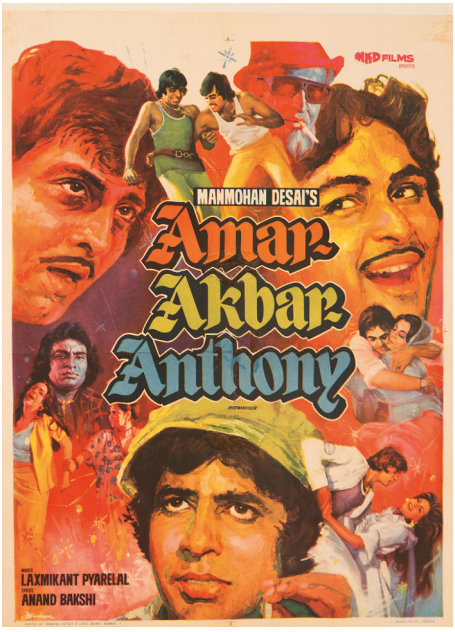
Amar Akbar Anthony (*अमर अकबर अँन्थनी*, 1977)

Rama Srinivasan

dir. Manmohan Desai; prod. Manmohan Desai; screenplay Prayag Raj; photography Peter Pereira; music Laxmikant-Pyarelal. 35mm, color, 184 mins. M.K.D. Films Combine, distrib. Shemaroo Video.



Courtesy of Andy Rotman

Amar Akbar Anthony (*AAA*) is a social drama film from a decade that had perfected what was later celebrated as the *masala* format. Directors such as Manmohan Desai and Prakash Mehra were best known for creating these genre-blurring, highly successful films. In *AAA*, this metaphorical spice mix (comedy, action, drama, romance) meets one of India's foundational narratives: partition-related trauma and the challenges of maintaining communal harmony.

Unlike later films where communal harmony was presented as preferable to the deadly consequences of sectarian violence (*Krantiveer*, 1994; → *Bombay*, 1995; *Zakhm*, 1998; *Dahek*, 1999), *AAA* opted for positive reinforcement where there is, as such, no real inter-community conflict on-screen. The message is delivered through loaded dialogues that draw on several registers and fantastic twists, designed to convince the viewer to take a leap of faith. It unabashedly commits to the idea of divine retributions and rewards, bizarre coincidences, and over-the-top emotions. Although the film does not shy from milking poignant moments, the *masala* format ensures a brisk journey through a gambit of emotions, life in a nutshell.

The narrative starts with Kishanlal (played by Pran), whose confrontation with his smuggler-boss, Robert (played by Jeevan), leads to a sequence of events that tears his family apart. His ailing wife, Bharati (played by Nirupa Roy), has left him a note informing him of her decision to commit suicide and, thereby, reduce his challenges. In order to save what is left of his family from Robert's goons, Kishanlal temporarily leaves his children unattended in a public park, leading his antagonists away on an elaborate car chase that ends in a non-fatal crash. By the time he returns, the three sons are separated and have been taken in by three good Samaritans.

Meanwhile, Bharati has changed her mind after losing her eyesight in a freak accident that she interprets as divine retribution for the sin committed by even considering suicide. She is led to believe that the car crash had actually killed her husband and children. While she settles down into a life of selling flowers to devotees of all faiths, Kishanlal embraces a life of crime as a result of this family tragedy. As part of his revenge, he abducts Robert's daughter, Jenny (played by Parveen Babi), who also serves as a placeholder for his own sons. At various points in the film, he narrates the tragic circumstances of this family separation with the preface: »22 years back, on 15th August, the day of (our country's) independence […].« This opening functions as a reminder to the audience that the story is also a metaphor for partition—the great tragedy that unfolded in the midst of a celebration. Bharati, a play on the country's name in Hindi, is also Mother India, who suffers several blows onto her corporeal self. While the older son, Amar (played by Vinod Khanna), retains his name and religious identity in his new life, the other two, Akbar (played by Rishi Kapoor) and Anthony (played by Amitabh Bachchan), are adopted into the faiths of their new guardians and grow up as Muslim and Christian, respectively. Of the three, only Amar refrains from invoking his religion in conversations and, instead, stands in for secular authority and the rule of law as a police officer.

The film underlines the majority community as the norm and rule enforcer where those belonging to minority faiths are marked by a difference that borders on stereotyping. Akbar is a romantic *artiste* who sports garish clothes and spouts poetic phrases in Urdu—dominant stereotypes associated with the affable Muslim man of Hindi films. Anthony, on the other hand, is a flamboyant troublemaker with coarse language and a weakness for alcohol, fitting the popular image of a working class, Christian man in Mumbai. The opening credits, which roll well into the 24th minute, frame the scene where the three men are brought into contact again through an interconnecting web of surgical tubes, set-up for a blood transfusion Bharati requires. From here on, Akbar and Anthony regard her as a mother and each other as blood brothers. Anthony tries to draw the aloof Amar into the brotherhood without much success as if to underline that a natural affinity already exists between Abrahamic faiths. Hindus, the film seems to suggest, need to be persuaded to join this universal brotherhood, a task that requires a leap of faith.

Melodrama is a perfect vehicle of the film's central conceit: Those who regard each other as brothers *could* in reality be brothers without any knowledge of their shared ancestry. This sentiment is both the entire story and the subject of countless encounters. For example, Anthony asks Bharati, now a flower seller, for a blossom he would present to a »big daddy« (an authority figure such as a cop or a judge) but, in a twist of fate, ends up at Kishanlal's den and presents it to his real father instead. Since the audience is privy to the family history, it would likely chuckle at such encounters thinking, »if only they all knew […].« But, through these clueless characters, the filmmakers could also be referring to the film's audience—a majority of Indians who are ignorant of their own shared history of syncretic cultures that were disrupted but not fully erased by the experience of colonialism.

AAA is, in many ways, a testament to postcolonial India. It invokes partition obliquely since it was still a taboo to speak of the great tragedy. Melodramatic films since the 1950s (*Awara*, 1951; *Waqt*, 1965; *Naseeb*, 1981; *Coolie*, 1983) have invoked partition through metaphors of separated families, abandoned wives whose chastity could no longer be

vouched for, and orphaned children who were left to deal with the consequences. In 1977, the orphans of partition had become adults and those who had taken over from the British had been corrupted by power, resembling, in many ways, the colonists themselves. Robert, a Christian man, is an anglicized, exploitative boss, and Kishanlal emulates aspects of Robert's personality when he assumes his new life as a successful smuggler. But the former is also a human being with a family that the latter has deprived him of. The film does not allow the audience to empathize with this near-desperate father but offers them, instead, another version of Christianity—the priest who adopts and cares for Anthony represents the best of what the faith has to offer.

AAA asks its audience to not associate faith with individual actions and offers examples of worthy and corrupt individuals from every community. Along with Kishanlal, there are many Hindus—including the woman Amar falls in love with—who have succumbed to a life of crime. Akbar has his own struggles with the shady father of his girlfriend, Salma (played by Neetu Singh). Anthony is, in turn, engaged in bootlegging alcohol before he is redeemed by his love for Jenny.

The plot undoubtedly advances a patriarchal narrative, where the course of the postcolonial nation is represented only through the lives of three men who belong to different faiths and pursue different life trajectories. Although the women are mostly appendages to the main plot, *AAA* is still intriguing in its gender politics. In contradiction to essentializing tropes that represent Muslim women as oppressed and Christian women as sexually promiscuous, Salma is shown as an independent professional, a doctor, and Jenny, an emancipated woman, is presented with dignity and respect. Salma and Jenny do not subscribe to patriarchal prescripts on securing parent/guardian approval before considering marriage, although Akbar insists that Salma's father bless their union.

The unkindest cut is reserved for the Hindu women. Apart from the ever-suffering mother (India), there is Laxmi (played by Shabana Azmi), a sly thief, who is rescued and then ensconced in the domestic space by Amar. Laxmi's quick transformation, depicted through her choice of clothes, fits well with the dichotomy Priti Ramamurthy has drawn between the tropes of a modern girl and the New Woman in Indian cinema. The New Woman is educated, cultured, agential—representative of a »nationalistic feminism«—but she must stay within the domestic space. The Hindu woman is conceived as the »soul of the nation« (Chatterjee), while Hindu men, who needed to contribute to economic progress, were free to adopt aspects of western culture and modernity.

Coming as *AAA* did, after the end of a well-chronicled period where democracy was suspended and, in a decade marked by outbreaks of sectarian violence, it will not be a stretch to assume that the film was designed to remind the audience of their shared history and the need to preserve freedom, religious tolerance, and inclusivity. The last song (»Making the impossible, possible«), which plays out during an extended climax, underlines the leap of faith postcolonial India had taken in forging a secular political society. This politics of love over hate also resurfaces in some unexpected ways. The song, »Tayyab Ali: Enemy of Love,« where Akbar decries Salma's father, has, for example, been appropriated by queer pride events. Prominently featuring sexual minorities, a song that shamed intolerance against love and those in love worked quite organically with the overall message of communal harmony.

The film still resonates today with Indians who seek to preserve India's inclusive ideals (Bhatia). The two brothers do not return to the religion at birth but, rather, through their marital choices become firmly entrenched in their adopted community. Filmmak-

ers had not, it appears, considered the possibility of inter-faith marriages. The idea that religious communities should lead parallel and harmonious lives is still widely shared, as a recent survey by the U.S.-based Pew Research Center underlines (Evans and Sahgal). A majority in every community in India reportedly seeks harmonious relations but are against cross-community unions. As a decidedly patriarchal text, *AAA* may not have all the solutions for an India where a significant number of people would be open to blurring the social boundaries by forging intimate relationships across communities—except perhaps, an unlikely queer song that can be used to shame any and all.

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