

The Barred Baba of Bling

Guest Post by Piyush Roy

I had always thought that the most elaborate and outlandish entry of a film character in Indian cinema, was the introduction scene of *Madam X* in the 1990s' Rekha-starrer about a diabolique Mafia boss with a zany fascination for ostentatious gender bending costumes. This had remained, until I saw *MSG: The Messenger* (2015), featuring another unusual character, Saint Guru Dr. Gurmeet Ram Rahim Ji Singh Insan, playing a larger-than-life version of himself, as the sat-guru, saviour and 'father' of a million plus people on-screen, and another five-crore hinted to be constantly lurking in the background. In an ominous forecast of the post-conviction mayhem in Panchkula, his followers in the film, frequently hint at thwarting any challenge coming their *pitaji's* way, through physical violence, if necessary.



Still from *MSG: The Messenger* (2015)

MSG was an uncommon narcissistic extravaganza in self-promotion that was unanimously discounted as anything but cinema by critics, while the Censor Board refused to even acknowledge it as a film. Little wonder, its beginning is prefixed by the longest staying on-screen disclaimer about the 'fictitious nature of its spiritual super hero's supernatural

feats'.



But, once in, you are treated to such a never-before-seen roller-coaster of wooden acting, whiny diction and cringing parade of crazy costumes that it's tad difficult to look away. Mounted on a massive scale of real human extras that great epics from Hollywood would be envious of, *MSG* with its curious hook of 'what next and how much bigger...' had the B-Movie fan in you glued to the end. It's one of those unintended movies that attract cult viewing 'for being too bad to miss'!

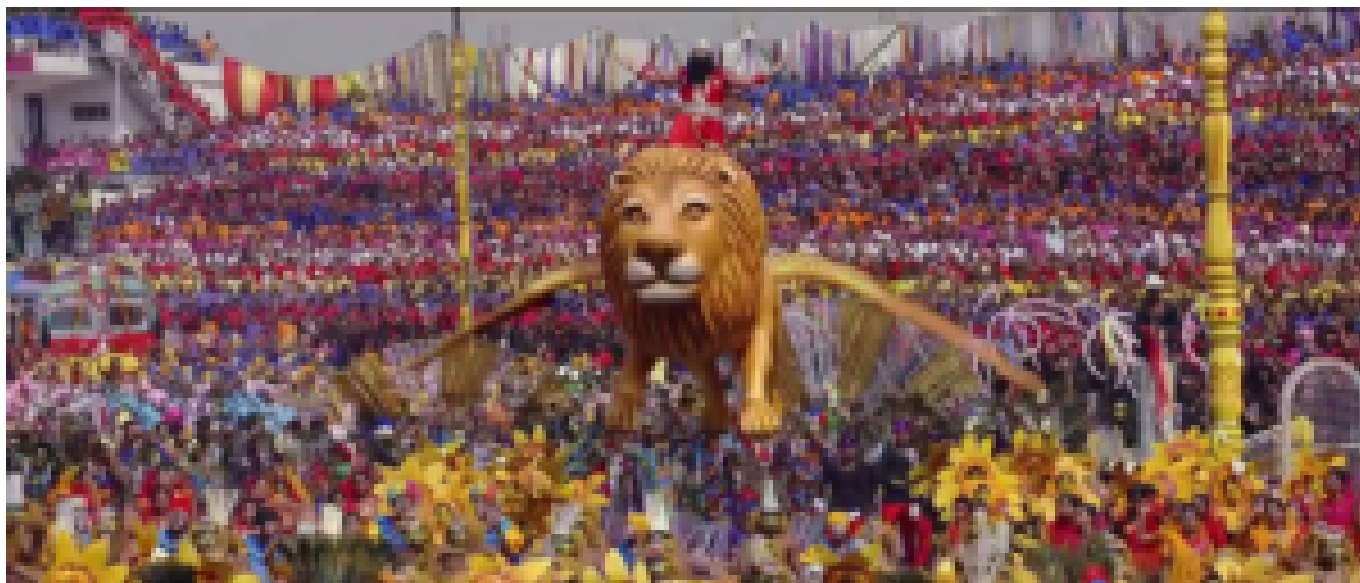


MSG is a unique aspiration exercise in India's most prolific desi super-hero franchise (five films in two years – *MSG 1 & 2*, *MSG: The Warrior Lion Heart 1 & 2*, and *Jattu Engineer*), written and produced by Ram Rahim. He also is its co-director, co-costume designer, co-choreographer, co-art director, co-

cinematographer, co-editor, co-action director, stuntman, lyricist, singer, music director and of course, the lead actor. Ram Rahim thus broke Bollywood's long-standing record of a multi-tasking Manoj Kumar, who used to write-direct-edit-produce-and-act in most of his later home productions.

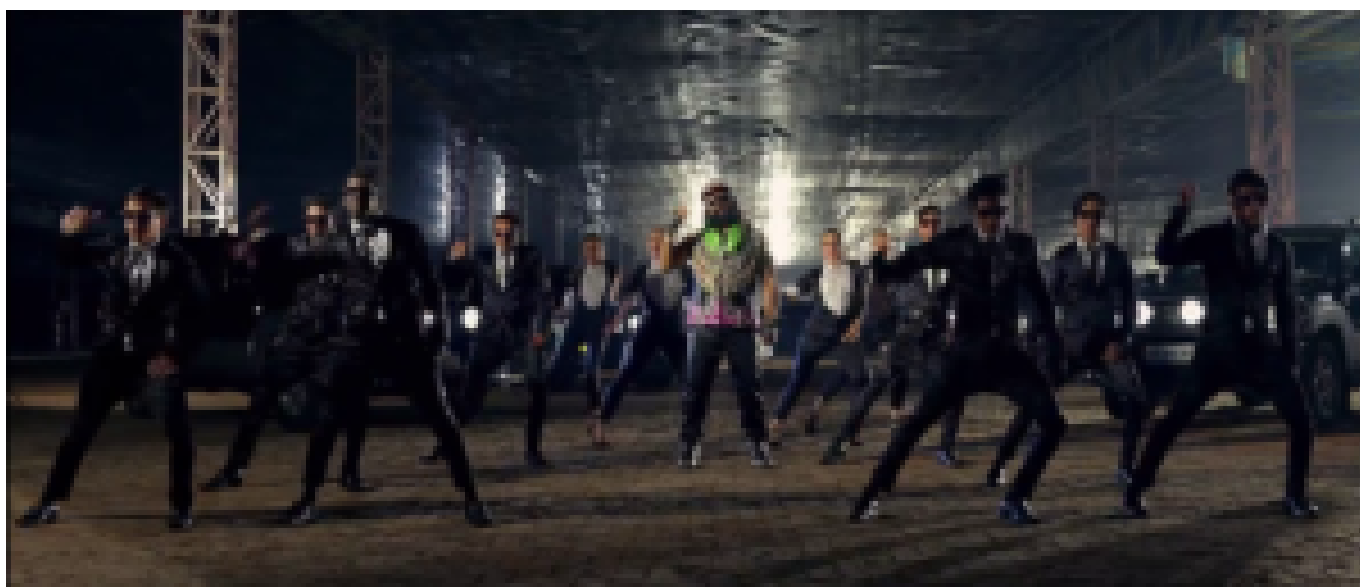


Breaking records, incidentally, seem to be a fascination for Ram Rahim, with each of *MSG's* song and dance extravaganzas unfolding on an auditorium size-stage with a million plus extras. The Google credits Ram Rahim and his Dera with multiple world records from planting most trees in a single session to organising camps with record blood donors, most blood pressure readings and diabetes screenings (in a day), the largest display of oil lamps (1,50,009 lamps), the largest finger painting (3,900 m²), the largest vegetable mosaic (1,858.07 m²) to even the most number of people sanitising their hands simultaneously (7,675).



At heart, *MSG* is meant to be a patriotic film with a reformist heart that celebrates a range of Indian political ideologies from Gandhi's message of winning one's opponent through non-violence to PM Narendra Modi's 'Clean India' campaign. Ram Rahim's on-screen entry is preceded by a collage of leaders from India's Independence movement like Gandhi, Sarojini Naidu, Madan Mohan Malviya, Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose, Jawaharlal Nehru, Sardar Patel, even Lord Mountbatten, (though there is no sighting of Jinnah).

And then the dichotomy begins...



Ram Rahim addresses himself as a fakir, but is seen in elaborate never-repeating costumes that feature some heady imaginations with bling that you would ever see. He rides fancy vehicles, from cycle and tractors to a lion with wings,

i.e. when he is not himself flying with his hands as wings and legs as parachute. He endorses multiple religious icons – Ram, Allah, Waheguru; and insists on fighting against every social evil – corruption, drug abuse, prostitution, etc. – albeit, as a single-handed miracle worker.

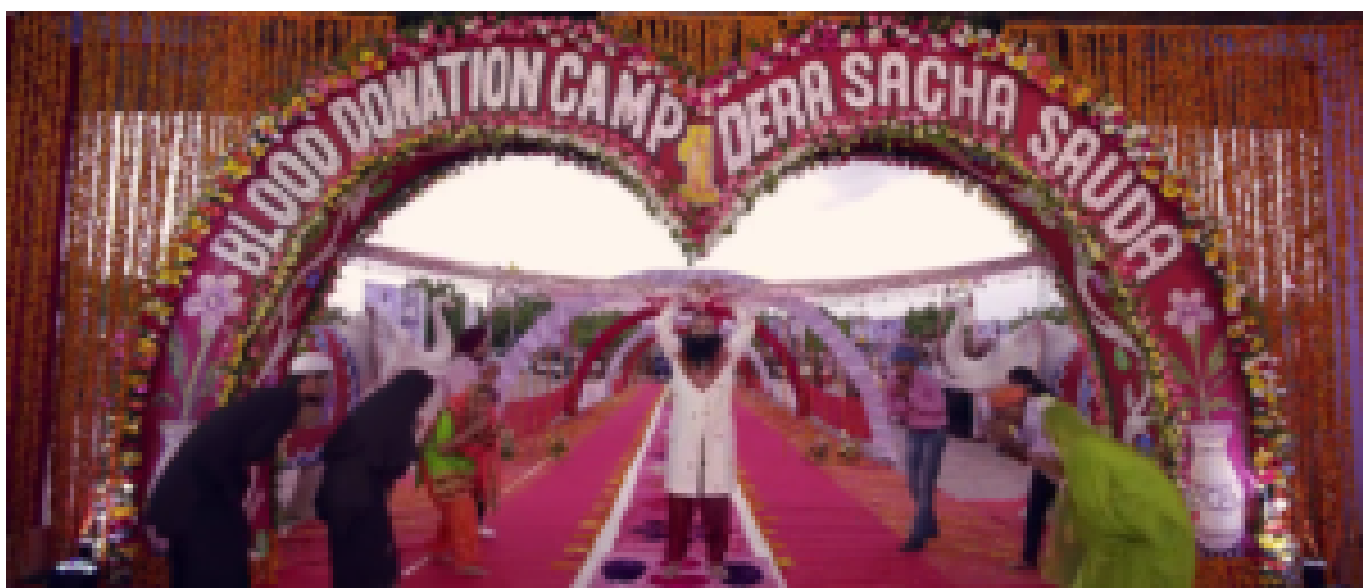


Interestingly, he takes the idea of being comfortable with one's self, to an altogether different level of dare in our chiselled times, by not batting an eyelid before baring his hairy-bear self or his love handles through outfits unflattering hugging his corpulence.

In these, is reflected the tremendous self-fascination of an insecure man, who not only hogs every frame of the film, but in the few rare moments of absence, he makes sure to have a portrait or two making his presence felt in the background. He also introduces in narration media-interviews to tackle some of the allegations in circulation against him, while achieving a grand recruitment video for the Dera that he used to head.



No one discounts that *MSG* and the subsequent Ram Rahim helmed films had an agenda. None can now deny that a lot was hunky-dory under his publicised 'reign of bliss' at the Dera. But anyone with an iota of filmmaking experience can also not deny that to assemble such a humongous cast of real people as happy extras and then getting the best out of them isn't the outcome of faith and fear alone. What made so many see a spiritual guide in someone with such an unabashed lust for material possessions in a culture that used to associate simplicity and renunciation with saintliness, warrants introspection. If religion, as Marx said could be 'the opium of the masses', Ram Rahim for sure served a recipe of relief, even if momentary, for at least some in our compromised times of compromising idols.



The memory of his crime's long distance from punishment may have made the Baba of Bling gravitate with a new-found lure towards the tinsel world like a rejuvenating attraction of a parallel career happening mid-life. With an assured fan base of politicians across ideologies, just when Ram Rahim was all set to become Bollywood's latest B-Movie star in superhero spectacles with a Marvel-comic like proliferation, the Master-Writer up there, introduced a blast from the past twist to script a dramatic anti-climax far memorable than any of His imposter namesake's films.

The circle of life, indeed, can be a great climax close!



The article was first published as a column piece in Sunday Talkies column of Orissa Post, Sept. 3 2017.

Dr Piyush Roy, is an author, curator, critic and filmmaker. He is director of *Pleasures Prejudice Pride: An Indian Way of Filmmaking* (2019) and author of *Bollywood FAQ – All That's Left to Know About the Greatest Film Story Never Told* (2019).