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Author(s): GITA VISWANATH and SALMA MALIK

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Revisiting 1947 through Popular Cinema: A Comparative Study of India and Pakistan

GITA VISWANATH, SALMA MALIK

The memorialisation of the Partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947 through popular cinema is the theme of this paper. Both in India and Pakistan, cinema as a cultural production wields immense influence in the lives of the people and mainstream cinema has been deeply affected by Partition. By offering the potential for public mourning in a public space such as a theatre, cinema confronts the trauma of that cataclysmic event and Partition cinema in particular invests heavily in the private sphere of emotions and familial relations while also demonstrating that the private domain is already political.

In this paper we attempt to study conflict as a represented category by examining the memorialisation of Partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947 through mainstream cinema. Cinema is one of the most popular and influential cultural productions in the lives of people in India and Pakistan. This paper argues that popular cinema in India and Pakistan is deeply influenced by the watershed event of Partition both as industries in the respective countries as well as at the level of diegetic content and narrative styles of individual films. Further, we argue that films may be considered as constituting important historical sources by raising questions such as: To what extent can popular cinema take on the burden of recreating historical events accurately? Can films be seen as legitimate historical sources? Can cinema be considered a site for the production of historical knowledge? In using films as sites of production of the meaning of Partition, we are more interested in the “interpretation” rather than the “event” per se to use Gyanendra Pandey’s terms (Pandey 2003). Historical memory to a large extent is constituted by and through “institutionalised sites of memory”. Thus we wish to insert popular films as analysable categories and propose that films constitute one such site of memory.

The defining moment of Partition has been the focus of academic attention in India since 1997, a year which marked 50 years of independence for India and Pakistan. Studies abound on the political aspects that led to Partition (Moon 2005, Page 2005, Hasan 2005), gender perspectives on Partition (Butalia 1998, Bhasin and Menon 1998), Partition and memory (Pandey 2003, Kaul 2001) and representation of Partition in literature (Bhalla 2006). No study has yet been undertaken on the representation of Partition in the visual domain constituted largely by popular cinema. This study is an attempt to fill the existing gap.

The cataclysmic event of Partition deeply affected the social, political, economic and cultural lives of millions of people. In the words of Mushirul Hasan (2005):

No other country in the twentieth century has seen two such contrary movements taking place at the same time. If one was a popular nationalist movement, unique in the annals of world history for ousting the colonisers through non-violent means, the other, in its underbelly, was the counter movement of Partition, marked by violence, cruelty, bloodshed, displacement and massacres.

The impact of such a life-altering event has been documented from historical, political, sociological and literary perspectives. Nevertheless, the Partition also inspired filmmakers on both sides of the divide. When it comes to the role of media, it certainly has had a great impact in the shaping of popular mindsets,

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Gita Viswanath (gita.viswanath@gmail.com) is an independent researcher based in Baroda and Salma Malik (salmamalik@gmail.com) is with the Department of Defence and Strategic Studies, Quaid-e-Azam University, Islamabad.

both in India and Pakistan. Where on the one hand, media has influenced the broader Indo-Pakistan relationship, on the other, through its various genres, media has also served as an alternate channel of dialogue and communication through which nations and populations can talk with each other. The genre of films in particular has left an everlasting impression in shaping the popular mindset of the people of India and Pakistan.

In a sense, all of Hindi cinema may be seen as Partition cinema. While we may use the term "Partition cinema" broadly, we are aware of the problematic of such a nomenclature for Pakistani cinema. As one of our respondents Ahmed Qureshi, a TV journalist and commentator has pointed out, "Indian cinema uses the underlying connotations of the word Partition to imply a mistake, a part of the homeland unjustly separated". Thus when we use the term, we imply the event of 1947, which while it was a partitioning of the Indian subcontinent, also led to the birth of a legitimate nation state, Pakistan, which was further divided in 1971 with the founding of Bangladesh. The recurring themes of separated lovers, feuding families, and the trope of brothers lost in a *mela* or the well-known "lost and found theme" – all resonate with memories of the Partition of the subcontinent. Besides, the film industries of both India and Pakistan are replete with people (actors, producers, directors, scriptwriters and technicians) who are Partition victims. Hence, the Partition looms large over the thematic and ideological concerns of their oeuvres. However, for the purpose of this paper, we look at the Partition film as a genre in a narrower sense. Besides the sheer methodological convenience of classifying films generically, this approach would help us to focus on the interpretations that the films offer of the event of the Partition. By functioning as mnemonic devices, these films are conduits to the past of the inextricably interwoven destinies of India and Pakistan.

Cinema and Partition

The Partition affected film production and many great performers had to make choices about their location. It affected the Indian film industry by destabilising two major film centres of undivided India – Bombay (now Mumbai) and Lahore. Legendary film personalities like Noor Jehan, Zia Sarhadi and Ghulam Mohammed left for Pakistan. Similarly, prominent Indian filmmakers such as Gulzar and Govind Nihalani, B R Chopra and Yash Chopra migrated to India from what became Pakistan. Bhisham Sahni, whose famous Hindi novel *Tamas* is based on Partition, was also from Rawalpindi in Pakistan and moved to Indian Punjab. The migrations caused a great deal of professional insecurity in the film industries, especially in India for those Muslims who chose to stay back. Ian Talbot notes that even in secular India the Muslim actors felt apprehensive of the audience's acceptance and therefore functioned with Hindu names. He cites the example of Dilip Kumar who adopted this screen name and even refused to perform roles of Muslim characters with the exception of *Mughal-e-Azam* as the secularism portrayed in the film matched the Nehruvian thought of those times (Talbot 2000: 58). Novelists and writers whose prose and poetic writings form much of the content of the Partition cinema had had a direct experience of this horrific event. The works of several writers

across the borders who lived through the horror of Partition such as Khushwant Singh, Qurutulain Haider, Saadat Hassan Manto, Saifudin Saif, and Bapsi Sidhwa have been adapted to film screenplays, thus creating an interesting fusion of literature with popular cinema.

The history of Pakistani cinema is not as rich and vibrant as its counterpart in India. In its 58 years of history, Pakistani cinema has produced and released approximately 3,941 feature films from 1948 to 2005. These figures also include 207 feature films (154 Bengali and 53 Urdu films), which were produced in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) from 1956-71.¹

Pakistani cinema can be divided into five phases; the initial seven years (1948-54) signify the "struggling phase" of establishing a nascent cinematic culture in a newly independent country. This was followed by the decade long second phase, which is normally considered the "competition phase". In these 10 years (1955-65) the Pakistani moviemakers were in a direct competition with Indian cinema. This was followed by the "peak phase" (1966-79) in which after the censorship on the viewing of Indian films, the Pakistani cinema which was already doing good business managed to gain more commercial success. In the initial days of independent Pakistani cinema, movies from India and Pakistan were shown in the respective countries. However, the Jaal Agitation² by Pakistani moviemakers against releasing the rights of Indian movies in East and West Pakistan and then the 1965 Indo-Pakistan war ended this practice. The fourth phase (1980-1995) is considered the "action films phase", whose hallmark was the *Gandasa* culture and the most popular and trend-setting movie of this phase was *Maula Jaat*. The period after this since 1996 signifies the downfall and a virtual collapse of Pakistani cinema. Unfortunately, Pakistani cinema, since the late 1970s has been dying a slow death, if it is not already dead, owing to the socio-political culture, coupled with the issue of piracy and lack of governmental interest in promoting and sustaining the film industry.³

This was mainly because popular cinema's role was relegated to that of entertainment alone and respective governments failed to recognise or appreciate the role and contribution cinema could make in shaping the public opinion and in return casting an influence over the society. For a certain segment of opinion makers, cinema was nothing more than a frivolous, mushroom growth, which would die its natural death with time and this in turn, has contributed to the depreciation of the cinema in Pakistan.⁴ Not only this, there was no concept of a film academy in Pakistan and the only regulatory body National Film Development Corporation (NAFDEC) established in the 1970s also closed down a few years ago.

However, post-Partition Pakistani cinema did produce some significant works. Around a dozen movies have been made on the issue of Partition: *Kartar Singh* (Saifudin Saif – 1959), *Khaak aur Khaun* (Masud Pervaiz – 1979), *Tauba* (S A Hafiz – 1964), *Lakhon Mein Eik* (Raza Mir – 1967), *Behen Bhai* (Hasan Tariq – 1968) and *Pehli Nazar* (Islam Dar – 1977) (Goreja 2000). All these movies fared well on the commercial and trade circuits, with *Kartar Singh* being a record breaker and very popular in India as well. The latest in the genre of Partition movies is the fairly recent

Jannat Ke Talaash (Hasan Askari – 1999), which failed to do much business for two reasons: first, cine-goers preferred light entertainment over serious movies. To many, Partition is a subject best forgotten by the people, and second, because it carried a rather unconventional storyline.⁵ However, some of our respondents to the questionnaire still believe in the cathartic value of such narratives. Popular cinema according to film scholar, Ira Bhaskar has great powers of effective and emotional engagement with the audience. “It helps create spaces for discourse, confrontation and debate...Cinema as such is an alternative discourse of history telling, and can in this way authenticate lived experience and cultural memory”.⁶ Cinema in confronting the trauma of Partition paves the way for collective mourning in a public space such as a theatre. There is a big difference in the manner in which contemporary problems are represented in the other genres of media, namely, news or television, especially media that is responding to developing events. Cinema is different in this respect, as the temporal dislocation between the occurrence of an event and its re-creation or representation in the film allows for a time of reflection, introspection and assessment.⁷

Unfortunately, except for Ritwik Ghatak's films and a Bangladeshi film called *Chitra Nodir Pare (On the Banks of River Chitra, 1999)*, by Tanvir Mokkamel, the Partition of the eastern borders of India, i.e., Bengal was not highlighted. According to a Pakistani film analyst Omar Adil, this lack of cinematic coverage of the Partition of Bengal largely was due to the fact that mainstream moviemakers were not only based in Lahore and Bombay, but also that the bulk of people associated with cinema in the shape of writers, directors, actors and lyricists also hailed largely from Punjab, and what they brought out on cinema appealed largely to an audience that could personally as well as culturally identify itself with the milieu.⁸

Hindi cinema, since the beginnings, has shown an abiding interest in momentous events that are bound to become part of history. Together with K Asif and Kamal Amrohi, Sohrab Modi pioneered the spectacular genre of historical film in India (Rajadhyaksha et al 1999). The narrative of Kanjibhai Rathod's silent film *Bhakt Vidur* (1921) was an allegory of Gandhian swadeshi. Since the 1990s, there has been a sudden spurt in films dealing with historical events (*Gadar* (2001), *Pinjar* (2003), *The Legend of Bhagat Singh* (2002), *Mangal Pandey – the Rising* (2005), *Rang de Basanti* (2006), for example). By and large Hindi cinema has foregrounded the love story and has brought in history only tangentially or as a backdrop. Overtly and consciously historical films are few and far between. The fear of controversy and personal safety, according to scriptwriter Rekha Nigam⁹ are the reasons why Hindi filmmakers do not engage with “sensitive” issues such as Partition. At the same time, she feels they are also passionate about some issues, which they would like to address in their films. This contradiction is resolved by dealing with controversial themes in a tangential manner, either by making them the backdrop to a love story or by highlighting certain universal and humanist concerns and glossing over the political contradictions and contestations. Moreover, it may be too facile to say that in Hindi and Pakistani cinema the Partition serves only as the background. After all, the love stories that dominate are ones whose

trajectories have been charted by the historical event of the Partition. Whether it is the plight of Sakina and Tara Singh in *Gadar* or Henna and Chander in *Henna* (1991) or Mehmooda Begum in *Mammo* (1994) or Shanti and Kewal in *Challia* (1960) it continues to be the stories of people whose lives were altered forever and restructured by the displacement that followed Partition. To consider these as mere love stories would be a gross misreading.

According to Bhaskar, “The work on Partition really began after 1984. Before that, there were novel, short stories but there wasn't any sustained discussion on these issues in films.”¹⁰ She divides work on Partition in Indian cinema into three phases. The classification is useful for us in tracing the trajectory of the topos of Partition in Hindi cinema. The initial 15 years after the Partition (1947-62) form the first phase. The common narratives in this phase were those of migration, abducted women and their recovery. Yash Chopra's *Dharamputra* (1961) was the first movie that addressed the communal crisis as well as Partition as a social and political reality. Bhaskar notes that the film addressed the issue of Hindu fundamentalism in Partition which was for its time quite radical. The archival footage of Partition caravans and trains added to the impact generated. Indian, Pakistani as well as Bangladeshi filmmakers have very effectively used this visual technique alike. This technique held enormous melodramatic potential and was capitalised by filmmakers. In reality, the experience of a traumatic shifting was not uniform. As one of our respondents who wishes to remain anonymous says,

Most of them foresaw the likely escalation and relocated in relative comfort and in a timely manner. Those who were landowners lost a lot financially but those in service, especially government service had a pretty non-traumatic shifting.

The second phase is that of the 1970s which gave space for the surfacing of concealed emotions by dealing with repressed issues in society – amongst these was Partition and communal conflict. The art or parallel cinema movement with giants such as Kumar Shahani, Mani Kaul, M S Sathyu, Shyam Benegal, Govind Nihalani and others was at its height in this period. Two of the best known Partition films came out of this period: M S Sathyu's *Garam Hawa* (1977) and Govind Nihalani's television serial *Tamas* (1989).

The third and last phase is that of the 1990s with the demolition of the Babri masjid followed by the Bombay riots, which negotiated issues of identity, secularism and citizenship. Bhaskar observes that subjects considered taboo for nearly 40 years were being talked about openly: preconceived stereotypes and prejudices against one another, communal and racial sentiments, rise of Hindutva and erosion of secular values. Yash Chopra's *Veer Zaara* (2004) “is an interesting example of returning to those concerns. The film has deep emotional investment in reconciliation, in bringing two conflicting nations together.”¹¹ It is from 2000 onwards that Partition was directly confronted in the domain of mainstream cinema. *Gadar* (2001), *Pinjar* (2003), *Train to Pakistan* (1998), *Earth 1947* (1998), *Partition* (2007), *Veer Zaara* (2004), *Mammo* (1994), *Refugee* (2000), and *Hey Ram* (2000) are all films of this period. Shivam Viji comments that it is not simply a question of individual identity that was addressed, but also the social change fashioned by the Partition with the very tradition

of pluralism being torn apart. It also changed for millions of people the very idea of home. He says,

People who had never been out of their insulated villages for generations were suddenly forced to choose a country and this also changed for them the idea of a nation. Perhaps for many, nationhood became a conscious fact only because of the Partition, when friends became foes because they were of the other community and compelled them to flee to a land far away.¹²

The recurrent themes in most post-Partition cinema in both India and Pakistan of films made after 1947 are separation within a single family, or between lovers – both of which could be read as metaphors for the division of land and people during Partition. Thus, the family-as-nation trope, central to Partition films, abets audience identification. A romanticised pre-Partition era, the apportioning of blame to politicians, the heroism of individuals, the triumph of love, violent and bloody scenes of Partition – these are some of the leitmotifs of the Partition film. The narrative of *Kartar Singh* is prototypical in nature. *Kartar Singh* was not only the first ever movie made in Pakistan on the subject of Partition, but rather in both post-Partition India and Pakistan. Written, directed as well as produced by poet and writer Saifudin Saif, it was released in 1959. The black and white Punjabi film made the audience (mainly in the Punjabi-speaking belt) relate to the theme. Set against a rural backdrop, the movie introduces the audience to a pre-Partition village, which later becomes part of post-colonial India, and had very lively characters. The predominantly rural setting despite most of the violence having taken place in the cities could also be attributed to the valorisation of Punjabi stories. Punjab, which faced the major brunt of the Partition, was mainly a rural, agrarian land. Also, a bulk of these movies was adaptations of novels whose writers had their roots in villages. Omar Adil while commenting on *Kartar Singh* says,

It was a microcosmic representation of *Punjabism*, which overrode all other 'isms'. The secularity of Punjab was so strong, that once divisions and fissures developed, it became most painful, and enhanced the feel for blood.¹³

The renowned Punjabi poet Amrita Pritam's famous poem *Aj Akhan Waris Shah Nun* (I Say unto Waris Shah) forms the central theme of the movie, and highlights the hopelessness and grief of the characters portrayed. To date no other poem has depicted Partition better. In fact, Saif was himself a poet, knew Pritam personally and has dedicated this movie to her.

The recall value of Partition is enormous as in the way it is invoked in communal riots discourses as well as by the people during genocides, pogroms, etc. During the 1984 pogrom against the Sikhs, a lot of the victims called it a second Partition. Anil Sonawane, a 25-year old respondent to our questionnaire heard of the Partition for the first time when "some of my neighbours (were) talking about Dawood, Babri Masjid, Ram Mandir and Partition". Kamal Hasan's *Hey Ram* is one movie that shows the seamlessness of Partition and communalism in India. The film takes place as Saket Ram, a retired archaeologist, lies in his deathbed on 6 December 1999, the seventh anniversary of the destruction of Babri Masjid in Ayodhya by fanatical Hindu groups. Set in Karachi, Calcutta and Madras of 1946-47, the story revolves around the character of a south Indian brahmin called Saket

Ram, who is an allusion to Nathuram Godse, the assassin of Gandhi. Saket Ram is drawn into the mindless communal violence after his young wife, Aparna is gang raped and killed. Subsequently, Saket Ram is influenced by Abhyankar (Atul Kulkarni) and his militant Hinduism. Several dialogues in the film strongly indict Gandhian philosophy. However, the film does not go as far as to show Saket Ram killing Gandhi. On the contrary, he has a change of heart (highly unconvincing, considering the strident anti-Gandhi tone of the entire film) and refrains from killing Gandhi although he goes fully prepared for it. Even if Saket Ram's fanaticism is undercut at the end of the film for ideological and perhaps censorship reasons, the audience gets an experience of his extremism. Towards the end of the film, when the old Saket Ram is being taken to a hospital, he witnesses the Hindu-Muslim riots in Bombay that followed the destruction of the mosque, and asks, "Ab bhi?" (Even now?). With that one terse question, along with the fortuitous day of his dying, the film addresses the continuities between nationalism, communalism and the watershed event of Partition. The inclusion of south Indian characters and milieu in a film based predominantly on the Partition is an interesting point to note. The Partition and its aftermath in India as we know were regionally restricted with Punjab and Bengal bearing the brunt. The Partition trauma is not a part of the collective unconscious of the south Indian. In the light of this, the film attempts to mobilise a pan-Indian sentiment to its ideological moorings.

Similarly, the making of *Tamas* is coloured by the multiple narratives of history whose overarching rubric is the narrative of Partition. The novelist (on whose work the film is based) Bhisham Sahni's own connection with the two histories of the 1971 Bhiwandi riots and the Partition is an interesting link. Bhisham Sahni is said to have written *Tamas* after visiting Bhiwandi during the riots because it brought back memories of Partition.¹⁴ Further, the filmmaker Govind Nihalani made *Tamas* after witnessing the Bhiwandi riots of 1984. Such is the vigour of the memory of Partition which seems to lie just below the surface of the collective unconscious that needs only a light prodding to awaken it.

Having said this, how does the filmmaker represent at all the horror and brutality of an event such as Partition? Does the monstrosity of the Partition violence challenge its very possibility of representation? Such difficulties in narrating a historical event in popular cultural forms result in somewhat simplistic modes of representation. Hindi cinema tends to paint all acts of violence that it depicts with the brush of communalism. Recent research on Partition has demonstrated that several acts were local in nature, carried out for reasons other than genocide: loot, capture of property and abduction of women (Brass 2006). The abduction of Puro, later known as Hamida in *Pinjar* and the betrayal of Shanta in *Earth 1947* are quite clearly not entirely communal in nature. Rather, these acts are made possible by the existing situation of those times. However, since the dominant focus of the films is on the religious divide, such subtleties are invisibilised. All the same, films brought to fore the concern over the abduction of women during Partition, a topic that remained largely taboo in families.¹⁵ Another strategy employed by filmmakers is to eschew violence all together and instead focus on the impact of

Partition on the lives of ordinary people. Shyam Benegal's *Mammo* is one such film. The film depicts the travails of common people who wish to cross the borders to visit their relatives. Displacement, the consequent identity crisis, and the coldness of immigration procedures form the core of this film, which focuses on the continued impact of Partition rather than the violence that immediately followed it. It is well-established by now that Partition films use a real historical event for visualisation. This brings us to the complex relationship that film shares with history. Historians have generally been sceptical of filmic depictions of momentous events in history. Nonetheless the postmodernist insistence on the similarity between historical and fictional discourses has rendered their suspicions dated.

Film and History

If according to Stuart Hall, popular culture is a site where "collective social understandings are created" (in Storey, 4) then we may ask: What understandings of Partition may we arrive at from cinema? Since mainstream cinema cannot be understood by excluding its deeply commercial moorings, we need to look at some of the views of the audiences. The key word here is "pleasure". Audiences go to the movies principally for entertainment. The cinematic experience is not restricted however merely to the bounded space of the theatre; it spills over into spaces outside of it that is constituted by a plethora of ancillary experiences such as listening to film music, reading of film magazines, newspaper film reviews and interviews of stars, joining fan clubs, etc. The cinematic images in historical films evoke the past event constantly and yet assert themselves in terms of their own autonomy.¹⁶ Thus when we analyse historical films, we need to keep in mind the salience of the cinematic image alongside the historicity of the narrative.

In an article on the film *Mangal Pandey – The Rising*, Majumdar and Chakrabarty suggest that mass media and democracy influence each other. They also assert that the past circulates in popular memory through rituals of memorialisation shaping in the process memories and perceptions of the past. For instance, one of our respondents said that she became aware of forced killings/suicides of women during Partition only through cinema. To a generation that is moving farther away from the event, cinematic images are one of the most powerful ways by which the past is made available.¹⁷

Thus filmmaking also involves the historian's tasks of sifting through materials, selecting appropriate sources and then giving a perspective to the narrative. The process of remembering on both sides of the divide is selective as each one struggles to come to terms with the pain of the rupture. India and Pakistan tell rival tales of Partition. In official remembering, there is denial and repression of the stories that do not fit into the fabric woven by the self in opposition to a hostile other. What is often forgotten, with a will to never remember, is that the other was once the self, and the self will always be partly the other. It is left to folklore, legend and popular memory to hold on to and recall the lost self, to remember what official history chooses to forget with vengeance.¹⁸ History therefore serves the purpose of a mnemonic device. As a narrative it selects, rejects, includes, and then

establishes the boundaries of memory that can then be crossed safely, without the threat of being trespassed. History in turn also enables all generations to claim some part of the past for themselves. For the older generation, it is a vehicle to travel smoothly from the past to present, while still clinging on to a select portion of memories. Whereas, for the younger generations, who have not been a part of that process, it is to weave for them a reality that allows them to be a part of the collectivity called nation. Ultimately, the present takes over the entire memory process and restructures not only the past but also shapes the future.¹⁹ Masud Pervaiz's *Khaak aur Khaun* with its ultra nationalism purports to shape national memory. Based on Nasim Hijazi's novel by the same name, it was a big budget release by the NAFDEC in 1979. The film was considered a palpably biased, "historical extravaganza" (Gazdar 1997) and could not gain as much popularity as *Kartar Singh*, which was hailed in both India and Pakistan. Nonetheless, the movie made with government sponsorship meant to educate people, specially the youth about the sacrifices and troubles a whole generation of Pakistanis underwent to secure a free and independent homeland for the future generations. The timing of the film leads us to an interesting observation. Eight years after a war against India in which Pakistan lost its eastern territory, the release of a film that harks back to the sacrifices entailed in the making of Pakistan can only be seen as partisan. Like *Kartar Singh* (which has more or less achieved an iconic stature in the Pakistani cinema) *Khaak aur Khaun* and its characters journey through a colonised India living in a close community together with no communal segregation. However, the Partition proves to be a turning point, highlighting the inherent differences and stirring a deadly communal drift. Common to both Hindi and Pakistani films is the idea of a momentous rupture in the wake of Partition. Pre-Partition conflicts between the Hindus and Muslims are seldom addressed. In cinema, such a construction heightens the intensity of the tragic fall from a mighty civilisation to the narrower entities of nations.

Although the referent of history is real as Hayden White reminds us, filmmakers are anxious to insist on the fictional character of Partition films. For instance the producer of *Gadar*, Nitin Keni says,

It took me three months to finalise just the story. It's a real story which finds a one-para mention in Dominique Lapierre's *Freedom at Midnight*. Manto also wrote about it. Then later it was made into a film, *Shaheed-e-Mohabbat Buta Singh*. For me, the story was just a take-off point. *Gadar* is completely fictional.²⁰

All the same, what little historical information such films convey is significant for its value as an informative channel to the masses that include those who do not have access to the written word. Besides, the ideological inflection given to the historical data is open to critique and contestation. Films with their predominance of visual signifiers also contribute significantly to the construction of national and social memory.

All Partition films in the process of narrativising history willy-nilly negotiate the category of nation and as a corollary construct the "Other". This usually takes extreme forms as for instance in *Gadar*, which created a monstrous Pakistan through the character of Sakina's (Amisha Patel) father, Ashraf Ali (Amrish Puri) who

becomes the mayor of Lahore after migrating to Pakistan. At the other end, the Muslim is also caricatured through the character of the hero's friend who appears in a cameo as a "good" Muslim with a cantankerous wife and 12 children in tow who upholds the value of friendship and loyalty that transcends the physical boundaries of the divided states. Thus we see the Muslim characters occupying the spaces of the villain and the comedian played by actors recognisable as such. The Sikh hero is called Tara Singh, a name that resonates with the significance of Master Tara Singh, an influential political leader of the Sikhs at the time of Partition. Tara Singh, played by Sunny Deol combines masculinity and jingoism that have become the actor's hallmark traits in the film viewer's consciousness. By marrying a Muslim girl, Sakina who is about to be raped by a gang of Sikh and Hindu youths, he remains in the viewers' eyes the quintessential Hindi film hero who rescues the heroine from danger. Further, the rescue is dramatised in a way to disgrace the Pakistani father as self-seeking and one who can even disregard his daughter's need for happiness and fulfilment. The power of literature and cinema as sources of historical knowledge is such that unlike official statistics, it has the capacity to individualise identity clashes at a time when it could be distorted by loot and rioting, whether it be Ayesha of Sabiha Sumar's *Khamosh Pani* (2003), Puro of *Pinjar* or Hari who became Himmat Ali in Deepa Mehta's *Earth 1947*.

All Partition films broadly belong to the genre of historical films as their referent. They aim for authenticity through period settings, costumes and dialects. They are one among a plurality of narratives on Partition such as the novel for instance. Like

historical narratives, they are embedded in particular ideologies. After Butalia, Menon and Bhasin, it would be naive to read Partition narratives without inflecting them with the category of gender. Several of the films discussed here make available such interpretations. They strive hard to present on screen a visual version of national histories. In this they necessarily engage in political categories such as nation, state, national identity and citizenship. The dominant mode through which Partition is represented is through the largely popular genre of melodrama which we will discuss at length below.

The Melodramatic Form

We now need to examine the formal structures through which history is narrativised in Partition cinema. To do this, we resort to the generic frame of melodrama. The epic scale, centrality of family, the representation of women and a rhetorical acting style are some features that invite us to study Partition films as melodramas and more interestingly how these very characteristics of melodrama seemingly circumscribe the political potential of these narratives.

Although most easily characterised as a type of aesthetic practice, in the words of Gledhill, "melodrama exists as a cross cultural form with a complex international two hundred year history" (1987: 1). Further, she notes, "with its historical associations with tragedy and realism, melodrama may be seen as a way of looking at the world" (1987: 1). According to Elsaesser, melodramatic effects in film usually quite successfully transfer explicit political themes on to a personalised plane (1987: 47). Strong family ties and friendships and their subsequent breakdown are

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A separate section assesses the downturn in India, the state of the domestic financial sector, the impact on the informal economy and the reforms necessary to prevent another crisis.

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central thematic concerns in Partition cinema both in India and Pakistan. V Shantaram's *Padosi* (1941) which addressed the larger communal fissures through the story of two neighbours – one Hindu and the other Muslim, who play chess with each other, could be seen as an early case in point. Masud Pervaiz in Pakistan also touches a similar chord in his 1979 movie *Khaak aur Khaun*. Arguably, the best Partition film, M S Sathyu's *Garam Hawa* (1973) focuses on the plight of a family that is facing the dilemma of whether to migrate to Pakistan or stay back in India. Salim Mirza (Balraj Sahni), a shoe manufacturer in Agra of the late 1940s, is trying hard to cope with the sudden transformations in his social world after many of his family and friends choose to migrate to Pakistan. Without any attempts to aestheticise violence, the film stays focused single-mindedly on how political and social circumstances overwhelm individual lives.

In melodrama, which is the mainstay of popular cinema in India and Pakistan, ideological conflicts are personalised through the drama of emotionally encumbered family situations. For instance, Vic Sarin's *Partition* (2007) which borrows its storyline heavily from *Gadar* (which in turn had borrowed from *Shaheed-e-Mohabbat Buta Singh* (1999)) engages with the binary of secular and communal attitudes prevalent during the time of Partition through the crisis that ensues in the life of its protagonist, Gian Singh (Jimi Mistry). According to Elsaesser, "even if situations and sentiments defied verisimilitude, the structure had a truth and a life of its own which an artist could make part of his material" (1987: 49). It is for this reason that melodrama has come to remain the main mode of expression in popular cinema, especially Hindi cinema. While in the west melodrama was long disparaged for its excesses and lack of realism, Rajadhyaksha believes that the melodramatic form could have room for realism in the Indian cinema.

Accordingly, we now need to foreground the Indian context in order to study how Indian cinema incorporated this western mode of expression. Ashish Rajadhyaksha traces the genesis of the melodramatic form to the very beginnings of Indian cinema in the 1930s and 1940s. Early attempts to conceptualise Indian cinema such as those found in the S K Patil Film Enquiry Committee Report of 1951 hinged around the distinction between art/parallel cinema and commercial cinema, with the concomitant valorising of the former over the latter on the basis of art cinema's realistic moorings. This made realism "one of the key sites of a major cultural hegemony in cinema..." (1993: 56). Further, realism was linked to the metaphors of science, rationality and historicity bringing about a shift from the genre of the social to melodrama which could accommodate the realist expression (Rajadhyaksha 1993: 56).

In Indian cinema the epic melodrama was launched concurrently in several languages.²¹ Interestingly, Hindi cinema came into this form only later but it did become the dominant mode of expression both in style and narrative terms. In India, melodrama was usually cast in the mould of allegory in which "it evokes a typical and familiar strategy of making the family stand-in for the nation..." thus making melodrama transcend its predecessors like the novel to become something more than a genre perhaps like a "mode of cultural production/assimilation"

(Rajadhyaksha 1993: 59). Partition cinema foregrounds the mode of synecdoche insofar as it focuses on separation of lovers/families, etc, to stand in for the Partition of the subcontinent. Raj Kapoor's last film *Henna* completed by his son Randhir Kapoor after the former's demise is the story of separation. The hero, Chander's (Rishi Kapoor) romance with a Pakistani girl, Henna (Zeba Bakhtiar) is doomed at the outset as it happens in a state of amnesia the hero suffers in a car accident. Ultimately he returns to his Indian girl friend, Chandini (Ashwini Bhawe) who has been waiting patiently for him. Henna is killed in a gunfire that ensues in the hero's attempt to cross the border. The plot seems analogous to peace attempts between India and Pakistan, which at their best can only be mild flirtations after which they invariably return to their respective hostile positions. Sabiha Sumar's *Khamosh Pani* (2003) is different from the rest of these movies, as it is not part of the mainstream cinema just discussed above. Secondly, it was never released to be viewed in the commercial cinema, except for a limited release in few cinema houses in India. Critically acclaimed in the international scene, it also won three awards at various film festivals worldwide, including the third 2003 KARA film festival²² which is an alternative cinema initiative. Yet, it shares melodramatic features common to popular films. It concentrates on the point of view of the victim and tells the story of the nation through the story of the individual. Ayesha (Kiron Kher) turns Muslim after her abduction and marriage. Years later, once again communal peace is disturbed by the sudden upsurge of extremism and religious intolerance (a microcosmic depiction of the Pakistani society) hence contributing to the silent trauma Ayesha suffers leading to her suicide. The suicide is made more poignant by the fact that she jumps into a well; an act she had bravely run away from despite being forced into it by anxious parents during Partition.

Melodrama is commonly construed as having complexly interwoven plots and as being self-consciously tragic. This makes melodrama seem like a kitsch version of the classier genre of tragedy. But in the case of historical narratives, according to Ricoeur, emplotting is important as plot is a mediator between events and the experience of temporality. In his essay "Time and Narrative", Ricoeur suggests that all historical narratives have to address the ultimate referentiality of time itself which he calls "the structure of Temporality" (in White, 172). It is this temporality that lends the events of a story the "aura of historicity" (in White, 173).

Melodrama has normally been understood as a woman's film. The shift from an investment in family and emotions to women is almost naturalised in studies on melodrama. Partition films also focus on women but the constructions go beyond the private sphere to portray women's negotiation with the state. They are imaged as repositories of national/communal identities. Besides, women's bodies are seen as sites on which ideological and communal conflicts may be staged. The gendered nature of violence, at times glossed over, is by no means of less salience. Thousands of women became victim to crime during the Partition riots. More often than not, violence against women of the "other" community was a way of asserting the superiority of the aggressor community. This painful experience has been the central theme of

movies such as *Pinjar*, *Earth 1947* and *Khamosh Pani*. These films dramatised the predicament of kidnapped women and their consequent marriages to their abductors. Even the respective government's policy of rehabilitating and repatriating these victimised women could not help heal the wounds, as they faced the eventuality of not being accepted back by their families. Chandraprakash Dwivedi's *Pinjar* based on Amrita Pritam's novel of the same name portrays such a plight of a Punjabi girl Puro (Urmila Matondkar) who is abducted by a Muslim man, Rashid (Manoj Bajpai) who has always coveted her. The Partition riots provided him with the opportunity to get the girl of his dreams. In the end, she chooses to stay back with him even when her relatives come to "rescue" her. After the initial trauma, the film gives agency to the woman but not until the state in drawing the borders and boundaries drew them on the bodies of women too. Most Partition films with their heavy investments in the domain of the emotional/private undermine the role of the state in the violence while highlighting the communal and religious nature of the conflict.²³

Raza Mir's *Lakhon Mein Eik* (1967) can be seen as an instance of such an observation. It is an adaptation of Zia Sarhadi's story, in which the plot revolves around a Hindu girl, Shakuntala (Shamim Ara), left in the care of a Muslim during the riots of Partition. She falls in love with a Pakistani boy (Mehmood, played by Ejaz) who turns out to be the son of Shakuntala's foster father. Due to injury during the riots when he was a child, Mehmood loses his memory and is raised by a Pathan. Subsequently when he regains long-term memory, he loses short-term memory, thus forgetting his love for Shakuntala. The heroine here is placed in the genealogy of literary characters such as Kalidasa's Shakuntala who suffers a similar fate when Dushyanta forgets his love for her. The Shakuntala of the film is taken to India and married off to a Hindu who becomes aware of her continued love for Mehmood. Unable to tolerate this emotional intransigence, the husband plots to kill Mehmood for which he lures him to the border. Shakuntala arrives there to save Mehmood and is accidentally killed in the gunfire. *Lakhon Mein Eik* acquired cult status in that its story line is repeated in several films: *Henna*, *Veer Zaara*, *Challia*, *Pinjar*, for instance. The film narrative completely allegorises the story of the Partition. The visual signifiers such as borders, fences and the like recall the drawing of lines between Pakistan and India and the separation of families and friends. The hero's amnesia – both long- and short-term memory loss – serve as convenient ploys to evade difficult questions such as: Would he have fallen in love with a Hindu Shakuntala if he had remembered the horrifying atrocities of the Partition? Would he have naively gone off to the border to meet Shakuntala's husband if he had remembered his relationship with her? The story of betrayal, trust, separation, violence and so on resonates with the politics of the Partition. However, the film in depicting love as a transcendent category succeeds in obfuscating the political from the narrative of the Partition.

Thus melodrama as Rajadhyaksha has suggested assimilates the realist idiom; in this case by using a real event as a trigger to the fictional stories constructed around it. The melodramatic narrative principles are encoded in the films through use of

actors with star value, elaborate period settings and costumes combined with location shooting in villages or check posts such as Wagah. The high affective content of the narratives proves to be cathartic for some viewers. Several of our respondents remarked that they enjoy watching melodramas based on historical events for the spectacle and performances of their favorite actors/stars.²⁴

Possible Lineages of Partition Cinema

Through our readings of several Hindi and Pakistani Partition films, we found that the dominant trope is "loss": of territory, lives, livelihood, property, honour, humanity, shame and values. Yash Chopra's *Veer Zaara* is an exception to this paradigm. Although the film does not evoke Partition, it forms the chief absent presence in the film. Even if it glosses over political differences and machinations, it seems to have gone beyond the trope of loss to acknowledge Pakistan as a sovereign entity and makes a plea, quite directly through the long, poetic monologue of Veer Pratap Singh (Shah Rukh Khan) at the end of the film for harmony and good neighbourly relations. Likewise, one would have imagined that "gain" (of sovereign nation state) would be celebrated in Pakistani narratives. However, from our readings of films, we learnt that the loss-gain binary is not absolute and that interestingly, Pakistani Partition films also focus on loss and nostalgia. We suggest that perhaps certain common lineages, like literature for one, could be the cause of an overarching humanism that transcends the physical constraints of borders and boundaries. At the time of Partition, Pakistan shared the literary culture of the Indian subcontinent. The ideology of Iqbal and the progressive writers related Pakistan to its literary past. But fratricidal riots at the time of Partition destabilised certain ossified notions of human nature. Several short stories were written around this time which dealt with the new realities of emerging Pakistan. The term "Tales of the Riots", came to be used for stories such as Hameed Akhtar's *La-makaan*, Qurratulain Haider's *Housing Society*, Ibraheem Jalees' social reportage *Chor Bazaar*, and Shaukat Siddiqui's *Khuda ki Basti* (The Blessed Dwelling Place).²⁵

In the initial decades, it was common practice for filmmakers to adapt literary works for the screen. The trend, which started sometime in the 1930s, flourished in the 1950s. According to a study by Bhavana Sommaya, the record for making the maximum films whose subjects were borrowed from literature perhaps goes to Bimal Roy (Sommaya 2004). She elaborates that for several reasons these movies were well received by the audiences, who comprised largely the middle classes. She further notes:

The advantage of using literature on celluloid was that the filmmaker had a readymade screenplay supported by well-etched wholesome characters. The disadvantage was that it raised the expectations of the audience. Over the years this problem diminished because the reading audience had stopped frequenting movie theaters and the film-going audience are blissfully detached from literature (ibid).

The cognitive impasse of the moment led to easy tactics such as the construction of stereotypes and a facile apportioning of blame to politicians with the attendant imagining of a docile civil society. All the same, both in Indian and Pakistani cinema there

is more hope than despair, which we believe comes from a humanist philosophy common to both cultures inherited partially from British romanticism and substantially from the indigenous Bhakti and Sufi literatures.

Conclusions

The individual stories of human pain and suffering that form the content of Hindi and Pakistani cinema, constitute history; at once both small- and large-scale. It is microhistory to use Ricoeur's term because it is the story of individuals and communities, yet large-scale because it transcends the specificities of individual life to stand in for the nation and eventually is a metaphor for the passage of Time itself. In Ricoeurian terms, cinema refashions itself to match the secondary referentiality of all historical narratives, i.e., "the structure of temporality". Devoid of gratuitous

attempts to justify the brutality of the times, these narratives proceed to focus on resettlement and renegotiation of new identities imposed by the two states. As a record and interpretation of a particular era, popular cinema on the Partition, we contend, may be understood as one of several ways of "doing history". It forces us to look beyond its own representations of "monumental history" which presents a vision of the past in moments of crisis and heroism. Rather, popular cinema demonstrates how it can engage in "critical history", which interrogates the methods and values of historiography.²⁶ Couched in the vocabulary of melodrama, Partition cinema invests heavily in the private sphere of emotions and familial relations. Nonetheless, far from depoliticising history, it demonstrates that the private domain is already political. More often than not, the private sphere is a stand-in for the larger public categories of nation and state.

NOTES

- "Pakistan Film History", *Pakistan Film Magazine*, <http://mazhar.dk/film/history>
- Since the Partition of India and Pakistan, movies made in both Lahore as well as Bombay, were being released and viewed in both the countries. But in the year 1954, leading film personalities were arrested in Lahore agitating at Regent Cinema against the release of Indian film *Jaal* on 9 July, which was licensed by Pakistani government for import only to East Pakistan but not in West Pakistan. The agitation was led by leading figures in the Pakistani film industry such as W Z Ahmad, Shaukat Husain Rizvi, Saifuddin Saif and Sibtain Fazli and actors that included Madam Noor Jahan, Naina, Santosh, Sudhir, Bibbo, Al-laudin, M Ismael. The demand was accepted by the government and a film-to-film exchange agreement was made with India – separate for East and West Pakistan until the war of 1965. Since then Indian films were totally banned in Pakistan. However, in the decade of 1980s, two Indian movies were given special screening rights in Pakistan. Source: 1954: "Jaal Movement", *Pakistan Film Magazine*, <http://www.mazhar.dk/film/history/50s/1954.htm>
- Personal interviews with script writer Riaz ur Rehman Sagar, critic and columnist Saeed Malik and veteran movie producer Aslam Dar, Lahore 22 September 2006.
- Interview with Aslam Dar, Lahore, 22 September 2006.
- Views expressed in an interview by Shahid Siddiqui, professor of Language and Culture, Lahore School of Economics, Lahore, 21 September 2006.
- Ira Bhaskar, in a presentation on "Popular Films and Reconciliation", as a part of the WISCOMP symposium on Reconciliation in South Asia: Exploring the Terrain, WISCOMP, New Delhi, 2005. Reported in Tonusree Basu and Sruti Bhatnagar, "Formulating Discourses: The Media and India-Pakistan Relations", WISCOMP CT Working Paper X, 2007, p 36.
- Report of Fifth Annual Conflict Transformation Workshop, p 116.
- Personal interview with film analyst Omar Adil, Lahore, Sunday, 23 September 2007.
- Personal interview with Hindi film scriptwriter, Rekha Nigam, 10 October 2006.
- Bhaskar, WISCOMP, 31 October 2006.
- Ibid.
- Shivam Vij, "Borders and Boundaries in Partition Literature", a paper presented on 12 September 2003, St Stephen's College, University of Delhi, <http://www.southasiacitizensweb.com.htm>
- Interview with Omar Adil.
- Entertainment News, "Filmmakers Refused to Portray Partition: Film Scholar", New Delhi, 1 November 2006, <http://www.webindia123.com/article/index.htm>
- Sadia Tasleem, respondent to our questionnaire.
- We are drawing on Ricoeur's formulation of image in *Memory, History, Forgetting*.
- Majority response to the question: Do you think watching films is a nice way to learn history? Why? in the questionnaire distributed by the authors of this paper.
- Salma Malik and Sharmeen Lodhi, "School Curriculum and Pedagogy in India and Pakistan" in Report of the Collaborative Explorations Fifth Annual Conflict Transformation Workshop, October-November 2006, p 93.
- Ibid, p 95.
- www.velocityreviews.com/forums
- Marathi: Prabhat Studio's *Dharmatma*, 1935 and *Sant Tukaram*, 1936. V Shantaram's *Kunku/Duniya Na Mane*, 1937 and *Manoos/Aadmi*, 1939. Bengali: P C Barua's *Devdas*, 1935 and *Mukti*, 1937. Telugu: Vahini Studio's *Sumangali*, 1940 and *Swargaseema*, 1945. Tamil: K Subrahmanyam's *Thyagabhoomi*, 1939. Malayalam: Ramu Kariat/P Bhaskaran's *Mudiyanyaya Puthran*, 1961. Kannada: G V Iyer's *Bhoodana*, 1962 (Rajadhyaksha 1993).
- KARA Film Festival stands for Karachi film festival, a private sector venture, which qualifies as the only film festival in Pakistan, promoting amateur as well as parallel cinema. Initially confined to Karachi only, owing to increased popularity and appreciation by the government and people alike, the organisers bring the best selections to audiences in both Lahore and Islamabad.
- Lajwanti Chatani in her response to the questionnaire.
- Response to questionnaire by authors of this paper.
- Gillani, Kamran, *Pakistani Literature: Evolution and Trends*, http://www.the-south-asian.com/Nov2004/Pakistani_literature_short_story_1.htm
- The two terms "monumental history" and "critical history" are coined by Marcia Landy in her edited volume, *The Historical Film: History and Memory in Media*, London: The Athlone Press, 2002.
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