

THE ARRIVAL OF CINEMA IN INDIA, ITS GROWTH AND THE MAKING OF A MUSLIM HERO**Dr. Tasneem Q. Khan**

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ABSTRACT

In the West, cinema arrived as the stage was set with the technological developments, there was modern technology and consumers of technology, and cinema, there, was “no-accident”, “film technology had been invented to meet an already existing cultural need...These situated cinema in a cultural context already inclined towards realist representation...” (Madhava Prasad 1). In India too, the evolution of cinema was the development of technology, arts and aesthetics along with entrepreneurship. Here cinema arrived during the colonial rule thus the films financed during pre-independence period “...vacillated in opposing the colonial state as well as supporting nationalism.” (Deshpande 101) and pre-independence cinema included ‘swadeshi’ images and as Madhava Prasad adds, “There was a cultural, political, social field from within...” (2) which supported its success.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study adopts a qualitative research design to explore and analyze the arrival of cinema in India, its growth, and the making of a Muslim hero. Qualitative research allows for an in-depth understanding of the historical, social, and cultural aspects associated with the topic. The Primary sources have been archival documents, historical records, newspaper articles, and interviews with filmmakers, actors, and experts in Indian cinema along with some films which are considered. These sources provide firsthand information and insights into the subject. Secondary sources include academic books, scholarly articles, and relevant literature, to gain a comprehensive understanding of the topic and support the analysis. The study largely focuses specifically on the arrival of cinema in India, its growth, and the representation of a Muslim hero. Other aspects of Indian cinema may not be extensively covered. The researcher's own perspectives and biases may influence the interpretation and analysis of the data but efforts are made to minimize that. Efforts have been made to minimize bias through reflexivity and transparent reporting. The research aims to contribute to the existing knowledge on Indian cinema by exploring the arrival of cinema, its growth, and the representation of a Muslim hero in the historical and socio-political context. The findings may shed light on the interplay between cinema, society, and identity formation in India.

Cinema vis-à-vis Socio-Political Developments**The Pre-Independence Cinema**

The early years of pre-independence cinema witnessed mythological and historical genre, Kaushik Bhaumik writes that in the early 1920s “...mythologicals [were] released on the occasion of religious festivals.”(56) Since it was considered that the audience was aware of the story “...these films were mostly episodic...” and since in Bombay, with the dominance of Marathi and Gujrati “...most films belonged recognisably to the Gujarati cultural world” (56) but appealed to the audience across the subcontinent.

Cinema of the later 1920s showcased stunt films and socials too. *The Thief of Baghdad* (1924) was viewed by all across classes and age, so was *The Mark of Zorro*. An interesting development was the arrival of stunt in mythological and historical films, lending it an ‘indigenous’ approach. The Gujrati, and Rajputana valour was visible in these films. Bhaumik asserts, “A ‘historical atmosphere’ was invoked through costume and decor, while values of valour, patriotism and feminine chastity were worked back into the historical past through the codification of a fictive ‘Rajput’ world. The stunt films, as much as the historical films, contributed to the public imagination of what was Rajput about India’s past.” (59)

The films dealt with social-problem and social-romance as an intertwined genre, these involved the problems and pain of women in society and questions of social reform and change. These social problems were related to drinking and gambling and confusions arising and affecting an ‘ideal Indian family’ during economic crisis.

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Cinema, Javed Akhtar says, offered dreams to its viewers, and when decoded it could ‘unearth the collective psyche of the society’. It was an entrepreneurial outcome too; the Indian capitalists who financed the film defined the subjects. Anirudh Deshpande asserts, “These capitalists, as the period of proletarian unrest in the 1930s showed, opposed films critical to their class. On these class issues the government, Indian capitalists and the major political parties conveniently united against the worker.” (101)

The decolonization of India gave India its own form and content, unlike other countries of the west, India had a trace of colonial encounter. This led to an outcome of hybrids. Ashish Nandy, views Hindi cinema’s peculiar hybrid nature as a deliberate refusal of “authenticity” and “realism” of the kind expected by a western audience, he reads this as a symptom of protest and resilience against an alien culture of modernization. If such a view, specific to the postcolonial situation, reveals resistance to imperial pressure on the one hand, it is culpable of “indigenous chauvinism” on the other. These films as Gokulsing and Dissanayake said “communicate [and communicated] collective fantasies” (45) and were largely melodramatic, often musicals, and conveyed simple, clear moral messages.

1940s was the time where the political scenario of the country was changing. The Muslim League had demanded for a separate nation state in 1935 and the cry for a two nation theory was already echoing. Lalit Joshi in his article ‘Cinema and Hindi Periodicals in Colonial India (1920 -1947)’ writes “...this period is representative of the most decisive phase of India’s anti-colonial struggle in which the diverse colonial elements of modernity were being negotiated in the hope that a pan-Indian identity could eventually be forged.” (19) But, this was also the phase where the same identity was under question. The society was divided into two but cinema was trying to tow the line of unity achieved through harmony in the years old heterogeneous culture. Films dealing with the Mughal history were now being made in large number. Akbar was one of the most famous king loved by the film makers, the medieval history of Hindu-Muslim unity was being evoked. Urvi Mukhopadhyay borrowing from V P Sathe writes, “In spite of the growing uneasiness in choosing the “medieval” as the locale for historical genre, the 1940s [was] the era of ‘Shahenshah films’.”

Profit had always been an important issue in the film making business. This was also one of the reasons for developing a Hindi-Urdu language (though the views on the usage of language are varied). What should be considered though is, the Bombay film industry developed an idea of a nation which was non-encompassing and established a majoritarian hegemony of ‘Hindu nationalist viewpoint’. The pan-Indian identity which was being established was one sided and hegemonic. It is important to look at the development of cinema in India through the development of nationalistic fervors through the early days till date. Here a nation which was coming into existence was, as the critics have argued, a Hindu nation. Rachel Dwyer in *Filming the Gods* writes, “In the 1940s, there was a generic shift away from mythologicals, devotionals and stunts towards the omnibus genre of the social, which came to be the dominant genre. Given that this was the time of one of the major social upheavals in India (the world war, followed by independence, Partition and mass migration) and major communal tensions, the cinema was surprisingly quiet on all these issues.” (138). What is interesting to note here is, the Social produced under this ‘omnibus’ were further categorized under sub-genres named as the ‘Muslim Social’. And, there were also the ‘Muslim Historical’ and the ‘Muslim Courtesan’ which showcased ‘Islamic architectural motifs,’ ‘performance idioms ... the *mujra* and the *mushaira*’ and the ‘song forms associated with Urdu language’ (*Islamicate Cultures of Bombay Cinema*, Preface ix). A nation was thus imagined through cinema with a common language.

Cinema Post-Independence

From 1947 to the turn of the 21st century cinema in India has been broadly divided into three notable shifts: Nehruvian Cinema, Cinema of 1970s, and cinema post liberalization of economy, and if one may add, post post-liberalization cinema. Each, a representative of the socio-political character of the time, and each carried forward a set of narrative, protagonist and antagonist.

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From the 1950s to 1970s, this period of Hindi cinema was dominant in the theme of ideals of Gandhian - Nehruvian socialism and trusteeship. India was independent and it shaped the task of filmmaking in collaboration to nation building and of economic development. A new nation meant new challenges, one of it being that of jobs for the unemployed. Cinema was idealist as well as unhopeful. There was migration towards cities, which led to "...employment, wealth, and excitement..." but also "...a site of exploitation, crime, and danger." (Ganti 29) which led to filmmakers making cinema depicting the harshness of urban life. This was also because there was a counter narrative against modernism and it could only be conveyed through a life in the village. Cities in films were shown with thieves and criminals as central characters and their presence was shown more as a social and economic problem rather than the political. The villains in the cinema then were the wealthy businessmen, money lenders and *zamindars* whereas the peasant, a worker in a city or a middle class professional was the hero. The new world was full of anticipation and idealism for a better tomorrow where the state was a friend which helped achieve progress and justice.

Nehru always laid emphasis on secular credentials of the country. He said, "If any person raises his hand to strike down another on the ground of religion, I shall fight him till the last breath of my life both as the head of the government and outside." (qtd. by Mahesh Bhatt). The example suggests that what is known as Nehruvian cinema was cinema for a new nation where the people came together for a better tomorrow. The period between the 1950s and 1970s is called the 'Golden Age of Cinema.' The cinema of this phase reflected Nehru's vision on an all inclusive secular identity in a nation which recently was born and was growing. Cinema of Nehru's era, writes Madhur Tankha, included "...politics, caste, gender, community, the rural-urban dialectic, questions of modernity versus tradition, social and legal justice and the meaning of secularism and democracy." The middle class drew confidence from the educational institutions Nehru had the vision for, it was the modernization initiated under him.

Ravi Vasudevan, Sumita S. Charavarty and Anirudh Deshpande read this as cinema as one propagating Hindu Nationalism. Anirudh Prasad writes, "The mainstream Bombay cinema of the 1950s and 1960s defended patriarchy as essential Indian... In non-Hindu plots manicured minorities prevailed. Muslim characters dominated the historicals and the Muslim social... These films ... essentialised Muslims as feudal and, by implication, anti-modern." (Prasad 97) These observations of Prasad inform that the cinema telling stories was particularly dominated by a religious majority. The portrayal of the country's minority was conveyed only through 'islamicate idioms' creating a picture which was long lost from the real frame.

These portrayals of the majority established as hegemonic constructions led to an idea of a nation openly implying as homogenous, and the way the minority was portrayed was not visible around thus bringing forth a religion as a 'national identifier'.

The 1970s

The second shift in filmmaking happened in the early 1970s against the backdrop of widespread social and political unrest accompanied with growing disaffection with the system. The ideals of freedom struggle and opportunities of development looked meek and were fast being replaced by the widespread corruption and nepotism. The feudal order remained intact and the rural economy collapsed due to over dependence on foreign import and this was reflected in cinema too where the village was now suffering. Between 1970 and 1980, the agriculture growth declined to worst since 1951, this decade witnessed several organized mass mobilizations of students and working class in cities and violent armed revolts in countryside. Following a war with Pakistan, the chaotic and confusing state of the country culminated in the imposition of state of internal emergency in 1975 by the then Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi.

The family was the central point of the melodrama, each character shared affection in the close knit togetherness. The parallels were drawn between family and nation, where the citizens from different communities were brought together through stories, and the narrative 'transposed on the nation'. The lost and found narrative became

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popular with the nation as a microcosm the protagonist lost was much in the family and could be found by cosmic interventions.

One of the films of the time was *Amar Akbar Anthony* (1977), Dwyer writes, the protagonist is usually the upper caste Hindu hero and elaborates in the context of the film:

The fact that the boys's real parents are Hindus and the Hindu son is a policeman reinforce the underlying Hinduness of all Indians, although there is much lip service to the religiosity of the catholic priest and the sincere prayers of Akbar to Shirdi Sai Baba, whose devotees are shown clearly as both Hindus and Muslims. Akbar's prayers result in his blind mother's miraculous cure as two rays of light emanate from the eyes of the image. The token through which much of the family's recognition of each other occurs is an image of Santoshi Maa. (156)

Film production in this era differed considerably from those of the previous one in terms of how the state, the male protagonist (commonly referred to as the hero), and villainy were represented. The Hindi film of this period witnessed the emergence of 'angry young man', a symbol of youthful rebellion. The writer-duo Salim-Javed introduced a hero to the audience who, unlike his predecessors, believed in winning by any means. This ideological shift was the expression of growing impatience with slow or lack of progress as promised during independence struggle.

Like India's economy, its film industry too woke up from a decade long slumber in 1990s. This period of filmmaking was influenced by economic liberalization which was taken up in 1991. The period is also marked by the growing influence of 'Hindu nationalist' political parties and organizations. Here television has taken over the viewership and the hegemony exercised by cinema missing until now and television was a rival which did not allow the same profits associated with cinema earlier.

Post-Satellite Era

Post-satellite era changed the themes conspicuously. The medium and its contents showed an absence of class difference and the arrival of flaunting of wealth which until now was considered obscene. The balance in portrayals which cinema exercised earlier which included 'signs of poverty, economic hardship, or struggle' were now missing, the protagonists in these films were inheritors of wealthy parents. Since wealth and riches were shown in positive light, as something which is worth chasing, anything which isn't rich or a reflection of 'dark side' of system became negative and villainy by default. The audience of cinema too was expanding at this time. The films were focusing on the Indians outside India and this was also a time when the anti-hero was the hero in some films. The gangster films also were produced at this time which was problematic in the depiction of Muslim characters.

This was also the era of underworld money and the industry status approval for cinema. The films produced during this era never depicted the state machinery as villain and also the wealthy businessman was no more a 'symbol of exploitation'. This was the time of going back to traditions as at this time the films were ready to catch the eyes of the non resident Indians whose children can learn traditions and customs from Hindi cinema.

Cinema was now viewed across the seas and the audience was very Indian, the diaspora responded to the new construct of hero, or if one may say that the new construct was keeping in mind the Indian diaspora, cinema led to a construction of not just another cinema but was also an extension of the nation.

Faiza Hijri reading Vijay Mishra says,

As Vijay Mishra notes in his acute study of Bollywood history, the changing economy and politics of India prompted a concurrent transformation of Indian cinema. Young rebels with a cause gave way to young quasi-rebels who were easily tamed. Respectful young lovers such as Salman Khan and Shahrukh Khan ascended the cinematic ranks in the 1990s, frequently in roles where they professed love as sincerely for their parents, their siblings, and their faith (usually Hindu, despite their real-life Muslim monikers) as they did for the sultry beauties they romanced. Hijinks, romantic ballads and the occasional fight might pepper a Khan movie, but in the end, the political tensions were rarely as pronounced as in the 1970s films of Bachchan or his predecessors. The worthy

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causes of 1990s and twenty-first century Bollywood drama were far more likely to centre on romance than around societal problems. (59)

The developments which took place at that time were with the opening of the market, the upsurge of the middle class, status of 'Industry' to cinema allowing it to take loan. Also, the creation of an enemy led to an increased nationalism in films. The ways in which the nationalistic feelings and patriotism was depicted post 1990 was different from the mild patriotism of Nehruvian era. This patriotism was replaced by loud nationalism which demanded, which wanted to put an end to the composite structure of the country and replace it by rigid framework based on majoritarian ideas.

The Muslim trajectory Pre-Independence to Post 9/11

A trajectory of cinema with Muslim protagonists can be broadly divided into (but not limited to) Muslim Historical (1940 -1960) Muslim Social and Muslim Courtesan (1960 - 1980) and the Muslim Political (1980 – 2000) which continues towards the turn of the century as the 'enemy' travels from Kashmir to Afghanistan and ahead. The division especially that of the first two genres, are common to Hindi cinema and with a Muslim protagonist make it a Muslim Historical or Muslim Social, but the Muslim Political is the representation of the Muslim protagonist amidst the Hindu nationalism and Kashmir insurgency 1980s onward.

The 1980s and the early 1990s brought to the screen a *jihadi*, fighting India for Kashmir but in the name of religion. Gita Vishwanath quoting Giddens adds "...outsider representations are characterized by two themes, viz., romanticized and quaint or demonized as urban criminals...Both kinds abound in Hindi cinema. The representation of Muslim in Hindi cinema transformed the romanticized and lethargic Nawabs, Badshahs and nobles into demonic underworld dons until the image crystallized as that of a fanatic *jihadi*. (80)

With liberalization, "...The pre-globalization Hindi film defined the mainstream and colonized the marginal" (Anirudh Prasad 103). This Muslim protagonist changed into a terrorist and post 9/11 a more "...immediate cause of the anti-Muslim riots ...[was] to be found in the general media portrayal of Muslims as potential terrorists and traitors since 9/11 terrorist attacks on the WTC. American reaction to Islam in particular, and Western reaction in general, sat very well with *Hindutva* in India." (Anirudh Prasad 18)

This development of the west towards Islam led popular Hindi cinema to carve a narrative but it was still revolving around Kashmir and *jihad*. It happened much later that *Chak De! India* was made. Gita Vishwanath adds "As far as films go, the representation of Muslims has come full circle from the construction of the 'good' Muslim to underworld criminals to Pakistani agents to terrorists back again to the 'good' Muslims" (87) but she also believes that "...the representation of Muslims ... swings between victim and perpetrators especially in the past -9/11 global scenario.

Anand Vivek Taneja referring to the change in portrayals and the presence of minorities and their representation in cinema says, "...the secular credentials of the nation were displayed in the sympathetic portrayal of the minority in the national forms; and the erosion of the secular ideals in national politics has been mirrored in the marginalization and demonization of Muslim in recent years." This is true and the portrayals have an elaborate variety. Similarly Priya Kumar notes, "Nationalism needs and produces its minorities – defined as such in order to reinforce and validate its own centre...One significant consequence of this successful minoritization of Muslims in post-Partition India has been that Indian Muslims have come to bear the difficult burden for India national vivisection. If Indian Nationalism is haunted by its 'other' –Pakistan – then, the figure of the Indian Muslim comes to occupy a strange, liminal place in this drama between self and 'other'" (*Limiting Secularism* 177)

Anirudh Deshpande "Being Indian in a particular Hindustani way is considered old fashioned, irrelevant and useless in a society dominated by the upwardly mobile elite of India's middle class. The mannerly Muslim produced by the secular Hindi films has no place in such an ambience – he has been replaced by the terrorist who, not surprisingly, wear their identities on their sleeves while carrying out terrorist activities ...Bollywood wants to make sure that the religious identity of the terrorist is not doubted at all by the audience". But recently, the urban

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playboy Muslim terrorist has been made an appearance in films like *Fanaa*, thereby sociologically broadening the definition of Islamic terrorism. This further reduces the discursive space accorded to Muslims making them more vulnerable to social ostracism, state violence and mob fury...it also drives home the part that individuals, especially if they are Muslims, who refuse to identify, who refuse to identify with the symbols of Indian nation state could be suspected of various infidelities.”

The cinema post 9/11 has been a cinema of re-creating the middle class and bringing forth the idea of nation with it. With every passing year the Hindi film industry appears to be doing the same more strongly.

CONCLUSION

Indian Cinema has undeniably exerted a significant influence on our lives, manifesting in numerous ways. However, like any coin, it possesses both positive and negative aspects. On one hand, it has made substantial contributions to our society; yet, on the other hand, it has also been a catalyst for new forms of criminal behavior. In essence, Indian Cinema has played a crucial role in shaping our lives and society. Although it occasionally portrays objectionable content and romanticizes crime, it is our responsibility, and no one else's, to discern between right and wrong. The day we exercise this discernment, Indian Cinema will be wholly virtuous. With its extensive reach, Indian Cinema possesses the capacity to sway people's thoughts and has the potential to transform societal norms.

Popular Hindi cinema, often regarded as a profit-making entity, has predominantly showcased heroes who hail from upper caste Hindu backgrounds. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that the portrayal of Muslim characters in films must not have adhered to stereotypes and biases. India, being a secular country, promotes a syncretic approach and celebrates its unity in diversity. In this light, it becomes the responsibility of cinema to mirror this ethos and present a fair representation of all communities, ensuring that Muslim characters are depicted with respect, authenticity, and a genuine understanding of their culture. By doing so, Hindi cinema can play a significant role in fostering harmony and fostering a sense of unity among diverse populations, while fulfilling its commercial objectives.

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