

Useful message for Singaporean youth in soft power push: A movie review of Bajranji Bhaijaan

Following Kabir Khan's Ek Tha Tiger that presented a love story that brew between India's RAW (Research and Analysis) agent and Pakistani's ISI (Inter-Services Intelligence), Bajranji Bhaijaan (BB) hit the box office with high expectations particularly for its star-studded cast starring Salman Khan, Kareena Kapoor Khan and Nawazuddin Siddiqui and its timed release a day before Eid which is the usual movie season for fans worldwide. Despite previous movies of Kabir Khan having themes of Islamophobia, spy thriller and violence in his movies such as New York and Ek Tha Tiger and Salman Khan acting as masculine hero centric roles such as in Dabangg, BB was surprisingly different as it showed Salman Khan more tamed, a very peaceful coexistence of multiple religions in India and the strong helping relationship between Pakistan and India. One who watches this movie can discern many parallels to Singapore. In this film review, I will argue **how this movie is a play of India's soft power in terms of peaceful inter-religious coexistence**, a term coined by Joseph Nye which is "the power of attractiveness that involves intangible power resources, such as culture" and aims to change the narrative of India to the world (Nye, 1990). In doing so, I **analyse how despite its soft power and exaggeration, the movie's portrayal of peace, harmony and community spirit inspires gratitude among Singaporeans and urges the Singaporean youth to shape a better future ahead beyond race, religion and country.**

Soft power used to dismiss Islamophobia

The movie shows how the Hindus and Muslims lived harmoniously in India and unlike new articles reporting tense relations in India, is a power play designed to paint India in a positive light. The movie starts out with how a Hindu woman in the train talked to Shahida's mother politely and with a smile despite knowing that she is Muslim. Subsequent scenes portray the tranquillity of Rasika's house, a Hindu vegetarian family being next to a Muslim family despite the fact that the Muslim family cooks meat. This promotes how families of different religions are coexisting together peacefully in close proximity. Not only that, the close proximity of mosques and the Hindu statue is very telling of how different religions are able to live together harmoniously without conflict unlike what news reports tend to suggest. Not just Hindus, but the movie also portrays Muslims very positively such as in Pakistan, when Maulana Azad, a religious

scholar played by Om Puri as the head of the Islamic school, welcomes Pawan into the mosque and assuages his uncomfotability to enter the mosque by saying how the mosque is open to everyone. This is further seen as how those who helped him in Pakistan were primarily Muslims and helped Pawan, who has an obvious Hindu name, despite their varying religions. This is complimented when Azad prayed for Pawan to successfully bring Shahida back to her parents, despite it being their first encounter. The subsequent scene plays with the varying language used to say goodbye (Khuda Hafiz which is Urdu and a more Islamic word while Pawan, a strong Hindu only says "Jai Shri Ram " as a way to praise Lord Ram). This initial hesitation and conflicting language ends up with Azad taking special effort to learn and say Jai Shri Ram. This extra effort is an indication of soft power used to change the traditional narratives of Muslims and Hindus towards both parties happily learning more about each other's religion and greetings. Thus, the soft power of India and its state of harmony is omni present throughout the various scenes scattered across the movie in an attempt to change the perception of viewers worldwide in India that Indians treat everyone as equals, as one. Such a move could also be interpreted as an extension of a diplomatic olive branch by India to their counterparts Pakistan, to dismiss current tense relations in an attempt to reconcile and move forward harmoniously.

Being grateful for Singapore's harmony

Despite the rosy picture the movie paints and its glaring use of soft power, I believe that Singaporeans can appreciate the movie and learn a few pointers that can be likened to Singapore such as coexisting harmoniously and community spirit, something we might take for granted.

A key distinction that can be drawn from the movie when comparing the state of Harmony between Singapore and India is this concept of acceptance vs tolerance. In the movie, Rasika's father became enraged upon hearing that Shahida was from Pakistan and not a Brahmin. His harsh words bringing up the past whereby some Pakistanis killed Indians is indicative of how he has been merely tolerating non-Brahmins and Pakistanis. This hatred seems deeply rooted in the minds of older generations such as Rasika's father and perhaps even passed down. This suggest that despite not having experienced it first hand, they have been borrowing and

internalizing stereotypes. This proves pivotal in highlighting how despite living harmoniously, it is in fact a ticking time bomb waiting to explode such as Rasika's father sudden rage and can be easily exploited to create havoc in the country. This is starkly different from Singapore where we are not tolerating everyone but in fact generally accepting of everyone here. Everyone is equal here as in the words of our founding father Mr Lee Kuan Yew,

"We are going to have a multi-racial nation in Singapore. This is not a Malay nation; this is not a Chinese nation; this is not an Indian nation. Everybody will have his place: equal; language, culture, religion."

While yes there are some incidents of unhappiness reported such as the curry incident where the Chinese family could not tolerate the smell of the curry emanated from the Indian family's house, there is still a general consensus that we accept everyone as Singaporean first before race, religion, language or colour. Despite Singapore enjoying a peaceful time since the 1964 racial riots, this movie serves as a reminder of how the deeply entrenched hatred built up from tolerating all this could in fact blow up in the future and thus, we should be accepting of all. It also brings attention to the role of the media in spreading news. Nowadays, the Singapore media has been censoring racial and religious insults and the administration of the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act (MRHA) helps foster a more accepting culture. This is starkly different to in the past during Maria Hertogh and the 1964 riots, the media was exploited in fuelling hatred against each other which exacerbated the extent of the riots. The controlled media presence and immediate addressing of such racial and religious issues in Singapore now has caused tension to not escalate and subside quickly. The movie on the other hand shows the result of how without the intervention of the media by the government, as seen in how Pawan was immediately assumed to be a spy and paraded as one on national television in Pakistan. Through this movie we are better able to appreciate the Singapore government in its integral role in shaping our non-partial and non-discriminatory racial and religious policies which have been crucial in providing a safe space and promoting a culturally accepting mindset amongst Singaporeans.

Furthermore, it spurs us to revive the community spirit in Singapore. The whole journey of Pawan bringing Shahida back to Pakistan was not an easy one and reaching his end goal could not have been possible without the help of everyone he met along the way, especially the news reporter, the guards at the Pakistani border and the head of the Islamic school. As compared to Rasika's father when he said he cannot help a Pakistani and a non-Brahmin because of an old-time feud when some Pakistanis killed some Indians, everyone who helped Pawan along the way did not discriminate against him for his race, religion or country, so much so that Pawan was shocked that this was possible. This example proved that humanity prevailed in times of crisis and when put together with how the Hindus and Muslims can live together is testament of what is possible, even in Singapore. It also highlighted that while there might be a select few who discriminate and are against such as the police officers who regarded Pawan as a spy, there are still those who enabled Pawan to continue with his journey genuinely. If the Pakistanis can display such helping spirit and humanity to Pawan despite their countries being at loggerheads, we as Singaporeans in Singapore can do better in retaining our 'kampung spirit' we are known for. This prominent example inspires us to help those around us, both friends and strangers in our own way possible, something that we might have forgotten since the onset of Covid-19 and its restrictions that might have caused us to be more self-contained.

As a whole BB is impactful as it allows a reflective viewer to appreciate the beauty of the harmony we experience in Singapore, our competent government and prompts us to revive the community spirit hidden within us.

Youth as driving forces of peace

More than just spark gratitude, the movie **rallies the youth to step up** and start afresh to undo any entrenched alienations of a particular race or demographics of the population. Upon Pawan finding out that Shahida was a Muslim, Rasika scolds Pawan about how "different caste, different religions are all nonsense. I cannot explain to dad but at least I can explain to you" when he was scared of what Rasika's father would say. This is indicative of how changing the perception of the elder generation in terms of caste and religion is a lost cause but the younger generation such as Pawan and

Rasika have a chance to make this work. It projects the hope imbued in the youth who view everyone as humans first before denominations such as religion and cast. Thus, with humanity and the power of youth, the movie preaches that it is possible to officially graduate from the caste system and the segregation of treatment based on such denominations. To reach this however requires the support of every youth to start afresh. For Singapore more specifically, this means that there is hope to stop the underlying discrimination and segregation of people by race or religion or language but the youth need to drive this change by starting off on a clean slate.

The current state of harmony is fragile and can be broken easily and a current threat would be that some of these discriminatory thoughts might have already contaminated the youth over the years by their parents and grandparents. Just as in the movie, where Pawan, a representative of the youth had readily accepted Rasika's fathers' segregation of Shahida to be of another religion and caste, it shows the dangerous influence the older generation has on the youth, especially in their budding years. This might lead to a dilution of the youth's strong accepting and embracing views of the different religions and prove threatening to peace and harmony. However, hope is not lost as history has shown how it is possible to bring forward the good and put the negative past where it belongs. For example, the bad memories of Hokkien Teochew riots which happened in 1854 and the fight between the Muslims from the Nagore Dargah Muslim Centre and the policemen were not passed down from our great grandparents and not present in our history textbooks which means the youth of today are unaware of this story. This selective passing down has prevented these sour memories from influencing the state of relations between these groups in the subsequent generation. Such an example showcases the possibility to move ahead from our past and shows how despite past riots, starting afresh without having preconceived mindsets is possible as we move on to the next generation. To do so, it is imperative for the youth to make special effort to learn more the practices and history about other religions and races from trustworthy sources such as the Harmony Diversity Gallery, instead of their parents who might have misconstrued some of the facts unintentionally. It also warrants extra effort in sieving out the misinformation that might persist online on social media which the government can only do so much to govern against. In doing so, while they might not be able to change the current older

generation, the youth can collectively shape the generation after them. Hence, the road ahead towards the sustenance of the peace and harmony we have starts with continued acceptance today and proper discerning skills by the youth who are more educated and possess the energy to enact change in the future.

In conclusion, the movie Bajrangi Bhaijaan, despite being a soft power of India has inherent value as it serves as a reminder to Singaporeans that we should not take the peace and harmony we enjoy for granted. Tolerating everyone is precarious and we should aim to accept everyone for who they are and learn as much as they can about them from trustworthy sources. While it comes with its set of challenges, the movie inspires the youth to spearhead a peaceful and harmonious society of viewing everyone as humans first before segregating everyone according to race, religion, language, or culture. That way, Singapore can continue to maintain the inter-racial and religious harmony it has for the years to come.

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