

# Film Genres, the Muslim Social, and Discourses of Identity c. 1935–1945

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## Abstract

This article explores the phenomenon of the Muslim social film and “Islamicate” cinema of pre-Partition India to suggest a significant background to cinema’s function in the emergence of new states. In particular, it seeks to provide an account of how discussions of genre and generic difference framed issues of audience and identity in the studio period of Indian film, broadly between the mid-1930s and mid-1940s. Rather than focus too narrowly on identity discourses in the cinema, I try to move among amorphous and dispersed senses of audience, more calibrated understandings related to a trade discourse of who films would appeal to, and finally, an agenda of social representation and audience address that sought to develop in step with a secular nationalist imagining of the Muslim community and its transformation.

## Keywords

Muslim social, Mehboob, K.A. Abbas, Islamicate, oriental, Lahore

This article explores the phenomenon of the Muslim social film and “Islamicate” cinema of pre-Partition India to suggest a significant background to cinema’s function in the emergence of new states. In particular, it seeks to provide an account of how discussions of genre and generic difference framed issues of audience and identity in the studio period of Indian film, broadly between the mid-1930s and mid-1940s. Rather than focus too narrowly on identity discourses in the cinema, I try to move among amorphous and dispersed senses of audience, more calibrated understandings related to a trade discourse of who films would appeal to, and finally, an agenda of social representation and audience address that sought to develop in step with a secular nationalist imagining of the Muslim community and its transformation.

A key agenda that emerges in these discussions was how cinema could provide an institution and imaginary that inducted people from different backgrounds into an expansive and inclusive audience. To pursue this line of enquiry, I have looked at film periodicals that address and seek to shape trade practices, along with film reviews and publicity of the period. My overall approach seeks to decode trade prognoses, taking them not as positive knowledge, but as constructs based on a particular understanding of what would attract audiences of different identities to the cinema. I then move on to consider a specifically reformist intervention in the popular format through the writings of K.A. Abbas, a well-regarded

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film critic, screenplay writer, theatre, and film director. Abbas represented a certain aesthetic and reformist outlook that exercised a presence across the domains of film criticism, left-wing and secularist intellectual culture and media practice, and had ramifications for how community representation in the cinema was framed. To engage this intellectual profile, it is important not to focus too narrowly on its discourse of identity and difference. Rather, we need to keep in mind a certain modernizing imperative that had a troubled relationship with the very porosity and indeterminacy of the popular; it seeks to distance itself from the popular's fuzziness to construct clearer lines of distinction in its bid to explore conditions of coexistence in an increasingly fraught sectarian climate. This rationalist secular disposition had links to my final focus, the discourses surrounding the emergence of the Muslim social, how these related to the broader category of the social film, and how this impinged on contemporary identity politics. Through this arrangement of discursive material, I hope to suggest that there was a certain line of transformation in the way Muslim subjects and audiences were conceptualized within the discourses of the film trade and film criticism. To outline such a pattern, however, is not to argue for the entire supplanting of earlier ways of figuring genre and identity, ones which were perhaps more open, dispersed and less programmatic in their formulation.

Pertinent to a more flexible frame of genre formation and audience engagement is the question of Islamicate cultures and, relatedly, oriental and fantasy films. These conjure up a mode of cultural address that at best appealed to a "fuzzy" sense of identity, one not based on ethnicity, but on a broader sense of cultural habitation through the familiarities of linguistic and musical idiom, narrative convention, and architectural and sartorial engagement. In the reflections of Mukul Kesavan (Kesavan, 1994) and Ira Bhaskar and Richard Allen (2009), it might conjure up investment in a particular imaginary that focuses on Lucknow, and dramatis personae that would include the nobleman and the courtesan. In a broader range of narrative traditions based on oriental fantasy films, as referred to in the work of Kaushik Bhaumik (2001) and Rosie Thomas (2014), it could conjure up the world of *paris* (fairies) and evil *amirs* (chieftains), genies, and itinerant adventurers who could traverse worlds. While these authors might address different components of the so-called Islamicate, they argue that such cultural forms were critical to the way Bombay cinema was organized from an early period, and through its links with phenomena, such as Parsi theater, the traditions of Urdu romance narrative and poetry, and to the fabulous worlds derived from Arabian Nights and dastaan performances. Here is Bhaumik's account of an

Islamicate Oriental costume adventure of the Parsi stage style.... In the context of Bombay cinema, the term "Oriental" is used for a particular cinematic mode of address that utilized the spectacle of adventure against semi-historical setting marked by a particular configuration of dress, décor, action and sexuality that evoked, in most cases, the Islamicate atmosphere of bazaar towns and cities. (Bhaumik, 2001, p. 135)

Bhaumik goes on to argue that Hindu nationalist arguments for cultural integrity attacked such hybridity and sought to institute an authenticity of language, dress, and setting (Bhaumik, 2001, pp. 157–184). While he provides a rich description of urban, film, and media experience in 1920s Bombay, and a substantial account of a puritanical Hindu discourse in the 1930s, he perhaps forecloses too rapidly on the durability of the "Islamicate" form. Rosie Thomas has recently written of the persistence of such oriental fantasy works well into the 1950s, when the social film was avowedly dominating Indian film production (Thomas, 2009, 2014). While keeping this persistence in mind, I would nevertheless like to consider the 1930s and 1940s in a more disaggregated way. For it would seem to me that we need to explore a number of different sites to consider the terms of discourse about the cinema, and how these came to be refashioned in this period through a multilayered impetus that related to the evolution of discourses of nationhood and community.

Discourses about the institution of cinema aired in forums that shaped public opinion and encouraged cultural reflection, such as the film trade press, government policy reports, and intellectual essays, appear to assume two forms. The first is what I would call an evaluation of the cinema's social and public capacities, specifically as a vehicle for audience gathering and often associated with nationalist objectives. As I will show, there were different inflexions to this array of opinion, including a highly segmentary imagination, the second dominant feature of the discourse of audience. By segmentation, I mean a segmentation of films by genre and audience, with the implication that different genres appealed to different audiences who were defined by distinct social and cultural profiles. To state the obvious, Indian film audiences were not one but many, and the institution of the cinema did not automatically guarantee a single audience unified by social, cultural, and intellectual orientations. The most commonplace discursive segmentation of audiences lay across the rural–urban divide, but audiences were in certain trade circles conceived of in terms of gender and generational difference (women, children, and college-going youth), religious persuasion (orthodox and devout audiences, usually meaning Hindus, Muslim audiences being separately referred to) and class configured audiences (intellectuals, middle class, and “masses”).

This was a sociology of the market undertaken by the trade, and this arena of discourse often considered film production companies and studios in terms of their social, religious, and ethnic composition, and how this determined the type of films they produced and the audiences they pandered to. However, there was the emergence of a different kind of critical evaluation, motivated by a social reform point of view and evident in film periodicals especially from the late 1930s. These were rationalist critiques of a liberal and socialist persuasion, and advocated films that promoted a reform of caste relations and the amelioration of differences and conflicts based on religious identity, primarily Hindu–Muslim relations. There was a strong tendency here to also argue for the cultivation of a realist aesthetic that would do away with fantastical narrative and miraculous enactments.

Politically and culturally, this was a crucial period for the institutionalization of ideas about the relations of the so-called Hindu majority to Muslims, the most substantial minority, in the run-up to the decolonization and Partition of the subcontinent. The cinema provided an important site for the discussion of cultural differences along with the critical arenas of electoral politics, the ups and downs of party alliances, and the bid to extend the support for nationalism through community-specific mobilization (e.g., the Congress Party's Muslim Mass Contacts program). Trying to capture distinctive types of cultural discourse about cinema and how these shifted under the impetus of a changing national scene, I juxtapose these with significant film practices. For the purposes of this presentation, I will be looking at the genre of the social film, the one used to address modern experience, along with the related subcategory, the Muslim social, but will also refer to existing work on the historical, stunt, and devotional films.

## Discourses of Segmentation

### *The Film Trade Produces a Sociology of the Market*

Taking the leading film periodical of this period, *Filmindia*, a careful reading will suggest that its self-image was that of a gentrified Hindu outlook of liberal persuasion and modern ethos. Later, with the increasing polarization generated by sectarian differences in the run-up to decolonization and Partition, the magazine assumed a strident Hindu chauvinist attitude defensive of the majority population's interests in the face of the threats perceived to emanate from Islam and Pakistan, on the one hand,

and Communism, on the other.<sup>1</sup> During the period I am looking at, we will at first observe the journal undertaking what appears to be a rather crude sociology of film audiences. Closer attention suggests that there could be complex assumptions built into these formulations about film markets. This initial impression gives way to a more liberal reformist outlook, indexed by Baburao Patel, the editor, giving K.A. Abbas, the left-wing journalist and writer, and subsequently scriptwriter and filmmaker, regular space in the magazine from the late 1930s through to the early 1940s (Abbas, 1997, chapter 23). As a staunch socialist, Abbas provided the unusual credentials of being a non-believing Muslim who could comment on sectarianism of any religious background.

Let me provide a sampling of the “crude sociological” phase by citing the magazine’s estimations of various films’ box office appeal, taken from the June 1935 issue:

*College Girl*: “paying picture everywhere except Madras”

*Chand Ka Tukda*: “should do especially well in Punjab,” a “clever Arab romance”

*Judgement of Allah*: “will pay in Punjab and in provinces where Mahomedans predominate”

*Do Ghadi Ki Mouj*: “social picture with an underlying theme. Good box office attraction with Sulochana. Will do well in cities all over”

*Talash e Haq*: “Jaddanbai has mass appeal, should do well in Punjab and Hyderabad”

*Huntermali*: “will do well in provinces where stunt stories are appreciated”

*Shahi Lutera*: “On the whole the picture is third class with only Mahomedan appeal and will run fairly well in Mahomedan towns. All other places it must fail”<sup>2</sup>

To hazard a decoding: “Madras” was meant to convey Brahmanical orthodoxy, and was therefore inimical to the depiction of modern college mores. The projection for *Do Ghadi Ki Mouj* (*Two Hours of Fun*) suggested that the social film and its critical social outlook was best suited to urbane, city audiences. However, also implied here was the suggestion that a major star such as Sulochana could exercise an appeal that could go beyond any specific target audience. By contrast, Jaddanbai, mother of the future star Nargis, had “mass appeal.” The well-known former courtesan, patronized by landlords and the urban elite in Punjab, had left that context behind to become a recording star, and subsequently set up her own film company (Bhaumik, 2001, pp. 123–124). The anticipated attraction of Jaddanbai to audiences in Hyderabad perhaps derived from an estimation of the hold of Muslim courtly patronage in that city. The references to Jaddanbai, to the Punjab, and popular “Mahomedan” culture require a more elaborate picture of what these spaces and contexts meant in contemporary film culture.

This was an extremely complex cultural context, defined by a powerful hybridity. Urdu, subsequently associated with “Muslim” society when language politics became embroiled in Hindu–Muslim antagonism, was shared by Hindus and Muslims, especially the elite classes across the towns of Punjab and the United Provinces.<sup>3</sup> Bhaumik has brought out the richness of this cultural territory, and the way in which the cinema intersected with popular performance culture, including the tradition of the tawaif or courtesan, new literary genres, such as, the romance narratives of masnawi, and a vivid culture of the bazaar, involving popular print culture, calendar art and the manufacture of backdrops for the stage and for film sets (Bhaumik, 2001, pp. 135–137). Lahore, the Punjab’s main city was the center of an important market for the cinema, and therefore exercised considerable weight on the industry in Bombay both in terms of its audiences and for the finance it commanded through distribution networks.<sup>4</sup> However, Bhaumik (2001, p. 129) argues that both in the “silent” and talkie periods, its importance as a production center was transient. He suggests that by the mid-1930s, Bombay had taken over personnel, narrative, and performance culture from the Punjab, neutralizing it as a distinct production center. This was the period when a substantial critical discourse started developing, what Bhaumik calls the formation of a Hindu ethnoscape, in which many of the marks of hybridity of the earlier period, whether in terms

of language, dress, setting, or music, came under attack, and critics demanded the institutionalization of authentic representations of Hindu culture. Lahore's presence as a production space in the 1940s was short lived and abruptly brought to an end by decolonization and territorial partition of the Punjab. However, as I will show, it sustained something of the earlier hybrid cinema culture of the territory, if in a more complicated cultural and political context.

Something of the context of *Filmindia's* capsule box office reviews on films now comes into clearer perspective, where Punjab and "Mahomedan culture" overlap through the narrative, performative, and representational cultures of an Urdu cinema. The more pejoratively inflected remarks—about third-rate films that would only appeal to Mahomedans—suggest a different sense of the Mahomedan, perhaps a more working class culture rather than the nawabi or aristocratic variant, and one attracted to a "Shahi Lutera," or royal plunderer in perhaps the action film mode. However, this distinction was not clear, and the stunt film as a category was not subjected to a sociology of taste as yet, for the Nadia film, *Hunterwali*, was, rather tautologically, deemed to appeal to whoever stunt films appeal to!

The final point worth exploring was the reference to a "clever Arab angle" in *Chand ka Tukda* (Exquisite Beauty). The remark gestures to a certain expansive presence of the category of legendary romance, cosmic tales of love made impossible because of clan differences, such as, Laila Majnu, Shireen Farhad, and, in a more specifically Punjabi folk register, Sohni Mahiwal and Sassi Punnu. Laila Majnu, in particular, was a staple of the Parsi urban theater dating to the nineteenth century (Gupt, 2005, translated Hansen) and was made into a film not only in Bombay, Lahore and Calcutta in the 1930s but also in Malaysia, where a filmmaker who had grown up and learnt his craft in the Punjab, BJ Rajhans, made a Malay version in 1934 (van der Heide, 2005, p. 134). The story and a musical culture around it was also popular in Egypt (Shafiq, 1998). And it featured along with the Persian love legend Shireen Farhad in the first set of Persian films commissioned by the Iranian entrepreneur Abdul Hossein Seponta from Imperial Studios, Bombay, in the early 1930s (Mehrabi). Thus, the Punjab, and the Urdu narrative and performance culture it generated was actually part of a larger territory that went beyond the sub-continent to include North Africa, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia, straddling Arabic, Persian, and even Malay and Indonesian cultures. As the film trade was actively tracking information about Indian cinema's external markets during this period, the reference to the Arab angle may thus have intuitively condensed a considered trade projection.

## A Reformist Discourse

### *Abbas: Reason, Culture and "the Growing Depravity of Popular Taste"*

If the trade discourse presented above provides one angle on popular genres, one which also suggests the expansive, hybrid terrain in which they operated, I turn now to elite criticism for another view. Aesthetic refinement, rationalism, and realism provide key features of this criticism, along with the emergent discourses of art and authorship. It also produced a focus on authenticity, if one perhaps rather different from the high Hindu stance Bhaumik outlines. Nevertheless, in the process there was a tendency to upbraid the very creativity of hybrid forms, including their porous relationship to a host of other cultural formations, the tendency to relentlessly scavenge from numerous sources, and the investment in the exciting and the erotic. What emerges from such critique is a peculiar hardening of criteria—including the criteria of authentic identity—that should define Indian film.

I take K.A. Abbas as a representative figure of this current. One should not overestimate the influence he exercised over the film culture of this period, as he was writing for English language periodicals and newspapers. However, as I have noted, he was also to be influential in the sphere of the

screenplay (Bombay Talkies *Naya Sansar/New World*, 1941), the iconic, and hugely successful Raj Kapoor films of the 1950s, *Awara/Vagabond* (1951) and *Shree 420/Mr Conman* (1956), in the activities of the key left-wing cultural organizations, the Progressive Writers Association (PWA) and the Indian Peoples Theatre Association (IPTA), for whom he directed the iconic IPTA film about the 1943 Bengal famine, *Dharti Ke Lal/Children of the Earth* (1946), and was to continue to make films and influence public discourse about the cinema on matters such as censorship. Arguably, in the period I am looking at, he introduced, or at least substantially contributed, to a progressive–rationalist discourse on the cinema. He was involved in imparting a cultural value and status to the cinema in a context where it was struggling for respect in the eyes of society and state. Thus, he wrote with a sense of gravitas about the high-end studio product of these years, of Prabhat, New Theatres, and Bombay Talkies, highlighting their particular contribution to the world of cinema in terms of characteristic films, key personnel, and business practices. Further, he elevated the figure of the director to the status of author, focusing in particular on the work of V. Shantaram at Prabhat and Nitin Bose and Pramathesh Barua at New Theatres.<sup>5</sup> There was an emphasis here on the importance of a distinctive worldview and originality of perspective, an emphasis that went side by side with his campaign for a better film script. It is interesting to note how Abbas’s outline of what needed to be promoted also entailed the purging of a series of evils. Here, he wrote in a disciplinary vein, ranging from issues such as the excesses of fan behavior, especially fan mail (Abbas, March 1940) to a decrying of stealing stories, especially from Hollywood. The attack on the pilferers interestingly assumed a legal tenor, with Abbas urging that India, already a member of the Copyright Union and the Berne Convention, should abide by these rules. He also warned of the economic consequences if Hollywood companies decided to take the Indian industry to court. While we can sympathize with his anxiety to promote good writing for the cinema, his diatribe against the script thieves assumed a repressive aspect, joining the rationalist voice to a stridently moral one that cut at the visceral and erotic allure of popular cinema. Thus he noted that the rapid turnover of material from Hollywood tended to take the easy way out by introducing “poisonous elements,” observable in the growing popularity of “crime film themes...semi-nude scenes and too intimate love-making involving kisses and embraces which are repugnant to cultured Indian taste...the country has had to pay a heavy price in the shape of an alarmingly growing depravity of popular taste.” Most of the films he singled out as copies were of the genre of the thriller or action film.<sup>6</sup>

### “Low” Genres and Exhibition Circuits

...efforts of the Industry have succeeded only when you have allied yourself with national tendencies. A film like “Tukaram” succeeded so well, for Bhakti is rooted deep in Indian sentiment. On the other hand the films of booted females flogging gansters (sic) wither away, like mushrooms, before they bloom. If the Industry is to prosper you must seek truly Indian themes, sceneries and sentiments.... (K.M. Munshi, Home Minister, Government of Bombay, 1939)<sup>7</sup>

Abbas’ criticism here was part of the general stance of an elite, reformist discourse against the erotic and visceral elements adapted indiscriminately and retailed through popular cinema. Munshi, a Congress politician and literary figure whose work had been adapted to the cinema, did not target superstition in the remarks I have cited above. However, the mythological film and films involving miraculous enactments were also targeted in these years. The overall bid was to cultivate the genre of the social film as a vehicle to build social reform opinion, and was noticeable in discussions about Tamil and Telugu as well as Hindustani films (D. Bhaskara Rao, 1948; Workshop on Tamil Cinema, 1997). This reform opinion’s critique of the popular genres was premised on the belief that the cinema audience was

bifurcated into a mass cinema and a literary-oriented cinema of social reform. However, historical research has indicated that the picture was much more complicated.

The action serial had a long history; both Steve Hughes' work on the culture of film going in Madras and Madurai in the early twentieth century (Hughes, 1996) and Kaushik Bhaumik and Rosie Thomas's work on 1920s and 1930s Bombay indicate the widespread popularity of the genre. Hughes argues that it was popular particularly among working class audiences in the native town of Madras in the 1910s, when French and American action series dominated the market. In 1920s Bombay, Bhaumik notes the specialization of Sharda studios in the stunt film, and how, in turn, there was an observable attempt within the exhibition trade to distinguish between halls that screened action serials and others that presented only full-length features (Bhaumik, 2001, pp. 62–67). However, he goes on to refute the dominant assumption that there was an inevitable segmentation of audience by such genre distinctions, or a fixed range of possibilities for where they could be exhibited. Thus, the success of Wadia Movietone's Fearless Nadia series, featuring the white actress of Greek–British parentage and Australian origins as their marquee star, while initially starting in the lower circuit of cinema halls, was picked up by distributors for the better quality cinemas in the wake of its resounding box office popularity (Bhaumik, 2001, p. 192). Even if these films moved among different levels of the exhibition circuit, Rosie Thomas has suggested that Nadia represents something of a counterpoint in terms of female narrative and ethnic type, offsetting her own hybrid, action-oriented persona to that of the high-caste Hindu heroine. These included figures such as, Devika Rani of Bombay Talkies and Shanta Apte of Prabhat, who primarily enacted roles of melodramatic suffering. Thomas makes the point that at the level of the mass circuits of film exhibition and reception, issues of identity, specifically of race and of caste, were relayed through less rigid or prescriptive film genres and viewing situations. Thus, Nadia could play an Indian action heroine with democratic resonances, and perhaps even anti-imperialist ones for audiences in the lower exhibition circuit. On the other hand, a Devika Rani, Shanta Apte or Shanta Hublikar, even if representing marginalized figures—"untouchables," prostitutes, orphans—would nevertheless act out a submissive and dignified response to their situation, appropriate in terms of a high-caste coding of female virtue (Thomas, 2005).

In this analysis, linkages are developed between female characters in particular genres and the social contexts of exhibition networks, with a strong emphasis on a mass popular circuit offering less rigid, prescriptive roles, ethnic-caste anchorage, and perhaps even a utopian vision of female action. While such an argument appears persuasive, in practice we may observe more complicated dynamics to the way gender and genre function, including the interpenetration and recoding of the sensory attributes of generic universes rather than their rigid separation. To site an example: in *Kunku* (V. Shantaram, Marital Mark, 1936), Shanta Apte stars as a young orphaned woman tricked into marriage with an old man by her money-minded guardians. Trapped in her marriage, she exhibits a remarkable *velocity* of aggressive and assertive being against her subordinate role in the household. She charges briskly from space to space, propelled by an energy that leaves her aged husband and his bullying sister completely disoriented. There is a peculiar action-orientated momentum developed within the oppressive stasis of the reform-minded social film here. There is a second consideration that urges us to a more careful assessment if not of genre and its appeals, but of star discourse and its allure. This is in a more extended understanding of how the body and the personality are rendered through the publicness of the cinema, where the film is only one component of an expanded sphere of perception. Thus, as Debashree Mukherjee has argued, while Devika Rani might incarnate high-caste roles of suffering Indian womanhood, she could represent the actress as a modern career choice, and through the registers of scandal and gossip, could also engage audiences in the allure of the transgressive and erotic (Mukherjee, 2013). Thus, whether through the register of the filmic text or a more complex portraiture of cinematic publicness, we are

alerted to a dynamic mobilization of audience imaginaries that clear-cut transitions to a repressive Hindu ethnoscape or clear distinctions between the repressions of high-caste Hindu female roles and the emancipation of lower-circuit female action heroines may not allow us to engage. However, while such correctives are crucial, there is no doubt that in contemporary discussion there was a bid to associate the social as the preeminent genre of the modern with high-caste Hindu identity that was in the process of reform, and to assign Muslim identity to non-realist and historical works. It was in this context that the Muslim social sought to make a change in discourses about the cinema and its audiences.

### *The Restructuring of Segmentation*

With the screen overwhelmed with numerous stories of Hindu social life, the film had helped to set a Hindu pattern of social life to the entire country, with the result that people never had a chance to know how our Muslims lived behind the veil.<sup>8</sup>

Remarkably, it requires a forthright statement like this, somewhat compromised in its motivations by the Hindu majoritarian stance it emerged from, to cast a different light on the canonical creative cinema of this period. While studios such as New Theatres used Hindustani in their versions for the larger market, its key star personality, Kundan Lal Saigal derived his famous singing style from semi-classical sources and the ghazal (Jason Beaster-Jones, 2014, pp. 31–32). However, the narrative worlds generated by the studio sprang from the (reformist) Hindu world of authors, such as, Sarat Chandra Chatterjee. Prabhat was even more “Hindu” in this sense, resorting to a Hindi rather than Hindustani language in its dual language version. Of course, the Muslim, Syed Fattelal, Prabhat’s art director, but also codirector with A.V. Damle of *Sant Tukaram*, *Gopal Krishna*, *Sant Sakhu* and other “Hindu” devotional films, was perhaps testimony to the cultivation of syncretic knowledge which is perhaps especially common in film studios.

Keeping this in view, let me turn back again to the trade discourse, now undergoing a significant transition to a discourse about the relationship between social and cultural segmentation and nationhood. For *Filmindia*, socials were in the first instance films about Hindu society; Muslims by contrast tended to dwell in the past, making historical films, or historicals. It was only lately that films representing modern social life among Muslims were being made. There seems to be a perceived lag here. While the magazine welcomed the new trend of Muslim producers and directors seeking to represent contemporary Muslim life, we may notice that it was not necessarily a modern dynamic that these films were meant to fulfill: that they should be about the challenges posed to Muslim modernization, as might be the case with Hindu social films. Rather, the producer was congratulated for the first time in bringing to the screen “an excellent and faithful portrayal of the intimate life in our millions of Muslim homes” (*idem.*).

Hindus would give the lead in cultural life, just as they had in political life. The Congress party, the leading party of the nationalist movement, had come to power in several provincial governments under elections held under the Government of India Act, 1935. A definite discourse of Hindu–Muslim differences and conflicts emerged at this time, when power partially devolved to provincial governments and alliances needed to be struck. While the electorate was only about 10 percent of the population, the elections provided the occasion for mass political mobilization. Provinces with substantial Muslim presence, such as Punjab, the United Provinces, Bengal, and Sindh witnessed negotiations, claims, and counterclaims about who was the legitimate representative of particular communities. The Congress, which claimed to represent all communities in India, had inaugurated a special Muslim Mass Contacts campaign to establish ties directly with the community rather than through alliances with Muslim parties. The Congress’s broad representational claims were challenged by the Muslim League, and



attempts to patch together an alliance in the wake of the United Provinces elections of 1937 came to naught. It has been argued that the secularist, Nehru, would not relent, as in his view religious identity was a diversion from the true economic interests of the masses (Sarkar, 2002).

Were Muslims capable of telling stories about their contemporary life? And did this narrative capacity, or its lack, bear on the political question of whether they could represent themselves in the new provincial legislatures and governments? Certainly, divisions and differences around communal representation at the political level had resonances in the film industry. According to Abbas, he was approached by a group of Muslims who argued that Muslims in the film industry needed to band together. He denounced such moves in the name of secularism.<sup>9</sup> In 1940, the Muslim League declared a separate state of Pakistan to be their objective. Shantaram's *Shejari* (*Neighbours*, 1940) was seen as a salutary riposte in its message of intercommunity amity, and *Filmindia* devoted a special section to the laudatory comments of industry people and public figures, including many Muslim figures as well. Subsequently, in 1941, in the wake of a call from the Sindh Muslim League that Muslims buy only Muslim goods, the magazine ran an extended section featuring the critical response of film industry people to this call and the attempt to communalize the industry (*Filmindia*, 1943).

While we do not have any clear sign of such Muslim group formation in the industry, a significant trend now emerged, almost in the face of the *Filmindia*'s challenge that Muslims would not make films about their contemporary situation, because, implicitly, they were mired in backward ways and in the past. What is suggestive is that the initiative was taken by a number of different people spread among a number of studios. Mehboob Khan made *Najma* (1943) and *Elaan/The Announcement* (1948) in Bombay, and S.F. Hasnain, whose company Fazli Brothers originated in Calcutta, made *Qaidi/Prisoner* (1941) and *Masoom* (1942) in the Muslim social genre. Mazhar Khan, the highly regarded actor who had featured in *Padosi*, the Hindi version of Shantaram's *Shejari*, also made a Muslim social, *Yad* (1943). Perhaps most suggestive of all was the production by Dalsukh M. Pancholi of *Khandaan/Family Ties* in Lahore in 1942.

I will only essay a preliminary analysis of the Muslim social genre of this period. Firstly, a film that was described in film reviews or in the trade press as Muslim social was not always advertised in this fashion. For example, some advertisements for *Khandaan* only referred to it as bidding to be the new "musical hit of the year" from the producers of *Khazanchi* (see image 1); with Mehboob's *Najma*, some advertisements indicate its "Muslim" provenance in the dress, fez ("muslim" hat) and salwar kameez (women's tunic-pyjama) of its characters (see image 2) while others more explicitly refer to how the film's cast "bring the grand majestic yet serene life of the U.P NAWABS in Mehboob Production's First Proud Presentation.... NAJMA, a Moslem Social" (see image 3). In the case of the Fazli Brothers, whose key director, S.F. Hasnain, proved an articulate representative of the genre and its agenda, we have an interestingly diverse set of publicity and practices. Central was the studio image, the hands clasped across the territory of India, declaring this as a trademark symbolizing Hindu-Muslim unity (see image 4). However, public discourse about the Fazli films was not consistent. If *Filmindia* would assign the Fazli Brothers' *Qaidi/Prisoner* to the Muslim social genre,<sup>10</sup> another film made by this company, *Fashion*, centered on the corrupting influence of urban leisure and consumption, would not be described in this way (see image 5). And this despite the fact that it fulfilled what would arguably be a key dimension of the genre's universe: a predominantly, often entirely, Muslim dramatis personae (*Filmindia*, May 1944).

Overall, key to contemporary discourses about the genre, and observable within film narration, was the outlining of a "traditional" Muslim order, defined by the features of aristocratic habitation, cultural practice, including "excesses" of drink, gambling, and pastimes such as kite flying; a popular world composed of the *mohalla* (neighborhood), communal piety, mosques, *madrassas* (religious schools), and

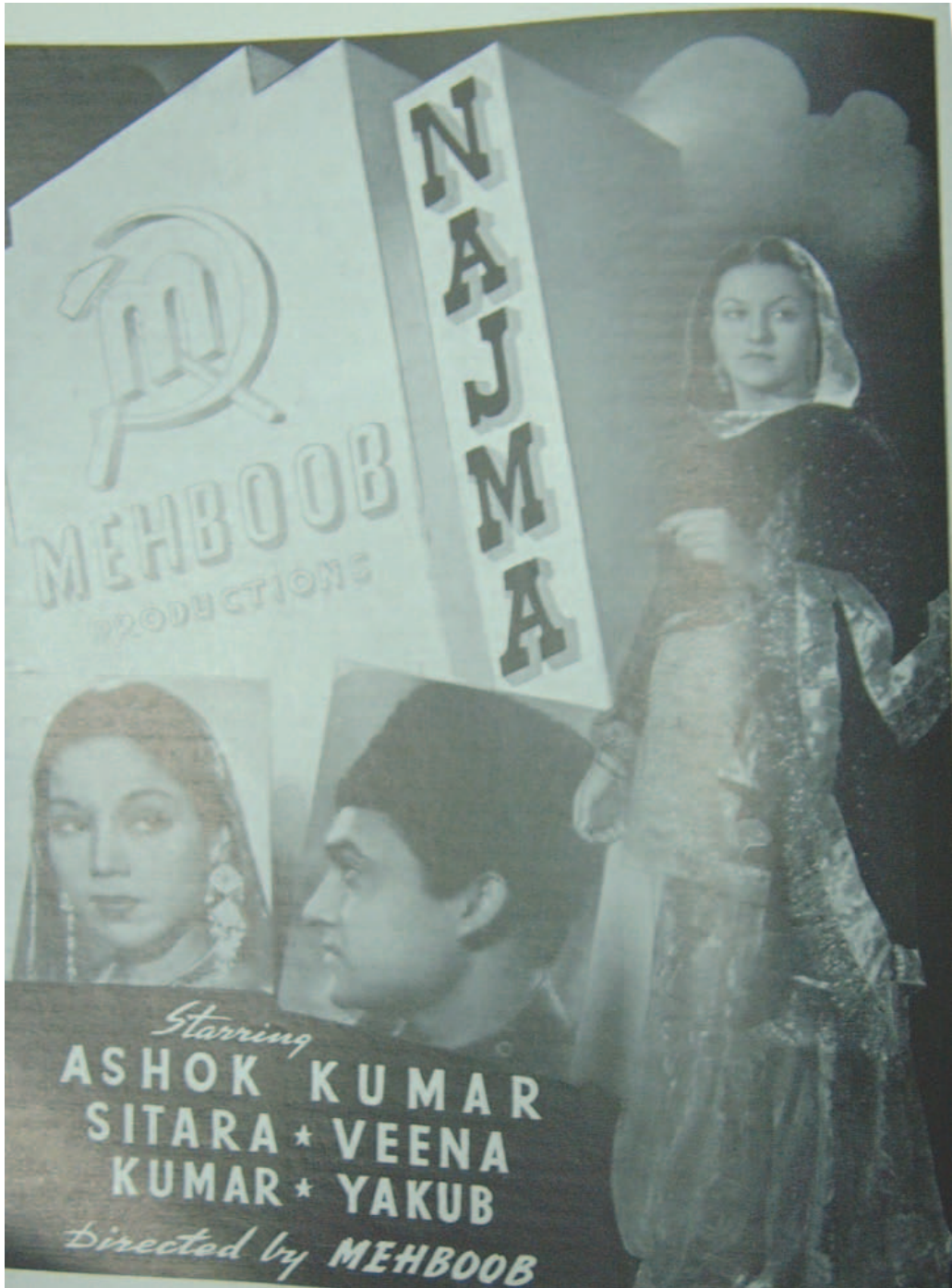


**Image 1.** Advertisement for *Khandaan*, *Filmindia*.  
Courtesy National Film Archives of India.

the mullah/priest; and, emerging from within this complex, modern impulses embodied in new professions. If we enter the mapping of generic discourse through the Mehboob films, their diegetic world, at least in terms of named characters, was entirely peopled by Muslims. In both the Mehboob films, however, the lead male characters were played by well-established “Hindu” stars, Ashok Kumar and Surendra. The Mehboob films had a relatively clear ideological structure, counterpointing a figure of professional modernity, a doctor in *Najma*, a lawyer in *Elaan*, to the effete lifestyle of a declining aristocratic figure, and also against the traditional educational system. The narrative world was largely composed of ornate feudal homes, the house of the tawaif/courtesan, and the Muslim *mohalla*. Distinct spaces of modernity emerged around the figure of the hero, as in the hospital and operation theater in *Najma*, and the court of law in *Elaan*. Mehboob and his writer Aga Jani Kashmiri constructed a narrative that staged a critique of a decadent Muslim culture on the basis of a new, emergent modernity within the community. It was also structurally organized around a narrative of romantic impossibility, with the lead woman character subordinated to the feudal order, and the mutual romantic desire felt between her and the modern professional hero doomed to be unfulfilled. Interestingly, *The Bombay Chronicle*’s review seemed to suggest an almost documentary veracity to *Najma*’s portrait of feudal life and also seemed anxious to downplay the film’s reformist agenda:

Mehboob presents Muslim society in UP and covers a number of details while the story progresses. The way Nawabs and Rajahs spend their life their empty pastimes like cockfights, kite-flying, chess-playing their leisurely and luxurious relics of aristocratic grandeur of old have been vividly portrayed with effortless ease. Customs like the purdah and marriages between cousins have been brought to notice without giving offence but suggesting reform.<sup>11</sup>

*Najma* made considerable investment in detailing the ornate settings, social graces, and romantic interplay in the aristocratic household and, in that sense, indulged an exhibitionist drive, making the feudal veneer into an attraction for audiences. Certainly, this



**Image 2.** Advertisement for *Najma*, Filmindia.

Courtesy National Film Archives of India.

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**"NAJMA"**

*A MUSLEM SOCIAL  
 Directed by ~ MEHBOOB  
 Whose name spells  
 Perfect Pictures*

 **MEHBOOB PRODUCTIONS**  
*Tardeo, Bombay - 7*

**Image 3.** Advertisement for *Najma*, Filmindia.

Courtesy National Film Archives of India.



**Image 4.** Fazli Brothers trademark, *Filmindia*.

Courtesy National Film Archives of India.



**Image 5.** Advertisement for *Fashion*, *Filmindia*.

Courtesy National Film Archives of India.

proved to be the long-term attraction for the genre when it transited to a primarily romantic story form in the 1960s, with films such as *Chaudvin Ka Chand* (S.U. Sunny, 1960) and *Mere Mehboob* (H.S. Rawail, 1963). However, Mehboob's work in the genre strived to balance such an exhibition with an alternative vista of modern possibilities in professional engagement and romantic choice.

In a different ordering of narrative material, the aristocratic household of *Khandaan* generates a very specific type of imaging of a feudal transition. In the first instance, the film signals a shift in genre, as if the Muslim social were announcing its own arrival. The film opens with an extended scene of romantic dalliance in the mode of Mughal historical romance. Jehangir and Nur Jehan indulge in romantic exchange in an ornate setting through the song sequence *Ur Jao Panchi Ur Jao* (Fly away little bird, fly away). As the sequence unfolds, we come to realize this is a play being performed by two cousins (acted by Pran and Nur Jehan) who are indeed in love, and part of a household headed by the upstanding businessman, Amjad, to whose accounts office the film transits. When we are first introduced to Amjad, we observe a figure of decorum, a contractor whom we see keeping accounts meticulously. This responsible businessman and loving father is carving a life out of the ruins of his own father's notorious past of sensual pleasure, bloodlust, and murder, which had led to his incarceration. The film's opening thus condenses a transition from the narrative space of the historical film to that of the social, symbolically charting the emergence of a modernizing logic. However, as with all good melodrama, there is a fateful clue to unresolved pasts in the presence of a gun in Amjad's desk, residual trace of a violent lineage, which will inevitably play a role as the film proceeds.

The focus on the transition was not the inevitable scenario of the Muslim social. According to reviews, a number of films apparently showed neither the aristocratic life nor that of the modern professional. Instead of remarking on an ideology of change, they extolled the films for showcasing the everyday life of Muslims, in their work spaces, households, and community. S.F. Hasnain and Mazhar Khan seemed to put a value on this, perhaps in contrast to conventional associations of Muslims with historical epics. There was another running issue, however. *Filmindia* had for some time reported that films with Muslim subjects often evoked public outcry for falsely representing Muslim habits and religious beliefs. In the journal's account, this was also related to an incidence of blackmail, where producers were extorted by groups who threatened to arrange a turbulent response.<sup>12</sup> Against such a background, a producer like Hasnain admitted that it was a challenge to make such films, but one he had consciously decided to take up despite the problems involved:

Muslim social and cultural life must be portrayed on the screen as it has numerous facets worthy of emulation by the masses in general and unless the Mahomedans see them as presented through the artistic emotions of a motion picture producer, how will they ever come to love their way of living? I am a Mahomedan, and if I don't risk it [a violent response], who would? (*Filmindia*, 1943, p. 47)

There seem to be two addressees here: "the masses in general" and Mahomedans who can come to love their way of living by seeing it on screen. Therefore, the genre carried both a general address and a particular one to the Muslim community. This complicated statement suggests that the screen offered pedagogical functions, educating an undifferentiated film audience in the qualities of Muslim life, and also provided a medium for self-recognition, an idealized mirror held up to the community. To this formulation, I would add that the genre was also crucially representational, inscribing a contemporary Muslim presence (whether modernizing or otherwise) on the screen where it had earlier been absent. Here was a form of intra-generic segmentation that extended the spectrum of what the social film could address by multiplying its worlds. It placed a Muslim present, its everyday habitus and social grace, but also melodramatic narratives focused on plebeian folk as in the case of a film, such as, Mazar Khan's *Yad*. The

review of Mazhar Khan's *Yad* (1943) indicates no ideological structure of the sort noticeable in Mehboob's Muslim socials, and largely dwells on the failures, follies, ups and downs but final happiness of a *tonga-wala*, horse cart driver, played by Mazhar Khan himself (*Filmindia*, 1943). An additional feature of the genre was that it generally composed a largely autarchic world, which rarely featured Hindu characters.<sup>13</sup> However, it was a world being produced for a general audience, not a particular one. Ironically, once the Muslim social emerged into view, the previous history of the social film appears to be defined not by a transcendental locus of meaning, but by a largely self-referential Hindu social world.

Let me retrace the logic of this argument. The terms of segmentation we had started with in the trade's discourse of genres and audiences were highly fragmentary. It speculated, often we found with some film-territorial intelligence, how a film might attract a particular segment of the audience. However, in the later 1930s, with the acceleration of the political demands for representation of community interests, and the secularized dispositions of critics such as Abbas, we observe the emergence of a more homogenized set of demands on how communities should be represented on screen, that is, through the prism of modern social reform. The Muslim social of the early 1940s emerged in the wake of that recalibration. As a form, it could express cultural distinction while laying claim to a presence on-screen on par with that of the advanced sectors of society in relation to which it had hitherto been considered backward.

This is where the presence of Dalsukh Pancholi, the only instance of a Hindu producer of a Muslim social, and the only instance of a Muslim social made in a Lahore studio, is particularly suggestive. Pancholi's earlier work in Punjabi and Urdu cinema had embraced the musical vehicle of legendary romance, including *Laila Majnu* and *Gul e Bakavli* and, later, *Shireen Farhad*. In his making the Muslim social film, *Khandaan*, he indicated a certain line of transformation, or diversification of film culture in the Punjab. He had been involved in making a hybrid musical/performative cinema that we saw arcing from North Africa through the Middle East and Punjab through to Southeast Asia, and was therefore not specifically marked in terms of community identity. The hybrid form did not go away, and Pancholi was to make *Shireen Farhad* later. Bhaumik forecloses to rapidly on the history of "Islamicate" cinema, and, as Rosie Thomas shows, it was to have a vivid life well after this time. However, it was a sign of the politics of film culture that an Urdu filmmaker had to turn to a newly fashioned genre to find an appropriate outlet for Urdu cinema, one now clearly identified and marketed as a product of Muslim culture.

As a coda, let me conclude with a piece by Abbas that offers sad testimony to the way the porosity of older cultural forms was no longer recognized. Thus, Abbas failed to recognize the wider purchase of the older format, and attributed it now to a specifically Muslim cultural provenance. In an essay promoting the contribution of the entertainment cinema in the educational sphere, he tied narratives and narrative forms to distinct community identities, and saw the cinema's circulation of these forms as a way of communicating discretely held cultural knowledge and practices from one community to another, thereby creating a pool of multicultural resources for the nation:

The cinema not only will teach India's 400 millions, it is already teaching a vast number of them... a few examples, if you require confirmation of these remarks... Before the advent of the cinema how many Muslims knew anything about Krishna, Ram, Seeta, Savitri, Tukaram, Dnyaneshwar?... Conversely, how many Hindus had heard or read the legends of the Arabian Nights, the romantic classics of "Laila Majnoon" and "Shirin Farhad" or the story of the justice of Jehangir? (Abbas, August 1941, p. 58)

One can say in polemical response that the Hindu Pancholi was making *Laila Majnoon* and *Shirin Farhad*, and that the Muslim Syed Fattal was making *Sant Tukaram* and *Sant Dynaneshwar*, and that this represented a wider social and cultural world where audiences were familiar with these narrative traditions. It seems strange that Abbas could not perceive this, or, rather, that he was so easily able to

repress this knowledge. As has often been said of hyper-secularist models, they require clear definitions, and too much certitude in identifying the populations they address and rule, breaking them up into discrete identities that may go against the grain of life, everyday practice, and belief. The Muslim social of the 1940s emerges from a particular moment in this discourse of cultural difference, and sought to negotiate a space on the screen, which was distinctive and new, a space for the Muslim in the contemporary world, and as part of a national imagination. It was very much a political product of its times. However, it lived alongside more durable forms, ones that could continue a promiscuous engagement with the hybridity of languages, dress, décor, and setting despite large-scale changes in the formation of nations and states.

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## Notes

1. For example, "Hinduism and Celluloid Demons," editorial, *Filmindia*, December 1949, denounced the way Hindu gods and goddesses were represented on screen. The editorial page also has a photograph of the Hindu right-wing leader, Golwalker, extolling his bid to revive Hinduism; "The Crescent over India," editorial, *Filmindia*, March 1952, narrated the long history of atrocities committed by Muslims in India, from the time of Ghazni down to Jinnah.
2. "Tabloid Reviews," *Filmindia*, June 1935 and July 1935.
3. Christopher R. King (1994) shows how the idea of separating Hindustani into two languages, Hindi and Urdu, was tied to political transformations. Also see Alok Rai (2001).
4. *Filmindia* noted that there had been a "multiplication of distributors in several provinces and particularly in the Punjab." However, a lot of small financiers had entered the fray, anticipating big profits and offering very good terms, and a downturn in returns led to a crisis: "The Punjab which happens to be the backbone of income for Indian pictures has at present become a slaughter house of hopes and aspirations. 'Whither Bound?'" editorial, *Filmindia*, July 31, 1935.
5. Abbas (June 1940). subsequently he also wrote about Debaki Bose, *Filmindia*, August 1940.
6. Abbas (June 1939). The films mentioned include *Zingaro*, *Zambo*, *Tarzan Ki Beti*, *Yangrilla*, *Jungle Queen*, *Jungle King*, *Baghi Sipahi* (from *Cardinal Richelieu*), *300 Days and After* (from the *Amazing Quest of Mr Ernst Bliss*), *Indira MA*, *Moti Kallar* (Sangeet), *The Cat (Damsel in Distress)*, *Zamin Ka Chand (Prisoner of Shark Island)*, *Rangeela Raja (The King Steps Out)*, and *The Only Way (Seventh Heaven)*.
7. Address to the first session of the Indian Motion Picture Congress, March 7 and 8, 1939, *Indian Motion Picture Congress, Proceedings*, 1939, p. 167.
8. "'Masoom' Portrays Muslim Life Excellently," review, *Filmindia*, July 1942.
9. Abbas (February 1940). Also see the journal's mobilization of opinion against communalism in the wake of the Muslim League of Sindh campaigning that Muslims should only buy goods from Muslims. "The Monster of Communalism," *Filmindia*, September 1941.
10. "[*Qaidi*] was the first picture of Muslim social life to be shown on the Indian screen and its remarkable success at the box-offices surprised many producers who revised production plans and we soon had a spate of Muslim subjects in *Khandaan* and other pictures" (*Filmindia*, December 1943, p. 47).
11. *Bombay Chronicle* (31 July 1943). Interestingly, there is a cautionary note in the review, suggesting that however unhappy people were in the marriages arranged for them while "there is no avowed or implied advocacy or otherwise of arranged marriages... one thing is sought to be driven home. Once you are married you ought to be loyal to your spouse. That counsel of commonsense is definitely inculcated by means of this film."



12. “The Blackmailing Twins,” editorial, *Filmindia*, February 1940. The editorial noted that this was so especially in north India, and urged that all journals be registered with the film journalists association to guard against such corruption.
13. *Khandaan* featured a Hindu character who has an important plot function, helping the hero to be reunited with his family.

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