

The Sikh Diaspora can play a significant role as gender and racial profiling are serious crimes in most countries. As Hindi films desperately need an international audience, such complaints will help stop their distribution and force a change in perspective back home where they are made



Sikh students supposed to react, when the panelists on the Boogie Woogie Show prod a girl participant to narrate a Sardarji joke?

The imagery of Sikhs in Hindi Cinema has degenerated from the innocent rustic taxi-driver to the sex-crazy womanizer; to the alcoholic, to the terrorist, or the down-right naive and gullible individual. Women characters are using Sikh names and ushering in a new kind of hatred and stereotyping of Sikh women. The shabbily dressed comedian with the most atrocious make-up is invariably the Sikh character in Hindi films. The wayward co-actress, who wants to run-away from home, invariably has a Punjabi name in today's Hindi films.

Films like *Raja Hindustani*, *Mohabbatein*, *Badal*, *Jo Bole So Nihal*, *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai*, *Shoot Out at Lokhandwala*, *Bombay to Goa* and *Gadhar-ek Prem Katha*, *Jab We Met*, contain scenes which defame Sikhs.

In recent times, the movie which raised the hackles of the entire Sikh community was the one entitled, '*Jo Bole So Nihal*'. Virtually the whole community including the Sikh religious body, the Shiromani Gurudwara Parbandhak Committee was on the streets seeking a ban on the film. Umpteen representations made no difference.

Instead of understanding the gravity of the situation, the producers and the Film Censor Board made fervent attempts to divide the community and obtain clearance for the film. Regrettably, it was a violent incident in a cinema hall in Delhi which resulted in the removal of the movie from cinema screens across the country. However the distributors sold the telecasting rights and it is now shown at regular intervals on 'Sahara Filmy' and other channels.

In the movie, '*Bombay to Goa*', one of the character uses the Sikh attire as a camouflage and in an utterly derogatory and repulsive manner, when the attire is not needed, in the presence of a multitude of people, discards his hair and turban.

The film '*Gadar- Ek Prem Katha*' has a Sikh character but he is an apostate who is willing to easily convert to Islam for his lady love, has strong animosity against Muslims and is depicted wearing the turban most of the times, but conveniently removes them at some places. When he is wearing the turban, his beard is shaven, when he is without the turban, he has a beard. The reaction of the Sikhs is one of helplessness and as psychologists and sociologists tells us; this state is not a healthy sign for society.

The "terrorist" image of the Sikh has for long been responsible for hatred against Sikhs in India and has the potential to aggravate

the situation in the Diaspora where Hindi movies are screened more than ever before.

The central character of an upcoming movie, called '*Singh is King*' as is known from the previews available on the internet, is wearing a turban, with some unknown symbol affixed on this turban, and he is without a moustache and beard.

The portrayal of Pidhu the great on MTV and Khabroo Singh on Yo TV are other examples which show that such characterization is the creation of sick minds. The portrayal of Sikhs in their own Punjabi song videos and even in the film "*Mitti Wazaan Mardi*" has also got a lot to do with the stereotyping of Sikhs.

To save the situation from reaching a conflagration, all the five minority communities in India must have one well-respected member of the community as a member of the Film Censor Board and the proposed regulatory authority for the satellite media. The Film Censor Board has had a Sikh member in the past and should have one now without delay. This one step with help diminish and gradually stop all such nasty portrayal of Sikhs in Bollywood.

Sikh organizations must initiate penal proceedings against producers and the Censor Board for hurting the sentiments of a community. The Diaspora too can play a role as gender and racial profiling are serious crimes in most countries. As Hindi films desperately need an international audience, complaints of racial profiling will stop their distribution and hence force a change in perspective.

The Sikh character, ideally, should be portrayed by a Sikh only. In case it is not possible to do so, the sensibilities of the community must be respected and the character must undergo a sensitivity training programme just as they do for all other characters that they have to portray. For those who want such characters, the likes of Manmeet Singh are always there.

Creative liberty cannot be allowed to become a poetic license for name-calling and hate generation. Let Manmeet Singh have the last word: "Dialogue and interaction with the film world and everyone in it will change the way Sikhs are looked at and portrayed, atleast that has been the case with me." Let us hope that it stays that way for Manmeet Singh and the entire Sikh community. In any case, eternal vigilance is the price of liberty, even creative liberty.

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Man da mit MANMEET SINGH



The cheeky grin of the burly Sikh in the Indiabulls ad campaign brings a smile to even those who do not understand shares and stocks. The Sardarji in the board meeting is Manmeet Singh of Mumbai characterizing Kulwant Bhatia. WSN caught up with him and found him to be a busy man neck-deep not only in promotional films but also into Bollywood and its Tamil version too.

WSN: How does it feel to be a model?

Manmeet Singh: It feels good. It is my kirat and I go about it as everyone else does his or her kirat.

WSN: What is the score card as of now?

Manmeet Singh: With Guru's grace, I have done close to 90 ad films and have played parts in 15 movies so far, since I started my career in 1999.

WSN: What have been the best moments so far?

Manmeet Singh: I enjoy all of my work. I take all work seriously. The impromptu show *Lokal lo baat* on Sab TV made a big difference and it was a tuning point in my career. Since then, I have not looked back.

WSN: How did you start modelling?

Manmeet Singh: I wanted to become a singer. 8 of my songs have been recorded by a company in Ludhiana. Somehow that has not clicked so far though I still desire to sing. The Samsung TV ad with Indian cricketers brought out my acting talent and that brought in more work and recognition.

WSN: And the films?

Manmeet Singh: Good Sikh actors are in short supply, so when a choice was available, producers lapped it up. I have played roles in *Jungle* and *Barsaat*, with the second lead in *Bombay to Bangkok*. I have done 15 movies and 4 more are slated for release in the coming months.

WSN: Are you working in a Tamil film too?

Manmeet Singh: Abhiyum Mnum -that is the Tamil film in which I am playing a major role and perhaps am the first Sikh to do so. Shortly we would be shooting for the movie in Chandigarh. It is an interesting story where a Tamil girl falls in love with a

Sikh boy. I must add that the entire star cast and the director's team have respected me as a Sikh and have expressed eagerness to know more about the Sikh way of life.

WSN: What do you think about stereotyping of Sikhs in Hindi movies?

Manmeet Singh: I think that we need to stand up to such attempts. Some of our own people accept such roles and this makes the fight more difficult. Politely but sternly we should make our viewpoint clear.

WSN: Have you faced any such situation?

Manmeet Singh: Yes and No. I was asked to play a derogatory role and I explained to them that it hurts us and the scene was tweaked. In another case, a filmmaker wanted to me to mouth some remarks against another religion. I turned down that too. I told them that as a Sikh I would respect all religions including my own.

WSN: How does one contest such prejudice?

Manmeet Singh: Love, courage to say no, persuasion, respect and availability of more Sikh actors.

WSN: What is your take on Sikhi?

Manmeet Singh: I love Sikhi. I vigorously attempt to be a good Sikh and a good human being as mandated by our Gurus. I also make my humble contribution in this regard. Funding education of deserving students is one of my dreams. I have also taken part in the Punjabi play, "*Meri Maa Jooth Boldi Hai*" which has had a significant impact upon young viewers.

WSN: Are you happy?

Manmeet Singh: With the grace of Waheguru, Chardikala.

