

Ahmad Bilal*

The Established Cinema of Pakistan

Abstract

This paper examines the reasons for the demise of the established cinema of Pakistan. It is considered that the Pakistan film industry was growing in the 1970s and 80s; however, data gathered through semi-structured interviews, with leading film practitioners, have provided new insights about the social shaping of film production in Pakistan. It reveals that even during times of growth, the film industry was struggling to achieve an environment which facilitates further growth. Different national administrations did not realise the importance of film as a subject; however, they tried to control the medium, consciously and unconsciously, to achieve personal agendas. Thus, Pakistan's cinema industry failed to achieve a sustainable model for productions and their screening. The first democratic government, in the 1970s, formed the National Film Development Corporation (NAFDEC), which is considered, by most filmmakers, to be the only concrete step taken by the government. Even the formation of NAFDEC, has not been able to change the perception of filmmaking, as a non-serious and dirty career path. The subject of filmmaking was never a part of the curriculum at national art institutes.

Cinema; A Dirty Business

Filmmaking in Pakistan is regarded as the 'work of *kanjars* (hustlers)' and watching films is always considered as 'a boy's night out' kind of activity by policy makers (Bilal 2015). Noor (2012), in an interview with the researcher, indicated that the middle class is watching movies, want to meet actors and aspire to collect their autographs, whilst not allowing their family members, particularly females, to join the film industry, considering it 'a dirty business'. Recently, a television serial *Rangreza* (2017), has highlighted this highly paradoxical state, where a poet is in love with a film actress; however, he does not want his daughter to become an actress.

Bhatti (2012, pp.16, 26), Syed Noor (2012) and Shahnawaz Zaidi (2012) link this paradoxical approach with the animosity of Imperial rule for the indigenous arts, which had an impact on post-colonial theatre and film. Thus, dignified families did not allow their children, particularly females, to perform in a local theatre, while feeling that they gained prestige by participating in English language plays. Consequently, male actors had to perform female roles, and, later, females from the red-light area were used in performances. This reinforced the perception of society that people associated with the film industry are immoral; specifically women actors were regarded as prostitutes. Their prominence and success as a star in films did not earn them status and prestige in society. Some of the actors, in

* Dr. Ahmad Bilal, Assistant Professor, University College of Art and Design, University of the Punjab, Lahore.

order to join the film industry, changed their names. Dilip Kumar's father was against his working in the films as he considered it a "low and frivolous" profession (Gulazāra, Govind Nihalani, and Saibal Chatterjee 2004, 470). Filmmaking is just another profession; however, it has never been considered to be prestigious, in Pakistani society.

Cultural Identity

Generally, cultural identity is defined by factors such as nation, community, class structure, region, religion and language. However, the version of the nation-state adopted in Pakistan and India is different due to the partition. The British rulers announced that they would divide the colony into India, areas with Hindu domination, and Pakistan; a land with a Muslim population. The partition formed the political identity of Pakistan, as an Islamic state for Muslims, which should oppose the identity of Hindu state. Ahmad (1965) investigates cultural and intellectual trends in Pakistan and highlights the inner contradictions, caused by forming a political nation-state, without building a corresponding cultural identity. As a result, the state overlooked the heritage and literature of Indo-Muslim culture. Regional literature and poetry was favoured over Urdu literature that had been created on the Indian side of the continent. Jameel Jalibi (1984), in his book *Pakistan the Identity of Culture*, indicates that this political identity has caused a historical and cultural breach, which has dented the art and culture of the country, causing the Muslims of Pakistan to disown their own collective history, art and architecture, and reject traditional and cultural values.

The political identity instigated an endless discussion: whether the new country should be an Islamic state or a state to guard the rights of the marginalized Muslims from the Hindu majority (Egan 2002). In 1949, the industrial ministry disapproved of filmmaking stating: "In principle Muslims should not get involved in film-making. Being the work of lust and lure, it should be left to infidels"(Gazdar 1997, 24). Agha Nasir (2012), in an interview with researcher, reconfirmed that filmmaking, since Independence, has been perceived as a "work of lust and lure", and that a specific version of the Muslim religion has been exploited to control cinematography. This also shows a policy of disowning the film industry, and how the art has become known as 'a dirty business'. Talbot (1998) mentions that language and religion, instead of uniting society, have raised various different identities, and it still needs to be decided whether Pakistan is a land for Muslims where minorities are treated as equal citizens or an Islamic state where only Muslims can enjoy the status of citizen.

The initial inspirations, for both Indian and Pakistani cinema, were Nineteenth-century Parsi theatre which was comprised of songs and dances, Urdu poetry, Victorian melodrama, and folk tales of sub-continent (Mooij 2006). Since Partition Indian film industry has a continuous progression, and has achieved the status of being one of the largest film industries of the world in terms of the number of films produced each year (Taeube and Lorenzen 2007). In comparison, the Pakistani film industry has faced serious downfall after the 1990s, and reached its minimum of not producing a single film in 2012 (Iqbal 2015). Amjad Islam Amjad (2013), in an interview with researcher, finds dissimilarities between Indian and Pakistani society, as the elements of film are integral part of Indian culture, and

they have used the medium of film as a binding force; whereas in Pakistan, film was unable to achieve similar status, due to imposed religious boundaries, a small number of fundamentalists have proclaimed that filmmaking as being is opposite to their interpretation of religious beliefs. Naeem Tahir (2013) and Samina Peerzada (2012), in a personal interaction with researcher, state that a particular version of religion has been funded by the establishment to defend its power structures. This approach has prevented the cinema from working as a major cultural element and binding force in Pakistani society.

The dominant political ideology of a separate national identity from India based on Islamic ideology has been absorbed into films without any repression or censorship in a straightforward sense. This has created a highly paradoxical situation for the arts, crafts and cultural forms in the country, as most of the cinematic elements: dance, acting, and music, have been considered as part of Hindu traditions. This has made filmmaking a challenging task, as, on the one hand, the form of local cinematic practice has been celebrating traditions of the sub-continent, which belong to both India and Pakistan, and, on the other hand, it has been trying to align itself with the political and religious identity of the freshly formed nation-state. For example both the films *Shaheed* (1962) and *Farangi* (1964), showing the freedom fight against the colonial rulers; and *Anarkali* (1958), which presented the historical myth associated with the times of Mughal emperor Akbar e Azam, were produced with the intention of promoting a sense of cultural identity (Wille 2005). *Zarqa* (1969), another successful film, propagates Muslim brotherhood. However, in the attempt to align the content of film with the national identity some of these films presented stereotypical accepted narratives which deny the basic elements of cinema. In case of *Shaheed* (1962), the female antagonist is a non-Muslim girl, who uses her dance skills to achieve her negative goals; however, she transforms herself, leaving her lifestyle and sacrificing her life to save the country. *Zarqa* (1969), is another successful Pakistani film, in it a Muslim girl rejects the idea of dancing for the sake of dancing, but, she agrees to present a dance performance to help her nation and to destroy its enemies.

Policies to Control National Cinema

A. Williams(2002, p.6) describes two major functions of National cinema; first, it can earn money for the nation, and second, it is a tool to promote and endorse 'national values'. However, in Pakistan even the major subjects of "politics, economics, commerce, industry, society, language, morals and religion are being pulled down from the national and global planes to the purely personal level"(Jalibi 1984, p.6). This negligence, on the part of governments, has stimulated regionalism and individual preferences. Indeed, the role of national cinema, to assist in forming the cultural and social values of the nation-state, and to set the common goal for progress, peace and education, has never been realised.

The strict censorship policy has restricted the Pakistani film industry from experimenting with marginal subjects. The centralised censorship board and its bureaucratic functioning with the objective of controlling criticism on the policies and conducts of establishment has constrained established cinema from addressing any political or national issues (Gazdar 1997, 73). Agha Nasir (2012) affirms that control has been implemented at three levels: first, the censorship board to edit the

script or the final film; second, a control was exerted over the import and purchase of raw material and the compulsory screening of propaganda documentaries; finally, a practitioner can also be restricted from making films, depending upon the harm he has caused to the power agendas. According to Nasir restriction means that a practitioner will never get a job anywhere. This has motivated film practitioners towards self-censorship, and restricted films only to melodramatic stories based on social themes. The investors try to play safe, so the filmmakers have achieved a successful formula: a story based on family oriented melodramatic social subjects combined with songs and comedy scenes for the sake of entertainment alone. This specific formula has also been acceptable to the policymakers. The separation of East Pakistan, in 1971, was a major disaster for the Pakistani film industry, as the split has damaged the inflow of human resource (Amjad 2013). It also damaged market for films, as almost 33 percent of the market share of Urdu films was in Bengal (Gazdar 1997). The impact on the method of acting and the form of music, as the ethos of East Pakistan was different and had a peculiar sensitivity; hence, the cinema lost the delicacy and romanticism of Bengal (S. Peerzada 2012). In the words of Kabir(1969, p.91):

The advent of Independence failed to make an immediate impact on the pattern that was deeply rooted. Stage acting or cultural shows of the kind that were frequent in East Pakistan remained generally unknown in West Pakistan. In the late fifties and in the sixties, the new generation with a broader outlook began to show active interest in cultural activities. But soon the trend roused fear in social guardians who have so far been co-existing without much prick of conscience with the decadence described earlier.

The significance of the medium was only realised, to some extent, by the first democratic government of Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto (1973-77), who established a public limited corporation: NAFDEC (National Film Development Corporation), in 1973 (Gul 2009). The previous governments had increased the entertainment tax: a ticket costing seven rupees included about 80% tax; hence, the business of film was not viable (Nasir 2012). NAFDEC was formed to import foreign films and raw material, build new cinemas and studios, promote low budget films at international venues to strengthen the home-grown cinema, institute film festivals, enable participation in foreign film festivals, launch National Film Awards, and assist the installation of modern equipment along with the formation of National film academy (Gul 2012). However, film practitioners were aggrieved as the Corporation tried to control the cinema through the registration of producers (Nasir 2012). Another concern was the expenditure of the organisation, as most of the funds were consumed in salaries and the import of films(Gazdar 1997; Gul 2009). The Corporation was fully operational until 1979, and import of raw stock was continued through it until the government of Benazir Bhutto in 1988. It was totally closed down in 2002 (Gul 2009). The making and breaking of NAFDEC demonstrates that political disruption is one of the major causes of failure. NAFDEC became a victim of bureaucratic handling, in which intellectual talent is over ruled by decision-makers (Amjad 2013). The government should reinstate an institution similar to NAFDEC to introduce teaching courses to familiarise filmmakers with the latest technology and to promote local films in the international market to support the image of Pakistani films (Noor 2012). It is

agreed by all the practitioners that rather than an administrative organisation, an educational institute should be launched which could train young film makers and also provide funding to start film projects.

Violence and Regional Cinemas

Almost all the film practitioners agree that the regime of General Zia-ul-Haq, 1977-88, was a major cause of the steady demise of the film industry. The elected government was toppled over, and, the public reaction resulted in increased violence in films. Indeed, violence on the cinema screen is linked with the dictatorship, as it was a way of catharsis for both practitioners and audience (Rafique 2012). Zia-ul-Haq's Islamisation has created a cultural vacuum, as dress code, religious beliefs and cultural traditions were questioned. According to Zia's Motion Picture Ordinance 1979 (WIPO 2015):

A film shall not be certified for public exhibition; if, in the opinion of the Board, the film or any part thereof is prejudicial to the glory of Islam or the integrity, security or defense of Pakistan or any part thereof, friendly relations with foreign States, public order, decency or morality or amounts to the commission of, or incitement to, an offence. It reflects the mind-set of the ruler, "who tried to control the medium of cinema in the name of safeguarding religious ethics, national security and public morals" (Gazdar 1997, 152). The policies of the regime resulted in intellectual curtailment, lack of financial investment, regionalism and violence on the cinema screen, as the space for the writers for the cinema was reduced to almost nothing. The family based melodrama of national cinema had been replaced with violence-based regional cinema.

Indian Films

Indian movies, due to the similar language and high budget, were always the major threat to the smaller film industry of Pakistan; hence, these were banned after 1965, due to commercial and political objectives (Egan 2002). The film trade with India was restarted formally, with *Khuda kay Liye* (2007), after a disruption of more than forty years (Arpana 2008; Rao 2009). The display of Indian movies raised the older issue of the survival of the established cinema once again. In the last decade, most Pakistani films have followed the trends of Bollywood, or replicated successful formulas; however, they are unable to produce "sense-generating" material, which is aligned with audience "schemata"; the prior knowledge and experiences of living in a society (Bordwell 1986, p.31). For instance, in *Main Ek Din Laut Ke Aaonga* (2007) and *Love Mein Ghum* (2011), both films were unable to communicate the place of action and *mise-en-scene*, which, in the case of cinema, includes everything in the frame of the camera; the actors, lighting, sets, and costume. In these films, the characters are placed in the context of some neutral place, maybe in no man's land, as the costumes, or locations or narratives of these films are neither relevant to Pakistani society, nor represent Indian culture. Indeed, the characters are living in a space where issues of Indian and Pakistani societies have no impact on them. Hence, the films are unable to produce sense-generating material.

Lack of professional ethics is another factor that had damaged the establish cinema. The cinema owners, for a long time, gave a certain amount to producers

and directors before each release. So if the film flopped, it was only the cinema owner who suffered the loss (Lashari 2012). This indicates that directors and producers enjoyed only the profits, so they became less concerned about the quality of films. Due to the non-professional attitude of the filmmakers, the cinema owners decided not to pay any advance money, but to make a deal based on the profit of the film, so the risk factor transferred to the producer. Due to this shift of the risk factor, the role of the producer has been apprehended by the financier, who has his own goals rather than making good films (Suleman 2012). The financier started copying the super hit Indian films, based on family subjects, which has caused an indescribable damage to Pakistani film.

For all of the above reasons, established cinema has lost its family audience, particularly youngsters; hence, a gap has grown. This represents a thirty year break which has distorted the relationship of Pakistani society with cinema (Nabi 2013). Due to this gap, the cinema going culture in families finished, and a whole generation has lost its link with the tradition of film. The parents were reluctant to send their children to the profession of hustlers and *bhaands**; however, recently the media revolution has created job opportunities, fame and respect, as well as an awareness of the importance of the field (U. Peerzada 2013). Thus, an overall drive can be noticed, as parents are allowing their children to study the subject of film. Key initiatives, on the educational and administrative fronts, particularly starting filmmaking education in public sector universities, are still needed from the government.

Conclusion

In Pakistani society basic elements of cinema; picture, music, and dance, had been considered immoral; thus, instead of defining a path for Pakistani cinema, it was declared as a work of 'infidels'. This mind set has reduced the scope of film to Entertainment, and the medium of film has not been able to establish itself as a serious subject. Therefore, not even a single film school has been built. The growth of private television networks has encouraged various educational institutes to start degrees or diplomas in electronic media; however, the government should take some serious initiatives to start the education of film at public sector universities. The role of film, as a strong medium to build the cultural face of the country and to represent its ideology, needs to be realised.

Acknowledgment

The researcher is most grateful to leading practitioners of Pakistani film for their semi-structured interviews, which has formed the basic data for this paper: writers Amjad Islam Amjad, Munnu Bhai, directors Syed Noor, Shahzad Rafique, Farjaad Nabi, S. Suleman, actress and director Samina Peerzada, actor, director and producer Usman Peerzada, Investor and distributor Zoraiz Lashari, and film critics Naeem Tahir, Agha Nasir, and Aijaz Gul.

* *Bhaands* are the traditional folk entertainers who perform on voluntary basis and collect money from audience on a 'pay-what-you-can' basis.

References

- Ahmad, Aziz. 1965. "Cultural and Intellectual Trends in Pakistan." *Middle East Journal* 19 (1): 35–44.
- Arpana. 2008. "Khuda Kay Liye Thaws 43 Years of India-Pakistan Screen Chill." *Hindustan Times*. <http://www.hindustantimes.com/News-Feed/Entertainment/Khuda-Kay-Liye-thaws-43-years-of-India-Pakistan-screen-chill/Article1-295024.aspx>.
- Bhatti, Muhammad Salman. 2012. "Lahore Main Urdu Theter Ki Rawayat Aur Irtaka (Qayam-E- Pakistan Kay Baad)." Govt. College University. <http://eprints.hec.gov.pk/view/subjects/b5L.html>.
- Bilal, Ahmad. 2015. "Recent Quest For Distinctive Identity in Pakistani Cinema." *IJELLH*. <http://ijellh.com/papers/2015/May/06-58-76-May-2015.pdf>.
- Bordwell, David. 1986. *Narration in the Fiction Film*. London: Routledge.
- Egan, Eric. 2002. "Pakistan Cinema: Between the Domestic and the Regional." *Asian Cinema*, no. Spring/Summer: 27–38.
- Gazdar, Mushtaq. 1997. *Pakistan Cinema 1947-1997*. Oxford University Press.
- Gul, Aijaz. 2009. "Cinemas of the South-A Short History of Pakistani Films." *The International Federation of Film Critics*. http://www.fipresci.org/world_cinema/south/south_english_asian_cinema_pakistan_history.htm.
- Gulazāra, Govind Nihalani, and Saibal Chatterjee. 2004. "Dilip Kumar." *Encyclopaedia of Hindi Cinema*. Encyclopaedia Britannica (India) Pvt. Ltd. New Delhi. https://books.google.com.pk/books?id=8y8vN9A14nkC&pg=PT494&lpq=PT494&dq=father+of+dilip+kumar+was+against+his+acting+career&source=bl&ots=ryPu5eFqba&sig=ce8Pncig1OnAPYFRCrF215dz6P4&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwjwPzism_WAhXFCsAKHdnFCMMQ6AEIbDAJ#v=onepage&q=fathe.
- Iqbal, Mazhar. 2015. "Mazhar.dk - An Infotainment Website." *Mazhar Iqbal Ka Pakistan*. <http://www.mazhar.dk/>.
- Jalibi, Jameel. 1984. *Pakistan the Identity of Culture*. 1st ed. Karachi: P.I.D.C. Printing Press.
- Kabir, Alamgir. 1969. *The Cinema in Pakistan*. Dacca: Sandhani Publications.
- Mooij, Thessa. 2006. "The New Bollywood : No Heroines , No Villains." *Cineaste*.
- Rao, Shakuntala. 2009. "Bollywood; A Rage in Pakistan." *The Sunday Tribune - Spectrum*. <http://www.tribuneindia.com/2009/20091122/spectrum/main6.htm>.
- Taeube, Florian, and Mark Lorenzen. 2007. "The Banyan and the Birch Tree : Institutional Field Overlaps and Network Relations in the Indian Film Industry in Bollywood." In *The DRUID Summer Conference 2007 on APPROPRIABILITY , PROXIMITY , ROUTINES AND INNOVATION*. Copenhagen, CBS, Denmark, June 18 - 20, 2007.
- Talbot, Ian. 1998. *Pakistan A Modern History*. London: Hurst and Company.
- Wille, Simone. 2005. "Evaluating Identity in Pakistani Art." In *Beyond Borders: Art of Pakistan*. Young Presidents' Organisation.
- Williams, Alan. 2002. "Introduction." In *Film and Nationalism*. Rutgers, The State University.
- WIPO. 2015. "Pakistan: The Motion Pictures Ordinance, 1979 Ordinance No, XLIII of 1979." *World Intellectual Property Organization*. <http://www.wipo.int/wipolex/en/details.jsp?id=13791>.