

Shehnshah to Jihadi: The Curious Case of Muslim Identity in Hindi Cinema

The paper will be published in three parts in consecutive volumes. It will slowly build up the argument by substantial supporting arguments.

By

Waqar Ahmed Fahad

Research Scholar

Indraprastha University, New Delhi

Abstract

The media has always been interested with Muslim identity. From a Mullah to a Tawaif, they have always been seen as an interesting subject. However this study is only looking at the Muslim identity from a lens of Hindi films. But before jumping to any conclusions, many other ideas and theories need to be encountered and investigated. In doing that, this paper will look at how Muslim identity has taken many forms. It will also investigate that why are Muslims stereotyped in Hindi films which is considered to be the national cinema? These are just a couple of propositions but this study will also unravel many other similar facts & findings which are hardly being observed or analyzed by masses. This paper will investigate that how from Mughals to Nawabs, Tawaifs to Jihadis, the identity of Muslims in Hindi film has always been a subject of interest for many scholars and researchers.

Keywords – Muslims, Mughals, Tawaifs, Nawabs, Jihadis

While India post-independence was a secular nation in true sense but now a days, the circumstances are such that calling India truly secular would raise many eyebrows. The hottest topic these days is intolerance. While many meaningless & futile discussions take place on news channels every day, the cases representing intolerance in the country are at a rise.

Many would agree that reason to this growing intolerance is more political than religious. Be it lynching over someone's food habit or killing in the name of religion, their purpose is definitely driven by hegemony & survival. "Killing others on because of their own people were killed gives the sense of association with one's own community. (pp 2, Sen 2007) maybe this kind of violence has been a product of associational massacres. India is also witnessing the worst form of communalism now days. While many national award winning authors have started a trend to return their awards to show their resentment, some have accepted the dominant ideologues in the country. ¹Some voices which raised their voice in favour of secular thread of the country have been either muted (reference to the case of slain Prof. Kalburgi) ²or have been sidelined (reference to the case of suspended Gujarat cop, Sanjiv Bhatt)³. The last Lok Sabha elections 2014 have made one thing very clear that India remains no more Hindustan which could accommodate everyone but it has become Bharat which has no room for ' others' . (Next Chapter will deal with this phenomenon of 'others')

Amartya Sen Theory-

Amartya Sen interestingly writes in his book *Identity and Violence* that "World will be classified on the basis of the religions rather than on the basis of geographies".(pp 13, Sen 2007) It appears valid in the recent times as some Hindu fringe groups in India are trying to send this message loud and clear that this nation is no more a nation for Muslims. What is important is not the general point that Indian society was radically different, but the more specific question of how this difference was read, what this difference was seen to consist of. By this time, Western societies were significantly secularized; the central question of political life was class conflict. In Indian society, by contrast, religion provided the basis of primary and all-consuming group identities. Western societies were also regarded as broadly culturally homogeneous, unified by

¹ http://www.business-standard.com/article/politics/nda-govt-says-award-wapsi-a-travesty-of-history-115103000693_1.html

² Kalburgi's assassination was condemned by many political leaders and social activists. The Karnataka Chief Minister reacted to the murder calling Kalburgi "progressive thinker" and said that the government had treated the incident "very seriously", and that culprits would be traced soon and "strictest punishment" would be meted out in accordance to law.

³ Bhatt was removed from the police service, on the ground of "unauthorized absence". In October 2015, the Supreme Court quashed Bhatt's plea for constituting a special investigation team (SIT) for cases filed against him by Gujarat Government.

single languages and common cultures; Indian society was bewildering in its cultural and linguistic diversity.(pp 22, Kaviraj 2012)

In taking a secular stance, any effort at thinking about multi-religious coexistence in the subcontinent must address the anomalous place of Muslims in the modern Indian nation, not just in the more virulent discourses of the Hindu Right, but also in the discourses of secularism, nationalism, and citizenship in India. One of the first steps toward such a task is rethinking the demand for Partition itself. While Muslims are enamored with Islamic Jihad, its Hindu counterpart is often misrepresented as a result of present-day tendencies to idealize the concept of ahimsa, or nonviolence. Notwithstanding its popular image, mostly informed by Mahatma Gandhi and propagandists of neo-Hinduism, it appears that classical Hinduism even misses a tradition of anti-militarism.⁴ (pp 47, Gommans 2002)

However the damage to the identity of Muslims in general goes to media and films which have turned no stone unturned in demonizing Muslims by stereotyping them in worst possible ways. “One very common problem to make the problem is stereotypes. Stereotypes are not so much aids to understanding but aids to misunderstanding. Stereotypes have received such a bad press in social psychology for a very long time. As Asch (1952) noted ‘The term stereotype has come to symbolise nearly all that is deficient in popular thinking’⁵(pp 2, Metz, 1982) Even Virdi (2003) notices it “Indian films are full of stereotypes and politically incorrect caricatures. (pp 86, Virdi 2003)

However Mukhia (2004) has an interesting reading of the identity, He asserts “The ‘nationalist’ mobilization was based upon the premise of the two major communities, the Hindus and the Muslims, joining hands in a drive against the British, with the identity of each community being safeguarded. The Sanskrit phrase, *Sarva Dharma Sambhav* (‘like treatment of all religions’), the popular Hindi phrase, *Hindu-Muslim Bhai-Bhai* (‘Hindus and Muslims are brothers’), comprised the core of nationalist ideology. It sought to preserve the community identities of the two religious groups, while merging them with their common nationalist identity. The ‘communist’ mobilization of the Muslim League also played upon the community identity of the Hindus and

⁴ H.W. Bodewitz, ‘Hindu ahimsa and its roots’, in J.E.M. Houben and K.R. van Kooij (ed), *Violence Denied: Violence, Non-violence and the Rationalization of Violence in South Asian Cultural History* (Leiden, 1999), p. 19.

⁵ Asch, S. E. (1952). *Social Psychology*. New Jersey: Prentice Hall.

the Muslims and developed the ‘two-nation’ theory, in which each community constituted an autonomous nation with no shared premises of religion, culture or history. Both the ‘nationalist’ and the ‘communalist’ strategies mobilized history, especially medieval Indian history, to sustain their projects. Religion in general and Islam in particular remained the reference point for political mobilization and for history-writing (pp 10, Mukhia 2004)

German Critic Kraucauer asserted since a film and reality has such a close and intimate connection, film ought to exercise mimetic power in opposite way: by contradicting, molding, forming, shaping reality rather than reproducing it. ⁶

While Godard suggests that it has become so debased by being used manipulatively that no film can represent reality. It can only, because of the connotation of its language, present a false mirror of reality. It must therefore be presentational rather representational. While it cannot reproduce reality honestly and truthfully, it may be able to produce itself honestly. ⁷ However in Indian context, it appears a little different as Indian societies are largely influenced by its cinema. These days more and more number of films are coming up on the real issues rather than to be driven from fiction that is one of the reasons that why people are also preferring to admire reality depicted on screen rather silly couple dancing around the tress.

Statistically speaking, The number of talkie films produced in the Hindi language alone between the years 1931 (when the first Indian talkie was produced) and 1987 is 6597; between 1947 and 1987 the number stands at 5074. Since 1971, India has been the leading the world in film production, and over the last decade or so, the film factories have churned out an average of 800 films a year. The advent of sound “national-ized the motion pictures, and linguistic utterance remains the crucial signifier of difference and national/ cultural distinctiveness in films. (pp 9-14 Chakravarty 1993) It means that films have a great impact on our lives and they are expanding only because people like them too.

The role of cinema from the advent of cinema was to propagate religion as it was DG Phalke who was enamored with the idea of capturing the life of Krishna on screen after watching life of

⁶ Monaco, pp 315

⁷ Monaco, pp336

Christ. Hindi cinema in general started producing many mythological followed by devotional films. People use to go barefoot in cinema and people often prayed in the cinemahall. Cinema was not seen lesser than a religion. But later years saw the demise of religious films and films emerged as the promoter of national culture and to promote Hindu culture equivocally, Cinema started vilifying Muslims , who were seen as either outsiders or a threat to their ‘own nation’.

Muslims have been stereotyped in popular Hindi cinema, where normalcy is the sole privilege of the Hindu hero. If Muslims by and large are characterized as a backward, orthodox, and deeply religious group marked by their peculiar dress, appearance, and speech, Muslim women in particular are constituted as intrinsically submissive, retrogressive, and essentially “other,” evidenced most obviously in the figure of the perpetually *burqa*-clad Muslim woman (Kazmi 1996). Next segment will look at the role of Muslims as Mughals which were the entry point for Muslims in Hindi Cinema.