

The young people in the audience were clearly anthropologists who had come to check out what made the Neanderthals tick. They must have been shocked

to discover that it was songs like "Pyaar kiya to darma kya, jab pyaar kiya to darma kya; Pyaar kiya koi chori nahin ki, chup chup ke aahen bharna kya!" ("When I have loved, why should I fear? It is love, not theft, so why should I sigh from behind a curtain?")

It would need a social historian better than I to convey how powerful, even revolutionary, the idea was that love transcended fear, for every father was an emperor then, demanding the destruction of love in the name of some higher social principle.

Emperor Akbar would not allow his son Salim — the future Emperor Jahangir — to marry Anarkali, a *kaneez*, a palace girl much above a courtesan but much below a princess because the honour of Timurid blood and the demands of empire would not permit a leap over social walls that held the establishment in place. In thousands of *mohallas* across India, millions of fathers would not permit a leap over the walls of caste and religion and language.

And just as Anarkali, played by Madhubala, accepted in the end, so did millions of women who dreamt of a brief moment of defiance and glory that they could call their own and take to their graves, secrets even from their children. All around me every Madhubala had become just another mother. Sitting to my left was a lady who, midway through the movie, spoke very softly into her mobile, a transgression I forgave for she was talking to a hospital about a patient.

As in the last moments of the film a frozen Madhubala walked away to freedom and misery, bereft of a love she had been forced to betray, and the song in the background became a chorus of catharsis for us all, I could not help singing along with Lata Mangeshkar: "*Khuda nighabaaan ho tumhara, dharakte dil ka payaam le lo, Tumhari duniya se jaa rahe hain, utho hamara salaam le lo.*" ("God protect you, my love, take a message from a trembling heart; I leave your world, broken, but rise and take my last salute.") The lady next to me began to sing as well. I am

by the music of words, and in the music lay the meaning. Urdu lives.

(Classical Indian music in a popular movie? Isn't that truly shocking?)

Bahar, Anarkali's competitor for Salim's affections, played by Nigar Sultana, arguably as beautiful as Madhubala, wears a light veil when she goes to meet a stranger. Madhubala says *namaaz* for the life of Durjan Singh, son of Man Singh, who has just rescued her at the cost of his life to keep the word of a Rajput. The emperor prays to Allah, through the sufi divine Salim Chishti of Agra, for a son, and accepts *prasad* from his Hindu wife, Jodha Bai, after she has worshipped Lord Krishna on Janmaashtami.

I could hear the credulity of one youngish voice break down in the hall. The scene was set just before the epic battle between father and son (the battle itself is a masterpiece of fusion between K. Asif's direction and R.D. Mathur's camera). A *maulvi* ties a *taveez* on the right arm of the emperor with the famous victory verse of the Holy Quran. Then a Hindu priest blesses the emperor as well with a saffron mark on the forehead. "Arrey," asked a querulous voice, "yeh Hindu hai ke Mussalman hai? The times are more liberal now, and the understanding is much less.

Why hasn't a chain of *Mughal-e-Azam* boutiques opened up? K. Asif brought master tailors from Delhi, and specialists in *zari* from Surat to create an exquisite array of clothes. But the *piece de resistance* is the jewellery, made by goldsmiths from Hyderabad and craftsmen from Kolhapur. It was the most expensive, as well as the slowest, film made till then, and the passion shows in every intricate detail.

The clothes may not find takers in a culture of pace, but the jewellery that Bahar wears would lead to competitive bidding in any elite environment. It could even be called the Bahar line. I visualize a jewellery fashion show ablaze with Mughal gold, ruby, sapphire, emerald, diamond and baskets of pearl. The models would wear jewellery and nothing else, of course. That would put their pic-

ence. *Mughal-e-Azam* also made marketing history in 1960 when it was released in 150 theatres simultaneously. Today film language is a pidgin patois bred out-

side known cultures. This does not make it good or bad. To state a fact is not to pass judgment. The relevant point is that the *Mughal-e-Azam* audience of 2004 seemed entranced by the music of words, and in the music lay the meaning. Urdu lives.

The denouement is marked by a *qawwali* that Bahar sings alone, for the conflict with Anarkali is over. Love has been defeated by power. There is pyrrhic victory for both women. Anarkali is permitted to become queen for one night, not because — as the emperor taunts, because a *laundi* (slave girl) cannot give up the dream of a crown — but because, as Anarkali retorts, she does not want a future emperor of Hindustan to be remembered as a man who could not keep his word to a slave.

In return, she must drug the prince to sleep while she is led away by guards to death (in the legend) and desolate freedom (in the film). Bahar has won the night, but lost the future, for she does not replace Anarkali in the prince's affections. But she is permitted her final taunt, and she sings:

*Yeh dil ki lagi kam kya hogi, yeh ishq bhala kam kya hoga Jab raat hai aisi matwali phir subah ka aalam kya hoga!*

(How will this passion ever diminish, this love ever wither? When the night is so delirious, imagine what morning will bring!)

I have rarely come across a more startling and poignant metaphor for power. This is the story of every government, yesterday, today and tomorrow. Everyone in power is permitted the luxury of just one night, and no one ever believes that the night will come to an end. Deceivers promise a dawn filled with wine, when the truth is that with dawn will bring a drug that will put the miracle to sleep. And you will wake up with nothing around you except loss; the mind swooning with the memory of what was, and the mouth bitter with the ash of what might have been.

*The writer is editor-in-chief, The Asian Age, New Delhi.*