roots in the caste system. Religious scholars (brahmins) were at the top of the caste hierarchy, followed by soldiers (the kshatriyas), merchants (the banyas) and peasants (the shudras).

He contends that Bollywood mirrors the psyche of Indians. The Indian film industry is the world's most prolific, producing more than 1,000 films year with a daily global viewership of over 12 million, second only to that of Hollywood.

The films chosen for this study entitled *The role of ideological change in India's economic liberalization*, are all winners of the Filmfare Best Film award, given to one Hindi film every year. These awards have similar prestige and popularity in Hindi cinema as the Oscars do in Hollywood. The Best Film is chosen through viewer polls and a panel of experts, so reflect a mixture of elite and popular approval.

A total of 52 films, one for each year from 1954 to 2007 (there were no awards in 1987 and 1988) were analysed in the study published in the *The Journal of Socio-Economics*.

Adhia argues that the dilemma of duty is recurrent in early Indian films. In the climax of *Mother India* (1957), a mother takes a stand on her wayward son. In *Deewar* (1975), a police officer finds he must cuff his beloved older brother. In *Upkaar* (1967), two brothers debate tilling their family farm or moving for better opportunities.

How these dilemmas are resolved, says Adhia, offers an insight into the prevalent values of the times. From the 1950s to the 1980s, he argues, the plot conundrums in Indian cinema invariably resolve in favour of duty.

The mother in *Mother India* shoots and kills her son as he attempts to kidnap a woman – an action that would have been shameful for the village. "I am the mother of the entire village," she says as she picks up the gun. She is shown to lament his death for the rest of her life, but the film idealises her as 'Mother India'.

But then, starting with *Ram Teri Ganga Maali* (1985), a spate of films arrived that celebrate the assertion of one's desire. This usually takes the form of falling in love.

The young lovers in the big hit *Qayamat Se Qayamat Tak* (1988) elope and endure enormous hardships because of their families' opposition. Similarly in *Ram Teri Ganga Maali*, *Maine Pyaar Kiya* (1989) and *Hum Hain Rahi Pyaar Ke* (1993), opposition to the romance arises from narrow concerns of class, status and language. But in the end, the lovers prevail.

In India of the 1980s, the pursuit of individual wants, needs and desires was gaining legitimacy. In *Jo Jeeta Wohi Sikander* (1992), Sanju (Aamir Khan) – who is initially the black sheep of his family – gains respect by winning a cycling competition. The race, argues Adhia, embodies individual effort, competition, and self-discipline.

While characters of earlier films had attained heroism through sacrifice to the in-

terests of family, village or nation, now the path to heroism lies in individual achievement.

Around the same time, the Best Film award-winning films begin to show businessmen as extraordinarily moral. For example, Ashok Mehra (Raj Babbar) in *Ghayal* (1990), who is the older brother of the film's hero, dies while trying to protect his business from being used as a cover for anti-social activities. *Maine Pyaar Kiya* and *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun* (1994) both revolve around families headed by benevolent, self-made industrialist patriarchs.

In contrast to the rich of the films from the 1950s, who were unfailingly wicked, the wealthy are now solicitous and magnanimous. In the plots of the films from the 1980s and 1990s, problems do not arise from actions related to the pursuit of wealth, but factors such as untimely deaths and envious outsiders. Wealth has become unproblematic.

To measure the portrayal of the rich businessmen systematically, Adhia analyses all male characters integral to the storylines of the films. Female characters are excluded because they are rarely shown to pursue a vocation, let alone run a business.

The analysis found the number of heroes as businessmen in popular Indian cinema has increased dramatically recently. The percentage of businessmen characters that are portrayed positively has increased, with an upsurge in the number of films toward the end of the 1980s and the early 1990s in which the occupation of the hero is that of a trader or business owner.

In the 1960s, not a single winner of the Filmfare Best Film award portrayed a hero who was a businessman, but by the 1990s, there were 11 heroes who were businessmen and only three who weren't, meaning almost 80 per cent of heroes by the 1990s were businessmen.

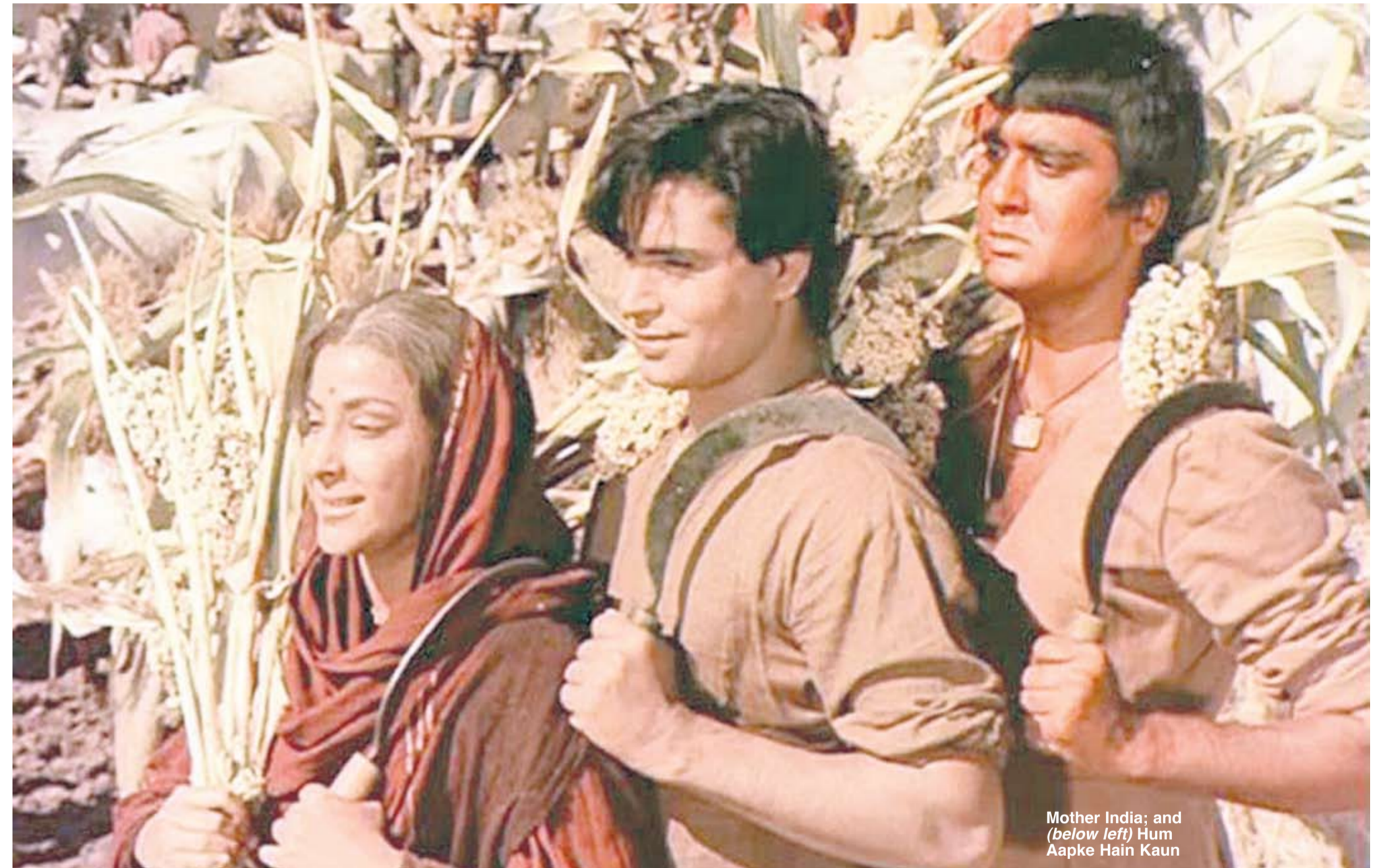
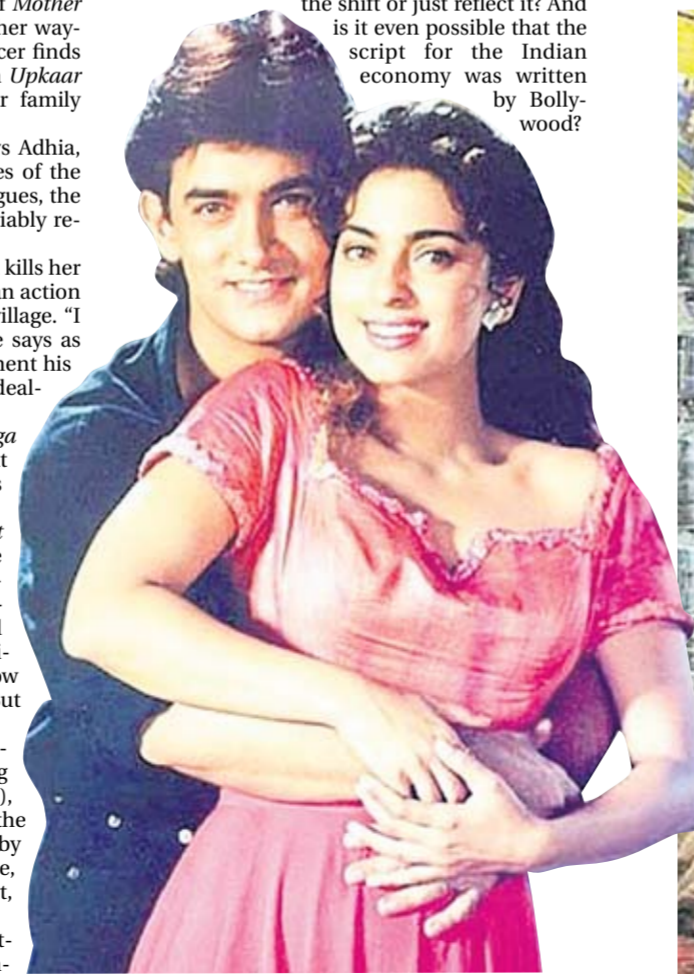
Also in the 1990s, there were 25 portrayals of businessmen in a positive manner and only four portrayals were negative, while in the 1970s there were twice as many negative portrayals of businessmen, in these films analysed, as there were positive depictions.

Adhia argues that the economy boomed after these significant changes in Indian cinema. He believes films reflect the cultural changes that were occurring in society, which anticipate the coming economic revolution.

But some will look at Adhia's data and come to a different conclusion. Did Indian cinema kickstart the shift or just reflect it? And is it even possible that the script for the Indian economy was written by Bollywood?



Maine Pyaar Kiya; and (right) Qayamat Se Qayamat Tak



Mother India; and (below left) Hum Aapke Hain Kaun



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