

## **”It’s all about loving your parents” The Reflection of Tradition, Modernity and Rituals in Popular Indian Movies**

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### **1. The variety of modernity**

Religion and rational, disenchanted modernity have been judged by the sociology of religion mainstream to be a tense dichotomy in the course of the common process of secularization. Only a few theoreticians such as David Martin, Thomas Luckmann, Peter Berger and Rodney Stark have disagreed with this widespread assumption on the grounds that there is no clear empirical evidence that religion is in the process of disappearing from modern societies. On a global scale, theorists often connect this question of modernity and secularisation with the problem of fundamentalism.

After Samuel P. Huntington (1996) stated that the clash of civilizations also implies religious aspects, his idea was contextualized with concepts of fundamentalism, which interpret religious fundamentalism as a backlash against Western modernity (Meyer 1989, Kuenzlen 1991, Tibi 1995). Although there is some good evidence for this view, it poses theoretical and also political problems in the context of a theory of modernity, and might tempt one to explain every opposition to modernity as a fundamentalist impulse (Kirloskar-Steinbach 2001, p. 8-14). We need to ask if this theoretical approach promotes an underlying assumption that – from a Western perspective – might identify every anti-Western position as anti-modern – anti-democratic, anti-pluralistic and anti-liberal – and consequently as a threat.

As a solution to this theoretical (and political) dilemma the Israeli sociologist Samuel N. Eisenstadt offers an alternative concept in his work *Die Vielfalt der Moderne* (“The Variety of Modernity”), which emanated from his Max Weber Lectures given in 1997 at the University of Heidelberg. In stark contrast to Francis Fukuyama (1991), who argues that a global world culture will replace local varieties, and to Huntington’s clash of cultures, Eisenstadt presents the idea of the polymorphism of modernity in its different cultural, religious, social and political contexts (Eisenstadt 2000). He draws on examples from Japan, the USA and Western Europe to demonstrate that modernity and religion are in many societies not completely opposed to one another. Thus, Christianity in the USA and new religious movements in Japan are quite compatible with a modern lifestyle. In the emerging epistemological debate it

becomes increasingly apparent that the notion of a rational and secular modernity only expresses a European ideal.

Since Eisenstadt also instances Asian societies (Eisenstadt 2000, 9-12) it seems to be a promising undertaking to focus upon Indian society. Using Eisenstadt's theoretical concept of a variety of modernities, we will analyse the function of religious rituals in Indian movies as a codified presentation of the conflicts between Indian tradition, Hindu religion and Western modernity.

## **2. Conflicts between tradition and modernity in India**

During the global process of economic and cultural exchange, Indian traditional and religious concepts of life are confronted with perceptions of a Western and modern way of life. India is the tenth largest industrial nation in the world and its computer industry employs as many or more software engineers as any other nation. From a Eurocentric perspective we might expect that the partial economic emancipation of the younger generation would simply overcome the traditional patriarchal social structures and its religious legitimation. But the Indian circumstances demand a historical perspective, taking into account the complex relationship of Indian traditions and Western modernity.

After the revolt of Indian soldiers miscarried in 1858 and Queen Victoria's power was restored – she later became empress of India – an ambivalent process of cultural approach and delimitation from England began. On the one hand more and more Indians were educated in colleges and heard the ideas of English liberalism put forth by Herbert Spencer and John Stuart Mill. Thus, many well educated Indians began to criticize their colonial governors using the liberal ideals of the western civilization – e.g. as the Parsi Dadabhai Naoroji, one of the first Indian nationalists, did in his book *Poverty and un-British rule in India* (1901).

On the other hand a new cultural and religious self-confidence arose among the Indian Hindus. By 1828 the Bengali Ram Mohan Roy had already founded the Hindu reform movement of the *brahmo samaj* and in 1875 Dayananda Sarasvati established the *arya samaj*, who turned against the abuses of the caste system referring to the "original" meaning of the *upanishads* and the *veda* as a basis for their revolt. The traditional religious powers, which had been organized in the *sanatana-dharma* movements since 1900, offered resistance to these reforms and rejected a radical departure from the traditional understanding of the Hindu religion. Adding to the turmoil within the different Hindu groups Swami Vivekananda, in a speech at the world congress of religions in Chicago (1893) implied that Indian spirituality was superior to western material and scientific strength. This re-awakening of a Hindu self-confidence was often understood as a blend of religious Hindu identity and national Indian identity, symbolized by the myth of the mother goddess *bharat mata* ("mother India"). In this context the reform movement of Mohandas K. Gandhi (1869-1948) must be mentioned. Referring to the ideals of the *bhagavad-gita* he made a strong effort for a social, economic, and political war of liberation from Great Britain. Although his mixture of religion and politics was unacceptable to his intellectual opponents, and there is still a strong secular

movement in Indian society (Vainak 2002), Gandhi was mostly a victim of Indian religious fundamentalism. His assassin was deeply influenced by the *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh* ("National Volunteers Association"), which struggled for Hindu unity. This movement, that has been banned several times for its opposition to Mohandas K. Gandhi and Indira Gandhi and its role in the destruction of the *Babri* mosque in Ayodhya in 1992, promotes the restoration of the so called *hindutva*, the spiritual and timeless identity of the Hindu nation. In explicit contrast to Islamic fundamentalism they do not want to isolate themselves from modernity, but fight against "western perversions" – licentiousness and materialism (Kirloskar-Steinbach 2001, p. 63-80).

After this brief review of the significance of religion in Indian history, it is most evident that Western culture's idea of modernity has been a strong reference point for religious and political developments in India for the last two centuries. While this confrontation between Western and Indian lifestyles has been historically presented, especially in Indian movies on the struggle for freedom, by showing impersonal stereotypes of British colonial rulers (or their henchmen) and their Indian counterparts (Kaul 1998), it seems as if recent movies portray modernity in the context of migration and globalization, e.g. the Film *Pardes* of 1997.

Although public and political conflicts play a central role in the Indian intellectual discourse, the problematic nature of tradition and modernity implies private aspects as well. Considering the fact that the family is the fundamental reference point in traditional societies, we may assume that family conflicts reflect the changes in the social life-world caused by the competition between traditional and western. It is quite obvious that issues such as marriage, the economic and social role of women, social aspects of gender equality, and the relationship between elders and their descendants are not only components of cinematic dramaturgy, but also palpable aspects of social change in real life – for a Hollywood example see movies like *Rebel without a Cause* (1955).

Although there are traditions of economically and politically engaged women in some regional contexts (Singh 2002), middle-class women (of the higher castes) are often socially disenfranchised and oppressed. The middle-class woman has to serve her high caste husband, who she worships as her "first god" (Gatwood 1991, p. 83-85). In a traditional understanding, marriage is an indispensable event of life. Hindus perceive (arranged) marriage as a holy and sacramental tie and not only as a contractual union: it is considered as a necessary sacrament (*samskar*) for begetting a son, for discharging the husband's debt to his ancestors and for performing religious and spiritual practices. As *arahagni* (half of him) the wife completes the man. Where as divorce has in the past been, as a matter of course, out of the question under Hindu law, today divorce is socially sanctioned but only men have the legal power to initiate it. (Diwan 1983, p. 31-35; Gatwood 1991, p. 85-88; Rao & Rao 1982, 14-18). If women dare to protest against their discrimination – for example in the case of rape, which is rarely prosecuted – their efforts are regarded as a breach of society's traditional harmony and order. And modern diagnostic procedures are used to prevent the "inferior" female progeny (Menon

1999, 53-55).

Concerning the matter of arranged marriages, we can observe that there is now more freedom in patterns of traditional mate selection. However, it is quite controversial, whether industrialization, urbanization and education as aspects of modernization will overcome the traditional patriarchal family structures, since there is empirical evidence in favor of both directions. The wider economic independence of the younger generation – and especially of women – indicates that the Indian family system is slowly becoming more flexible, but the demand of Indian women for emancipation pursues neither a totally secular society nor a purely religious ideal. While changes can be seen in the way the girls and boys are now allowed to participate in the marriage decision making process (a short formal visit, a brief conversation), the Indian family system maintains its basic character of adhering to traditional patterns of life (Mazumdar 1999, p. 10-14; Rao & Rao 1982, p. 18- 42).

Needless to say, tragic love stories – at times alluding to mythic themes as in *Savitri* (1923) – constitute the dramatic focus of most popular Indian movies (and indeed it is hard to find any Indian movies which abandon the telling of a love story) (Bhowmik 1995, p. 41-52). But staged in front of this dramatic backdrop the central conflicts of some films can be seen as a reflection on the ideals of Western modernity. In this context of the encounter of Indian tradition and Western modernity it is our intention to show the function of traditional Hindu rituals in some recent Indian movies.

### **3. Indian movies and cultural identity**

Every year more than 800 movies are produced in India and exported to China, East Asia and the whole Islamic world from Morocco to Indonesia. In recent years, some Indian films have even been shown in the cinematographic diaspora of Europe, Australia and the USA. The great success of Indian cinema can be traced back to an affinity for opulent dancing scenes, but also to the rigid censorship: kisses on the mouth, explicit sexuality and nudity are taboo. However, most notably, in the majority of cases the movies have a happy end. Up to now Western film critics have concentrated on the few socio-critical works of Indian directors, for instance the films *Salaam Bombay* (1988) or the current *Monsoon Wedding* by Mira Nair. This last film has been considered as the staging of the Indian conflict between tradition and modernity in the microcosm of a wedding party (Raweh 2002).

In my opinion, popular Indian movies reflect social conflicts between tradition and modernity just as much as the above mentioned works, and furthermore they often include a strong utopian notion – the vision of conciliation and harmony between the antagonistic powers: "Bollywood after all is not just a dream factory that belts out trashy material in the fashion of assembly line production. The potpourri despite itself, offers a glimpse of India's values, traditions, and contemporary events often in a unique formulaic package." (Kahn & Debroy 2002, p. 86; see also Kazmi 1999, p. 215-241).

Cultural, religious and social identities have always been interrelated and leading topics in Indian cinema. From the start, Indian filmmakers realized the possibilities of voicing

contemporary social and political concerns: Dhiren Ganguly attacked the Western way of life in his film *Bilet Pherat* aka *England Returned* of 1921 (Kahn & Debroy 2002, p. 86). Raj Kapoor's film *Shri 420* of 1955 became famous for illustrating rising social and cultural conflicts in the early process of India's postcolonial *modern times* (Parasher 2002, p. 105-148). Topics of identity and even fundamentalism in Indian movies have repeatedly been considered by Indian scholars (Chakravarty 1993, p. 18-52, Mishra 2002, p. 203-233), while the question of Indian identity in the diaspora confronted with Western modernity is a rather new perspective (Mishra 2002, p. 235-269).

Evidently Hindu rituals play a central role within the cinematic presentation of conflicts in recent films. Thus, focusing on rituals in popular Indian movies is not only a question of an unexplored issue in film analysis, but rather a highly significant aspect in the codified conflict of Hindu religion, Indian tradition and modernity, as Srivasta points out: "The idea of an 'unified' nation consisting of the construct of public ceremonies, symbols, institutions and discourses is of recent origin. It is paradoxical ... that traditions are used to justify the current social arrangements of a modern nation." (Srivastava 2002, p. 78-79)

#### **4. Rituals in popular Indian movies**

In my analysis I would like to draw attention to two very recent and popular Indian movies: *Mohabbatein* ("Love Stories") **and** *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham* (English title: *Sometimes Happy, Sometimes sad*). Regarding society as a complex of social relations and not only as an abstract concept, analysis of these films reveals the power of actual social structures or envisioned social ideals. It can also show existing collective perceptions of the world and conflicts of society's values with individual desires (Silbermann & Schaaf & Adam 1980, p.14-28). The following semantic contents analysis of *Mohabbatein* **and** *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham* focuses on the function of rituals in their particular context, considering primarily their semantic dimension. We may assume that here rituals play a role in the dialectic conflict in perceptions of Western modernity and Indian tradition.

*Mohabbatein* was released in October 2000. In this film Yash Chopra (\*1920), a well known Hindi director and producer of upper class love stories, brings "his" two great actors of recent Indian cinema together: the young and smart Shah Rukh Khan (\*1965) and one of the most famous Asian actors, the "Man of the Millennium" Amitabh Bachchan (\*1942) (Kazmi 1998, p. 98-105; Mishra 2002, p. 125-156). Chopra's son Aditya directed this 218 minute love-is-stronger-than-death melodrama.

The movie chronicles several love stories. First there is the tale of three college students who enter Gurukul – the best university in the country. When they fall in love with three young women, they come into direct conflict with the authoritarian headmaster of their prestigious college, Narayan Shankar (Amitabh Bachchan). An old man filled with bitterness, he encourages his students only to discipline, hard work, and excellence – love, feelings and fun are banned from the grounds of his college. A reception for the new students is held in an

impressive gothic hall and Narayan, elevated above his students and staff, speaks while the sun-like emblem of the college shines around his head like a mystic aureole:



### **Narayan Shankar speaks to his students**

”Tradition (*paramparam*), honor and discipline. These are the three pillars of Gurukul, the values with which we shape your future. Those who have been here have set very high standards for you ... Behind every great success lies a great sacrifice. By entering yourself into Gurukul you have shut yourself from the outside world ... if you have decided to stay here then that gate and the world outside does not exist for you anymore.”

Narayan’s antagonist is the new music teacher Raj Aryan (Shah Rukh Khan), who encourages his students not to betray their feelings and the longings of their heart. When Narayan first discovers Raj playing the violin, the headmaster complains about the noise. But Raj answers that he did not want to break the young girl’s heart who had insisted on listening to the instrument. ”It is more important not to break rules here”, is Narayan’s answer. The plot thickens when Narayan learns that some years ago Raj was his daughter’s *Megha*, great love.. She had committed suicide because she could neither be disobedient towards her father, who refused to allow a marriage, nor live any longer without Raj.

Notwithstanding the fact that these love stories could be told with great success in a

secular Hollywood manner (and it is no accident that many scenes remind us of Peter Weir's *Dead Poets Society* of 1989), the film contains many references based on a common understanding of the Hindu religion, expressed mostly by rituals. We may assume that there is a second symbolic structure of the movie besides the entertaining love stories.

Narayan – even his name sounds godlike – is not only presented as a traditional and bitter old headmaster, but also as a man who is aware of his religious duties. After the three young heroes enter Gurukul for the first time, Narayan Shankar attracts their attention while performing his ritual of greeting the sun in the morning (*suryanamaskar*). In a one minute scene, the camera shows close-ups of his praying hands, his mantra murmuring lips, and the sun reflected in his eyes.



**Narayan performing *suryanamaskar***

After the introduction of the main characters and the setting, the same ritual is repeated 60 minutes later in the movie. But this time Narayan is astounded to discover Raj standing close by, smiling blissfully with wide spread arms watching the sunrise and they get into a minor dispute over the ritual.



**Narayan watching Raj's unorthodox suryanamaskar**

Narayan: "What exactly are you doing?"

Raj: "The same thing that you are doing sir."

Narayan: "I am doing Suryanamaskar."

Raj: "So I am. Its just that you do it your way and I do it my way."

Narayan goes on, Raj follows him.

Raj: "Excuse me sir, I wanted to ask you, why do you do it."

Narayan: "It makes me feel good to stare directly to the sun without having to blink my eyes. I feel I am not weaker than the sun. I like it – why do you do it."

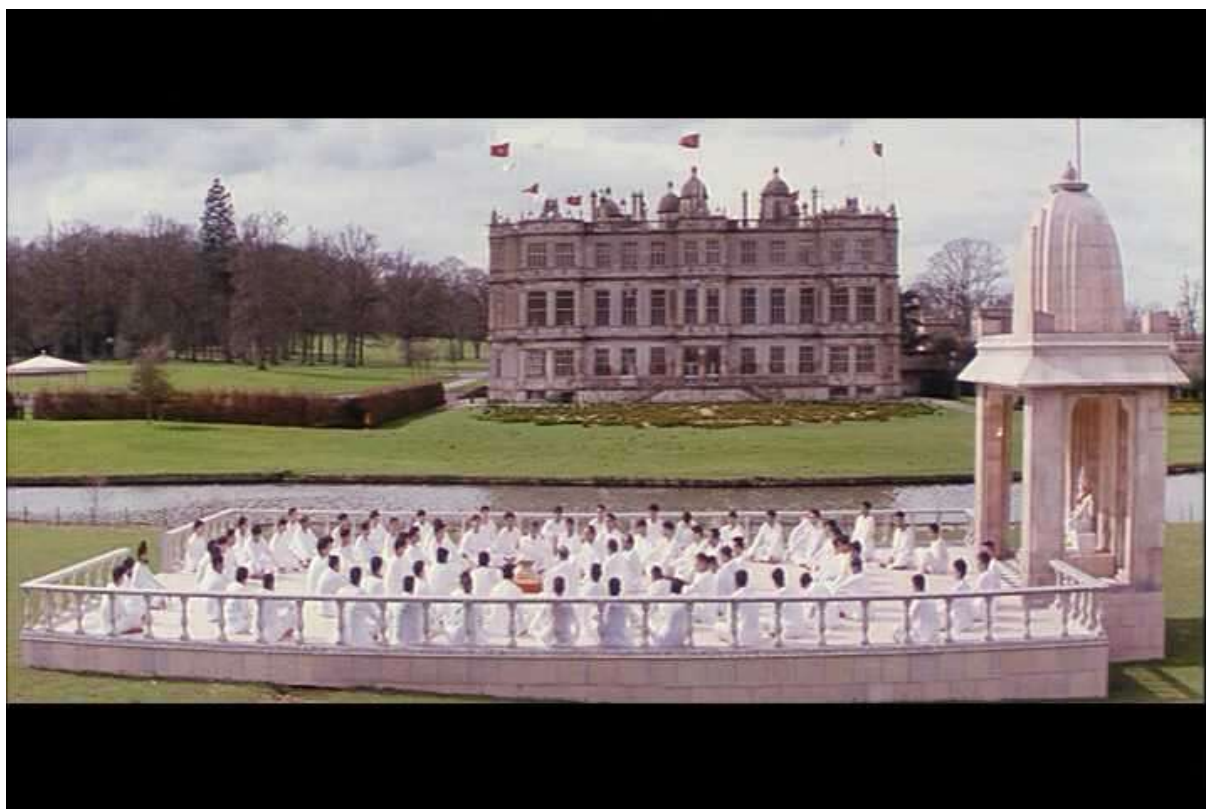
Raj: "Just like that sir, unlike you, I do not have a battle going on with the sun. I just enjoy basking in the sunshine, I call this Suryanamaskar."

At the end of this conversation Raj offers to mark Narayan's forehead with the holy *teeka* (also named *tilak* or *pundra* as the Hindu sign of social status) and both are emotionally touched by this traditional and familiar habit. But their conflict comes to a head when Raj arranges a wild dance party, including girls from the neighboring college. But relating to the *suryanamaskar* ritual, he assures that he will fight the battle for freedom and love in remembrance of Megha: "I promise you Mr. Shankar, by the time I leave I will fill this place with so much love that it will take you ten lifetimes to remove it. I will fill this place with so



much sunshine that a man who has been staring at the sun for 50 years, will have to blink.”

Then Narayan sits desolated in the dull great hall of his university and we see retrospectively his daughter Megha doing a *puja* (offering some candle lights, fruits, sweets) at the family altar in their former bright and pleasant house. Later Narayan assembles all his white clad students and staff in the college’s temple in order to perform a ritual for Shiva.



### **The students in the temple**

While they are reciting their mantras, Raj, clad in a sportsman-like leisure suit, stands outside and throws stones in the lake. After Narayan has dismissed all participants by distributing *prasadam* (holy, sacrificial food) he turns toward Raj and speaks::

Narayan: ”Next time I do not want to see you outside the temple.”

Raj: ”I’m sorry sir but I will not come into the temple. I have an old score to settle with him. He took the one person who believed in him the most.”

Narayan: ”Challenging us mortals was not enough for you, that you have decided to take on God.”

Raj: ”No sir, my God is conscience. I do not believe in any other God.”

Mirroring their first ritual meeting, Narayan now offers Raj some *prasadam* and after a short

debate, Raj accepts the sacred gift from the hands of his rival.

Finally, Raj recognizes that he has lost the battle since Narayan seems to have the full power to save all the traditions of honor and discipline within Gurukul. He starts to leave, but then, standing in front of the small Shiva temple, the deceased Megha appears and takes his hand to lead him inside the holy place where they pray together. In the following scene Narayan has also had a change of heart: in the same hall where he demanded tribute to tradition and discipline from his new students in the beginning of the film, he now confesses his total failure in front of the whole student body. He has lost the battle of life, because he has always acted without love. Then Narayan and Raj are able to reconcile and the movie ends, again with the ritual of *suryanamaskar*: but this time Narayan performs the ritual in the unorthodox posture Raj had used before – just basking the sun.



### **Narayan and Raj reconciliated**

It is quite evident that in *Mohabbatein* a conflict between tradition and modernity is staged – personally presented in the rivalry of Narayan Shankar and Raj Aryan. Narayan explicitly defends tradition and especially religious tradition, whereas Raj fights for the priority of an individual’s freewill. Referring to the idea of “arranged marriages” – a conventional topic of Indian movies – the dramatic focus of the love stories within the film confront the traditional claims of the family and social duties with the lovers demand for free choice in matters of love. But the opposition of tradition and modernity is not only presented by the characters, but also by the different scene locations. The collective location of tradition, the Gurukul (which is originally a term describing a religious school), is contrasted with the dancing gym of the women’s college and the marketplace with *Kake’s Cafe* at the very centre – the dancing gym

seems to be a place to vie for having the sexiest dance outfit, while the cafe is covered with large advertisements for Coca Cola. These are places of collective joy, confessions of love (mostly in love songs), dances and passion – combined with symbols of western modernity (women's outfits and western brands).

The ritual code of *Mohabhatein* is most relevant here since the rituals mark not only crucial points within the story, but also symbolize the conflict between tradition and modernity. First, the different manners of performing *suryanamaskar* at the beginning of the film reflect the conflict between tradition (Narayan) and individuality (Raj) – the temple scene even presents Raj as an agnostic, standing outside the community. But in defiance of recognizing their fundamental opposition they offer a gift (*teeka/prasadam*) to their antagonist in both these ritual scenes. On the one hand rituals here show the disturbances within the social community and on the other hand, rituals demonstrate their power of constituting community – even in moments of controversy. In this dramatic process of conciliation both opponents have to find a compromise and make concessions. Narayan has to admit his mistake of insisting on the blind following of tradition and discipline and of ignoring individual needs. And Raj has to make peace with God. Only then can they live in harmony again and express their new community by performing a ritual at the end of the film.

The second film, which deals with an interesting conflict between tradition and modernity, is Yash Johar's 220minuteblockbuster *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham*. This movie has even been in demand in smaller European cinemas, which is quite exceptional for a typical Indian movie. The director Karan Johar unites the most famous Indian actors of the day in this film, which premiered in December 2001. Amitabh Bachchan plays the multimillionaire Yash Raichand, Jaya Bachchan plays his wife Nandini, and Shah Rukh Khan and Hrithik Roshan are cast as their sons Rahul and Rohan along with India's most popular actress Kajol as Rahul's wife Anjali.

The story starts with a 90 minute long retrospective during which Rohan's two grandmothers tell him, why they can't stop crying. Their story begins ten years earlier when Rohan had left for college and his elder brother Rahul had abandoned India. From the beginning of the narration Yash Raichand's crucial speech on the duties, tradition and family honor is interrupted by short cuts showing Anjali deliriously waving a large Indian flag in celebration of a cricket victory. Anjali and Rahul fall in love and marry against his father's wishes. After Rohan has heard the full story, he promises to reunite the family and goes to his brother who is in exile in London. After a number of complications, Rohan succeeds and the harmony of the family is restored.

Modernity and its symbols appear here in several social and cultural dimensions. The main conflict – the question of arranged marriages – is portrayed first in a satirical scene when Anjali's friend is abducted by her prospective mother-in-law before her arranged marriage takes place. Afterwards Nandini and Yash, for their part, have a minor dispute over the

significance of arranged marriages in modern times:

Nandini: "These days everything has changed."

Yash: "Nothing has changed, Nandini."

Nandini: "But these days children make their choices themselves..."

Yash: "Nothing has changed, Nandini."

Nandini: "What I meant was..."

Yash: "Nothing has changed."

Nandini: "But..."

Yash: "I said it... didn't I? That's it!"

But at the very end of the film, the circumstances change as Nandini challenges the traditional Indian concept of marriage in a dialogue with Yash, who continues to reject his son.

Nandini:

"Do you know, mother always says that a husband is god. No matter what he says – no matter what he thinks – he is always right. You brought Rahul home one day – right [...] Then – one day he left home and went away. Wrong. You let him leave – wrong. You separated a mother from her child – wrong. Our family shattered to pieces – wrong. Then how does a husband become God? God can't do any wrong, can he? My husband is just a husband, just a husband. Not God. Not God."

The impression that Yash is an old fashioned family tyrant does not quite fit: many male characters are very traditional and at the same time very modern. Yash admires his helicopter and loves dancing with scantily clad chorus girls, while he insists on most traditional values within his family. This ambivalence can also be observed in Rohan's character and his attitude towards rituals.

In *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham* rituals refer strongly to the unity of family as well as to the question of Indian social and religious identity. As the two grandmothers begin their chronicle of family fatality, their most anxious concern is how to reunify their family before they die. The retrospective begins with an extensive celebration of the *diwali* ritual in Raichand's palace with the whole family, dozens of dancers, and guests.



**Lakshmi, Krishna, Rama**



**The Raichands at the *diwali* festival**



Diwali (or *deepawali*) is the most pan-Indian of all Hindu festivals and symbolizes the victory of righteousness and the lifting of spiritual darkness. Gods like Krishna, Lakshmi, and Rama placed on the various family altars and on plates with lights and *prasadam* are shown here in close-ups. The diverse puja rituals are depicted along with wide-scope dance performances, and even Rahul returns hurriedly from his English university – by plane and helicopter and still with a notebook case in his hand – to join the family doing the *darshan* in front of the gods.

This scene is contrasted with two rituals in the present: when the younger brother Rohan returns home to visit his parents after an absence of some years, he happens upon his parents celebrating the *diwali* festival completely alone in front of the great hall's family altar.



### **Yash and Nandini alone in front of the family altar**

In another scene, Rahul's family is shown in their London exile: Anjali is performing an *aratik* (worshipping the gods) in the morning, while her husband and her son Krish lay in bed wearing ear-plugs in order to avoid listening to Anjali chanting her prayers.



**Rahul and his son with ear-plugs**



**Anjali performing the *aratik***

Afterwards he begs her to refrain from singing in the morning:

Rahul: "Anjali... Anjali I need to talk with you."

Anjali: "What?"

Rahul: "That song that you sing every morning."

Anjali: "So?"

Rahul: "It feels very nice. I think it's wonderful, you are my Madonna. But the neighbors around were complaining."

Anjali: "I don't sing for them, do I? I sing so that my son learns about our country [...] He knows nothing about our country. Our religion, our traditions, our heritage [...] Eh! The country best in the world is our India... don't ever forget."

But now Rohan arrives in London and things begin to change. He is presented as more modern than any of the European people, he drives a Ferrari on the King's College campus, he wears a synthetic muscle-shirt, drives a racing motorcycle, plays football, uses a mobile telephone and is always surrounded by the most attractive British girls. He first meets Anjali's younger sister Pooja, who lives in her brother-in-law's household. In the English diaspora she has become a very Western model-type and wears such revealing outfits that Rahul is quite startled. But after Rohan moves into his brothers house, Pooja's character undergoes a radical change – one morning Rahul, with Anjali resting beside him, is awakened by chanted prayers:

Rahul: "If you are here, who is singing this prayer in the morning?"

Anjali: "Goddess Saraswati herself has incarnated in the house?"





**The "Western" Pooja**



**Pooja and Rohan performing the *aratik***

But then they discover Pooja and Rohan, both clad in traditional Indian clothes doing a puja in front of the family altar. With a disapproving glance Rohan even calls Pooja to cover her neck line in an adequate manner. They quip upon Pooja's change.

Rahul: "Who is this?"

Rohan: "You are not able to recognise her because you are seeing her fully clothed for the first time. It's your sister-in-law."

Then, Rohan offers *prasadam* and *teeka* to the family members and all are emotionally touched. Likewise, rituals become a symbol for the unity of the family in other scenes. As Rohan later arranges a surprise meeting of the elders and their outcast son, their encounter is cinematically announced by short cuts, commemorating the last common *diwali*. And when Rahul dreams of his future marital life, he sees his family and Anjali assembled in front of the family altar. But since *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham* is an epic-like movie, the conflict between Rahul and his father lasts till the grandmother dies – the ritual now reunifies their community, as Yash and both his sons light their beloved grandmother's funeral pyre.



### **Rohan, Yash, Rahul at the funeral pyre**

After Nandini's intense monologue on husbands, who are not gods in her eyes any longer, and after Rahul has worshipped the gods of the family altar, the rivals can fully reconcile, and Yash accepts his daughter-in-law.

Before the actual film starts, a quotation from director Karan Johar is faded in: "It's all about loving your parents". This citation reveals two different dimensions of the film and the

meaning of rituals, which complement one another. Rituals are used to illustrate the splitting of the family, – in the beginning the harmony of the family is shown by the *diwali* festival. But during Rahul's exile, rituals both in London and in the family's Indian home suffer from the incomplete community.

"It's all about loving your parents" also implies a second interpretation, since religious rituals constitute not only the community of the family but also the imagined community of all believers: the Hindu community and *hindutva*. In *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham* the lost children of *mother India* are Rahul and his small family, and in this context Anjali vehemently complains that their son has forgotten his origin, his traditions and his religion. The Indian identity is threatened in its Western exile. Here, Pooja's story is paradigmatic: in India she had been a kind, middle-class girl full of love and respect for her father. In London she becomes an arrogant and ungovernable snob, who has no respect for the elders. When Rohan arrives, her behavior changes completely – Rohan himself is more modern than all Europeans, but he is aware of his social duties, tradition and religion. Thus, Pooja now performs the *aratik* in the morning together with him – fully clothed in appropriate dress. Pooja's transformation illustrates the necessity of "taming" modernity. Tradition, religion and modernity are not presented as irreconcilable antagonists – all male and female characters have a very ambivalent attitude towards modernity. But a modern lifestyle and modern values (like being free to choose one's spouse) are portrayed as needing to be in accordance with Indian religious and cultural roots.

#### 4. Conclusion

This brief analysis of the function of rituals in *Mohabbatein* and *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham* reveals a complex relationship between perceptions of tradition, Hindu religion, and modernity. In this context rituals seem to codify the evolution of tensions and harmony within social and cultural conflicts – especially the confrontation of tradition and perceptions of Western modernity. While rituals symbolize religious and even national Indian identity, the various presentations of rituals in these movies demonstrate that this ritual harmony – with regard to identity and the community – is threatened. Understanding and reconciliation between the generations and individual desires and collective duties are the precondition for a ritual formation of the community. The family as a microcosm within the film reflects the significant conflicts within the Indian society. The West and its achievements obviously are admired, but the two films show that the advantages of Western modernity – above all, individualism and self-development – must be "tamed". Western values and the modern way of living must be transformed as they impact upon the family and the Hindu community, their tradition, religion and their rituals.

In accordance with Emile Durkheim's theory, rituals are used to express and constitute community in Indian movies, but contrary to his conviction, that religious rituals become obsolete in a modern "scientific" society (Durkheim 1994, p. 556-597), the Indian example proves that religion and modernity are not merely opponents. These popular movies reflect in

a distinct manner the struggle for a genuine Indian way into modernity. Analyzing the role of rituals in popular Indian movies is only one empirical piece of a greater theoretical puzzle, since India gives a particularly clear sample for Eisenstadt's theory of the variety of modernity. The questions of cultural and social identity, gender, education, migration or authority in Indian movies indicate further promising issues in this theoretical context.

Even though the theory of modernity is still a matter of profound academic and political argument, Anjali's aunt in *Khabhi Kushi Kabhie Gham* is able to relieve this tension between the theoretical approaches of Huntington, Fukuyama and Eisenstadt in a very convincing way: "Whatever the tongue, the culture is yours..." (*zaban jo bhi ho, tahazib to tumhari hai, na ...*)

### Acknowledgement

I would like to thank Mr. Sunil Hansraj of *Yash Raj Films* and Mr. Yash Johar of *Dharma Productions* for their permission to publish photographs from the films *Mohabhatein* and *Khabhi Kushi Kabhie Gham*. I also have to thank Maxie Schroeder, Jacqueline Fellner, and Prof. Dr. Fletcher DuBois for their kind assistance.

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*Khabhi Kushi Kabhie Gham*. Karan Johar (director), Yash Johar (producer). *Dharma Productions*, Bombay 2001.

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First published in Marburg Journal of Religion