CHAPTER TEN

EXPLORING ANWAR: RELIGION, IDENTITY AND NATIONALISM

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Religion has become an extremely important identity marker in the post-9/11 world. In this climate, multicultural societies have had difficulty in becoming or remaining inclusive, often forcing religious minorities to live under constant threat of suspicion and distrust. In this chapter I examine the identity politics around ‘being a Muslim’ in contemporary India through an exploration of the critically acclaimed 2007 Bollywood movie Anwar. Although the marginalisation of Muslims as a religious minority has been touched upon in other recent Bollywood movies, Anwar for the first time talks of the issue explicitly and emphatically by firmly placing it within the larger geopolitical context. This chapter uses the movie to explore the articulations of voluntary and involuntary identities in their interaction with religion, gender and nationalism against the backdrop of communalism, party politics and exclusion in contemporary Indian society.

1. Bollywood Cinema

Bollywood movies, especially those belonging to mainstream Hindi cinema, have often been derided for being frivolous song and dance extravaganzas. There has been a tendency to argue that in a country like India where the majority of the population still lives in poverty, Bollywood cinema provides a means of escaping reality for people needing relief from the problems of everyday life. In fact, this has been a very strong discourse among both scholars and those involved in making these movies, for ‘justifying’ Bollywood movie practices (Ganti 2004). These sentiments are echoed, for instance, in the following excerpts by popular contemporary movie actors (Ministry of External Affairs 2008). When questioned about why they think Bollywood movies are so successful, leading Bollywood actor Abhishek Bachchan and actress Karisma Kapoor said:

It's tough; it's a hard life, here! Come into a cinema, sit under a fan, come give us three hours of your time and we'll change your mind for three hours and
let you escape into a ... maybe sometimes a surrealist world, time for which you won’t have to think about how to feed your family or how hot it is outside.

I think India has such a large population, with a variety of people, and I think they basically want a fantasy, after a hard day’s work of breaking their backs I think they go and want to watch something where they feel ‘wow!, I wish we could be a part of that!”

It is perhaps not a surprise that following this branding as escapist, Bollywood as a popular socio-cultural form has until recently not been considered worthy of much academic analysis and scholarship. Over the last decade or so, however, this has been changing with serious sociological investigation into the subject, emanating mostly, although certainly not exclusively, from Western academic circles (see Dudrah 2006). Along with this, there has also been a growing realisation that, even within the mainstream Bollywood form and sensibility, moviemakers have often tried to raise critical social issues whether related to patriarchy, communalism or other concerns.

According to Mishra (2002), the religious landscape portrayed in Indian movies has changed significantly over time. He identifies the 1977 movie *Amar, Akbar, Anthony*, which showed three brothers separated at birth and brought up as a Hindu, a Muslim and a Christian respectively, as the point of demarcation after which liberal communal politics began to recede in Bollywood movies. Although this has, on the one hand, limited the number of movies with significant Muslim characters, it has also led to a move away from simplistic glamorised plots. This, perhaps unwittingly, opened up a growing space for representing a more realistic image of the anti-secular currents in Indian politics and society, unlike the earlier decades when the issue of community relations was dealt with more in terms of an idealistic glorification (see Hirji 2008).

In fact, Bollywood has produced several landmark movies over the last two decades that have been vocal about marginalisation of religious minorities, particularly Muslims in Indian society. Some of the most noteworthy movies here include *Bombay* (1995), *Mission Kashmir* (2000), *Fiza* (2000) and *Dev* (2004), which have all in different ways raised the issue of the recent mistrust and stereotypes surrounding Muslims in India. Note that in this chapter, I am concentrating on movies focusing on Indian society and therefore do not include recent movies such as *New York* (2009) or *My Name is Khan* (2010), where the narrative is situated almost entirely in the United States. Thus, whether it was the character of a Muslim police officer whose loyalties to his duty are constantly under suspicion in