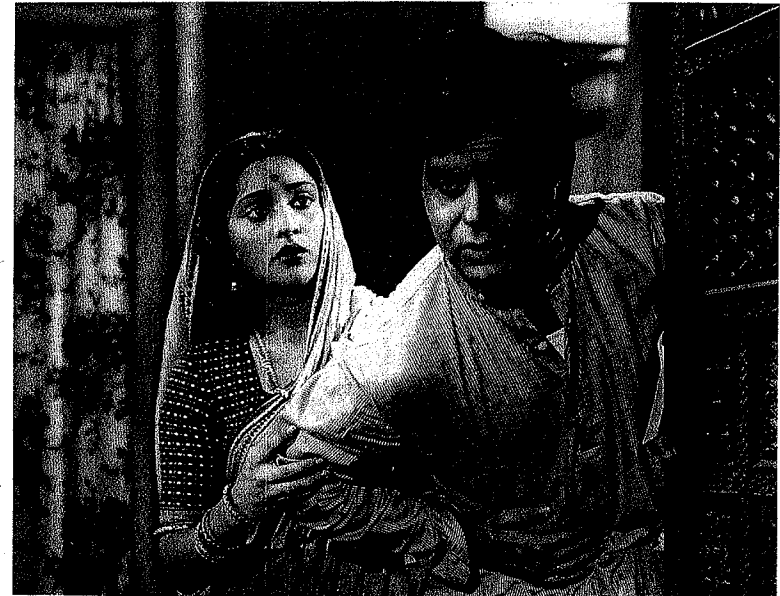



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Sumita S. Chakravarty

National Identity in • Indian Popular
cinema

1947 – 1987

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For Prasun

and in memory of

Kali Prasanna Sinha

self unsure of his political leanings, being a devout Muslim and professing vaguely socialistic ideals. The logo for Mehboob Productions reflected this contradiction: the visual image was of a hammer and sickle while a voice-over proclaimed a very familiar Urdu saying, "No matter what evils your enemies wish for you, it is of no consequence. Only that can happen which is God's will." *Mother India* no doubt is a patriarchal and dominant view of woman's experience and responsibility in society. Moreover, it relies on many stock situations and conventions of the Bombay film. But to the degree that its use of them is at least partly ambivalent, that its characterizations are quite powerful, and that it associates the mythic with the oppressed, it touches a deep responsive chord in the mind of the average Indian viewer.

Wendy O'Flaherty has remarked, "A myth is like a palimpsest on which generation after generation has engraved its own layer of messages, and we must decipher each layer with a different code book."³⁷ The commercial cinema has long been considered a site of mythic elaboration, a site where the archaic layers of myth as utopian or unifying force are given a modern resonance through the creation of the nation myth. But the investing of mythic status in individuals as authority figures contains the potential of the mobilization of myth toward privileged seats of power rather than for national-popular ends. This is a dilemma that the films discussed above are unable to solve or even address. Indian political culture's dependence on the mystique of individual leaders since independence suggests that this remains a problem. In the movies, the resolution through romance of class and status differences reveals the fragility and the "urgent" appeal of the nation myth.

Memory has a texture which is both social and historic: it exists in the world rather than in people's heads, finding its basis in conversations, cultural forms, personal relations, the structure and appearance of places and . . . in relation to ideologies which work to establish a consensus view of both the past and the forms of personal experience which are significant and memorable.

—Michael Bommers and Patrick Wright in
Johnson, Making Histories

5

The Recuperation of History and Memory

The historical genre in Bombay filmmaking, which goes back to the earliest days of the cinema, has all but disappeared over the last decade. Although historicals were always far outnumbered by other genres, perhaps because of the costs involved in presenting lavish spectacles on the screen, their decline is suggestive of the "proletarianization" of the Hindi film in the postcolonial era. From 1947 to 1967, historicals averaged roughly three a year. Since the late sixties, however,

their number has fallen further, with several years producing no historical films at all. In recent years, television has become the new site for the reconstruction of history: "Tippu Sultan," "Mirza Ghalib," "Tamas," and "Bharat ek Khoj" ("The discovery of India") have been popular series.

The issue of historical representation is perhaps the most contentious in the annals of moviemaking. History and cinema are both institutions, forms of narration, and sites of ideological struggle. As such, the cinema of a particular nation selects historical events that either glorify the past or help to throw light on the present. The commercial Bombay cinema has sought to stay clear of controversy by converting history into pageantry and spectacle and developing a repertoire of characters, mostly from Maratha and Mughal history, who are presented over and over again in forms firmly lodged in the popular memory. Shivaji and the queen of Jhansi are popular heroic subjects from the nationalist phase, Akbar and Jehangir symbols of Mughal imperial grandeur. Of the old studios, Minerva Movietone specialized in historicals, with *Pukar* (Call, 1939) and *Sikander* (Alexander, 1941) two of its well-known and popular products. Its *Mirza Ghalib* (Ghalib, 1954) was awarded the President's Gold Medal for the best film of that year. In these and other films, colorful characters from the past reinforce themes of patriotism, and their actions are woven into narratives of romance, intrigue, or conflict. Notions of historical accuracy or attention to detail are subordinated to the larger imaginative sweep of legend and heroic sentiment.

This tendency would seem to bear out the contention, in relation to film history, of theorists like Stephen Heath, Keith Tribe, and Colin MacCabe, who all point to the inability of the cinematic apparatus to present anything other than repetitions of its own structures of fiction.¹ Heath argues for the recognition of a basic duality in the historical film: past/present, construction/reconstruction. As a genre with impersonation built into its very identity and codes, the historical film provides a rich source of knowledge into the way a society constructs its self-image by projecting onto the past the imperatives of the present and vice versa. But it also reveals a particular attitude to the past and the kinds of relationships to be established between past and present. The historical film addresses the spectator in a particular way, establishing both (temporal) connection and disruption, identity and difference, autonomy and dependence.

Because Western film criticism has had little to say about the treatment of history in the cinemas of the colonized non-West, our starting

point has to be a notion of alternative histories and alternatives to "history." Philip Rosen has pointed out the coincidence of the birth of the motion pictures with a crisis in Western historiographic thought, its questioning of the security of historical knowledge.² But what if "the security of historical knowledge" is doubted to begin with, as it is in one dominant strand of the Indian cultural tradition? What if history is inseparable from myth and myth from narrativity, art, and representation? Would not such a situation require its own conception of film-critical historiography and analysis? And what if the history of colonialism enables "the natives" to rewrite themselves as objects-turned-subjects of history? The camera, "the machine for ideal looking" (Rosen), can then accommodate two modes of seeing, a double vision, as it were, which is also a double bind. That is, the cinema spectator both accepts and denies the capacity of the camera to "secure" the historical.

It is at this point that film-critical concerns with "national cinemas" as particular forms of mediated history intersect with the notion of the historical genre in film. The "national" as mode of knowledge and identification stakes out its territory in the space between prior knowledge or belief systems and new knowledge appropriated from the colonizer-colonized relationship. "Myth" meets "history" across the textual body of the historical film. In other words, in order to negotiate its dual identity as history and film, indigenous and Western, the historical film may be considered, as Thomas Elsaesser suggests in another context, as the site of ambivalence and as an "Edisonian imaginary."³ The choice of representing history on the screen is also a choice made by the filmmaker to articulate a "new" language of desire vis-à-vis the cinematic apparatus itself. The historical film, in short, makes a distinct break with normative expectations of realism and the transparency of the text and strains toward the grand, the opulent, the classical. The "Edisonian imaginary" merges with a "Third World" imaginary, the triumph through technology over scarce resources and means. In the context of the Bombay cinema, the decision to make a historical film on the part of a filmmaker becomes a signifier of "difference," an invitation to visual pleasure resulting from high production values, the expansive sweep of a historical narrative, the scope for stylistic excess. In foregrounding construction (elaborate sets and props), defamiliarization (costumed actors), impersonation (stars as historical personages), distanciation (the past as completed event), the historical film tells us that it is not history but only the shadow-play of history. In approaching the historical film, then, as

an object of study, our task is not simply to note what is history and what is not or to treat history as a mere subtext, but to see why a film engages history in the first place and what are its formal mechanisms for doing so. We have to keep these considerations in mind as we turn to the specific cultural and ideological context into which the Bombay historical genre inserts itself.

To begin with, imperso-nation in the Bombay historical film takes the particular and culturally privileged form of syncretism, history being an amalgam of mythical tales, legends, and folk knowledge rather than a search for the "truth" of past events and personages. Filmic constructions of history therefore extend an ancient and venerable tradition in Indian historiography in which history is not separable from myth, legend, and drama. This tradition both undertakes and reveals a process of cultural syncretism which is associated with India's survival from ancient times to the present. Terms like "unity in diversity," "synaesthesia," "synthesis," originally used by the Orientalist scholars, try to capture what is essentially a very complex process of cultural adaptation and adjustment. It is easy to see how these "positive" depictions lend themselves to a reversal into their negative equivalents—"timeless," "ahistorical," "devoid of history"—which a certain Western mind-set has found difficult to wholly shake off in relation to India.⁴

Indian historian Romila Thapar tells us that interest in India's past was initiated by the European Orientalists beginning in the late eighteenth century. The officers of the East India Company could ensure a securer base for trade and exploitation if they learned the history and customs of the people they were dominating. Thapar writes, "For the Orientalists, the most significant discovery was that of the relationship between Sanskrit and certain European languages, which led to subsequent work on the common Indo-European heritage. The ancient Indian past was seen almost as a lost wing of early European culture, and the Aryans of India were regarded as the nearest intellectual relatives of the Europeans."⁵ In 1817, James Mill published his *History of British India*, in which he maintained that Indian society had remained substantially unchanged from the time of its beginnings, the coming of the Aryans, until the arrival of the British. Other influential theories, such as those of Oriental despotism and the Asiatic mode of production, were later discredited or substantially modified by Indian historians. Meenakshi Mukherjee writes about the unprecedented interest in history in the late nineteenth century, the writing of historical fiction, and the start-

ing of historical journals aimed at discovering regional history—*Banga-darshan* (1872) and *Aitiha:sik Chitra* (1898) in Bengali, *Kavyetiha:s Sāngrahā* (1878) in Marathi.⁶ Artist-intellectuals like Rabindranath Tagore looked to the epics and scriptures "to understand our identity both in space and time, as a unified and great nation."⁷

However, etymological and traditional ideas about time do not reveal a strong historical sense in terms of a linear chronology. The Indian word for time is *ka:l* (from the root *kal*, meaning "to calculate") and may signify either the past or the future. In other words, both "yesterday" and "tomorrow" have the single equivalent *kal*. Romila Thapar tells us, "In early India the concept of time according to some was in the form of a circle and according to others in a series of waves. The Hindu tradition as recorded in the *Purānas* (literally meaning "old") saw time as moving in a cycle—the Mahāyuga—the great cycle which lasts for 4,320,000 years."⁸ And Sudhir Kakar writes that "not only is the meaning of the word *Kal* . . . derived from the syntax and context of the sentence, it also depends upon the inflection of the voice which conveys the speaker's mood. *Kal* can mean tomorrow or yesterday, a moment or an age; it may refer to an event which just happened, or to a future likelihood (as in the Spanish *mañana*)."⁹ The past and the present are connected through memory, which, as Mircea Eliade points out, has a high place in the Indian philosophical system. Memory is regarded as the preeminent form of knowledge, and "one frees oneself from the work of Time by recollection, by anamnesis."¹⁰ Eliadé writes: "Indian literature uses images of binding, chaining and captivity interchangeably with those of forgetting, unknowing, and sleep to signify the human condition; contrariwise, images of being freed from bonds and the tearing of a veil (or the removal of a bandage from the eyes), of memory, remembering, being awakened, the waking state, express abolishing (or transcending) the human condition, freedom, deliverance (*moksa*, *mukti*, *nirvana*, etc.)."¹¹ Through the agency of memory, the (Hindu) individual connects with the heterogeneity of past lives to a prior state of collectivity or oneness with all Being.

Time, memory, and history tend to have a circular movement. In ancient India, on the other hand, "the Hindu cycle concept is essentially a cosmological concept . . . [which] emphasized continual change. Thus there was an implicit rejection of the idea that history repeats itself."¹² The ancients showed a lack of concern for authorship or chronology, and "some of the most famous names to which history attributes certain

philosophical doctrines or systems are now admitted to be legendary.”¹³ Romila Thapar tells us that in some of the ancient texts, for instance in the genealogies provided in the Puranas, the dynastic lists appear in the form of a prophecy, using the future tense.¹⁴ Moreover, they were often fabricated, so that “traditional genealogies are rarely faithful records of times past.”¹⁵

Itihāsa, the nearest equivalent term for history used in Sanskrit literature, means “thus it was” or “so it has been.” But the word did not denote the factual in the strict sense and came to refer to legend, history, and accounts of past events. The purpose of *itihāsa* was to refer to the events of the past in such a manner as would relate them to the goals and purposes of the Hindu tradition. The historical tradition grew out of a variety of literary forms current during the Vedic period, the most significant being the *gathās* (songs), *nārasamsi* (eulogies of heroes), *akhyāna* (dramatic narratives), and *purāna* (ancient lore). The forms of historical writing produced in India, such as the historical biographies of royalty written in the period from A.D. 600 to 1200, testify to the dominance of literary conventions. The authors were sophisticated court poets who did not hesitate on occasion to sacrifice historical veracity to an elegant turn of phrase or to dramatic analogies. “The link with the *itihāsa* and *purāna* tradition was maintained both indirectly when the court poets used these earlier texts as source material and more directly by associating the subject of the biography with the earlier heroes and legends.”¹⁶ Mythology, genealogy, and historical narrative are now regarded as the three main constituents of the Indian historical tradition. In Sanskrit poetics, *itihāsa* is considered a genre of composition, like *kāvya* (poetry), or *nāṭya* (drama). While the word *itihāsa* was meant to stand for history, the “presentation of facts was never accorded a high premium in *itihāsa* compositions.”¹⁷ It has been pointed out that though in English commentary both the *Rāmāyana* and the *Mahābhārata* are referred to as epics, in Sanskrit a clear distinction was made between the two works, the first being *kāvya* and the second *itihāsa*. Such a conception of *itihāsa* dominated both the historical novel of the nineteenth century and the historical film of the twentieth.

During the nationalist movement in the nineteenth century, when the intellectuals felt most acutely the tremendous divisions of caste, creed, and race that had to be overcome to create a sense of national identity, efforts at synthesis drew diverse texts together. In “A Vision of India’s

History,” Tagore presents the epic *Mahābhārata* as a historical document of the Aryan period.

Another task undertaken by this age was the gathering and arranging of historical material. In this process, spread over a long period of time, all the scattered myths and legends were assimilated, along with all the beliefs and discussions which lingered in the racial memory. This literary image of old Aryan India was called the Mahabharata—the great Bharata. Even the name shows an awakened consciousness of unity in a people struggling to find expression in a permanent record.¹⁸

The *Mahābhārata* thus becomes a historical record, a work of “creative synthesis.” Tagore attributes the “glories” of Indian civilization to the success of the Aryans in assimilating non-Aryan features, its failures to the presence of unassimilable elements. He then voices his faith in India’s capacity again to “find her truth, her harmony, and her oneness, not only among her own people, but with the world.”¹⁹ The reverberations of an East-West synthesis were strong. Yet, as Kalyan Chatterjee writes, “he alternated sharply between his impulse to embrace the world and his urge to go native. Between a past in which imagination had freedom and a present in which colonialism constrained action, Tagore’s mind was a crucible of his nation.”²⁰

Indian cinema, with its history of drawing upon diverse indigenous cultural and narrative traditions, as well as those of Hollywood, its spectacles of the “grand historical” and “romanticized legend,” its biographies of celebrated saints, heroes, and freedom fighters: how did this cinema inflect the realities of postindependence India through historical portrayal? What particular forms did impersonation take in the historical film? For if, as Vijay Mishra has argued, Indian historical consciousness is nothing but a “black hole,” does that relegate the Indian historical film to a bottomless pit?²¹ Unfortunately, such a view of Indian history advances its own brand of Orientalism and a rather uncomplicated view of historiography. For whereas historians like Hayden White have now quite convincingly demonstrated the fictional or narrative form of all history writing,²² to hold to a positivist notion of history seems to me regrettable and to add nothing to our cross-cultural understanding of the historical film. Just as “realism” is a matter of representation, so is “history.” If, however, we are concerned, as I believe Mishra to be, with

the theoretical dilemma of how to hold the popular film accountable for its obligation to depict actual social events, the answer lies not in constructing a set of (essentialized rather than discursive) oppositions—realism versus romance, artistic versus commercial, or metatext versus history. Such an approach is a version of reinventing the wheel in the case of the popular cinema, to pose ignorance of the vast literature on genre, conventions, textuality, mode of production, and the like available to students of film. Rather, we might do worse than turn to “*histoire/discours*” (a glaring omission in Mishra’s text), for here the actual processes of *translation* and *enunciation* are foregrounded.²³ We can then start out from the premise, to use Stephen Heath’s words, that “no film is not a document of itself and of its actual situation in respect of the cinematic institution.”²⁴

Historical representation is, indeed, a question of the present impersonating as the past. For the purposes of film analysis, we have to ask: What are the mediations between history (past events) and power, memory, and desire (configurations in the present of the actual filmmaking)? In the context of the Bombay cinema, keeping in mind its cultural definition of history and its context of production (industrial and national), our questions become: How does ideology masquerade as history? What elements of synthesis, of syncretism, are built into the structure of the narratives? How do the films deal with historical and cultural contradictions? My aim in this chapter is to ground these questions in the discussion of two films of the postindependence period which were both critical and commercial successes: K. Asif’s *Mughal-e-Azam* (*The Great Mughal*, 1960) and Guru Dutt’s *Sahib Bibi aur Ghulam* (*King, Queen, and Knave*, 1962). They deal with two separate “moments” in Indian history which any ideal or ideology of synthesis could not incorporate: Hindu-Muslim antagonism, here displaced onto a nostalgic image of Mughal grandeur, and the excesses of feudalism (the divisions of “race” and class, respectively). Both these realms of experience might be said to have engaged strong, if often confused, feelings for many Indians, for they had been modified as a result of Indian independence. With the memory of Indian liberation from British rule were mixed those of the unimaginable horrors of partition. Independence had also brought about the abolition of the *zamindari*, or feudal land ownership system (although not of the smaller landlords), and the extinction of a whole way of life. *Mughal-e-Azam* and *Sahib Bibi aur Ghulam* are nostalgic evocations of selected pasts, but they may also be seen as texts of motivated

excess, stretching genre expectations, in the one case of “legend,” in the other of “social melodrama.” The films follow a structure of heightened emotional orchestration, where the past becomes the means of resolving tensions in the present. Imperial justice and order in *Mughal-e-Azam* and sexuality in *Sahib* threaten to get out of control in the narrative and have to be deliberately harnessed. These texts illustrate that the impulse toward synthesis becomes a means of exploring ideological and psychic disturbances pertaining to the group in question that then get resolved through emotional drama.

Fredric Jameson identifies three concentric frameworks or three “horizons” of interpretation whereby a particular text must be read: the first is that of “political history, in the narrow sense of punctual event and a chroniclelike sequence of happenings in time,” the second that of society or the struggle between social classes, and the third of history in its broadest sense as a succession of modes of production.²⁵ Approaching *Mughal-e-Azam* with this methodological schema in mind, it might be observed that the historical film, which elaborates itself along the first level, makes the past the symbolic realm in which the social and historical contradictions of the present are resolved. Here the “punctual event,” the “glory” of the emperor Akbar and his power struggle with his son, Prince Salim, opens out to the conditions of social life in India for Hindus and Muslims in relation to each other and to history and its reversals. Moreover, in addition to the successive outward movement of analysis suggested by Jameson, the historically motivated text encourages a split or double vision, the past as always already encased in the present, history as allegory.

The Bombay film has not so much addressed the Hindu-Muslim relationship as sublimated it by displacing it onto the canvas of history. A film like V. Shantaram’s *Padosi* (*Neighbour*, 1941), with its social message of Hindu-Muslim amity, its wooden characterization of intersubjective communal harmony submerged and sacrificed in a (literal) sea of hostility, did of course address the issue through the genre of “the social,” while countless Bombay films have a Muslim character to fill out their demographic view of India’s social universe. But the historical film has been the privileged site of elaboration of the Muslim sensibility, particularly by directors like Ezra Mir, Sohrab Modi, Mehboob (with *Humayun*, 1945), and K. Asif, some of them Muslims (although non-Muslims have also made historical films based on the Mughal period).²⁶ Apart from the scope for spectacle and romance, the appeal of the

Mughal period for these directors might have meant the assertion of identity through identification. Moreover, the nationalist ideology of historical synthesis found an effective though hardly unproblematic milieu in the Mughal period.

The need to address the issue of Muslim identity within Hindu-dominated India that one perceives in *Mughal-e-Azam* is masked but undoubtedly there. K. A. Abbas has described in his autobiography the atmosphere of tremendous animosity, fear, and tension during the partition years prevailing in many areas of Bombay among people belonging to the two communities who had lived side by side for years but felt they could no longer trust one another. Others have recorded similar experiences. Because the film took fifteen years to make, *Mughal-e-Azam*'s makers no doubt experienced the trauma, although it is not known to what degree they were directly affected by the events of the time. Other "happenings" that were direct or indirect responses to partition relate to policies of control on the one hand and a self-induced loss of memory on the part of writers on the other. Not only did the threat of censorship deter filmmakers from attempting communal subjects, but perhaps the events were too close in time and therefore painful to confront. (It was not until 1975, with *Garm Hawa* [*Hot Winds*], discussed in a later chapter, that an Indian filmmaker could take up the subject.) Refuge in the distant past was one solution.

Throughout the fifties and sixties, historians debated the proper mode in which the Muslim "intervention" in Indian history might be explained. They accused one another of distorting the facts, of bending to ideological and bureaucratic pressures in assessing the Muslim role in India's history. R. C. Majumdar, for instance, charged that during the period of the freedom struggle, there was a conscious attempt, in writing about medieval India, to "rewrite the whole chapter of the bigotry and intolerance of the Muslim rulers towards the Hindu religion. This was prompted by the political motive of bringing together the Hindus and Mussalmans in a common fight against the British."²⁷ He adds that during the postindependence period, Indian historians sacrificed historical accuracy in order to please those in power:

The evil is enhanced by the fact that the Government, directly or indirectly, seeks to utilize history to buttress some definite ideas, such as the Gandhian philosophy of non-violence, the artificial conception of fraternal relations between the two great communities of India sedu-

lously propagated by him, and several popular slogans evoked by the exigencies of the struggle for freedom. These have been accepted as a rich legacy by the Government, even though it practically means in many cases the sacrifice of truth, the greatest legacy which Gandhi meant to bequeath to mankind.²⁸

Romila Thapar, on the other hand, has argued against the projection onto history of narrow prejudices and divisions. In a more recent essay entitled "Communalism and the Writing of Indian History," she points out the distortions of colonialist historiography, particularly James Mill's periodization of the history of India into Hindu civilization, Muslim civilization, and British civilization. This periodization was adopted by nationalist historians and intensified with the demand for Muslim separatism from the 1920s onward. It was argued that the Muslim period saw the evolution of the two "nations," Hindu and Muslim, whose logical outcome in terms of modern nation-states could only be the partition of the subcontinent. Thapar writes:

That religious groups in themselves do not constitute a nation was an argument which was not given serious consideration.

The term "Hindu" is not found in pre-Islamic sources relating to India. . . . Similarly the term "Muslim" was rarely used until the 13th century in the sources, which do not use a religious terminology but refer to the Arabs, Turks and Persians in a purely political manner.

Historical interpretation is integrally related to a people's notion of its culture and its nationality. This in itself makes historical writing one of the most sensitive intellectual areas with wide repercussions on popular nationalism and political beliefs.²⁹

If there was no consensus among historians as to the true nature of the Hindu-Muslim interaction, writers and musicians in the Bombay film world were at pains to stress the theme of unity and communal harmony. Alison Arnold has found, in her study of Hindi film music, that music directors employed both "overt" and "covert" means of musical fusion. Of the former, she lists the following: (1) the mixture of a recognizable Hindu or Muslim musical form with contrasting, that is, Muslim or Hindu, lyrics and/or screen characters; (2) the combination of recognizable Hindu and Islamic musical features within one film song; (3) lyrics that openly express Hindu-Muslim brotherhood and amity. The covert means of musical fusion include the adoption of existing Hindu or Mus-

lim tunes for film songs of contrasting character and the combination of Indian ragas with other Indian musical elements for songs in Muslim social and historical film.³⁰ *Mughal-e-Azam* presents instances of such musical fusion in a richly composed musical score. The motivation was no doubt also commercial, meant to maximize audiences.

Indian historical films tend to be retellings of the same episodes, legends, heroic deeds, and characters. Since they are cast partly in the *itihāsa* tradition outlined earlier and partly in the conventions of the Parsee theater, which incorporated Persian influences of the romantic tale, legend and historical fact are freely mingled. The thin line between history and legend becomes evident in the case of Anarkali herself, the heroine of *Mughal-e-Azam* and *Anarkali* (1952), both of which Firoze Rangoonwalla classifies generically as “legendary.” Yet at least two texts assert her historical identity. A dictionary of Indian history describes Anarkali as “a lady with whom Prince Salim, later Emperor Jahangir (1605–27) was in secret love. The Emperor built a beautiful marble tomb on her grave in Lahore in 1615 and inscribed on it a couplet expressing his passionate love for her.”³¹ Edward Balfour’s *The Cyclopaedia of India* also mentions Anarkali’s tomb and says, “He [*sic*] was a favorite of Jahangir, but was seen to smile to one of the zenana, and was bricked up in a cell.”³²

If legend merges with history in the Hindi cinema, history provides embellishment to legend. As a historical setting for romance and spectacle, the Mughal period (1526–1707) and particularly the reign of its greatest monarch, Akbar (1556–1605), has been extremely popular with Bombay moviemakers. Through the figure of Akbar, known for his religious tolerance and for encouraging Hindu artists in court, filmmakers could convey messages of Hindu-Muslim brotherhood. Biographical films on the lives and careers of famous musicians of Akbar’s court of reign, such as Tansen (*Sangeet Samrat Tansen*, 1962) and Baiju (*Baiju Bawra*, 1952), were made, these being characters who embodied a blending of Hindu and Muslim cultural influences. Yet even within the conventions of this genre of “historical” or “legend,” where historical accuracy is seldom at issue, filmmakers would find it necessary sometimes to assert or deny a film’s claim to historical truth. Thus *Anarkali* flatly refuses any connection with history by beginning and ending the film with a disclaimer, “The picture *Anarkali* is based on the legendary love between Prince Salim and Anarkali and has no foundation whatsoever in history,” even though all the major characters in the film are

“real.” Perhaps it points to the situation of film reception in the early fifties, when any sort of historical portrayal relating to Muslims could stir up a controversy.

Mughal-e-Azam, in contrast to *Anarkali*, is interesting precisely because of its dual address: it claims both the authority of history and the license of legend and inscribes its dual focus in an oedipal conflict. History and legend no longer blend smoothly and casually (as in the *itihāsa* tradition) but appear in a hierarchical relationship. In choosing to call his film *Mughal-e-Azam*, the filmmaker makes Akbar as much a protagonist as Salim, who has the romantic lead. Part of the motivation is apparently to signify the grandeur, wealth, and power of the Mughal dynasty. We learn of the very ambitiousness of the project from film historian Firoz Rangoonwalla:

For more than fifteen years under production . . . and finally completed at a reported cost of more than a crore [Rs. 10 million, roughly equivalent to \$1 million]. . . Everything about the film was in grand style. It had a star cast led by Dilip Kumar, Madhubala and Prithviraj in the three pivotal roles, four renowned writers contributing its rich Urdu dialogue, huge sets like the glass palace (Sheesh Mahal), sweeping battle scenes and some highly appealing songs penned by Shakeel and tuned by Naushad. It had also English and Tamil versions, the latter being called “Akbar” and a few of its sequences were in color.³³

The opening shot of the film inscribes Mughal history within the visual frame of the Indian nation. The sonorous tones of a voice-over narrator are heard on the sound track while a map of India slowly moves upward in the frame, as though India is arising from its present state of fractured identity for Hindus and Muslims to a former state of elevated glory. As the image is held for a few seconds, the voice can be “recognized” as the voice of India because it speaks in the first person. It speaks of being bound in chains (a dual reference perhaps both to British colonialism and to the chains of hatred fomented by the British to break up Hindu-Muslim ties) by the naive (those suffering from illusions of power?). But, it says, “those who cared for me taught people to love one another and so forever took me into their hearts.” The composite voice-image invites collective spectator identification, for each individual viewer to recognize him/herself as a national subject or citizen in relation to the map. The idea of history-geography as constitutive of a national discourse, “of implanting and inculcating the civic and patriotic spirit,” has briefly

been dealt with by Foucault. He sees it as having the effect of constituting a personal identity “because it’s my hypothesis that the individual is not a pre-given entity . . . but the product of a relation of power exercised over bodies, multiplicities, movements, desires, forces.”³⁴ The map as instrumental of power/knowledge has a long history in the Western world, and one might consider its usefulness as visual allegory in the context of Indian national subjectivity. Certainly the Hindi cinema from its earliest days used the image of the map in interpellating viewers in all their diversity as unified national subjects. Also, here the map is a geographical rather than a political one. The features of physical geography are allied to nature, the natural and organic; India, the image tells us, has always been the same, in the sixteenth century as in the twentieth, through all the vicissitudes of history. Political lines are drawn to separate people, but nature/land knows no such differences.

The voice-over continues its rumination, and the flashback device is used to signify India reliving its memories. The camera slowly pans and takes in a high-angle view of the Mughal legacy—architectural monuments of Delhi and Agra, the places which had been the seat of Mughal power. These spatial configurations signify solidity, permanence, immobility. They also embody the highest cultural synthesis of Hindu and Islamic artistic and philosophical styles. Akbar and his grandson Shah Jehan (1628–1658), the builder of the Taj Mahal, were patrons of architecture, the buildings now symbolizing Mughal rule at its best. These buildings are aids to historical memory and almost have a life of their own. The camera’s panning movement shows the magnificent and deserted Fatehpur Sikri, the city that Akbar built near Agra and where he held court from 1569 to 1585. First the coordinates of space and then of time are established as the narrator begins his story, “Three hundred and eighty years ago . . .” and presents a monarch known not only for his love of India but for his piety as well. The narrative initially follows an episodic structure, presenting the circumstances that led to Salim’s birth and a few scenes of his childhood.

This shift to the domestic scene would seem to bear out Stephen Heath’s assertion that “the constant force of the narrative of history given is familial and family history” so that history is provided with the perfection of a story.³⁵ The “absence” of history is the “presence” and “present” of film in the sense that film or any other narrative form tries to grasp and render history in each telling. Moreover, in the Indian narrative tradition, family history is not strictly demarcated from social

history but opens onto the latter. The most obvious examples are provided by the two great epics which many believe have a historical basis: in the *Māhabhārata*, the battle between the Kauravas and the Pandavas, two branches of the same family, engages vast social, political, and cosmic forces, all of which are then sought to be compressed within a single philosophical framework; in the *Rāmāyana*, Rama’s relationship with Sita is largely determined by his obligation to his people and his social dharma.

It would not be too far-fetched to claim that *Mughal-e-Azam* draws upon this frame of reference in making the central conflict in the film one between family affection and social role. For Salim, the answer to Akbar’s prayers at the tomb of Salim Chisti (although the *Memoirs* of Jehangir state that Akbar made the trip *after* Salim’s birth) is not above the law. Whatever the actual historical reasons for Salim’s rebellion against his father, the film makes romance the cause of it. Thus for both Akbar and Salim love and duty become irreconcilable options.

The film associates history with the exercise of power, its heights and its limits. All of the major characters—Akbar, his Hindu queen Joda Bai (Durga Khote), Salim (Dilip Kumar), and Anarkali (Madhubala)—are trying to reconcile conflicting identities and roles. Akbar is a powerful monarch but unable to control his own son, Joda Bai is a fond mother called upon to be a proud queen, Salim is a prince in love with a maidservant, Anarkali is a commoner who dares to dream of the palace. The film explores the characters’ vulnerabilities, their temporary lapses but ultimate triumph, for which history remembers them. Although there is conflict between private passion or feeling and public duty, the two realms cannot be separated. This is evident in the handling of romance and spectacle. Film researcher Leger Grindon has noted these as the recurring generic figures of the historical fiction film, where “the romance dramatizes the personal experience, the spectacle the public life.” He adds that the romance and the spectacle have corresponding formal tendencies. “The romance favors characterization in interior space and invites two-shots, shot-counter-shot structures, and the close-up. The spectacle, on the other hand, solicits broader expression in the *mise-en-scène*, favoring group compositions and mass movements that suggest the long shot and the pan in expansive exterior landscapes.”³⁶ But in *Mughal-e-Azam*, it is the romance that provides the spectacle, the public dimension of the private domain being reinforced continually.

When Anarkali is first introduced, she appears in the form of a statue

presented in Akbar's court to celebrate Salim's return home after a long absence. Amid the assembled crowd, Salim drops the veil that covers the "statue" by shooting an arrow at it. Anarkali's doubling as a statue has many meanings: it is an early hint at Anarkali's "impudence" in falling in love with the great Akbar's son, thus exceeding her lowly status; it recalls her tragic end when she is buried alive, a condition of death-in-life; and finally it is an homage to the actress Madhubala's statuesque beauty. The "statue" moves and speaks, and the distant Salim is mildly interested. Thus begins the great romance in a very public way. In several other sequences, the romance develops as much through spectacles that present Anarkali performing dances or singing in front of the king and his courtiers as through intimate love scenes. The visual highlight of the film is the famous *shi:sh mahal* (glass palace) dance, which is shot in color in a black-and-white film and creates an effect of both fragility and brilliance. The romance has been forbidden by the emperor, and Anarkali is seemingly repentant and hence commanded to perform in court again. But Anarkali's dance and song convey to Salim that she still loves him, and she openly defies Akbar. As she dances, Anarkali's sparkling image is replicated in this hall of mirrors, reinforcing the notion of (slave) woman as spectacle. Other scenes are also mediated through other gazes. In a sequence where the lovers secretly meet in a garden, to the strains of classical music to denote almost spiritual ecstasy, the presence of an eye watching them is a sinister reminder of the invasion of privacy.

As a historical romance, *Mughal-e-Azam* is reminiscent of other texts lodged in the cultural memory. Like Rāma, Salim returns home from battle after fourteen years; like the heroes of Kalidasa's plays, Salim is caught between desire and duty, which is aesthetically manifest in the relation of the erotic sentiment to the heroic. No doubt other texts from the Muslim tradition found their way into the thematic and visual elements of this film. Indeed, the reference to art is more than accidental or unconscious. Hints of the darker side of Akbar's famed power and prestige are given through the character of the sculptor who had provided Anarkali's "disguise." He is sometimes shown at work and portrayed as fearless and morally strong. A representative of the worker-artist, his function is that of the chorus, commenting on the action and creating works of art which speak of injustice, violence, and the emptiness of pride. He can defy the emperor (refusing to marry Anarkali just to have

Akbar rid of her), spurning fame and money to follow his own vision. His look and speech align him with the "common man": he is dark and unattractive and speaks in less florid language than the others. Toward the end of the film, when Akbar orders Salim's death, the sculptor's song saves the prince's life, Salim now being associated with rebellion against oppressive authority, broad democratic sympathies, and freedom of choice. The artist is the life-giver, the social commentator, and one who, being above class and creed, can shape the course of history.

Mughal-e-Azam sees the artist as the mediator between opposite forces in society and "greatness," effective through justice, as immortal, as having conquered time. Guru Dutt's *Sahib Bibi aur Ghulam* positions the *ghulam* ("slave") as the narrator-chronicler of a decaying feudal society. The two films differ greatly in their visual style, narrative handling, characterization, and mood. Nevertheless they both use memory as a structuring device and associate the past with glamor, pageantry, and fascination.

Sahib is based on a very popular Bengali novel of the same name written by Bimal Mitra and published in 1953. The Hindi film was preceded by a Bengali screen version which had also been very successful commercially. *Sahib* spans the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and charts the process of decline of the Bengal *zamindari*, or land ownership system, and its distinctive way of life. It tries to capture the fading away of one social class and the emergence of another. Whereas *Mughal-e-Azam* actively seeks connections with history by incorporating some "facts," the author of *Sahib* would like to deny the status of history to his work. It is instructive to turn for a moment to the novel, not only to find out what the film leaves out, but also to get a clearer picture of the context of the choice and motivation of historical portrayal. What is immediately striking is the disavowal of the role of historian on the part of the novelist. In the preface to his novel Mitra writes:

I am primarily a storyteller, not a historian. For the sake of storytelling, sometimes history, science or social studies become important. That is what has happened in this case. For the story I have used material from Calcutta's social and cultural history, and only because such use was indispensable for the story, not because I had anything new to say about history. Here the story is primary, history or anything else secondary. But if my story is embellished by riding upon the