

International Journal of Social Science and Education Research



ISSN Print: 2664-9845
ISSN Online: 2664-9853
Impact Factor: RJIF 8.15
IJSSER 2024; 6(2): 345-349
www.socialsciencejournals.net
Received: 14-09-2024
Accepted: 22-10-2024

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Partition narratives in Hindi cinema, a critical examination of historical authenticity and cultural memory

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33545/26649845.2024.v6.i2e.161>

Abstract

Current discussions around citizenship and belonging in India and South Asia are perpetually influenced by the Partition, which serves as "the condition of possibility for the gendered ethnicization of citizenship and belonging in postcolonial South Asia." Although it remains prominent in popular consciousness, the violence and trauma have mostly been obscured as the Indian state has declined to commemorate the event in any form. In the lack of institutional memorialization, literature and films about Partition, coupled with personal accounts, serve as a significant medium for commemorating the human suffering, requiring a re-evaluation of Partition violence. While historians offer a broader context for comprehending Partition violence, the intricate nuances of loss, pain, and suffering are often more effectively conveyed in the works of creative writers and filmmakers, serving as a counterpoint to official narratives by focusing on individual experiences. Hindi cinema, commonly known as Bollywood, has been instrumental in safeguarding and promoting India's extensive cultural history. This research study examines the relationship between Hindi cinema and the preservation of Partition narratives within it. This study examines how Hindi cinema serves as a potent tool for cultural preservation by highlighting many facets of Indian culture, historical authenticity, traditional rites, festivals, familial systems, and regional customs.

Keywords: Hindi cinema, partition narratives, customs, festivals, cultural memory, historical authenticity

Introduction

Significant events such as Partition, which have profound historical repercussions and remain indelible even after numerous decades, are commemorated in various manners. The Partition prompted numerous artists and writers to portray this event through literary, cinematic, and dramatic forms. Partition holds a comparable significance in the Indian psyche as the Holocaust does in the Western consciousness; nonetheless, popular Indian cinema has not afforded it the same prominence that Hollywood has granted to the Holocaust. Indian mainstream cinema possesses a unique relationship with history, which I must analyze before discussing the films concerning Partition. The narrative of Hindi cinema mirrors the narrative of India itself. It is a narrative of a nation undergoing metamorphosis, transitioning from colonial governance to autonomy, from an agrarian economy to the digital era, and from traditionalism to globalization. Hindi cinema, as a cultural institution, has both reflected and stimulated these changes. Hindi cinema has ingrained itself in the national psyche with its iconic characters, enduring music, and poignant themes.

The narrative is crucial to the complex link between Hindi cinema and culture. Filmmakers have utilized several strategies over the decades to effectively include cultural themes into their narratives. A crucial factor to examine is the socio-cultural influence of Hindi cinema. It transcends simple representation; it molds perceptions and affects attitudes. Iconic individuals serve as role models; narratives function as templates for cultural norms. The vibrant depiction of Indian culture in Hindi cinema has both enlightened and transformed audiences, both domestically and internationally. It has developed a spirit of solidarity and pride among many populations nationwide. By doing so, Hindi film has surpassed its function as simply entertainment and embraced the position of a cultural ambassador.

Satyen K Bordoli asserts that the Indian film industry does not commemorate the Indian partition in the same manner as the Jewish Holocaust, which has inspired numerous films and documentaries addressing various facets of the event. In Bollywood, only a handful of films have focused on partition, and the subject has been treated with a lack of seriousness in India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, nations that endured the consequences of this divide. Gita Vishwanath posited that all Hindi cinema can be classified as Partition cinema, as the predominant theme in these films is around loss and reunion or the separation of lovers. The scarcity of films on partition may be attributed to the traumatic memories associated with the partition of India, leading individuals who lived through it to refrain from recollection or discussion. The initial hush in Hindi cinema was also attributed to this cause. While Hindi films about partition were produced in the late 1940s, a significant surge in partition cinema has been noted after 1997, marking the 50th anniversary of partition and independence. However, in relation to the multitude of films within the Hindi cinema industry, these films remain limited and insufficient, necessitating greater attention.

Review of Literature

Shirodkar, M. (2020) ^[18] study is an extensive examination of the cultural and socioeconomic importance of Bollywood cinema. The research examines the influence of Bollywood on the identity, values, and aspirations of India. Shirodkar contends that Bollywood acts as a cohesive force for many communities in India and serves as a significant cultural representative internationally. The book highlights Bollywood's function in supporting and perpetuating Indian cultural legacy, bridging generational divides, and showcasing India's cultural variety internationally. The study underscores Bollywood's persistent impact as a representation of Indian culture and a vehicle for cultural preservation.

Saxena, R. (2022) ^[16] examines the complex interplay between religion and Indian cinema. The research examines the representation and impact of Indian cinema on religious beliefs, rituals, and cultural values. Saxena examines the depiction of deities and mythology in film, illustrating its reflection and influence on religious discourse in India. The book analyses the influence of cinema on religious activities and the indistinct boundaries between the sacred and the cinematic. It demonstrates that Indian film is a crucial cultural influence in molding the nation's religious landscape and advancing the evolution of religious traditions.

Mishra, G. (2022) ^[13] provide an extensive analysis of Bollywood's significance within the framework of globalization. The research examines the evolution and adaptation of Indian popular cinema, specifically Bollywood, in response to global influences. It explores how Bollywood has influenced the formation of national identity, both in India and among the diaspora. The book emphasizes the transformation of Bollywood into a globally influential cultural phenomenon due to globalization, while simultaneously questioning the preservation of Indian cultural identity among these changes.

Gopalan, L. (2019) ^[5] analyses the complex function of Bollywood movies in Indian culture and society. Mishra contends that Bollywood films function as contemporary temples, catering to the desires and aspirations of the

populace. The research examines the dual role of these films as escapist amusement and as mediums for confronting intricate societal challenges. Gopalan examines the interaction of desire, fantasy, and identity in Bollywood, illustrating its ability to engage audiences while reflecting and influencing cultural norms and values. The study highlights Bollywood's pivotal role in Indian popular culture, providing a complex array of desires, fantasies, and cultural insights to its varied audience.

Indian History and Cinema

Indian popular cinema, as I have previously illustrated, does not recognize universal time. Crosscutting is absent, chronology and length are not well defined, and narratives struggle to situate the event within the historical continuum. Only a few historical periods offer material, primarily the Mughal Emperors Akbar, Jehangir, and Shah Jehan; nonetheless, these films are predominantly family dramas in period attire rather than historical investigations. History generates few myths, and it is challenging to find a film that employs even Independence as its narrative impetus, despite the state's attempts to construct a lasting mythology from the independence war. Cinema from the 1990s onward, such as *1942: A Love Story* (1994) to *Lagaan* (2001), seems to diverge from traditional narratives; yet, these films just employ history to validate patriotism and do not endeavour to reinterpret past in light of contemporary circumstances. This criticism can similarly be applied to *Gadar Ek Prem Katha* (2001), a film with an anti-Pakistani sentiment set against the backdrop of Partition. Additional characteristics resulting from this cinema's disregard for universal time include the resolution through familial reunions (or the successful culmination of a romance) and the absence of uncertainties within the story, meaning no unresolved fates persist. No character may depart into the sunset assured that history persists beyond the narrative.

A comprehensive research of audience responses to mainstream cinema, which examined multiple independent hypotheses regarding its social function, determined that it primarily serves as a mechanism for 'cultural continuity.' The films ostensibly sustain the social structure by depicting new requirements and mythologizing 'tradition.' New social requirements, historically established as a 'tool of cultural continuity,' might be claimed to bridge the divide between conventional beliefs and the real unfolding of history. Mainstream film narratives ostensibly complicate historical experiences using terminology that aligns with tradition, thereby offering 'traditional' resolutions. The expectations of the present moment are central to what is being problematized, rather than a historical event.

The historical trauma of partition is often more deeply experienced than analyzed. Many films on partition utilized authentic video footage of partition-related violence. The occurrences of train massacres, the mistreatment of women, and communal riots are depicted in every film centered on the split. Films from the fifth, sixth, and seventh decades were earnest attempts to portray the struggles of both countries following partition; nonetheless, twentieth-century films predominantly present Pakistan as a terrorist nation-state. Several recent films on partition exhibit inconsistency in their thematic approach to the subject. Early filmmakers were direct victims of partition or possessed first-hand knowledge of it, resulting in a serious perspective. In

contrast, modern filmmakers are influenced by secondary accounts and often pursue economic success.

Partition in Hindi Cinema

Hindi cinema endeavours to portray various facets of partition. Hindi films addressing partition endeavour to illustrate themes of displacement from one's homeland, loss of residences, separation of romantic partners, friendships fractured along communal lines, widespread violence, mass migration, political circumstances leading to partition, women's issues such as rape, abduction, and coerced conversions, as well as the challenges encountered by refugees. The film *Tamas*, created and directed by Govind Nihalani in 1973, is the inaugural significant endeavour of its kind. The film is derived from two novels and two novellas, thoroughly addressing the communal tensions that arose in a once-peaceful city, where mutual brotherhood was undermined by communal animosity instigated by the Colonial Government. This film illuminates communal violence. Humanity was disregarded, and individuals were just identified as Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs. Religious orthodoxy and fanaticism were significant factors for the Partition, exploited by the British Government. It also seeks to illustrate that the impoverished suffered the most from this upheaval, while the influential were the least impacted, although also experiencing displacement. This film attempts to illustrate how innocent individuals, such as Nathu, were exploited as instruments to propagate hatred and communal discord by certain fanatical individuals, with the complicity of the British Government.

Mainstream cinema typically lacks acknowledgment that its mythology is derived from historical events. According to Roland Barthes, myth functions as a language and a collection of rules that aim to provide timeless explanation for the demands of a historical period. Mainstream cinema, owing to its intriguing connection with global time and history, acts contrarily. It addresses historical contexts via well-known and enduring mythology. Anmol Ghadi, for example, symbolizes the looming threat of separation by depicting it as a destitute man abandoning his mother to pursue a wealthy young woman. If Lahore seems altered, the historical context in the film makes a harsh incursion into an otherwise timeless narrative. In contrast to these films, Chandra Prakash Dwivedi's *Pinjar* specifically addresses the Partition and hence warrants a more thorough analysis. I contend that it is not a mainstream picture and fits within a genre that emerged from a distinct, state-driven motivation.

Although the categories of Hindi cinema beyond the mainstream date back significantly earlier, as exemplified by the works of Bimal Roy, V Shantaram, and KA Abbas' *Dharti Ke Lal* (1946), there exists a hypothesis suggesting that the evolution of India's 'art' and 'middle' cinemas was predominantly propelled by state intervention and Mrs. Gandhi's radical initiatives during 1969-70, ultimately resulting in the segmentation of film audiences. The Film Finance Corporation (FFC), operating as a typical government entity, began to compete with the mainstream sector. The FFC policy was created to foster a 'national film' by prioritizing authenticity. FFC successfully financed and promoted Basu Chatterjee's *Sara Akash* (1969) and Mrinal Sen's *Bhuvan Shome* (1969). Although the movement diminished about 1977 following Mrs. Gandhi's ousting, it can be contended that the merits of non-mainstream cinema

continued to be advocated on the state-owned television station Doordarshan long into the 1980s. The 'Indian Panorama' at the International Film Festival of India continues to feature non-mainstream films, and selection ensures broadcasting on the state-owned Doordarshan, along with global visibility.

Certain films effectively depicted the harrowing realities of the subcontinent's Partition. During the partition, individuals were displaced, residences were incinerated, harvests were devastated, countless lives were lost, numerous ladies were abducted, and a much greater number were assaulted, transforming the Indian subcontinent into a cremation ground. Numerous partition issues have been portrayed in films such as *Train to Pakistan*, *Hey Ram*, *Gadar: Ek Prem Katha*, *Viceroy House*, *Jinnah*, *Earth*, and *Partition*. The anguished cries of individuals in films, streets saturated with blood and cadavers, and the desperate flight of vulnerable individuals seeking to preserve their lives, alongside the challenges encountered by their caravans, are portrayed in such a manner that we can vividly envision the actual events. The gruesome train massacre, characterized by streets teeming with dying individuals and strewn dead, has been portrayed in numerous films, vividly illustrating the brutal essence of separation. The trauma experienced by Saket Ram in *Hey Ram* was so profound that it converted him from a secular individual into a religious extremist. The portrayal of a blind child searching for his grandfather among corpses is profoundly poignant, encapsulating the entirety of partition pain.

Historical Authenticity and Cultural Memory in Hindi Cinema

Partition occupies the same position in the Indian consciousness that the Holocaust does in the consciousness of the West but mainstream Indian cinema has not given it the position that Hollywood has accorded the Holocaust. Still, Indian mainstream cinema has a singular relationship with history and I need to examine it before I actually discuss the films about partition.

Numerous Hindi films depict the Partition. *Shaheed* (1948), *Chhailia* (1960), *Dharmputra* (1961), *Garm Hawa* (1973), *Gandhi* (1982), *Tamas* (1988), *1947 Earth* (1998), *Train to Pakistan* (1998), *Hey Ram* (2000), *Refugee* (2000), *Gadar: Ek Prem Katha* (2001), *Pinjar* (2003), *Sadiyaan* (2010), *Sarabjit* (2016), *Veer Zara* (2004), *Viceroy House* (2017), and *Begum Jaan* (2017) are notable Hindi films cantered on the themes of partition and independence, although this enumeration is not comprehensive.

Hindi cinema endeavors to portray various facets of partition. Hindi films about partition aim to portray themes of displacement from one's homeland, loss of residences, the separation of lovers, the transformation of friends into adversaries along communal lines, widespread violence, mass migration, the political circumstances leading to partition, issues faced by women such as rape, abduction, and coerced conversions, as well as the challenges encountered by refugees.

Another topic in partition-related films is the plight of women, encompassing rape, abductions, prostitution, inter-religious marriages, and coerced conversions. These films illustrated that women's bodies were communalized and politicized during the split. Films like *Pinjar*, *Train to Pakistan*, *Gadar: Ek Prem Katha*, *1947 Earth*, *Hey Ram*, *Lahore*, and *Khamosh Pani* depicted women's hardships

during the partition and addressed matters of gender and sexuality. Urvashi Bhutalia contends that historians have mostly neglected the experiences of women during the partition, despite the fact that women endured the greatest suffering during this tumultuous period.

The mother epitomizes virtue in mainstream cinema, exemplified by the renowned scene in the film *Deewar* (1975), when her affiliation is with the virtuous son, despite her other son's affluence. This signifier possesses profound cultural significance, as evidenced by its utilization in art cinema, notably in MS Sathyu's *Garam Hawa* (1973), which depicts the struggles of an Indian Muslim family during the Partition. In the film, Salim Mirza's brothers depart for Pakistan individually, while Salim Mirza opts to stay in India. Significantly, his mother also stays with him. In the context of Pinjar, the lack of the mother in Rashid's family may be construed as an indication of Pakistan being the less virtuous environment.

Yash Chopra's *Dharmputra* is regarded as the inaugural significant film addressing the horrors of religious fundamentalism that intensified during the Partition, when families were divided according to their collective religious beliefs, severing their previous bonds of universality and brotherhood. The video depicts the communalism that arose during the Indian Partition, which altered both the material conditions of individuals and their psychological dispositions.

"Do Bigha Zameen," directed by Bimal Roy, is a pivotal film in Indian cinema that provides a profound examination of Indian culture and the safeguarding of its fundamental principles. The film, set in rural India, adeptly depicts diverse cultural features while confronting the issues encountered by agrarian communities.

"Lagaan," helmed by Ashutosh Gowariker, is a film masterpiece that delves deeply into Indian culture, colonization, and the safeguarding of cultural identity. The film is situated in the British colonial period and centers on a high-stakes cricket match, while also embodying multiple cultural nuances. "Lagaan" illustrates India's cultural variety, including characters from many areas, religions, and backgrounds together. This diversity epitomizes Indian culture. Scholar Amartya Sen examines the intricacies of identification in heterogeneous civilizations such as India in "Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny" (2007).

Swades "Swades," directed by Ashutosh Gowariker, is a contemplative film that examines the topics of cultural identity, patriotism, and the conservation of Indian culture. The film critiques the Indian diaspora's relationship with their country and underscores the significance of cultural heritage. The film centers on Mohan Bhargava (portrayed by Shah Rukh Khan), an Indian expatriate scientist who reexamines his cultural heritage during a trip to his own country. In "Gandhi's Political Philosophy: A Critical Examination" (1989), scholar Bhikhu Parekh examines the diaspora's relationship with India and their contribution to the preservation of Indian culture outside.

"Bajrangi Bhaijaan," helmed by Kabir Khan, is an evocative film that delves into themes of cultural identity, religious coexistence, and the safeguarding of Indian heritage. The film depicts the journey of a silent Pakistani girl in India and her relationship with an Indian guy to communicate its cultural themes. "Bajrangi Bhaijaan" illustrates India's cultural variety by showcasing festivals, traditions, and rituals from several places. It underscores the diversity of

Indian culture and the harmonious coexistence of multiple cultural practices. Scholar Ashis Nandy, in "The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism" (1989), analyzes cultural diversity in India.

Gadar: Ek Prem Katha (2001) is an anti-Pakistani film set against the backdrop of Partition. Additional characteristics resulting from this cinema's disregard for universal time are the resolution achieved through family reunions (or the successful culmination of a romance) and the absence of uncertainties within the story, meaning no unresolved fates persist. No character may depart into the sunset assured that history persists beyond the narrative.

Conclusion

It is imperative to acknowledge that partition is an enduring phenomenon. It is fated to recur repeatedly. It is essential to retain it in memory to prevent its recurrence in history, politics, and aesthetics. Partition violence represents the tumultuous inception of a nascent nation; for India, Partition often embodies 'man's inhumanity to man,' a theme echoed in Pinjar, *Tamas*, and Pamela Rooks' *Train to Pakistan* (1998). Deepa Mehta's *Earth* (1998) is distinctive as it is adapted from a Pakistani novel by Bapsi Sidhwa and addresses the violence of Partition as a means of retribution. The concept of 'man's inhumanity to man' has predominantly overlooked the violence in Bengal, which was virtually as severe as that in Punjab, albeit more sporadic. Indian culture has demonstrated exceptional persistence amidst historical transformations, societal adversities, and external influences. These films underscore the enduring significance of cultural values and traditions throughout Indian society, even under evolving circumstances. The cultural fabric of India is marked by its diversity. These films illustrate the cultural diversity of the nation, highlighting distinct regional customs, dialects, festivals, and traditions. They commemorate the diversity of civilizations that cohabit amicably. These films, over the decades, mirror the evolution of cultural conventions and ideals. They tackle topics concerning gender, class, caste, and social inequalities, illustrating the cultural dynamics of transformation and adaptation.

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