

Main Azad Hoon:

- The Politics of Myth and Reality

by
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MAIN AZAD HOON, described by the professional tribe of film critics as an offbeat film in the commercial genre, is obviously trying to communicate more than it says. The storyline is simple. The backdrop is the political conflict between an archetypal corrupt and venal chief minister and a crusading newspaper owner who has decided that the chief minister must go. To this end, with the assistance of a pliant editor and a skilful media manipulator turned journalist, he creates a mythical character called Azad.

Azad symbolises the suppressed anger and helplessness of the ordinary citizens against the all pervading corruption and maladministration. Through detailing specific instances of malpractice an air of public excitement is systematically built up, both against the beleaguered chief minister and about the identity of Azad. The atmosphere is taut with expectation because Azad has announced that on a certain date he will jump down from the top of a hospital building and commit suicide, as life under this regime is no longer worth living. But, and here lies the catch, to carry conviction, the newspaper needs an Azad. And the search is on. In this tense situation enter

two hobos, one of whom -yes, you have guessed it, is Amitabh. We know nothing about him, his name, caste, religion, background - except that he is too filled out to be a starving hobo, and is educated. In a beautifully orchestrated sequence where a hungry Amitabh, trying to pick up a half eaten apple from the ground, encounters a bunch of striking students agitated about the decision to shift their university outside the city premises, and with the help of a song reminiscent of the early IPTA days, fills them with the needed resolve to struggle till their cause has been won, we get the first glimpses of the making of a flesh and blood Azad.

Predictably, he is "discovered" by an enterprising woman

reporter and made an offer which involves his donning the mantle of Azad. The first formal encounter with his potential audience is a speech that Azad is to deliver in a hall. As is to be expected, he departs from the prepared script, and converses with the crowd, in the process not just winning them over with his restrained simplicity and the moral undertones of his plea, but also demonstrating the successful politician's knack of vibing with the crowd.

Thereafter, the story moves at a brisk pace. A mix of public adulation, combined with a heady sense of potential power to right the multifarious wrongs done to the long suffering citizenry, persuades the hobo that it is indeed worthwhile to be Azad. He moves from success to success, helped not inconsiderably by the power of the media. From correcting small ills, to getting the shifting of the university premises cancelled, Azad becomes a formidable presence. There is the predictable pitch for the literacy mission as the successful and grateful students open up an education centre in the slums; the equally predictable bulldozing of the slum by a heartless capitalist, culminating in a strike by the workers and students for payments of minimum wages and

bonus at the capitalist's factory. Here, when songs and street plays, as also generalised appeals to the righteousness of the workers' cause, cannot move the combine of the politician and capitalist, the script takes a leaf out of Lenin and Tikait. Since the factory crushes cane, the real leverage against it can only come out of denying it its raw material. Worker-peasant unity is demonstrated by a Tikait like converging of farmers who decide not to deliver cane till the workers get their just due. Interestingly enough, what impels them is not the promise of a higher price for their produce (though the usual references to middlemen are liberally sprinkled in the dialogue), but their hurt and ire against being neglected, as shown by the quality



of water that they have to consume.

Victory makes Azad unassailable, or so he thinks. If the chief minister and his backers are now running scared, the newspaper owner (a combination of Goenka and Shourie) now more directly gets into the act. With Azad as his puppet, he feels he has the chief ministership in his grasp, and despatches his enterprising journalist to do the needful. This is when the worm starts turning.

The journalist, appropriately named Subhashini, with parentage drawn from the Indian National Army or INA (a direct reference to the Sehgals' daughter Subhashini, now in parliament), avers that she has seen Azad grow, and in the process her own suppressed conscience has started surfacing. For how can the offspring of the heroes of the national struggle ever be a mere manipulator? She recollects the idealism instilled into her as a child, is horrified by the plain lust for power displayed by her boss, and tries to warn Azad that he is in for difficult times.

Azad by now is Azad, a case where creation has taken over reality. He not only scorns the orders to cooperate, but feels that he can get away with it. In a classic "The Empire Strikes Back" sequence, the scorned newspaper owner now exposes Azad for what he is, only an Amitabh. And, equally predictable, the mass adulation turns to mass hate, Azad is beaten up and thrown out of town.

The grand finale is a laboured sequence of the bashed up hero crawling back into town, evading all the hoodlums, official and otherwise, who are on the lookout for him; he manages to climb up on the top of the hospital building where he (or rather the mythical Azad) had once "threatened" to jump off; and notwithstanding appeals to the contrary, actually does so. All because the "truth" of the myth must be sustained.

Though the body is spirited away, the myth, like ideas, cannot be killed. Notwithstanding the declaration of a curfew in the city, the populace turns up in a stadium to listen to Azad. There, with the help of modern technology, a filmic Azad exhorts the audience not to be swayed by inessentials and to continue to struggle, for, after all, not only am I Azad, but all of us are Azad.

It seemed necessary to flesh out the storyline, because each sequence lends itself to multiple interpretations, and to unreality. That Tinnu Anand, the maker of *Kalia* and *Shahenshah*, should attempt a political film, much in the style of MF Hussain's billboards - in broad strokes- only compounds the sense of myth. The ease with which a myth can be packaged and successfully sold is only matched by the swiftness of its destruction, as also its phoenix-like rise from the ashes. That there is no romance, no humour, no dances, and above all no fights - all standard ingredients in a Tinnu Anand-Amitabh combine, does not make this film a lowkey political affair. Not only are all the principal characters drawn from current newspaper headlines, the cinematic style which

merges Amitabh the hobo with Amitabh the Don contributes to the viewer's sense of the unreal. With each character more than life size, both the myth and the underlying moral motif can only become amenable to alienated viewing. Just as Mrinal Sen's final sequence in *Mrigaya*, where raised clenched fists against the backdrop of a red sun, ostensibly symbolising the eventual victory of the "red cause", only manage completely to demolish the power of the earlier symbolism, here too, a "dead" Azad, now "alive" via the video screen, leaves the viewer untouched.

Sequence by sequence *Main Azad Hooo* has a lot going for it. Superb cameo performances by Anupam Kher as the archicapitalist manipulator, Manohar Singh as the newspaper owner, Sudhir Mishra as the grasping politician - all are likely to stay in the mind. So too is the punchy dialogue by Javed Akhtar, and the sole song "Kitne Baazu Kitne Sar" by Kaifi Azmi. Incidentally, the song is a much needed improvement over the now overused "Phir Woh Subah Aayegi." The struggling activist groups across the country now have an addition to their cliched repertoire.

But what remains unclear is the objective of the exercise, for it is difficult to view this film only as a film. Our perceptions about Amitabh the real as compared to Amitabh the hero, insist on being accommodated. Is it that Bachan is providing justification for his entry and exit from the cesspool of politics; that the, naive as he is, was manipulated into playing a role for which he was obviously not cut out? And now that he has clearly distanced himself, the real Amitabh should be accepted in his rebirth, not unlike the Azad who died a vilified character only to be reborn a hero?

Should the film be read as a warning to all moralistic crusaders about not taking their moralism too seriously? (Is Mr V.P. Singh listening?) Or is it an analysis of politics where real life issues manage to find a hearing space only through being blown up into posters by media manipulators? The weak hypothesis also doing the rounds that the film is actually a launch for Ms Azmi does not carry much conviction because, all said and done, she remains a side character, the inevitable fate of costars in Bachan films.

More charitably, the film is an appeal to the active subject in all of us; that once we recover our innate quality we just cannot be put down. True, our growing anger and concern at being constantly treated as manipulable pawns needs a symbol through which a refracted resolution can be attempted. But since Azad till the very end remains an unknown, at least theoretically, if the conjuncture is right, any of us have the potential to become a symbol. If this indeed is the object, then this film has undeniably attempted to break out of the sterility of politics and the inevitability of defeat syndrome that our modern genre of political films so repetitively depict. We are told that there is some space, and that we have a role. In this lies its merit.