

Roots of conflict

A powerful plea for the acceptance of diversity. BY A.G. NOORANI

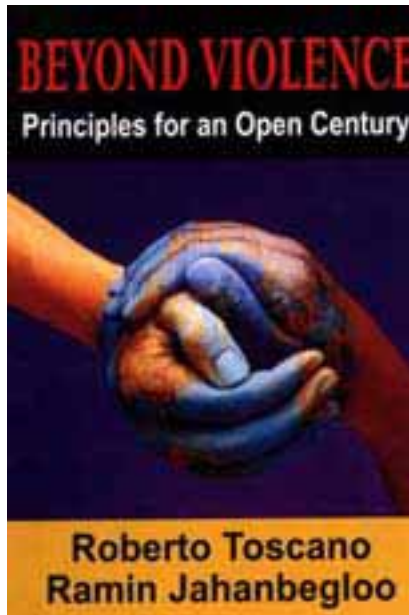
KNOWLEDGE without thought is labour lost; thought without knowledge is perilous. There are tomes which are the product of considerable research but are devoid of any analysis worth the name. Opinions, based on little study but dressed up in strident rhetoric, are passed off as “original” analyses. This slim volume is a refreshing contrast. The authors are erudite. They also dare to reflect afresh on an issue of consuming interest in this century which has opened its account with fears of worse to come.

Roberto Toscano has a law degree from the University of Parma, Italy; he studied international relations at the Johns Hopkins University and at Harvard and has written books on conflict prevention, human rights and ethics. He is currently Italy’s Ambassador to India.

Ramin Jahanbegloo is a well-known Iranian-Canadian philosopher and a cosmopolitan public intellectual. He studied at the Sorbonne and did research at Harvard. He taught at the Academy of Philosophy in Teheran in 1993 and was Director of the Department for Contemporary Thought at the Cultural Research Bureau in Teheran as recently as 2002-2006. He also has an India connection, apart from publishing his writings in his country. He held the Rajni Kothari Chair in Democracy at the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies.

SURGE OF VIOLENCE

The book reflects their liberal impulses. Its concern is with the surge of violence. “What is particularly unset-



IN REVIEW

Beyond Violence: Principles For an Open Century by Roberto Toscano and Ramin Jahanbegloo; Har-Anand; pages 128, Rs.250.

ting is the fact that between the end of the XX century and the beginning of the XXI century we have been witnessing three different modes of violence not replacing one another, but rather present at the same time – the pre-modern violence of Somali clans, the danger of classic inter-state conflicts (from the Falklands war to tensions between India and Pakistan) and post-modern violence carried out by terrorist networks not necessarily connected to a state and often not even operating on the basis of a unified

command centre (Al Qaeda is by now a franchising label rather than an organisation).

“Facing the confusing and unsettling picture, we witness the difficulty of thinkers of democracy and international affairs to understand the current proliferation of relativism, particularism and a variety of hard universalisms. A future for which the stage is cleared is rendering the democratic theory unable to grasp the nature of civilisation as an absence of violence. We have to ask ourselves how democracies could have been at once so close to and yet so far from understanding violence.”

The scourge cannot be eliminated unless its nature, origins and consequences are fully understood. “To be mistaken about it is to be in error on the goal of human civilisation. Strangely enough, it is the globalisation of modernity that is leading human civilisation to its uncertainties, challenges and maybe ruin. The fragility of the principle of politics, as a way of organising human existence, has rendered our century unable to grasp the nature of the political as ethical.”

POWER CAN BE MASTERED

Power is a reality. It cannot be banished. But it can and must be mastered and used for the common good. It is the despair of the impotent, their rage at being wronged, that drives men to violence. Do you blame the Arabs after what they have suffered at the hands of the British, the French and later the Americans, for 90 years from 1919 to 2009?

The authors rule out culture as a source of conflict. Religion does not

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prod people to violence, either. It is the political exploitation of religion that leads to violence. Professor Robert Pape's brilliant study of suicide bombers *Dying to Win* establishes, with a wealth of research, how the dispossessed are driven to this suicidal course. Tolerance and acceptance of cultural diversity, as an asset to be valued, can help. But the roots lie in festering, unredressed grievances.

"Has non-violence changed those who practise it for better or for worse? One thing is certain. It has made democracies more inclusive and more just. It has also helped nations in their peaceful transitions from tyrannies to democracies. As such, non-violence has filled the gap between an ethic of responsibility and politics. Non-violence and peace are just two sides of the same coin."

ISLAM AND THE WEST

The authors boldly address the issue of Islam and the West: "The events in the Middle East [West Asia] have stirred up a sometimes acrimonious debate about Islam and the modern world. Some commentators in the West say the two are not compatible. Others, including many Muslims, ask why Islam lost the pre-eminence it once enjoyed as a civilisation – and whether it can ever recapture some of its former glory. Muslims have responded to Western-style modernity in a variety of ways. Extremists like the Al Qaeda group and the Taliban violently reject it. But for many intellectuals in the Middle East the challenge, the 'mega-task', is to engage with modernity without sacrificing Muslim values. For them, the challenge for contemporary Muslim societies is to create their own modernity."

ENGAGING WITH MODERNITY

The authors make a very valid, but often neglected, point. The political Islamist rejects Islam's teachings and its cultural heritage. "The radical actors of the Muslim world in destroying the troublesome symbols of modernity have destroyed their own cultural vitality and dynamism. Their culture of

death has resulted in a death of culture. Islamism has pushed Muslims to mourn their own modernity. By insisting on the ambivalence between being both 'Muslim and Modern' radical Islamism has intensified the unresolved tension between Islam and modernity. As a result of this, Muslims who argue for democracy and secularism seem to be yelled out of the arena on the charge that they are 'not Muslim enough'. Voices within the Muslim community, which insist that Islam should have nothing to do with hatred, terrorism and backward-looking find themselves marginalised."

**The political
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They enunciate seven basic concepts and discuss the relevance of each to our situation – ethics comes first; next, identity; followed by idolatory; "history/memory"; authority; conformity; and fear.

INTERCULTURAL APPROACH

The chapter on "Non-violence in a New Century" draws on Gandhi, predictably. The book proceeds to discuss radical change without violence, "the new faces of barbarism" and religion and peace.

"If we do not want to be the passive witnesses of present human disasters, and of the further disasters that are looming, we will have to accept that an intercultural approach is not one of the many possible options for addressing the problems of human society, but the only one that is consistent with life in a globalised world. Interculturalism is an imperative, not a choice." The book is a powerful plea for acceptance of diversity.

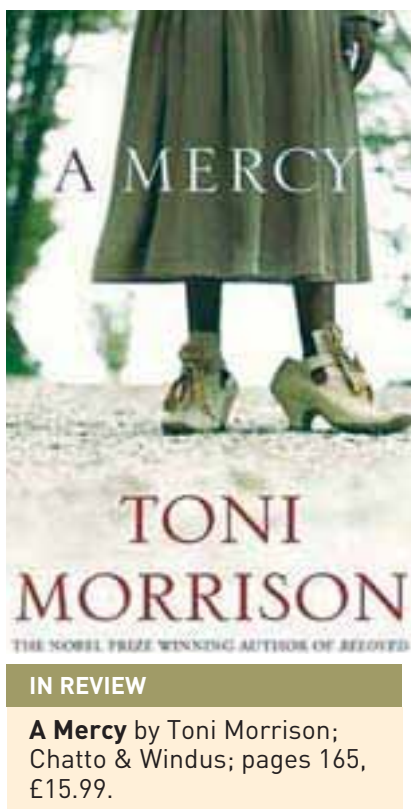
Of human bondage

The book examines the origins of America's history of racial discrimination and slavery. BY SHELLEY WALIA

THE time is late 17th century when slaves were mostly from Africa but ownership belonged not exclusively to the whites. You could be an Englishman, a pagan, a Christian or an African and still be a slave. In this society, where all trade depended on slave ownership, there are rootless, alienated inhabitants who respond to the landscape and struggle against it without realising that nature operates in ways human reasoning cannot fathom. Omens, accidents and elemental mysteries control their fate. Perspectives change according to one's relationship with the land and its overwhelming potential to control and impact one's life.

Each character puts across his/her individual story through his/her own experiences, which come together to project a realistic account of American history, with all the upheavals and teething troubles that a new-found nation experiences. The pain of its birth stretches through its long history, seemingly without end.

Toni Morrison's ninth novel, *A Mercy*, appears at a juncture when a black man sits in the White House. Gradually, the world digests the reality of this unimaginable victory. It is the birth of a new era, probably the most historic moment since the release of Nelson Mandela and the end of apartheid. Behind the victory lies centuries of servitude and throbbing pain as well as creative efforts that went into building resistance through various art forms. It is historic because a black man will now occupy the White House in a country weighed down with a dark racial history. It is historic because after centuries of slavery and injustice,



African Americans stand redeemed.

The Republicans are overwhelmed and the Democrats are in a state of jubilation at the new afterword to the long history of slavery and racism. This outcome became possible because there were mothers in America who, like Sethe in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, dared to kill their children to spare them a lifetime of slavery.

The new generation in the post-Cold War era in America has spoken. It is urban, intellectual and young, both white and black, reminding us of the 1960s when revolutionaries believed they were on the verge of a new society,

especially those who were college-going then. My mind often returns to the 1960s and its message of civil rights and the counterculture opposing the Vietnam War. The decade witnessed young people joining the Civil Rights Movement and burning their draft orders to show their resentment against relentless violence. Our times are similar when the young stand outraged by the war in Iraq and Afghanistan and are conscious of their racist history, which they would sacrifice anything to erase. Toni Morrison's main aim in her novel is to examine the origins of this history of discrimination and human bondage.

Though New Right campaigns have consistently castigated and disparaged the progressive movements of our times, many young people in America have kept the spirit of the 1960s alive. Over half a century has gone by and still the 1960s remain as heady as ever. That the youth came out in all their numbers and strength to back Obama indicates their eagerness to confront contemporary politics and interrogate their social and historical situation. They have indeed come out of the apathy of their generation to a realisation that it is time to set themselves behind the struggle for social justice and freedom of inquiry.

This is at the heart of an anti-racist struggle and is the principal concern of *A Mercy*, which too interrogates a society where masculine discourse predominates, and questions of justice and liberty underpin a world view where it seems that all hope stands deferred and answers to one's fate are more controlled by circumstances and spirits than by any human agency. Whereas the Africans in the

book find answers in a world of signs and omens, the quest of the Christians turns them towards their church for spiritual and moral interpretations: "Stranger things happen all the time everywhere. You know. I know you know. One question is who is responsible? Another is can you read? If a pea hen refuses to brood I read it quickly and, sure enough, that night I see a minha mãe standing hand in hand with her little boy, my shoes jamming the pocket of her apron. Other signs need more time to understand. Often there are too many signs, or a bright omen clouds up too fast. I sort them and try to recall, yet I know I am missing much, like not reading the garden snake crawling up to the door saddle to die. Let me start with what I know for certain."

Underlying this struggle to find meaning lies a deep feminist concern: that women "never shape the world, the world shapes us". They are at the mercy of the legal system and their religious affiliations and victims of the social world they inhabit. The characters silently share a deep commitment to democracy, a world embodying the ideals of liberty, equality and justice for all. However, events lie beyond their human control. Accident and contingency replace any logical or consequential progression. And their hope for freedom is a subtext that becomes all the more important because it remains unwritten and implicit in their heart-rending struggle for survival.

Toni Morrison's novel spans the life of slave girl Florens, who is exchanged for a debt. Jacob Vaark, an Anglo-Dutch trader, takes Florens into his custody from her mother, who offers Florens to him so that she can stay back with her infant son whom she still breastfeeds.

Other characters like Vaark's wife, Rebekka, and Sorrow, a parentless daughter of a sea captain, along with Florens possess the aspirations to face their fate with deep motivations towards the interrogation of their social and historical situation in a brutally male-dominated world with all its sec-

tarian and religious strife. In their awareness of their alienation and suffering lies the need to at least dream of comfort: "Sleeping on the cookhouse floor with them is not as nice as sleeping in the broken sleigh with Lina. In cold weather we put planks around our part of the cowshed and wrap our arms together under pelts."

The story goes to and fro, a structural device that depicts the upheavals of a history gone sour with all its slavery and servitude, with its struggles and pain at a site in history where conditions are deeply contrasted to contemporary times. The colonial order is yet to be born. Science and technology is many decades away. Toni Morrison, a dexterous craftswoman with the skills of a historian, recreates in all its complexities an alien, brutal and savage world of landowners and indentured labour from Europe and Africa.

VARIOUS PERSPECTIVES

Various perspectives are offered: Florens, the chief narrator tells her story of being sold and brought to the farm at the age of eight. And when she is 16, she is sent on a mission to find the man of her love who once worked on the farm and has some knowledge of herbal medicine that could be the remedy for Rebekka's attack of smallpox. Lina, a Native American, is the other comrade Florens has on the farm apart from Sorrow. Lina's narrative consists of her dim memories of her culture. Rebekka's narrative consists of her journey from England into the wilderness of the unexplored land where she would marry a man she had never met. Vaark's outlook emerges from his acute observation of the workings of varied religions and cultures in the states he often visits on his business tours.

Particular to their routinised life is the presence of sugar, rum or the slave trade around which their lives revolve. There are only two characters who seem to be free, one a Dutch farmer and the other a black tradesman, Florens' lover and a rebel by nature, who reacts strongly against a rigid system that does not permit any destabilising

of the status quo. However, a troublemaker like him is delineated in the novel as a hazy and fleeting presence, a thematic necessity congruous with the strict control exercised in such a social system.

The story weaves its way around the central motif of the D'Ortega Plantation with all its vicissitudes and the palpable presence of the owner, who is for the most part travelling or is believed to be dead. And when he finally dies, his hold on the story gets somewhat fragile. Like Caesar, he seems to be more present in his absence. The women and other workers on his farm are held together while he is alive; after his death the need to be free supersedes any bond that might have formed within the community. Profit and economics bring them together and remains the *sine qua non* of an existence that craves more for survival and money than for freedom, though that is the unsaid desire.

The real-life characters retain the attention of the story and their incomplete and nebulous impressions leave the narrative imperfect and dependent on the skills of the reader to piece together a more coherent account of the period in history when Virginia was yet to advance to the economic development of the northern States. A cosmography in which the human element seems to be absolutely missing rules the fate of the people, who find hope only in the afterlife. In the words of Florens: "We are baptised and can have happiness when this life is done."

The skill with which this philosophical and spiritual examination of the roots of racism in America is written becomes the chief reason for reading a novel that reveals a kind of profound irony behind a woolly structure with incomplete individual responses and tortuous progressions. The form and content cohere into a patchwork, or fragmentation, that is inherent in each character's destiny. This could possibly be the reason for the novel's deeply poetic quality and for Toni Morrison's reputed stature as a writer. □

Mired in mediocrity

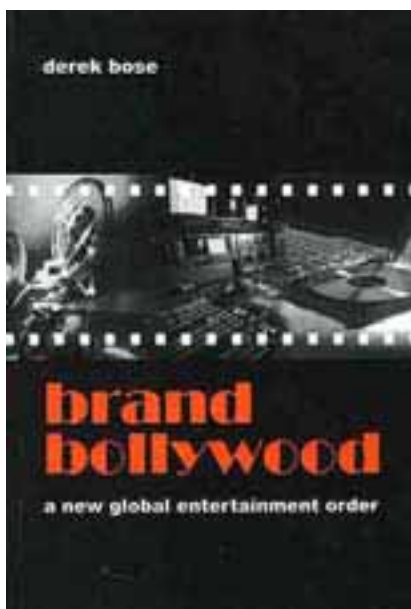
The stereotypical content of Hindi cinema is not really the formula for international success. BY PARTHA CHATTERJEE

DEREK BOSE, a prolific writer on commercial Hindi cinema, has come up with a new book on its possibilities in the international market. He has gone to great lengths to predict a bright future for it by providing varied data backed by analysis. However, many a time his objectivity gives way to subjectivity of the most vulnerable kind even while passing on plain information.

For instance: "Not many Indians know that the landmark film from Hong Kong, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000) [which reportedly grossed U.S. \$140 million worldwide] was actually produced by a Hollywood consortium" (page 207). Just why it is a landmark film, he fails to elucidate. Is it because it was a runaway commercial hit the world over? Or did it have any artistic merit as well? As far as this writer is concerned, Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger* is an average movie from Hong Kong with very good special effects. In the olden days, such films were called "stunt-pictures". If Bose had seen the poetic martial arts films of the late King Hu, he would have realised that Ang Lee was a mere hack who owed a huge debt to the master.

King Hu's films did not depend on exaggerated wire-work for their stunts. His actors were trained acrobats, and his camera placement and cutting was precise. The end result was invariably spectacular. This apart, his films had thought and feeling in ample measure.

Bose is hung up on Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger* and other such products. He waxes eloquent in the section entitled "Crossover Cinema": "Bollywood may still be waiting for a *Crouch-*



IN REVIEW

Brand Bollywood: A New Global Entertainment Order by Derek Bose; Sage; pages 227, Rs.325.

ing Tiger, Hidden Dragon (2000) or *Life is Beautiful* (1997) to emerge from within, but the real crossover will take place the day Shahrukh Khan shares the lead with a Brad Pitt or Nicole Kidman, or Aishwarya Rai (or any other mainline actress) becomes, say, Tom Cruise's heroine. That day is not far." Although Bose's artistic aspirations are questionable, his commercial intentions are not.

The volume takes on far too many themes at the same time to really make sense. His 'American-style' statistic-mongering is interesting though often misleading. For example, in the chapter "Rise of the Consumer Classes", the

data provided are impressive. Here is a sample:

Rural India has around 42,000 *haats* (including weekend markets) where consumer durables are bought and sold.

In 2002-2003, 50 per cent of the policies sold by the state-owned Life Insurance Corporation (LIC) across India were in villages.

Small towns and villages accounted for 1.3 million cellular telephone users in 2006.

Of the 25 million households that purchased television sets between 2001 and 2004, 19 million (or 77 per cent) were from the rural hinterlands.

Of the 20 million new subscriptions to a popular horizontal portal (providing e-commerce and free-mail service) in 2004, 60 per cent were from small towns and villages. And of the 1,00,000-odd persons who had transacted on the shopping site, over 52,000 were again from India's small towns and villages. Anybody believing such claims without question would of course think that India was well on its way to becoming a global power. But the truth is to the contrary.

According to the economist Arjun Sengupta, 77 per cent of the Indian population lives on less than Rs.20 a day. In a country of over a billion people, more than 770 million people live in abject poverty. Of the remaining 230 million, a little more than 40 million can afford television sets, cell-phones and insurance policies. The figure taken in isolation is impressive but quite ordinary when considered in relation to India's population size. As far as economic development is concerned, it has been, to put it charitably, haphazard. Why should 160 districts

out of 612 be under the sway of the ultra left-wing naxalites if everything is hunky-dory economically? Which States accounted for the LIC policies sold in 2002-2003 in rural India? How come farmers in Karnataka, Maharashtra and Punjab have been committing suicide, unable to pay off their debts? Statistics on the printed page may look impressive, but sometimes they may give false impressions.

Bose is good about the actual methods of production in Bollywood. In the chapter "Crime and Punishment" he says: "There is another way for film-makers to beat the law. Two versions of the same film are shot, using the same cast and crew, locations and even storyline. For one version, some sexually explicit scenes are shot without digressing too far from the plot, while for the other, these scenes are deleted or substituted with song and dance sequences, flashbacks and some such filler. It is this sanitised version that the film-maker submits to the Censor Board and obtains a clearance certificate." He fights shy of giving specific examples, perhaps because he does not want to offend or alienate industry insiders who are his sources.

He is spot on when he says it is the "Indian diaspora population mainly in the U.S., the U.K., South Africa, Canada and the Middle-East [West Asia]" that provides a large market for commercial Hindi films. He also offers a startling piece of information: the largest concentration of Indian settlers is in Myanmar (erstwhile Burma) and is double the size of the diaspora in the U.S. Apparently, this potential market cannot be tapped because of political and trade restrictions ("Back to the Future", page 205).

In the same chapter, Bose observes: "The very fact that Bollywood film-makers, actors, music composers and, of late, choreographers are increasingly finding work abroad proves that cinema knows no geographical boundaries." However, the fact that Shekhar Kapur has made four films with overseas funding - *Bandit Queen*, *Elizabeth*, *The Golden Age* (as Elizabeth Part II is known) and *Four Feath-*



NISSAR AHMAD

A SCENE FROM "SADIYAN". Hindi films have improved a great deal but are still not on a par with films from Hollywood.



OM PURI (ABOVE LEFT) in "My Son the Fanatic". He made a mark in this and another British production, "East is East".



A SCENE FROM Ang Lee's "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon", a commercial hit.

ers – does not really prove anything substantial. Victor Banerjee, Om Puri, Naseeruddin Shah and Aishwarya Rai have appeared in British and American films. But only Om Puri has really made a mark with two British productions, *My Son the Fanatic* and *East is East*. Naseeruddin Shah did appear opposite Sean Connery in *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*, a major Hollywood production. A.R. Rehman scored the music for *Shumdog Millionaire* and has become the first Indian to win the Golden Globe award.

But this contribution from the largest producer of films to the English-language cinema of the U.S. or Britain is not anything to write home about. Just why Indians have to prove themselves in England or the U.S. is a question that is never asked. Is it because some Indian film-makers are reasonably at ease with the English language? How is it that there are no collaborations with other English-speaking countries such as Australia, New Zealand and Canada, where films of a high technical standard are made? Is it because of a Hollywood fixation from the silent cinema days in British India?

Bose is right about the multiple malfunctioning that all but destroyed the state-owned National Film Development Corporation (NFDC), which was supposed to promote “good” cinema that was also commercially viable. After a 1980 collaboration with the British director Richard Attenborough on *Gandhi* guaranteeing a 12 per cent share in the profits, the organisation sat back. *Gandhi* was a global hit. The money that filled the NFDC coffers was squandered on ill-judged projects, including the proposed building of film theatres. Neither the NFDC nor other independent film-makers were able to come up with films of artistic merit that would also appeal to a reasonably large cross section of film-goers. Barring a few exceptions, NFDC-backed films were technically mediocre and dull in content and execution.

In the same chapter, “Rise of the Consuming Classes”, Bose says: “Sooner than later, the dynamics of free

trade will come into play, whereby small content providers will find it impossible to sustain themselves and shall be weeded out one way or the other. After this marked shake-out, the larger players will inevitably consolidate their positions and the industry will reach a state of maturity. Here, in a stable environment, it will not be quantity but the quality of content – with an accent on innovation and creativity – that shall drive the Indian mass media.”

ENTERTAINMENT INDUSTRY

Why does he make such observations? He is well nigh certain that “the nation is not very far from reaching that stage of stability. The indicators are already there.... Today India ranks among the top five economies of the world in terms of purchasing power parity and according to the estimates of leading global investors it is only a matter of time before India overtakes China as the fastest growing entertainment industry.”

With a massive global economic recession already happening, what would Bose and the investment pundits have to say now? He cannot, alas, stop playing the oracle. Where will fresh finances come from to change the face of the Indian (read Bollywood) entertainment industry? As far as the big players driving out the small players is concerned, he is right. It has already happened on television. The content has, strangely enough, remained puerile. Reasonable technical quality, these days, is easy enough to achieve. Artistic quality is more difficult; for that to happen, a large number of people have to be educated.

In India, the numbers of the educated have, contrary to claims made by the census, dwindled. They have been replaced by waves of barely literate, technology-savvy people. What else is a degree in Information Technology but glorified vocational training? What does Bose mean when he says that once the larger players consolidate their positions, maturity will descend on the industry? It is an interesting statement in itself but a

mere illusion when weighed against objective facts.

Bose does not consider a primary fact that a film, above all, has to run. He thinks if a film is completed within its budget and stipulated time, the face of Bollywood will change. Theoretically, yes. True, it is difficult for a standard, cliched film to lose money. Indeed, it would require a special talent to do so. But for a film to make an impact artistically and commercially would still be a tall order.

The average Hindi film producer is a chaotic creature and functions best in a state of disarray. He does not like to be pinned down by time schedules and bank procedures even though interest rates would be much lower than what he would pay to his usurer. Like a vast majority of Indians, he finds the idea of professional discipline and ethics revolting. Is it because both his personal and professional lives are made of a myriad shades of murky greys that he recoils at the very idea of organisation? Bose recognises this fact quite easily but he is inclined to hope that this capricious creature will be brought to heel once corporate players take over the entire Indian entertainment industry.

Bose hopes that Bollywood will soon compete on equal terms with Hollywood and, in the foreseeable future, overtake it. Whether this is at all possible is worth contemplating. Hollywood relies on the spectacle to make its money, thanks to the enormous talent available in special effects, art direction and props. It is also true that even now it does produce a number of fine, serious films every year. The same cannot be said of Bollywood. Content-wise, Hindi films are banal, barring an exception or two; technically, things have improved a great deal but are still not on a par with Hollywood. Despite what many patriotic Indians at home and abroad might think, there is not very much that Hindi cinema has to offer. The content is stereotypical and the music on which it continues to depend is usually cacophonous. Surely, that cannot be a formula for continuous international success. □