



People's Voice beyond Borders: Looking for an Alternative Border Narrative in Bollywood Cinema

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KEYWORDS: INDIA, PAKISTAN, BORDER NARRATIVE, GENDER, PEACE MOVEMENT,
PEOPLE-TO-PEOPLE CONTACT, BOLLYWOOD, BAJRANGI BHAJJAAN

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The highly militarised India-Pakistan border both symbolises and reinforces the antagonism permeating India-Pakistan relations. Reports of the UNDP and the UNICEF, on the one hand, and those of the Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, on the other, clearly indicate that both the countries remain hostage to war thinking and war preparation (Mehdi 2005). Even after seven decades since the Partition of India and the creation of two countries out of one, the border between the two countries is globally reckoned as one of the most hostile in the world. The conspicuous absence of any real initiative to eradicate this strain of hostility from official formalities, surveillance and rituals pertaining to the border by either government in all these 70-odd years may well be construed in terms of high stakes of both the states in the perpetuation of a hard border, resistant to any popular negotiation.¹ While military casualties of the hostile border situation are meticulously quantified and publicised by either state, the demographic, social, psychological and environmental costs of a hard border incurred by the civilian population is never audited, even though the latter may be the worst sufferers of the ever-eluding prospect of lasting peace (For a detailed historical account of how the two states have failed to work towards lasting peace, see Wirsing 1998).



So, a pertinent question—especially 75 years after Partition—is whether people’s narratives about borders, at variance with the state-authored narratives, have not congealed on either side; and, if they have, why they have not managed to make an eminently noticeable space for themselves in contradistinction to the continuing hegemony of the state’s or the majority community’s rationalisation(s) of a hostile border in either country. Critical research, indeed, finds that the India-Pakistan border evokes response not only from the dominant perspectives but also from marginal ones that pose fundamental questions around the border’s meaning and legitimacy (Purewal 2003). However, popular cinema in South Asia has not received as much serious attention in this regard as it should have; all the attention that Bollywood cinema has elicited from the practitioners of international relations studies appears to revolve round its perceived role as soft power (For an exposition of the concept of soft power, see Nye, Jr. 2004; for various perspectives on Bollywood cinema as soft power, see Schaefer and Karan 2013). And yet the possibility of such cinema popularising the marginal perspectives and inducing a rethink about the hegemonic perspectives is relevant to both peace studies and peace activism.

As a move in that direction, this essay delves into the world of popular Bollywood creations of the last ten years or so and zeroes in on the movie *Bajrangi Bhaijaan* (2015, henceforth *BB*) for a direct and focused take on the border question that is at a wide variance from statist and majoritarian narratives. Without denying the dense intertextuality in which the film may be situated, it is important to ask whether it is really irrelevant for peace studies that this film gives a call to the 'awaam' (the common people) on either side to mobilise and reclaim the border for their own agency if only to 'erase the hate component forever.'² In this connection, the essay also finds it significant that the film clearly appears to deploy the tropes of childlike innocence, irrationality and femininity as implicit counterpoises to the adult (male) rationality and hypermasculinity that informs the state’s propagation of a hard and hostile border. These are all reasons why *BB*’s possibilities for generating a popular rethink about the desirability of a highly militarised hostile border needs highlighting. Scholars of peace studies, in trying to identify border narratives different from or critical of the two states’ justification of a hard-militarised border, steer clear of 'emotional' narratives and exclusively focus on the ones that satisfy the criterion of dispassionate, rational argument that is usually deemed as befitting the supposed civility and impersonal orientation of public discourse. The dismissal of 'emotional' narratives as personal, and hence unworthy of consideration, leaves us with alternative narratives that are considered



noteworthy if only because they are dispassionate and impersonal enough to be reckoned as rational. But is it not significant that such unemotional narratives are in the mirror image of the impersonal rationale of a hard-militarised border that makes no exception to its general principle of territorial defence? Actually, however, the excision of emotional critiques of a hard border from scholarly reckoning derives from imagining the public sphere in gendered terms. The binary opposition that is generally constructed between the so-called public sphere and the so-called private one is intimately wound up with the equation of femininity with emotion and masculinity with intellection, and the relegation of women into the public sphere where domesticity is seen as squarely situated. By the same logic the public sphere is conceptualised in terms of an essential maleness, dispassionately distanced from the emotional (see e.g. Fraser 1990).

So, the question is: if the rigidness of a hostile border is often perceived by the common people on either side in their ordinary everyday lives in terms of traumatising closure and is recounted in terms of pain or even exasperation, would that critique be considered irrelevant to academic exercises like peace studies just because it is couched in emotionality? *BB*, a movie with considerable doses of emotion, often bordering on sentimentality, indeed gives the present author an apt occasion to raise this question. Not only does it emotionally script the triumph of the 'soft' reason of a mute child's need to be united with her parents over the reason of the closed border, but it also deploys tropes of femininity, unreason and childishness as counterpoises to the hegemonic tropes informing the justification of the hostile border between the two countries. Furthermore, peace studies does need to register a cinematic text, however melodramatic, when it morphs from being a simple tale of the muteness of a child and her subsequent recovery of voice into an overt message to the common people on either side of the border to assert their voice(s) against the insensitivity of a militarised border. Finally, it should not be lost on a critical reader that the film shifts focus from the Line-of-Control (LoC) that the 'war films' from Bollywood fixedly prioritise, naturalise and sanctify (For a critique of the pre-existing Bollywood cinematic focus on the LoC, see Athique 2008). *BB* in its optimistic climax takes us to the no-man's land as a symbolic vista of new possibilities; this makes the film particularly relevant to the concerns of peace studies and peace activism.



Too much read into a simple text?

The way the present author proposes to read *BB* is admittedly open to question. The film being a text—too audio-visual in nature—that may be interpreted in diverse ways that may differ from and even conflict with one another. The practitioner of classical international studies, in particular, would most likely be sceptical of the efficacy of the proposed exercise and ask whether the director intends the interpretation that the present author gives to the film; in other words, whether the reading is at all warranted by the maker's own intentions. Equally pertinent would be the question whether the box-office success of the film, in any way, indicates that the audience, in appreciating the film, saw in it an alternative border discourse. The present author's answer to these questions would be at various levels. However, that requires us to give a brief resumé of the storyline and a brief outline of what sense the present author makes of the film, justifiably or otherwise.

Released in 2015, *BB* has a simple storyline. Shahida, a girl child, muted by a shock, comes with her mother to the Nizamuddin Dargah (the tomb of the Sufi saint Nizamuddin Auliya) in Delhi from Pakistan in pursuit of her family's hope that her speech would be restored. On her homeward journey the train temporarily halts, and she, in a fit of childish playfulness, alights at midnight. But the train resumes its run to and beyond the border, leaving her behind in India. One Pawan Kumar Chaturvedi, an ardent devotee of Bajrangbali³, finds her and feels enjoined by his personal god to reunite this helpless child—Munni as he names her—with her parents. Finding all possible channels of her return blocked, he takes the desperate decision of travelling with her to Pakistan without a visa in search of her parents. Crossing the border with the help of a handler, Pawan, nicknamed Bajrangi, comes to be hounded by the Pakistani intelligence establishment on the suspicion of spying. Still the god-fearing simpleton does not abandon his mission.

With help from Chand Nawab, a small-time television correspondent from Karachi, he ultimately manages to restore the child to her parents, only to be nabbed by the Pakistani intelligence. Convinced of his innocence, however, a Pakistani intelligence officer disobeys his higher authority and releases Bajrangi from confinement. But Bajrangi is now faced with the insurmountable problem of crossing the Pakistani check-post without a visa and with official orders from the army high command that he should not be allowed to cross. However, in the meantime, Chand Nawab had used social media to mobilise ordinary people on either side of the border to enable



the visa-less border-crossing of the 'innocent Indian civilian whose affection for a mute child had brought him to Pakistan'. Aroused by this call, a virtual sea of humanity assembles on either side of the border. Their thunderous cheering of Bajrangi gets the better of the border guards' compulsory obedience to orders. As the handful of border guards decide to look the other way, the sea of humanity on either side storm the gates open to enable Bajrangi to cross over. The loud cheering of the ordinary citizenry then blends into the voice of Munni calling Bajrangi '*mama*' (maternal uncle); her rush of emotions at seeing Bajrangi successfully cross over fused with the relieving feeling of reunion with her parents, had caused a jolt in her brain restoring her voice. On the no-man's land Bajrangi, by now 'Bajrangi Bhaijaan' for the assembled Pakistanis, takes Munni in his arms to playfully toss her into the air. The film ends with this freeze-frame!

The film broke box-office records on both sides of the India-Pakistan border (Swaminathan 2017). But that is not the primary reason why it is being discussed here. The possible space that it provides for interpretations contrapuntal to the hegemonic border discourse(s) is what this essay notes about this film, which otherwise has to be sat through in a mood of willing suspension of disbelief. There is no denying that the film has all the ingredients of commercial cinema of the Bollywood kind—from song and dance sequences to Himalayan panorama, to Salman Khan with his six-pack abs to the camera's strategic gaze on Kareena Kapoor as Salman's love interest Rasika, to a fairy-tale ending. Yet *BB* is the first commercial film to give a direct call to activism by the awaam on either side towards a redefinition of the border, if only to make it sensitive to the ordinary people's priorities.

True, Chand Nawab's call to the citizens on either side is too sentimental and loud for sophisticated film appreciation. But he is clearly a protagonist of the message that the hostile border participates in the perpetuation of hatred of one people for another; to replace the regime of '*nafrat*' (hatred) with one of '*humdardi*' (empathy) and '*pyar*' (love) people needed to now re-script the border with their own agency. Further, it is eminently possible to read the character of Shahida/Munni in an allegorical light, albeit recognising the contraptions of a popular form that frames it. A discerning viewer may, indeed, want to keenly register that the moment the mute girl gets back her voice near the end of the film is also the moment the ordinary people on either side descend upon the border and raise their voice in favour of Bajrangi's border-crossing.

Notwithstanding the characteristic melodrama, it is possible to read the film as a text inchoately subverting the reason of the state that relegates



all alternative reasons pertaining to the border to the status of 'unreason.' The film, in its turn, seems to delight in symbolically deploying childish innocence, femininity and irrationality and somehow endearing these counterpoises to the audience by melding melodrama with these metaphors. Significantly, the storyline, the script, the situations and the screenplay cumulatively bring out another problematic implication of the hostile India-Pakistan border—the way in which the exclusionary and exteriorising vibes of the barbed wires of the border, on the one hand, and the communal divide propagated within the national territory by the majoritarian discourse(s), on the other, continually justify and reinforce one another (For a discussion of the way in which cartographic, communal and political lines in South Asia not only divide countries, but are replicated within countries, creating new internal frontiers, see Samaddar 2017). Finally, and most importantly, the film tends to invoke the no-man's land as some kind of an emancipatory space—beyond hegemonic territoriality of the two states—where the ordinary people's priorities and predicaments could be shared surmounting an insensitive border.

Coming back to the question of the director's intention, the present author's subjective reading may well be contested and questioned. But since the director Kabir Khan's own comments on the making of the film are available in the form of interviews, an engagement with them may be in order. Indeed, his comments make the present author to think twice before unhesitatingly declaring 'the death of the author' (Barthes 1977: 142-8; Derrida 1997), and inscribe the text exclusively with her own reading. In an interview, Kabir Khan affirmed that his choice of the no-man's land as the site of the climax was deliberate; the no-man's land, incidentally, is a stateless space and to cinematise the two peoples defying the hegemonic discourse of enmity and touching each in love on that particular site is highly significant. In the same interview Khan said, 'I feel strongly about unity, secularism and *people-to-people friendship*. I'm a product of a mixed marriage. Growing up, I saw the celebration of both cultures [Hindu and Muslim].' (emphasis mine)

Elsewhere, talking about *Tubelight* (2017)—a film of his that broached the question of India-China people-to-people contact against the backdrop of the hegemonic discourse of 'enmity' between the two nations—he brought up the question of war, indicating an ideological orientation that is so likely to have informed his treatment of *BB*, too: 'War cannot be a solution to any issue, it takes the lives of thousands of civilians from both the countries who are involved in a war.' (India Today Web Desk 2017) This



comment becomes relevant for the present discussion because I discern *BB* as questioning the justification of a hostile border; a hostile border is sought to be justified in terms of an ever-present possibility of war, and, in its turn, reinforces the possibility of war by being perpetually encoded with 'enmity'. Indeed, in the name of 'beating retreat,' the Indian Border Security Force and the Pakistani Rangers routinely perform belligerent actions at the India-Pakistan border at Wagah: 'Wagah is the ultimate border where hate and hostility is enacted every day in the morning and evening.' (Mehdi 2005: 121) By carefully nurturing it as daily ritual that is also marketed as a tourism spectacle of 'carefully choreographed contempt'⁴, the states on either side not only reify but also commodify mutual hostility for the citizens on either side to consume and be hegemonised by.

The context: Situating *BB* and other texts

However, popular cinema admittedly aims for box-office success; and *BB* evidently does so. Thus, Kabir Khan, too, would have to gauge whether the environment of popular sensibilities was ready for a message like that in *BB*. Or, possibly a changing world of popular sensibilities (Singh 2008), in the first place, assured the director that a cinematic text like *BB* could expect to make money. It may be suggested that *BB* was made amidst a transforming world of public discourse about India-Pakistan relations. Citizens' peace activism—however small an enclave—was clearly emerging in the two countries and beginning to get media attention.

It is unmistakable that in the immediate run-up to India's nuclear test at Pokhran (1998), closely followed by Pakistan's at Baluchistan (1998) and in the immediate conflict of the Kargil War (1999), the border came to be filmed in block-busters in the jingoistic imaginary of patriotic 'sons' defending the feminised territory of the nation at a highly militarised border, invincible enough to ensure an inviolate closure at the LoC, where the enemy should be held at bay from invading the body of the motherland. The state propaganda on either side justifying the choice of combat over peace, and media reportage in the two countries capitalising on the intense sensationalism of war news and the patriotic appeal of war-time demonisation of the 'enemy', created a popular appetite for 'war films'—epitomised by J. P. Dutta's films *Border* (1997), *Refugee* (2000) and *LOC Kargil* (2003) (Athique 2008). What is significant for the present discussion is the visualisation and narrativisation of the India-Pakistan border in these films. Rather than simply being permeated with jingoism, these films attempted to naturalise the barrier created by the Radcliffe Line in the west (Athique



2008). Again, a Bollywood blockbuster like *Sarfarosh* (1999) that did not directly focus on cross-border combat even amidst the popular jingoism in the run-up to Kargil War, represented the border, nonetheless, as radically disjunctive with the threat of cross-border terrorism typically emanating from the other side, that is, from Pakistan. Since this essay seeks to demonstrate the essential difference between such narratives and that of *BB*, it is also crucial to note in passing the way Dutta's films and their ilk elided/silenced the distinctiveness of the no-man's-land, lest this stateless stretch conjured up the possibility of a radically different border narrative.

This mood of the Kargil moment—clench-fistedly imagining the India-Pakistan border as a grim line with 'the enemy on the other side'—lingered for quite some time in popular cinema in the subcontinent. *Hindustan Ki Kasam*, a Bollywood film released in 1999, associated terrorism exclusively with Pakistan. Two twin boys, born of Indian Hindu parentage, become separated at birth. The one brought up in India by Hindu foster-parents typically turned out to be a liberal Hindu and a writer, whereas his brother brought up by a Pakistani terrorist called Jabbar grew up to be a fanatic 'jehadi'. Thus, the India-Pakistan border was blatantly conflated with an essentialised cultural divide between Pakistan as the home of Islamic fundamentalism and India as a cradle of liberalism and humanism (Din and Langah 2012). *Gadar: Ek Prem Katha*, released in 2001, apparently celebrated the spirit of love surmounting religious divides; a Sikh truck driver saves a middle-class Muslim girl from gang-rape at the time of Partition, wins her love and marries her only to ultimately go through a whirlwind of trying situations once the girl visits Pakistan and gets confined by her parental family who block her return to India. The narration of the hero's entry into Pakistan to 'recover' his wife took up the second half of the film; Pakistanis were stereotyped as India-haters, the Pakistani regime as inherently repressive, and the Pakistani people as fundamentalist—ever-ready to be unleashed as terrorists against India.

However, the popular jingoism excited by state propaganda and the corporate-media-authored 'militainment' of the Kargil War moment gradually petered out.⁵ The intertextual terrain in which *BB*'s making may be situated is, therefore, the one that gradually emerged around peace-oriented creativity from the period around 2003-2004 onwards. Of course, this essay does not claim that this terrain came to completely supplant/sideline the discourse of 'enmity'. In 2001, a rabidly anti-Pakistan film such as *Gadar: Ek Prem Katha* could still expect to be a hit in India. But other strands were developing in the world of cinema and in the subcontinent—strands that



came to undercut the prominence that war films had attained in the heat generated by Kargil. Indeed, if the Kargil moment had reinforced an unquestioning defence of the border as reflected in 'war films' of the type made by J. P. Dutta, the subsequent period on both sides of the border witnessed the emergence of pockets of public discussion interrogating the sanctity of the hard border between India and Pakistan. Significantly, in the wake of such discussions a genre of films emerged that directly addressed the trauma of Partition.

Anticipated by *Mammo* (1994), *Train to Pakistan* (1998) and *Earth 1947* (1998), Partition films became visible as a trend in the beginning of the new millennium with the making of *Hey Ram* (2000), *Refugee* (2000) and *Pinjar* (2003) in India.⁶ Partition films were made in Pakistan too. Two independent films from Pakistan—Sabiha Sumar's *Khamosh Pani* (2003) and Mehreen Jabbar's *Ramchand Pakistani* (2008)—sent across strong messages that differed from the statist rationalisation of the post-Partition border (Saeed 2009). Instead of revering the border as some kind of a sacred line that neatly and radically divides two nations, foreclosing any emotional spill-over, these films questioned the notion of compulsory congruence between official cartographies of closed borders, on the one hand, and people's (especially women's) trans-border memories and lived experiences, on the other. Significantly, some of these films drew upon the feminist critique of Partition and the post-Partition border that had emerged with the new millennium (Butalia 1998; Menon and Bhasin 1998); women were thus shown as the most quintessentially partitioned subject, with Partition's borders really and metaphorically rupturing their bodies, emotions and identity with terrible violence.

The highly acclaimed and award-winning *Khamosh Pani* made in 2003 in Pakistan poignantly underscored 'the violence women continue to endure in the name of religious and national identity' (Saeed 2009). It depicted—even through a poignant use of sound and music—how the violence of Partition, with its real and metaphorical borders, pierces women's lives not only in form of self-enforced silence about experience of rape and abduction, but also in the form of any accidental termination of that silence (Saeed 2009; Sundar 2010; Viswanath and Malik 2009). In the same year—2003—Chandraprakash Dwivedi's *Pinjar* was made in India based on a novel of the same name authored by Amrita Pritam. The film is about Puro, a Sikh girl, who was abducted by a Muslim youth, Rashid. She managed to escape and return to her parents, who, however, refused to take her back in the name of family honour. Puro found no alternative but to marry



Rashid—a compulsion that saw her name and identity changed with no option for her to have her choice. The Partition's border symbolised the delinking with her past life as she ultimately chose to stay in Pakistan with Rashid. As one scholar observes, 'the film acknowledges the irrevocable rupture of Partition, as well as the burden upon women to endure and absorb the consequences of the separations forced upon them' (Master 2010: 68). *Ramchand Pakistani* (2008), an independent film made in Pakistan, essayed its own specific take on the way the Partition-created border tears women's world of affect asunder. It also poignantly foregrounded children as the other category that had not created the adult-authored border and yet constitute another innocent part of a society grievously affected by an insensitive border mechanism (Saeed 2009).

It is unlikely that the idea behind *BB* did not take into account the legacy of the so-called Partition films. However, there was another development that is likely to have reinforced the making a film like *BB*, with its critique of a hard border between India and Pakistan—peace-oriented activism in the subcontinent from 2003-2004 onwards. Though the initiative of the two governments, especially the role of the-then Indian prime minister Atal Behari Vajpayee, has often been emphasised in this regard in the standard accounts of 'improving bilateral relations', the role of citizens' initiatives in fostering people-to-people contact and campaigns against visa restrictions is less discussed. It is, indeed, pertinent to ask whether it was not the emergence of these initiatives, campaigns and movements that induced the respective governments to tone down the high decibels of their militarist rhetoric. Writers, filmmakers, film artistes, cultural performers and peace activists came to play a significant role in crossing the border and speaking in favour of friendship between the two countries (Mehdi 2005: 119).

The reason why this civil society segment of pro-peace initiatives is more important than diplomacy is that even after 2003-2004 the two states have almost cyclically alternated 'cooperation' with militarist brandishing. So, in order to identify a possible milieu that promised the success of a film implicitly advocating people's activism against the hostile border, we need to ultimately look at the emerging segment of pro-peace activism rather than at the world of inter-state bilateral talks. After all, even though the two states hold high level talks about 'bilateral cooperation,' neither of them has ever decided to suspend the enactment of hostility at the Wagah border, carried out in the name of a 'beating retreat' ceremony in all the seriousness of a sacrosanct daily ritual. As if they have a tacit agreement regarding this one matter; amidst all the adversarial posturing, the two



'enemy' states immortalise Wagah as a 'symbolic battlefield where the ritual authentically communicates each army's power to its rival' (Mehdi 2005: 122).

Indeed, commercial cinema was quick to resonate to the emergence of pro-peace activism. Drawing upon the critical acclaim received by the Partition films, too, a slew of films—*Veer-Zara* (2004), *Main Hoon Na* (2004), *Ek Tha Tiger* (2012) and *PK* (2014)—charted a track very different from Dutta's war films, or from films like *Hindustan Ki Kasam* and *Sarfarosh* that stereotypically represented Pakistanis as terrorists and/or drug-traffickers. Instead, each of these films narrates in its own way love between an Indian and a Pakistani national, defying the discourse of hatred (Bharat and Kumar 2008); the drift of public sentiments had possibly encouraged the makers of these films to entertain a greater possibility of popular reception for themes that defied the prohibitive vibes of the hostile India-Pakistan border sustained by the two states. One film studies scholar suggests that these films reflect the sensibilities of a younger generation who had come to occupy the centre-stage distanced from Partition of India (1947) by 60 years (Singh 2008). However, another scholar reads the contemporary discursive context more discerningly in his effort to situate the making of *Veer-Zara*:

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It has long been argued rather vociferously by activists, artists, and scholars on both sides of the border that whatever the animosity between the two states, the people of Pakistan and India only harbor goodwill towards each other; in other words, it is civil society rather than the state that is invested in the peace process. When Veer submits his resignation and abandons the uniform of an officer of the Indian Air Force, should we only read this as an instance of love triumphing over patriotic militarism? Or does that sartorial gesture signify something much more profound, namely that institutions of the state hinder rather than facilitate the building of bridges between the two countries? (Lal 2018: 116)

By the 2005-2006, the call for people-to-people contact became louder, its reach among the citizens in both the countries wider and its cultural articulation more varied. An international NGO—Friends without Borders—initiated a project of people-to-people contact between the two countries in 2005. The Indian newspaper, *Times of India* and the Pakistani media house, Jang Group, partnered with Friends without Borders to generate the peace campaign named *Aman Ki Asha* (Hope for Peace). Though the *Dil Se Dil* (From Heart to Heart) *Border Concert* planned by them was cancelled in 2007, they stepped up their effort in other ways. It is noteworthy that in



2013, as tensions between the two states—India and Pakistan—rose over alleged cross-border firing and loss of lives at the LoC, with the state actors on either side exchanging allegations and counter-allegations, Samir Gupta, a Delhi-based IT professional, initiated the idea of global vigil for peace between India and Pakistan using the *Aman Ki Asha* Facebook group; members volunteered to organise vigils in New Delhi, Islamabad, Mumbai, Karachi, Chandigarh, Lahore, Shahdadt, Bradford, Boston, Los Angeles, New York and Toronto on 27 January 2013 (Khan 2010; Sarwar 2014).

Thus, even while many people in both the countries continued to acquiesce in the two states' justification of a hostile border, a space of public opinion was steadily and noticeably developing on either side against visa restrictions and in favour of a varied repertoire of activism and people-to-people contact. Indeed, 2013 marked a high tide of such activism, prompting Google to take note and make use of it in an advertisement for its search engine. The ad emoted on the basis of the trauma of Partition and post-Partition borders separating friends and families. It fictionalised the cathartic reunion of two elderly men who had been friends in their childhood, but had come to lose contact because of the vivisectioning effect of Partition and the consequent human displacement.

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Of course, the commercial aim was to project Google Search as the only possible conduit for making this dream reunion possible. But what is significant for the present essay is that this ad had a tremendous impact on internet viewers in both countries; it was viewed 1.6 million times even before being officially released on television on 15 November 2013 (*Reunion* directed by A. R. Sharma⁷). The emotionally moving content of the ad, along with its sensitive treatment and exquisite filming, coupled with its instant popularity, wove it prominently into the intertextual web in which *BB* may be seen as ensconced. After all, *BB* was made in the perceptible trail of this ad, which in its turn, is most likely to have been inspired by the Pakistani short film *Respect* (2012), in which two friends separated by Partition meet each other on social media (*Respect*⁸, directed by Taha Kirmani).

Even after the foregoing effort at situating *BB* in its appropriate intertextual context, the present essay may have to confront the argument that, after all, Kabir Khan's engagement with the border in *BB* may have been only incidental and not consciously political. Some critics may point out that Kabir Khan's *Phantom*, made in 2015 (the year in which *BB*, too, was released) fictionalises Indian intelligence agents' successful operation against Pakistan-based terrorists; and this may be read as pandering to the



stereotypical representation of Pakistan as the hotbed of terrorist activities—a stereotype that is so integral to the hegemonic narrative in India about Pakistan. Khan himself, however, has said in an interview that the two films—*BB* and *Phantom*—are not antithetical to one another:

Phantom is a different world but the same zone. I'm taking the *Lashkar-e-Taiba* head on. Phantom takes a strong stand against those who don't allow *people-to-people friendship* [emphasis mine] and unity. Once again, only those people who think *Lashkar* is Pakistan will think Phantom is anti-Pakistan. The same elements who engineered 26/11 also killed 200 school children in Peshawar⁹.

What needs emphasising in response is that whatever may be the nature of the interrelationship of the two films in Kabir Khan's schema, the present essay decidedly focuses exclusively on *BB* and not the whole terrain of Kabir Khan's cinematic creativity for its own sake. Despite its intertextual embeddedness, *BB* is also a unique text, and this essay, in its quest for an evocative popular text explicitly advocating a friendly India-Pakistan border, finds the answer precisely in this uniqueness.

Indeed, it is because of its effort to foreground this uniqueness that, even after situating *BB* in relation to other texts in the preceding discussion, this essay would now exclusively focus on *BB* as a filmic text. As stated in the introduction, this essay aims at searching the world of popular culture for a text into which meanings contrary to the hegemonic border narrative(s) can be read. In *BB* the present author finds just that. This occasions the present author to now break into a first-person narrative about her own politics of reading. The decision to go to war, for me, is an elite act that severely violates the ordinary citizen's human rights; and by perpetuating the possibility of war and feverish obsession with defence expenditure, the fiscal policy of the governments in India and Pakistan systematically deprive their citizens of a larger amount of budgetary allocation to food security, environmental security, education, health, housing, rural electrification and so on.

And, if I was starting to feel optimistic about the new turn in pro-peace activism in 2010-2013, I have also come to discern the fragility of that turn in the light of the most recent developments. The allegedly terrorist car-bomb attack on an Indian Security Forces' convoy at Pulwama on 14 February 2019, killing more than 40 CRPF *jawans*, has come to be followed by warlike posturing and retaliatory moves by the two governments, practically bringing the subcontinent to the brink of war (Gettleman 2019).



This has troubled my congealing optimism about the pro-peace environment coming of age; one could now clearly register what had somehow become temporarily submerged: the sustained capability of warmongers in official circles, political parties, majoritarian ideological formations in both India and Pakistan to take advantage of unfortunate developments like the Pulwama attack to excite a gullible middle class into a mood of intense war-craving.

The perpetually war-sensationalising commercial media, whether in India or Pakistan, would only reinforce the mood by appealing to an inchoate hunger for masculinist assertion of the military kind that these two post-colonial middle classes have nurtured, possibly as a derivative of their past subjugation to the military might of the British Empire. It is time we searched for popular texts that counterbalance the upsurge of war-mongering with a narrative of the possibility of peace that can stand firm in its own right and ethical claim and comes from the ordinary people's repertoire of realisations and yearnings. Initiatives like *Aman Ki Asha*, however sincere, constitute an enclave of peace activism limited to elite intellectual circles, where it tends to hover in the absence of a shared template with the ordinary people's narratives. Only such narratives that can be widely disseminated and severally repeated—narratives that are popular and entertaining, moreover—can resonate to the ordinary people's everyday, where they, too, not only acutely experience the insensitivity of militarised borders but grope for a model narrative to be able to articulate their difference with the border's violent closure.

It is in this connection that the possibility of a popular film, with its capacity for multipliable audience, sets a template, especially if it narrates the prospect of the people voicing their yearning for a soft border. My academic intervention in this connection, too, becomes a part of the intertextual mesh of peace-activist narratives when I almost audaciously suggest the eminent possibility of reading a popular cinematic text like *BB* in relation to the Sadat Hasan Manto's timeless short story 'Toba Tek Singh', one of the most powerful hitherto-obtaining literary narratives questioning the states' reason of the border.

The 'hard' border

With their respective strategic/political interest in keeping the prospect of war somehow ever-looming on the horizon, the two states use propaganda and the Wagah border ceremony to normalise a hard border. Their concern is to generate consent among their respective citizens to such a highly



militarised disjunction to an otherwise continuous landmass. The typical charges that the two states trade against one another crucially rivet on the border and reinforce the supposed need for its impregnability—cross-border firing, cross-border infiltration, cross-border terrorism and so on. Commercial news media, in their own turn, have generally found it profitable to tap into the typical imaginary of enmity at the border—an imaginary that never fails to promise TRP-enhancing sensationalism (Stahl 2010). In academic literature such normalisations of a hard border have been variously interrogated in recent years, especially from the standpoint of various critical theories. Gender has possibly been the most searing critical tool in this regard (Butalia 1998; Mostov 1995; Yuval-Davis and Anthias 1989).

If border mechanisms are generally imagined as manly protection of the vulnerable—and hence feminine—territorial space of the nation, a hard border is even more masculinist in its dominant imaginary; indeed, the invocation of 'hardness' as against 'softness' is itself gendered. The impregnability, invincibility, weaponised deterrents to cross-border infiltration, super-intelligent border surveillance, automated border control, blinding search lights and metallic buffers only help reinforce the gendered imaginary around the 'hardness' of a dispassionate border management that does not yield to the 'soft'—read feminine—vibes of emotion, sensitivity and compassion.

The 'war films' of the late 1990s in the sub-continent valorised this gendered representation of the border, fictionalising in a manner that lionised the male characters, who defended the border as true 'sons' of the nation. The camera usually represented the border in terms of stealthy movements of soldiers in ambush at the LoC, surveilling male eyes synchronised with the sound of soldier's boots on the soundtrack melding into an impression of manly vigil protecting the vulnerability of feminised space of the nation within the border, the metallic noise of army convoys on the border roads reinforcing the masculinity of border-vigil with the implicit association of technology and metallic structures with masculinity. Machine guns and tanks with their protruding and rotating muzzles and, even more so, missiles are cinematized in these films in a way that emphasises their penetrative power, the other side of the border being imagined as a feminised space to be mauled in order that the motherland on this side may be protected and glorified. Most significantly the borderland is represented in these films as the zone of the soldier and not of the civilian. The voice at the border is typically the voice of combat and/or command; the voice of



the civilian population, if any in this area, is not of their autonomous agency but of victimhood at the hands of the nation's 'enemy.'

I see *BB* as highlighting this masculinist trope of the border surveillance, very cinematically at that, using the camera and the soundtrack in tandem. However, in a marked difference with the 'war films' cited above, this film masculinises the border mechanism, not to valorise its impregnability and impersonality, but to critique its insensitivity. To the discerning viewer the paradox is that with all its technological sophistication and its intelligent vigilance catering to national security, the border mechanism is helpless in the matter of recovering a mute six-year-old child in the immediate vicinity of the border, albeit on the other side. The way in which the border guard tries—with all the diplomatic correctness on his side—to reason with the mother about why she cannot be allowed to go to the other side without a visa to look for her child barely a mile away, is carefully cinematised to sound routine and insensitive.

On the other hand, the close-up of the mother's flushed face streams with tears, fear of loss running through her taut veins and brimming at the brink of her terrified eyes. Her indignation at the guard's inability to realise the impossibility of a mute child ever being able to find her way back across the border overwhelms the soundtrack in the form of an anguished wail and comes across as far more reasonable in the given situation. The immediately preceding sequence had already portrayed the helplessness of the child in all her orally challenged vulnerability, running in vain after the trundling metallic body of the train that leaves her behind and moves into the mindless zone of an automated border system where no humans are seen on the screen; only metal gates close shut with deafening noise and clockwork impersonality, and lights flash with a blinding effect.

Interestingly, the train that leaves the child behind, separating her from her mother and tracing its typical metallic negotiation of an equally metallic border along metallic tracks, is the Samjhauta Express. This train service jointly run by the Indian and Pakistani railways, however, strictly operates within the constraints, protocols and restrictions typical of the bilateral relations between two mutually suspicious states. To the discerning viewer *BB's* portrayal appears to hint at the irony of the official '*samjhauta*' (compromise) between two states—India and Pakistan—by making the soundtrack synchronise with the photography to bring out the steely insensitivity of the routine, bureaucratic formality of border-crossing of this official transport service; the metal chassis of the train, the metallic tracks and the aurally magnified metallic dialogue of the two may be read as the



audio-visual metaphor of a mechanical track—a track of state-to-state formalism as opposed to the informality and emotional terrain of people-to-people contact. Using the entire spectrum of shots, from long to short and from the worm's eye to the bird's, a soundscape that intermeshes thudding, crashing and slamming metallic noises with women's agonised cries, close-up of heavy iron bolts and border guards carefully concealing even their half smiles in their dutifully stiffened jaws, the film situates the Samjhauta border-crossing in a suffocating zone of prohibitiveness, ever-threatening closure and chilling surveillance; the iron-made and iron-bound chassis paradoxically carries ordinary citizens who are not the authors of this hard border but are often helplessly at its receiving end.

The script appears to move by undercutting the adult-authored, elite-authored statist reason that normalises the hostile border with the argument of territorial integrity in the face of cross-border attack/ terrorism/ infiltration; in the process what gets progressively revealed is the hypermasculinity and latent violence of the hegemonic border rationalisation. By the time the film's narrative has moved past the futile appeal of Shahida's mother to the border personnel, it is bound to occur to the viewer that on either side of the border the states' reason is programmed to reduce all alternative takes on the border as unreasonable. It no longer comes as a surprise, therefore, that Pawan's reason of risking his own life to restore a mute child to her parents is treated by the army officer at the border as unreason of an utterly insane variety. Another dimension of the film seems to confirm the film's latent project of destabilising the hegemonic reason of the border. *BB* invests considerable footage on bringing out the way in which mainstream media, too, sustains the statist reason of a hard border. The film scripts the way in which one big audio-visual media house after another refuses to buy/telecast the story of a simpleton crossing the border to reach a mute child home. Here two dominant reasons converge: the reason of the state and the reason of capital. For these houses, as the film explicitly scripts, it is commercially sane to safely take the cue from the state's unitary rationalisation of all visa-less border crossing as espionage/ infiltration and then spawn sensationalist spy stories of border-violation which only reinforce state's justification of a hostile border.

The 'soft' counterpoise

With the notion of unreason thus suggesting itself to the viewer as a possible counterpoise to the statist reason, a critical sensibility is prone to expect the script (and the cinematography) to deploy unreason as a



counterpoise. Pawan's reason of risking his own life to return/restore a mute child to her parents is, of course, treated by the army officer at the border as insanity. But does the film not deploy unreason in the form of childishness and femininity, too? The six-year-old Munni, whose childlike impulse to play with kid goat(s) beside the railway tracks separated her from her homeward-bound mother, may be easily reckoned as a victim of the rigidity and impersonal masculinity of the hard border. Munni is not merely helpless relative to the border narrative of the state, but also symbolically located in a mental space that neither authors nor enforces nor even comprehends the adult reason of a hostile border. And, Pawan is a dimwit, reckoned by adult society as worse than a child in his near-imbecility. The childlike simpleton fails to understand the logic of the visa regime and doggedly declines to understand why he cannot cross the border into Pakistan to redeem his pledge to Bajrangbali of bringing a helpless child home to her parents.

Significantly, the frequent appearance of lambs in the film strikes me as a visual metaphor of childish innocence. If actually invoked as by the director, such an allegory of lamb-like innocence, of course, makes the film vulnerable to the criticism of essentialising childhood as a 'natural' state of innocence. But, since assessment of the artistic aspect of the film is not my concern, I read this innocence as taking on a political significance—ordinary people's innocence of the creation and maintenance of the hostile border. Childish innocence may act as metaphor of the ordinary civilian's innocence of the border—its making, its sustenance and its surveillance. And it had, indeed, been used, even before the making of *BB*, in the Pakistani film, *Ramchand Pakistani* that scripted the seven-year-old Ramchand from a village in Pakistan crossing the India-Pakistan border unawares and then getting caught by the Indian Border Security Force, only to languish in jail for ten years in India; *Ramchand Pakistani*, thus, used the child to symbolically represent the ordinary people's helplessness viz-à-viz hard borders that they have not made.

This symbolic deployment of childlike innocence possibly also alludes to the circumstances in which high politics of elite adults authored the borders in 1947 and hardened it further during the 1960s, with the vast majority of the population often at the helpless receiving end. Innocence, in the sense of people's innocence of hostile borders, is also reflected in *BB*'s cinematic journey through small towns, villages and bazaars in Pakistan. Any discerning viewer would note that the film's script, camerawork and fleshing of characters along this route represents an ordinary population



wrapped up, very much like their Indian counterparts, in all the ordinariness of an everyday, unconcerned with the typical territorial anxieties that make the two states militarise borders to the teeth and protect them to the point of paranoia.

I also see the film as invoking femininity, if only as a counterpoise to the hypermasculinity of the hard border's latent violence, ruthless commitment to territoriality, sleepless surveillance and insensitivity to civilian vulnerabilities. For example, an intense care-based reason inheres in Shahida's mother's entreaty that she should be allowed to bring her child back somehow, as her child cannot speak. She further reasons that Indian territory is just five minutes away from the spot where she has pulled the chain and stopped the train to report the loss of her child. But the state's reason is: 'So what if it is five minutes, the place is under the jurisdiction of another nation-state. And you need to make a visa afresh to go there.' It is ironic, however, that to quell her feminine 'unreason', the state officials have to ultimately abandon rational argument and deploy the overpowering force of a masculine physique that restrains her before the heavy metal gates of the border close as the ultimate symbol of inviolate closure that no 'unreasonable' extension of feminine care can violate. Again, significantly, it was Rasika's father, who, as a typical authoritarian male head of the household, is more amenable to the persuasion of hegemonic discourse of enmity and wants to drive Munni out of his house on the grounds that she is from the '*dushmans*' (enemy's) country. Rasika's protest that Munni, an innocent child, is not party to any enmity, is just silenced by the patriarch's growl.

A film that can thus be read as critically exposing the border as hypermasculine, also feminises Salman Khan, who is otherwise rated as a star with an overt macho appeal among the audience. After having initially shown the actor in all the glory of his famed six-pack abs, the film steadily feminises his character (Pawan) with studied brushstrokes of irony. The script narrates how this apparently muscular guy has disappointed his Sanghi father by failing the RSS's test of manliness; he can neither wrestle, nor master the masculinity of intellect, nor regiment himself into routine and rhythm of the RSS drill. Distancing the character from any trace of heroism, the script makes Pawan's exasperated father explicitly declare that his son is 'zero'. If the Salman-played character, Pawan or Bajrangi, excels in anything it is his care and concern for Shahida who he renames Munni; and such mother-like care is reckoned as a feminine preserve in patriarchal society. At the border and in police custody in Pakistan,



Bajrangi's six-pack abs only serve to protect his bones from the incessant thrashing by the intelligence establishment and the police; but, as he silently endures the beating, the endurance paradoxically makes his character conform all the more to stereotypical femininity.

Most significantly, however, *BB*'s script arranges for a veritable subversion of the masculinity of the border vigil by using Munni's agency itself. Munni's love for bangles makes her covet the handcuffs in the possession of a Pakistani police officer at the border and ultimately steal them. By making Munni imagine handcuffs as bangles the text is in conformity with the patriarchal stereotype of equating bangles with femininity/effeminacy. But in effect the femininity that is used to thus subvert the masculinity of the armed enforcement of the border, is itself reconfigured as power rather than powerlessness. A close, critical reading of the script induces me to see this stereotypically gendered discourse of bangles made to stand on its head in the film. Instead of conjuring up the powerlessness of femininity, such a cinematic turn uses the girl-child's imagination to effectively denude the handcuff of its masculine associations and make it powerless!

Hands to hold and voice to recover

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It is eminently possible to read into the film a metaphorical use of the hand and the voice capable of talking back to the hegemonic border narrative(s). The reason of the hard border, after all, is about denial of any direct touch between the citizenry of the two countries; all overtures need to be necessarily mediated by and channelled through the concerned departments, offices and protocols of the state. From the perspective of the two states, people-to-people contact is a potentially suspicious affair. The caring function of the hand does not figure in the range of symbols marking the relation between the two states that habitually assume each other to be enemies. Diplomatic/bureaucratic hand-shakes, on the one hand, and the armed hands of soldiers locked in combat, are the accustomed symbols in the two antagonistic official imageries. Again, the state's rationalisation of the hard border denies legitimacy to any voice of the people at variance with the narrative of the state, arguing that such autonomous voice is potentially capable of endangering the security and territorial integrity of the nation.

The mainstream media, more often than not, privileges the state's border narrative and ignores/delegitimises the nonconformity, real or imagined, of the difference of the people's voice. What is more, whether in India and or in Pakistan, the respective majoritarian ideologies reinforce



the state's position by fanatically appealing to the susceptibilities of the religious majority, effectively marginalising/silencing any other border narrative as either sacrilegious or seditious or both. In such circumstances, the state's rationale of a hostile border between 'our' nation and that of the 'enemy' resounds, virtually reducing the citizenry to muteness. Does Munni's story somehow allude to this muteness? And, do the numerous sequences, shots and close-ups depicting the activity of the ordinary people's hands—whether in the form of embrace, caress or a mute person's signs—symbolise the somatic as the site of people-to-people contact as against the insensitivity of the barbed, metallic border?

The hands of a Pakistani *maulvi* (a learned teacher of Islamic law) embraces Bajrangi—a *maulvi*, who was not bothered about the latter's religious difference while hiding him from the Pakistani intelligence in his own little *madrasa* and then transporting him out of the area under surveillance. Chand Nawab, the small-time Pakistani correspondent embraces Bajrangi a number of times in the film, whether to celebrate shared elation or to communicate mutual affection and gratitude. The hands of Munni eagerly fling around Bajrangi's neck every time she has to ride piggy-back, indicating her assured feeling of comfort and security in the company of an Indian, about whose (different) nationality she, as a child of six, is blissfully unconcerned. Again, Munni as a mute person communicates through her right hand that she habitually raises in accompaniment of a broad grin to indicate that her feelings had been correctly read.

And the affective care with which Bajrangi gradually imbibes and reciprocates that sign language is symbolic of Bajrangi's transformation from a man shrinking from any contact with the 'enemy' country to a human with compassion, transcending the border and touching pulses across it. And, most importantly, the climactic sequence that scripts the ordinary people on either side railing against the mechanical closure embodied in the barbed wire and padlocked iron gates, uses hands in various gestures graphically synchronising with the crescendo of the people's cheering voice. Thousands of Pakistani hands (of people assembled to have the border gates opened) caressingly stroke Bajrangi's body with deep gratitude and affection as he moves through the sea of humanity towards the border. It is the same hands, in tandem with their counterparts just across the barbed wire, that rise in indignation at the insensitivity of the hard border that is disallowing Bajrangi to cross over into India on his return journey. The camera uses mid-shots to close-ups



in its frequent visual reference to these hands. Using the mid-shot to show hands (and feet) climbing the huge padlocked iron gates that deny the two citizenry's proximity to each other, the camera closes up with a climactic effect on the hand that ultimately breaks the padlock. Hundreds of hands then push the heavy gates open for Bajrangi to cross over! In keeping with this tenor, Bajrangi whom the hands of the Pakistani intelligence establishment had *handcuffed* [emphasis mine] and wounded to the point of movement impairment, is helped across a big boulder at the border by the compassionate *hands* [emphasis mine] of a frail elderly Pakistani civilian. The caressing, embracing, helping civilian hands at the border may be read in an intertextual context in which the two states daily make the Border Security Force and the Pakistani Rangers respectively 'swing their arms in huge parabolas' to display 'choreographed contempt' and 'precision nastiness in which thumbs [down] are used with terrifying effect' (Mehdi 2005).

Accompanying this regular theatrical performance of hostility at Wagah, the two border security establishments use microphones to egg on their citizen-spectators to express belligerence against their counterparts across the border. No wonder, the ceremony climaxes with the border gates on either side being slammed and sealed. *BB*, by contrast, appeals to the audience with the emotionally moving spectacle of the two citizenries using their unarmed hands to compassionately open the border gates. *Humdardi* and *pyar* (as the script itself uses the terms) is the key to *BB*'s cinematic focus on the ordinary citizen's compassionate hands.

Bajrangi's own right hand comes into (close-up) focus, too. Earlier in the film, he had instinctively raised his right hand to communicate *Khuda Hafiz* (lit: May God be your protector; the parting phrase derived from Persian and common among Muslims in the terrain from Iran to the Indian sub-continent) out of heartfelt gratitude to the *maulvi* who had sheltered him from the Pakistani intelligence. But his hand had dropped mid-way, inhibited by his deep conditioning in the culture and taboos of a Brahmanical milieu. But in this final sequence, with the script having navigated him through deeply transformative developments, he now unflinchingly raises his hand in a *Khuda Hafiz* gesture, saluting the cheering Pakistanis he is leaving behind; and this gesture is a parallel of the *Jai Shri Ram* (lit: Hail Lord Rama; a greeting phrase common among many denominations of Hindus in northern and western India) that the *maulvi* had unhesitatingly wished him some days back. The reciprocity of *Jai Sri Ram*, uttered by the *maulvi* and *Khuda Hafiz*, gestured by Bajrangi, however, may be read as



negotiating another border. Within the territories of the two respective nation-states majoritarian intolerance towards the minority community incessantly insembrates a boundary, a boundary that reinforces the 'enmity' at the India–Pakistan border. Thus, I read Bajrangi's hand, raised in the *Khuda Hafiz* gesture, as a counterpoise to Rasika's father's resentment against his Muslim neighbour consuming a meat-based diet next door and supposedly polluting his Hindu household with a 'foul' smell. Symbolically—and not unexpectedly—his intolerance of the Muslim presence next door intimately ties up with his belligerence towards the 'enemy' across the border. The hands raised in cross-border empathy and locked in cross-community embrace, on the other hand, tie up with the plurality of the culture in the subcontinent symbolised in the film in the spatial-visual metaphor of Delhi's Chandni Chowk. That is the neighbourhood where the script, with a touch of irony, locates the house of Rasika's father, an anti-Muslim and anti-Pakistan character.

This gives the camera the opportunity to capture the tremendous architectural plurality and hybridity typical of the Chandni Chowk skyline; the dome style shared by the Jama Masjid and the Gurdwara Sis Ganj Sahib is Byzantine/Persianate in terms of derivation and Indian in terms of imaginative indigenisation. Children of the neighbourhood, who might otherwise be exposed to the persuasion of the majoritarian discourse, are caught by the camera playing under the walls of the magnificent Humayun's tomb, possibly to hint at a latent paradox. The camera closes in on the *pietra dura* work on the walls of the tomb—Italian in origin, Mughal by adoption. The cinematography may be easily read as taking advantage of the cultural plurality of the location to also sensually invoke a plural foodscape and aromascape, so typical of this neighbourhood. Against this backdrop of cultural hybridity, the film also claims Bajrangbali, the monkey-god, for individual piety, in this case that of Pawan. The latent dig seems to be at the Hindutva outfit called *Bajrang Dal*,¹⁰ who appropriate the folksy deity of Bajrangbali to foist it as a masculinist leitmotif of hatred against both the Muslims and Pakistan.¹¹

This brings us to the most significant aspect of the film as I see it. At a simpler level the film's story is definitely about a child lost and found and her voice lost and found. But could we not, at a symbolic level, read into this film an allegory of the people's voice lost and found? Indeed, if at the level of the storyline Munni is a child who loses her voice to ultimately get it back at the end of the film, at the level of the symbolic she may be read as the allegory of the lost (and found) voice itself. The theme song indicates



so, as it plays again and again even while Bajrangi wades through one trying situation after another with Munni in his caring custody. Tellingly, the theme song ultimately overflows the soundtrack and fills up the Himalayan panorama in the climactic shot:

Tu jo mila, lo ho gaya main qaabil,
 Tu jo mila, lo ho gaya sab hasil'
 (Now that I have found you, I have become able
 Now that I have found you, I have found everything)

But whose voice should we read it as—a voice so enabling? A Pakistani intelligence officer seems to give us the cue when, convinced of Bajrangi's innocence, he defies the orders of his superior in the intelligence establishment and helps Bajrangi's border-crossing. The chief border guard on the Pakistani side of the border in Kashmir cites the orders of his superior and refuses to open the border gate for Bajrangi even while the slogan—*Bajrangi Bhaijaan* (lit: respected elder brother, Bajrangi)—voiced by hundreds of local Pakistani villagers rents the air. Coming to Bajrangi's aid, the intelligence officer then tries to reason with the border guard, and, significantly, this is what he says, pointing towards the vast sloganeering crowd, 'Yeh aawaz sun rahe hain? Yeh hai Pakistan ki awaam' ('Can you hear the voice? It is the [voice of] the common people of Pakistan'). The voice lost and found—apparently Munni's—is thus allegorically the voice of the awaam or the common people on both sides regarding the signification of the border, at least to me. This allegory comes home with all its impact when we register that the moment, near the end of the film, when the common people go against the will of the state and voice their support for Bajrangi's border-crossing, is also the moment when Munni recovers her speech. And the voice of the masses at the border gradually merges into her individual voice as she calls out to Bajrangi to bid him *adieu*. The reference to the 'common people' as the repository of the voice at variance with the state is significant; what unavoidably rushes into our critical sensibility is a possible allusion to the way in which the voice of the common people had been marginal to the elite deliberations that determined the borders in 1947.

This emphasis on the voice of the common people gives us an occasion to look deeper into the possible significance of the evident subalternity of the lead characters of the film—Munni, Bajrangi and Chand Nawab—as well as that of the thousands of Pakistani villagers assembled at the border and their counterparts on the other side. And, if Chand Nawab, the struggling, freelancing television correspondent catalyses the crystallisation of the



common man's narrative in the film in favour of Bajrangi's innocence and humanity, his narrative is significantly at variance with not only the narrative(s) of both the states but also that of corporate media. Nawab's narrative highlights a scantily educated Indian simpleton's affection for a six-year-old mute Pakistani girl, hails his extraordinary resolve to reach her home in Pakistan, resents the way he is being unjustly punished for this love's labour by the Pakistani intelligence and upholds the duty of the common people of both the countries to enable him to cross the border into India. On the other hand, both the state and the corporate media are shown in the film as converging, in their own respective interests, on the stereotyping of any visa-less border crossing as spying/infiltration and situating it in the zone of criminality; such stereotyping only continually reinforces the justification for a militarised hard border. When big media houses refuse to give televisual space to Chand Nawab's narrative, he resorts to social media:

This servant of god [Pawan] has fallen into the pit of hatred [fomented between the two peoples]. That hatred is compelling him to desperately flee from one hideout to another in Pakistan like a convict. This hatred must be terminated. And this job needs to be done by us – *the thousands and millions of ordinary people of the two countries* [emphasis mine], who want our children to grow up amidst love and not hatred.¹²

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If Chand Nawab's appeal is to the common people as a more democratic constituency for the reception of his alternative narrative, the appeal is also made in an alternative space of dissemination, distinct and different not only from state-sponsored channels of communication but also from those of the big media houses. And this appeal facilitates a mass mobilisation—rather than a civil society mobilisation—at the Pakistan-India border. Responding to this appeal, thousands of ordinary people gather on both sides of the high-altitude border and it is their chorus in favour of an innocent civilian that catalyses Bajrangi's border-crossing. Melodramatic as it may be, what matters here is that *BB*, with Chand Nawab as the protagonist, is the first film in the subcontinent to give a direct call to the common people of the two countries to assert their voice towards the undoing of a hard border that the two states justify.

The space of alternative possibilities: The no-man's land

The film's emphasis on the voice of the common people, that evidently comes across as different from that of either the state or the majoritarian



ideological formations, impels the logic of the narrative towards the delineation of a space for this difference. It is probably not unexpected that the film identifies such a space in the virtual domain of social media. But, the territorial power of the state is most hegemonic in its cartographic form that draws the border as a sharp wedge, embossed with trigonometric precision, on geographical space. An alternative narrative of the border, therefore, may equally tend to be expressed in terms of geographical space, albeit different in its imaginary from the state's cartography. Resistance to the tyranny of an insensitively closed border may well tend to define a trans-territorial geographical space as the organising trope for the alternative imaginary.

Significantly, *BB* resonates to such a quest and opens up for viewers a possibility unexplored by any commercial Hindi cinema before—the emancipatory possibility inchoate in the stateless space of the no-man's land. The last shot of *BB* captures and freezes Bajrangi affectionately tossing Munni into the air where she remains because the shot freezes and the film terminates. But what is significant is that this happens not on the LoC but on the no-man's land where the territorial power of neither India nor Pakistan prevails. If *BB* is the only commercial film so far to have dared to thus distinguish the no-man's land from national territorialities, it is probably important to hear what Kabir Khan has to say in this regard. Asked in an interview whether his choice to shoot the last shot on the no-man's land was deliberate in his scheme of things, he replied, 'Yes. While writing the screenplay, we were heading towards it. I wanted it just like that...with the man and child caught in their moment in that space between the borders and the river flowing by...I knew I wanted it for the climax.'¹³ This statement confirms my suggestion that the film strikes with its symbolic imagination of the no-man's land as the space for the awaam of the two countries to surmount the insensitivity of rigid borders and contact as people.

Audacious as it may sound, *BB*'s deliberate recourse to the no-man's land and the visual invocation of the fluidity of a stream in which Bajrangi stands knee-deep to take Munni in his arms may be read as a signification of the no-man's land very akin to that of Hasan Manto's 'Toba Tek Singh'. In this connection it is important to recall that Manto was scathingly critical of the elite authorship of the Partition of India (1947). His literary creations often highlighted the way in which the redrawing of borders to create two national territories on the basis of religious difference traumatically tore millions of ordinary human existences asunder (Narang 1994). 'Toba Tek



Singh' is one of Manto's short stories particularly inscribed by his disdain towards the cartography of the two states that the redrawn borders came to rigidly bound.

Agitated over the way the new national cartographies forcibly displaced helpless people from the comfort zone of their age-old habitat, the accustomed rhythms of life, and the cultural plurality amidst which people had lived together for centuries identifying themselves with centuries-old place names, Manto sarcastically inverts the tragic into the comic. He fictionalises a situation in which the post-Partition arrangements demanded that 'lunatics' too should be exchanged. Muslim lunatics from Indian asylums were to be sent to Pakistan, whereas Hindu and Sikh lunatics from Pakistani asylums were to be sent to India. Questioning the reason of Partition whereby adult male elites proclaimed the rationality of the new cartographies overnight, Manto portrayed the lunatics as failing to make any coherent sense of these new developments. The questions voiced through the lunatics exposed the contradictions inherent in post-Partition identities and geographies; Manto thus parodied the 'sanity' of the 'wise' people who had authored the Partition's borders (Alter 1994; Das 2005).

The common people's non-identification with the new border was personified by one inmate of the asylum who would rather live in a tree than have to come down and choose between a Hindustan and a Pakistan. However, Manto's protagonist, Bishan Singh's episode is the most relevant for the present essay. Religion was no marker of identity in his mental register; he identified squarely with his native village, Toba Tek Singh. So when people gave him confusing and often contradictory information on where his village belonged in the new cartography, he refused to be sent to the country that the officials earmarked for him and ran, instead, to the no-man's land. There he stood like rock and gave out a shriek before sinking into eternal rest on a piece of land neither in Hindustan nor in Pakistan. This death on the no-man's land is deeply symbolic of the predicament of the common people, who would rather die peacefully in a state of borderlessness than live an alienated, displaced existence tormented by the inability to identify with the exclusive cartographies of the new nation-states (Nisar 2014).

For me, *BB* has moved a full circle from Manto's short story 'Toba Tek Singh'; not, of course, in terms of creative excellence, but definitely in terms of the signification of the no-man's land. For Bishan Singh the no-man's land was an escape from the state-enforced conformity to a territoriality determined by the two-nation theory. Bishan did not subscribe to any



other identity save his nativity in Toba Tek Singh. Denied access to it and forced by the exchange mechanism to go to an India where this villager from Toba Tek Singh (now in Pakistan) would be a nowhere person in terms of his self-perceived identity, he rather chose to die in a nowhere place between and beyond the territories of two mutually hostile nation-states. This sense of the no-man's land signifying a stateless space unbound by exclusive and hostile territoriality is very evident in the last shot of *BB* too. Symbolically, such a space unencumbered by the tyranny of a hegemonic narrative predicated upon hostility and suspicion, is the ideal space for Bajrangi and Munni to remain perpetually connected as a popular archetype of people-to-people contact. The gushing, babbling stream in the no-man's land is symbolically a contrast to the closure of the barbed wires and the iron gates, even while it also symbolises the imagined openness and flexibility of non-state dialogue.

And yet 62 years had elapsed after the publication of 'Toba Tek Singh' when Kabir Khan's *BB* was made. In other words, peace activism and notions like people-to-people contact had in the meantime come to crystallise, even as, very crucially, new generations had begun to think through the mechanical reiteration of typical narratives of hostility and closure. Bishan Singh had escaped compulsory inclusion into an exclusive citizenship based on the two-nation theory by choosing to die on the no-man's land. But, 62 years later, Bajrangi's is a generation for which the no-man's land need not symbolise a site of escape into eternity but a paradigmatic space of possibilities to live for. That is possibly why the shot freezes once Bajrangi, on taking Munni in his arms, tosses her into the air in the no-man's land. Munni thus remains suspended in the air never to fall to the ground. Let us remind ourselves that Munni allegorically symbolises the voice of the awaam that was once lost but now found and reverberating in the vocal cords of thousands of common people from either side. The frozen flight of Munni, as I read it, is the envisioning of the soaring possibility of people-to-people contact vigorously interrogating the hitherto dominant border narrative. This is how the no-man's land translates in the film from a geographical space into a metaphorical one—a stateless space where the awaam of the two countries assert their voice to script other narratives.

Conclusion

Peace activism and critical thinking sensitise us to the way in which the two states virtually collaborate to keep mutual suspicion and enmity alive



among the two citizenries through the daily performance of 'beating retreat' at the Wagah border (Murphy 2001). Some have also suggested the replacement of this ritual with a peace memorial and museum. With the 'beating retreat' ritual at Wagah performing as a hegemonic exercise of initiating citizens into a culture of hostility, the need for an alternative project has been felt by peace activists. Yet the possibility of popular cinema—with its remarkable mass appeal—being used to popularise an alternative has been largely elided in the peace activists' quest for counter-hegemonic narratives. Possibly, the theatricality and melodramatic quotient of such films have stood in the way of the appreciation of their efficacy as a vehicle of sensitisation. But then the Wagah border ritual is even higher on those quotients, and ludicrously so, prompting foreign visitors to make sarcastic remarks that have not done the 'prestige' of the two countries any good, either!¹⁴

It is important to register that *Aman Ki Asha*, as a civil society peace initiative, had in its first statement of purpose recorded its anguish shortly before *BB* had been made,

Peace between India and Pakistan has been stubbornly elusive and yet tantalizingly inevitable. This vast subcontinent senses the bounties a peace dividend can deliver to its people, yet it recoils from claiming a share. The natural impulse would be to break out of the straitjacket of stated positions and embrace an ideal that promises sustained prosperity to the region, yet there is hesitation. (Swaminathan 2017: 25)

The statement had then gone on to read: 'The people of today must find its voice and force the rulers to listen. The awaam must write its own placards and fashion its own slogans. The leaders must learn to be led and not blindly followed' (quoted in Khan 2010). *BB's* maker seems to have responded precisely to this call by inseminating—albeit in a melodramatic wish-fulfilment mode—a situation in which the awaam does find its voice. The producers and distributors may have had their appetite for profit whetted by the huge viewer response on the release of the film and its continued ability to justify its television rights, but the possibilities of the film for peace activism have hardly been explored. And yet it is peace, rather than war, that is challenged to create its own worldview with a repertoire of stories, myths, folklore in post-Partition India–Pakistan where hegemonic discourses, whether statist or majoritarian, make war the template of normalcy (Visvanathan 2019). There is no reason why a text



like *BB*, with the additional advantage of being an audio-visual feast packaged in a popular culture genre, should not be reckoned and popularised as one such story, very moving at that! This potential was realised by a pro-peace journalist in Pakistan in 2015; while noting that the film had 'done record business in Pakistan' she registered it as a 'commercial flick that happens to speak to many on an emotional level, in reiteration of how political and military realities are not always expressive of the sentiments of people on both sides of the Line of Control (LoC)' (Tarar 2015).

A scholar, too, observed in 2016 that *BB*, as a 'heartwarming' film, had done more than many diplomatic rounds of talks towards improving people-to-people relations between India and Pakistan (Thussu 2016). *BB*'s potential for generating popular peace-thinking is all the greater because it squarely addresses the question of the border. A highly militarised and practically closed border incessantly participates in perpetuating the atmosphere of hostility and hatred—the reason why the two states find it so important to perpetuate the Wagah border ceremony. *BB* can be read as putting its critical finger directly on this hatred-spewing border. The film can thus be drawn upon as a story, appealingly audio-visual, that supplies a template for a differently configured border—a border inscribed not with *nafrat*, but with *humdardi* and *pyar*. After all pro-peace activists and peace theorists feel the urgent need for a reconfiguration of the India-Pakistan border;¹⁵ while the governments have been found to be eager to establish war museums and war memorials, they have not cared to memorialise peace.

A pro-peace scholar from Pakistan has, therefore, urgently suggested the establishment of a peace museum at Wagah replacing the 'beating retreat' ceremony (Mehdi 2005). Another author writes, while enjoining a powerful peace movement in India and Pakistan, that India and Pakistan must reimagine the border as a fold of peace instead of as a threshold of hostilities (Visvanathan 2019). *BB* could go a long way in popularising such reimagining, provided peace activism takes it on board and systematically ensures its continued dissemination. Suggestions—and, hopefully, plans—about a peace museum, too, can ill-afford to leave out the preservation and daily screening of a film like *BB* in its precincts, as if such films were merely popular entertainment to be kept at arms' length from any serious exercise.



Endnotes

¹For example, on becoming nuclear powers in their respective capacities, the two states used the mass media, under their respective patronage and directives, to whip up mass hysteria in favour of these deadly weapons among the citizenry within their respective territories (Mehdi 2005: 118). 'Since 13 April 1984, Indian and Pakistani troops have confronted each other, eye ball to eye ball, for the control of the 76 km long glacier. This is the longest-running armed conflict between two regular armies. Fighting at an altitude of over 22,000 feet in the minus 60 °C temperatures, both India and Pakistan bear enormous costs for their unwillingness to take the peace route' (ibid.: 119).

² The turn of phrase within quotes is taken from what the Pakistani small-time journalist, Chand Nawab, a central character in *BB* says while voicing over a video he makes in order to sensitise his viewers over social media about the urgent need for common people's initiative across the border to move away from the hate-centred rhetoric of the two states.

³ Bajrangbali or the 'iron-limbed hero' is a folksy Hindu epithet for Hanuman, the 'monkey-god' (see Lutgendorf 2007).

⁴ This is a quote from 'Michael Palin at the India – Pakistan Border ceremony – BBC', BBC Studios Channel on YouTube <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n9y2qtaopbE> [retrieved 31.05.22].

⁵ This essay in using the concept of militainment draws upon Roger Stahl's study (2010) of war becoming, especially since the 1990s, a major fixture in commercial entertainment, a feature of popular culture and an object of consumption.

⁶ For subtly differing definitions of Partition cinema, see Ira Bhasakar's presentation on 'Popular Films and Reconciliation' at the WISCOMP Symposium on 'Reconciliation in South Asia: Exploring the Terrain,' 2005 as reported in Basu and Bhatnagar (2007: 36); Viswanath and Malik (2009).

⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gHGDN9-oFJE> [retrieved 03.11.22].

⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kt-kk9iJ5OA> [retrieved 31.05.22].

⁹ Indian Express, 24 July 2015, <http://indianexpress.com/article/entertainment/bollywood/salman-khan-bajrangi-bhaijaan-director-kabir-khan-hanuman-doesnt-belong-to-only-one-community/> [retrieved 31.05.22].

¹⁰ 'The Bajrang Dal is a contemporary manifestation of the accumulating discourse on the requirements of "Hindu masculinity"', and the organisation was 'envisioned as a looser, less organised, and less demanding version of the RSS, requiring no uniform or participation in daily drill, but sponsoring ideological and martial training camps' (Lutgendorf 2007: 367).

¹¹ For a critical study of the ways in which the lives of the Bajrang Dal activists in Delhi not only display Hindu religious fundamentalism but also a bloated quest for masculinity that connects, moreover, to the processes of contemporary capitalism, see Srivastava (2010).

¹² I am quoting this from Chand Nawab's appeal, as made in the film.

¹³ *Indian Express*, 24 July 2015, <http://indianexpress.com/article/entertainment/bollywood/salman-khan-bajrangi-bhaijaan-director-kabir-khan-hanuman-doesnt-belong-to-only-one-community/> [retrieved 31.05.22].

¹⁴ For example, Claudia Kolker, a tourist from the West found the ceremony a huge parody in which two nations performed pas de deux even while hissing war. See, Kolker quoted in Mehdi (2005). Also see 'Michael Palin on at the India–Pakistan Border on the Pakistan Side', BBC Worldwide video on YouTube.



¹⁵ Since 2008 pro-peace activist groups like Milne Do and Aman Ki Asha have been organising cultural programmes and sporting activities at the Wagah border. See Mehdi (2005). Also see, e.g., 'India, Pakistan: So Near and Yet So Far – Milne Do', Aman Ki Asha, 9 January 2017, <http://amankiasha.com/india-pakistan-so-near-and-yet-so-far-milnedo/> [retrieved 31.05.22].

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