

Defining a Non-Pakistan-centric Post-globalisation Self in Hindi Cinema 1996-2006

Sunny Singh

Studio Logo and Pre-credits

The past decade has seen dizzyingly spectacular changes in Indian society, politics and economy, at a pace that rivals a classic Manmohan Desai production. The key reason for these changes is primarily a demographic transformation which has ensured that over seventy per cent of the Indian population is under the age of forty.¹

Not only does this demographic transformation impact the country's exploding work force and aspirational challenges, it has also required a colossal shift in the popular national narrative, as can be evinced by the past ten years of Hindi films. While much is made of the 'rise of Hindu nationalism of the early 1990s' in Hindi cinema, less attention has been paid to a generation coming of age in an increasingly maturing democracy, where the one-party rule of generations gave way to a series of coalition governments. The years between 1995 and 2005 have also been marked by a second round of nuclear tests in 1998, a low-intensity border conflict with Pakistan in Kargil in 1999, economic sanctions from the US and EU countries that barely made a dent in the country's growing confidence, and, finally, an increasing economic and international political clout. Since 2001 and the international events following the attacks of 9/11, the country has also benefited from the shifting set of geo-strategic priorities of various global powers.

Set against the backdrop of such rapid historic changes, Hindi cinema has followed its historical role of engaging with events and reflecting as well as anticipating the nation's discontents (Prasad 1998; Vasudevan 2000). In the past decade, the Hindi film industry has attempted to both reflect and construct an adequate, the national self-image as well

as an appropriate national discourse for these changes. This process has seen various guises and stages, but this essay will focus on the following:

1. The naming of and focus on Pakistan as a major of source of terrorism and internal unrest, with a simultaneous blaming of a feeble, ineffective or oppressive state.
2. The transformation of India's Muslim minority from apparent susceptibility to Pakistan to citizens of the contemporary nation-state.
3. The construction of contemporary national identity through an 'independence' narrative that sidelines and ignores the Partition of 1947 as a keystone of the formation of national identity.

Drawing on films as different as *Border*, *The Legend of Bhagat Singh*, *Gadar*, *Phir bhi Dil hai Hindustani*, *Saafarosh*, *Lakshya*, *Main Hoon Na*, *Rang de Basanti*, and *Fanaa*, among others, this essay explores the above mentioned issues through readings of the film-texts and how they mediate, legitimise or, indeed, subvert entrenched Pakistan-centric political discourse through the use of content, theme, star-power, or indeed *auteur*-intent. I also attempt to demonstrate the gradual but distinct move by Hindi cinema from a Pakistan-centric and Partition-related construct of the national self-image to an increasingly self-reflexive and self-reflective one. These films are not necessarily chosen for their alleged 'quality' or theme, but instead for their self-professed commercial intent.

Flashback

Representations and constructions of the national identity, as well as representations of Pakistan in Hindi cinema have long been a subject of personal interest, perhaps because my own identity has long been linked to both of the above, and far too often Hindi cinema has been the only medium of constructing and articulating that identity.

The first time I realised I was Indian was in 1980. Before that year, being Indian meant very little more than march-past ceremonies in school on 15 August and 26 January.

In 1980, we moved to Islamabad, Pakistan; the move was linked to my father's job. The Indian government felt that its efforts to promote 'people-to-people' contacts were best served by educating

the children of embassy personnel in local schools. That of course meant that we were bussed off to the Rawalpindi cantonment every morning, to attend 'pre-approved' schools. My first experience at the Rawalpindi school was of being abused and beaten up for precisely a part of my identity I had never considered before—my nationality. There was little recourse: the school authorities preferred to ignore what they classified as schoolyard spats and often teachers took a hand in penalising the handful of Indian students. The situation was complicated further with my clear-realisation that complaining at home would have meant being sent back to live with relatives in India. The choice—rather heroically conceived with a healthy dose of Amitabh films—was between staying with parents and fighting alone in the schoolyard, or returning to India and losing parental presence.

Little wonder then that those years in Islamabad were marked by obsessively watching Amitabh Bachchan films, partly for moral support and partly to learn the actor's fighting techniques. On the daily drives to school, the popular song from *Lawaaris* (1981): '*Jiska koi nahin uska to khuda hai yaaro*' ('Those who have no-one have God') became an anthem, allowing an identification with the relevant film-text/star-text so painfully acute as to be self-definitive.

In the years following those spent in Islamabad, I have watched the Hindi cinema industry attempt to alternately profess peace that would 'unite' the two countries based on linguistic or ethnic similarities, or pin the blame for all national discontents on our troublesome neighbour. Perhaps the films have merely reflected the Indian polity's own obsession with Pakistan, as well as of the inability of the Cold War-era superpowers to de-hyphenate and de-couple their relationships with the two countries. Simultaneously, an overwhelming nostalgia by filmmakers who came to Mumbai after Partition and a generation of Independence-linked nationalists ensured this Pakistan-focused cinema remained in these two well-established grooves.

Credits

However, the first clear inkling of change came with the release of *Maachis* (Marchstick) in 1996. Made by the renowned *auteur* Gulzar, the film unflinchingly takes up the issue of Punjab militancy in the 1980s. The film places the responsibility for the 'making of terrorists' squarely on an unjust, corrupt and oppressive state that scapegoats innocent civilians, who are then forced to take up weapons. At the

same time, Gulzar also does not flinch from referring to Pakistan's role in supporting the militancy as well as arming the movement. In a telling scene, the militant commander Sanatan (Om Puri) explains that the group must wait for the rocket-shooter (Veeran, played by Tabu) to show up after receiving training across the border. With this throwaway dialogue, Gulzar acknowledges the role played by Pakistan in arming and training militants, without ever removing the focus from the narrative that asserts that internal conflicts are solely responsible for the violence. However, it is important to note that, here, all mention to Pakistan is covert, with Sanatan referring to the shooter as travelling from 'across the border'.

Like many other films that have preceded it, *Maaichis* also chooses to leave the neighbouring country unnamed. However, with that film, Hindi cinema takes the first step into simultaneously identifying Pakistan as the source of the weaponisation of militants as well as holding the Indian state responsible for the citizens' discontent that forces them to take up arms. Other films that follow have taken one or both of these trends to their logical conclusion. Further elucidation of the themes outlined for this essay requires some initial discussion of the films that reflect the trends. As mentioned earlier, these films have not been selected for their quality, but for their commercial intent and relative success.

First, the increasing focus on Pakistan as a major of source of terrorism and internal unrest reaches its height in the years of electoral turbulence in India, especially between 1995 and 1999. Among the films discussed as part of an evolving continuum of the Pakistan-centric discourse are *Border* (1997), *Sarfarosh* (The Martyr, 1999), *16 December—All Forces Alert* (2002; henceforth *16 December*), *The Hero* (2003), *Main Hoon Na* (Don't Worry, I'm Here, 2004), and *Lakshya* (The Objective, 2004). They all identify Pakistan overtly as an enemy nation, although the last two begin to move beyond the combative debate to begin reflecting on the national self in relation to the enemy, rather than directing the national gaze solely outwards.²

At the same time, Hindi commercial cinema has not minimised the role of the Indian state, often depicted as corrupt and repressive. This facet is most clearly seen in representations of the Muslim minority in cinema. Along with *Sarfarosh*, films such as *Mission Kashmir* (2000), *Fiza* (2000), *Khakee* (Uniform, 2004), and *Fanaa* (Annihilation, 2006) take up the role played by the Indian state that exacerbates the marginalisation of Muslim citizens of the country as well as the

violence experienced internally. As Hindi cinema moves away from a primarily Pakistan-centric threat to the national fabric, the films also show a dramatic change in the representation of the Muslim minority in the country.

From a marginalised, supporting role in *Sarfarosh* to the central space in *Fanaa*, the de-centering of Pakistan from the national psyche is accompanied by a transformation in the status of the Muslim characters. The films increasingly reduce their marginalisation and susceptibility to oppression by providing the Muslim characters with agency in the narrative. While a simplistic reading may lead one to assume that the agency can only be exercised for the preservation of the hegemonic state, the recent portrayals of Muslims in commercially successful films seems to signal a move away from the dichotomous Hindu/Muslim and Indo/Pakistan discourse that has plagued the region for the past century.

This marginalisation of Pakistan in the national discourse has also led to a (re)visioning of the independence struggle that allows a view of the colonial past and the freedom struggle that is not hampered by an automatic discussion of the Partition. Films such as *Lagaan* (The Tax, 2001), *The Legend of Bhagat Singh* (2002), *The Rising—Ballad of Mangal Pandey* (2005; henceforth *Mangal Pandey*), and *Rang de Basanti* (Colour Me Saffron, 2006) construct a pluralist, secular vision of colonisation and subsequent decolonisation that seems to signal a trend for future productions.

Cut to the Present (1996–2006)

The early turbulent years between 1996 and 2006 also saw the first 'war' film hitting the Indian screens in decades, with *Border* raking in record collections in 1997. The film fictionalises the battle of Longewala during the 1971 Indo-Pakistan war along the western border. The historical situating of the film allows director J. P. Dutta to name the 'enemy' state within the film text. However, despite the martial narrative, the director cannot avoid an apologist note by including a final lament against war with the final credits rolling to the tune of the song: '*Mere dushman, mere bhai*' ('My enemy, my brother'). The final shot of the film is a rather artificially inserted image of the flags of India and Pakistan unfurling side-by-side. *Border* is perhaps the only war movie in the world to include the 'enemy' flag as its last visual sequence.

Curiously enough, the 2004 release, *Veer-Zaara*, also reverts to this historical past in order to stage a trans-border love story. The film's romantic narrative is nominally set in the past—ostensibly twenty years before the present—which allows the love to flourish between the Indian air force officer Veer (Shahrukh Khan) and the Pakistani politician's daughter Zaara (Preity Zinta). When the film jumps to the present, despite its ostensible message of 'peace' read out in the courtroom by an emotional Veer, it appears to suggest that cross-border distances are unbridgeable in the present, except by political and human rights-linked actions. There can be no *Veer-Zaara*-style love story for the present generation on the subcontinent, as represented by the young Pakistani lawyer, Saamiya (Rani Mukherjee), whose travels across the border to India have no ostensible impact on her.

If *Border* names Pakistan in the context of the 1971 war, India's unequivocally 'good' war in the national narrative, it requires a film linking the Mumbai underworld, drug and weapons trade, and home-grown militancy to identify Pakistan as a source of continued national instability. *Sarfarosh* is groundbreaking not only for its overt identification of Pakistan, both on maps used in the narrative and in dialogue, it also weaves into the narrative a number of real-life events, including the links between Mumbai underworld dons and Pakistan's ISI, weapons-smuggling and, finally, the complicity—willing or unwilling—of Pakistani artists. Drawing on a host of press, police and intelligence sources, director John Mathew Matthan constructs a complex tale where art, law-enforcement and international crime converge to build a fast-paced action film.

Sarfarosh, like many other films before and after, represents the Muslim minority in India through the marginalised figure of Inspector Salim (Mukesh Rishi). His personal isolation is acutely and poignantly highlighted. While the police establishment doubts his honesty in arresting Muslim criminals, the headline elements within the Muslim community also mock his allegiance to Islam. Salim's character, however, is also representative of the economic underclass, denied access to the higher ranks of the police as represented by the Indian Police Service (IPS) officer, ACP Ajay Singh Rathod (Aamir Khan). At the same time, his class origins allow him access to the underbelly of Mumbai city in a way that his social and professional superiors do not have. Salim's isolation can be interpreted as the general condition of the Muslim minority in the country, which feels its loyalty questioned by the majority community on the one hand and its religious dedication

doubted by headline international and domestic Islamists on the other. At the same time, Salim's own agency in choosing his loyalties can be read symbolically as a choice available to the minority population, complete with the necessary consequences.

The film also tangentially includes a mirror-reflection from across the border, in identifying and discussing the conditions of the *mohajirs*, or those who migrated from India—primarily Uttar Pradesh and Bihar—to Pakistan during Partition. Initially, at least, there seems to be symmetry in Salim's anguish at the doubts regarding his national loyalties with the anger shown by Gulfam Hassan (Naseeruddin Shah), a famed Pakistani *ghazal* singer. The film, in extending the dominant nationalist discourse, shows that Hassan lacks the possibilities of acceptance open to Salim, despite sharing his religion with his compatriots. While Saleem is not only accepted and apologised to by Rathod (as the stand-in for the Indian state), Hassan, in turn, is betrayed and abandoned by the ISI officer. The implicit message, then, is that despite differences in religion, Salim—and therefore the Indian Muslim—has a greater role and choice in the national enterprise than ethnic-minority Muslims across the border.

National passions whipped up by the Kargil war in 1999 seemed to put a temporary freeze on the construction of Pakistan-based debate, as few films addressed the issue during that year. At the same time, the war in the mountains provided India with its first televised war, with the emotional reactions and outpourings giving proof to the power of the cinematic images. However, 2000 marked a clear shift in the Pakistan-centric rhetoric in commercial Hindi cinema, with the release of *Mission Kashmir* and *Fiza* within months of each other. Both films started the light-eyed, 'foreign-looking' Hrithik Roshan, his exotic looks helping in the construction of the marginalised Muslim youth in both films.³ While *Fiza* presents the Muslim marginalisation and militarisation within India as being a result of the rise of Hindu nationalism, in specific pinning the blame on the Mumbai riots of 1992–3, *Mission Kashmir* sets its tale in the more complex backdrop of Kashmir militancy in the 1990s, where state oppression—deliberate as well as unwitting—leads a young orphan to militancy.

Fiza ends on a tragic note—both narratively, with the protagonist's death, as well as thematically, with the overwhelming message seeming that there is no valuable or positive space for the Muslim minority in India. The film is a complex articulation of Indian-Muslim fears regarding its minority status, which lead Amaan (Hrithik Roshan)

to take up arms to 'protect' his people, while his apparently moderate sister, the eponymous Fiza, rejects any possibility of joining the national (Hindu) mainstream by rejecting the marriage proposal from Anirudh (Bikram Saluja). Perhaps unwittingly, the director falls into a trap of his own making when Fiza is shown as incapable of separating the state—ostensibly defined in the film as Hindu and anti-Muslim—from the majority population. Angered by the injustice that she sees meted out to her brother, she rejects her suitor Anirudh, who has remained steadfast, loyal and supportive all along. Her apparently irrational decision, and the director's depiction of it, may also be interpreted as the minority community's capricious exploitation of the majority community's assistance and patience. For the director, the only choices available to India's Muslim minority seem to be death, with a detour through militancy, perpetual marginalisation or, even more frighteningly, absorption into the Hindu majority. Politically and thematically caught in a bind, the director has little recourse but to revert to a reactionary community identity that can only reject contemporary society.

In the same year (2000), *Mission Kashmir*, on the other hand, took up the issue of national identity through the prism of the unrest in Kashmir. Locating the conflict within the family, the film plays out the traditional Hindi cinema tropes of identifying the family as the nation (Gokul Singh and Dissanayake 1998, Virdi 2003, and others), and constructs the ideal Kashmiri (thereby Indian) family, formed by Neelima (Sonali Kulkarni), a Hindu woman married to Inayat Khan (Sanjay Dutt), and a Muslim police officer, whose son is an unwitting casualty of the rising Islamist tensions in the state. In their grief, the couple adopts an orphan, Altaaf (played as an adult by Hrithik Roshan), whose parents have been killed in a police raid led by Inayat Khan. On discovering Inayat's involvement in his family's death, the child runs away and grows up a militant. His attacks against the state pit Altaaf against Inayat, leading up to an action-packed finale, where the father-son pair must confront each other before uniting against the 'enemy'.

The entire family, and thereby the nation, is not only traumatised by nominally religious extremism but also caught in a cycle of reciprocal violence throughout the film, a situation that must be resolved by uniting in the face of external threats. Not surprisingly, the film relies on the image of the Hindu mother as the symbol for the nation, a fact underlined by Neelima's declaration: 'No matter who fires the shot, the bullet shall only hit my breast.'

However, within the discursive evolution, the film also signals a subtle shift. In a series of references that appear prescient from our perspective today, *Mission Kashmir* includes the shadowy presence of a figure eerily reminiscent of Osama bin Laden. Within the narrative, this figure is the puppet-master, the overlord of the Pakistan's ISI as well as a non-state actor whose loyalties are with no particular nation-state, including the one that temporarily serves his/her interests. With this figure, *Mission Kashmir* heralds the gradual shifting of focus from a Pakistan-centric source of instability to globalised Islamist terrorism as a growing threat to the Indian nation-state, where the country's western neighbour is merely a pawn in the larger geo-strategic game. Moreover, a further shift in the politics of naming the enemy also specifically identifies Pakistan's shadowy ISI as an agent and player in this international federation of destabilising terrorist forces.

The theme of linking Afghanistan-based Islamist terror networks with connections to Pakistan's ISI is furthered with films such as *16 December* and *The Hero—Love Story of a Spy* (henceforth *The Hero*). The former also introduces a new plot element to commercial Hindi cinema—the threat of the use of a nuclear weapon by rogue non-state elements. Curiously enough, as a corollary to the globalisation processes, both films also included NRIs (non-resident Indians) in far corners of the globe as potential patriots whose intrinsic loyalty to the 'homeland' could be counted on for national enterprises. In Hindi cinema then, not only did the terrorist threat go global in the post-9/11 scenario, but so did the country's ability to mobilise its resources transnationally to act against that threat.

Returning however, to the filmic introspection of the nation-state, numerous recent films have dealt with contentious themes like the state's role in marginalising the minority community, and the doubts embedded in the majority community regarding Muslim loyalty to the nation-state. The most obvious amongst these are *Khakee* and *Dev* (2004), dealing with the issue of choices (or the lack thereof) available to the minority community. The issue of the state repressing the population and silencing dissent is reflected clearly in *Khakee*, where an alleged ISI-agent Dr Iqbal Ansari (Atul Kulkarni) is found to be a loyal citizen framed by politicians for his refusal to assist corruption. *Dev*, in turn, explores the role of the state further, setting the narrative in the backdrop of communal riots and increasing intercommunal suspicions. The political establishment is shown to place its own interests above that of the nation, as well as to exploit communal rivalries and suspicions to its own advantage.

However, it is important to note that (re)presentations and (re)visions of the minority community are in flux and new possibilities have been presented by recent releases, most notably by *Fanaa* (2006).

The marginalisation of Pakistan in the discussion of Hindu-Muslim relations within the contemporary nation-state reached a new high with the release of *Fanaa* (2006). Once again set in Kashmir, this film returns to the issue of transnational nuclear terrorism, this time devoid of any real religious grounding and played out entirely by non-state actors with little or no community, religious or national ties. It also revisits the motif of family as nation, this time setting the narrative within an entirely Muslim social and familial context. Referring constantly, visually and thematically, to earlier nationalist cinematic texts such as *Mother India* (1957), the film places the Kashmiri Muslim woman, Zooni (Kajol), at the centre of the narrative. Physically blind from birth, her trip to Delhi brings her in contact with the tour guide/terrorist Rehaan (Aamir Khan) and, quite literally, 'opens' her eyes. The shot of a terror attack by Rehaan on the President's residence is rapidly cut to a scene of Zooni in the hospital, regaining her eyesight after surgery.

The second half reveals Rehaan's identity as a terrorist on a mission to secure nuclear parts for an unidentified 'Kashmiri liberation' group. Like Radha in *Mother India*, Zooni is ultimately faced with the choice between her nation and her lover, constructed here as the choice between her son and her husband. The last scene also echoes *Mother India* Rehaan; runs with the electronic device he has stolen, reminding the viewer of Birju's riding away with Champa. To allow the men to escape with their 'stolen' prize would mean giving up on the village's honour (*Mother India*) or its safety (*Fanaa*). Like Radha, Zooni too calls out for Rehaan to stop. And like Radha in the earlier movie, Zooni must also shoot and kill Rehaan in order to secure the national narrative. Her physical stance, clutching the pistol in both hands, legs apart, also echoes Nargis's bounty-hunter posture from the earlier film (Chatterjee 2002).

Despite the similarities with the earlier film, *Fanaa* does not shirk from contemporary complexities, either of the nation-state or of the delicate balance needed to place the Kashmiri-Muslim mother at the centre of the national narrative. Immediately following Zooni's first shot, Rehaan turns to fire back, his physical reaction a result of instinct and training. Yet the camera remains on his face as his expression changes from rage to confusion and finally sad acceptance

of inevitability. The director then pulls out for a long shot of the two lovers set against each other in a Mexican stand-off, their pistols pointed at each other. It is Zooni who finally pulls the trigger, making her act seem deliberate and considered than that of *Mother India*'s Radha, who pulls the trigger in extreme rage. Zooni, after all, is no mother killing her son in an extreme rage. She is a single mother, who has broken earlier taboos to follow her own life, and her decision to kill Rehaan is no less considered or decisive.

Not surprisingly, the final sequence of *Fanaa* also refers to *Mother India*, as Zooni and her son lay flowers on two graves, one possibly of Zooni's father and the other of Rehaan. Yet, this is no enfeebled tragic mother inaugurating a dam that fills the fields with water tinged with metaphoric blood. Zooni's task isn't over as she prompts her young son to offer his respects and then gently guides him away from the graves. The final image is not one of the price of sacrifice but of the continued resilience that allows Zooni to claim her rightful place in the centre of the national narrative.

In stark contrast to *Fiza*, the final frame of *Fanaa* leaves open a multitude of possibilities for the Muslim minority's role in the nation-state, delinked from memories of Partition and of suspected ties to Pakistan. Not surprisingly then, religion has little space in the discourse of *Fanaa*, and Pakistan is merely another nation to be 'informed' of political and military developments. In the film, the Indian defence minister merely informs his Pakistani counterpart of the 'developments'. There is no recrimination, suspicion or even accusation in the discourse. As the Indian Muslim takes centre-stage in the narrative of national identity-building, Pakistan is finally marginalised, and eventually excised from the picture.

Before moving forward to discussions of recent (re)visionings of history and thus (re)definitions of the nation-state, two films deserve a mention in the evolving discourse on Hindi films' representations of national selfhood. *Lakshya* and *Main Hoon Na*, both released in 2004, were works of a new generation of directors. Farhan Akhtar and Farah Khan, their respective directors, represent the generation defined not by memories of colonialism or the Partition, but instead brought up in the 1970s. Not surprisingly, the definition of the nation-state for both these directors is quite startlingly different from that of the earlier generations.

Lakshya, ostensibly set in the backdrop of the Kargil war, explores the coming of age of a spoilt young man with no apparent ambition.

Despite the war rhetoric and the spectacularly shot action sequences, the film is relentlessly self-absorbed. The 'enemy' is merely a distant, nameless force whose only role is to function as the opposition against which the nation-state defines itself. The protagonist declares on first looking at the border guarded by Pakistan's outposts, 'For the first time I know what it means to be an Indian.' The borders thus become the defining space for identity, regardless of what lies beyond. Curiously enough, the statement also sets to rest residual nostalgia about reunification (as was the case, for example, in the films of the 1960s and 1970s, which reached their pinnacle with *Amar Akbar Anthony* (1977)). Not surprisingly, the *laksya* (goal) that the young protagonist finds is achieving control of a ruthless mountain-top, similar to Tiger Hill. The narrative plays itself out by his effacing the 'enemy' and turning the war action into a *bihungsvoman* for the protagonist.

The second film, *Main Hoon Na* by Farah Khan, reflects the sensibilities of a generation whose first memory of historical events is the Emergency. Inspired by the Nasir Hussain and Manmohan Desai brand of extravagant spectacle, the film recuperates the lost-and-found metaphor, although this time in order to resolve intranational differences, with the family once again serving as the metaphor for the nation. The brothers, born of different mothers and the same father, must resolve their disagreements overcome, past hurt and injury, in order to face the current destabilising threat. In this case, the threat is from an internal source, from a group of former army officers who can neither forgive past atrocities nor move forward, and therefore will hold the nation hostage to their radical agenda.

The film also marks the completion of the transformation of Shatrugh Khan's star persona, with meta-textual links to Rama, a process that follows the trajectory of the past decade (Singh 2005). If the turbulent 1970s had required a martial narrative of the embattled hero, personified by Amitabh Bachchan's Mahabharata-linked star persona, the post-liberalisation, globalised India identified more closely with the Ramayana narrative, where war must be waged as a necessity, and stability and prosperity are the primary goals. If the earlier generations required change to be brought about by constant strife and cataclysmic violence, the current generation places greater importance on responsible behaviour and change brought about gradually and, if possible, without violence. Not surprisingly, the imaginary Ramarajya, personified by Shatrugh's star persona of the good son (*Dilmale Dulhania Le Jayenge*, 1995) (The One with

the Heart will Take the Bride), *Mohabbatein*, 2000 (Love), the good friend (*Dil to Pagal Hai*, 1997 (The Heart is Crazy)), the good father (*Kuch Kuch Hota Hai*, 1998 (Something Happens)), and the just ruler (*Asoka*, 2001) find their apogee in *Main Hoon Na*. His character is named Ram, the righteous warrior who suffers familial exile, yet makes peace with his stepmother, winning his half-brother's loyalty, and finally rescuing his chosen mate—along with other hostages—from certain death.

Although *Main Hoon Na* contains ostensible references to peace talks with Pakistan, oppositions to the peace negotiations as well as the conflicting views regarding Pakistan are depicted as entirely internal to India. Pakistan's reactions, or indeed actions, are of secondary importance in achieving a national stance.

Post-interval: (Re)visioning the Past

Perhaps there ought to be no surprise that the marginalisation of Pakistan in popular discourse and imagination has a corollary: a view of the history of decolonisation that takes no cognizance of the rancorous history of events leading up to Partition. In (re)constructing a history that can be entirely self-focused and reflective, recent cinema has begun reverting to not only pre-Partition figures such as Subhash Chandra Bose, Mangal Pandey and Bhagat Singh, but has also begun imagining (and imaging) a mythical past free of the strain of Partition. In films ranging from *Shahneel Udham Singh* (2000) to *Rang de Basanti* (2006), there is an emerging trend of viewing history as de-coupled from Partition and Pakistan.

One aspect of this trend has focussed on (re)covering and (re)presenting leaders and activists of the independence movement through bio-pics such as *Shahneel Udham Singh*, *The Legend of Bhagat Singh* and *Bose—The Forgotten Hero* (2005) who are represented as more than simply members of the Indian National Congress, and are also removed from the events leading up to Partition in 1947. However, a more interesting trend has been of films depicting both colonial history and resistance through narratives that marginalise the Partition as an event while engaging directly, and without mediation, with the colonial experience. These films include *Lagaan*, *Mangal Pandey* and, far less successfully, *Karna* (2005). While the trend is still at an early stage, these films have thrown up interesting postcolonial issues: the intersections of gender, race, desire, and power, which indicate a

new willingness to engage with the colonial experience, revealing a growing sense of self that allows such a direct engagement with the former coloniser.

Mangal Pandey presents a complex vision of the colonial past. However, it also simplifies one aspect of that past: the dissensions and conflicts between Hindu and Muslim communities within the country and the ensuing competition for power. By setting its narrative in 1857, the film attempts to erase the taint of Partition and revert to a mythical past where Indians could join a national cause, regardless of their religious affiliations. This revisiting and re-visioning of the colonial past is crucial to the growing national narrative that considers the 1947 borders as the defining boundaries of the modern Indian nation and chooses to ignore and erase narratives that challenge that view. This growing view is linked intimately with the demographic, political and economic changes of the past decade and can be seen as a process of constructing a contemporary, self-reflective identity to account for the changes and experiences of the nation.

However, the exigencies of identity-creation mean that (re)visioning history cannot be limited to the distant past. Clear links must be forged to the presence and potential future of the nation. While *Mangal Pandey* and *Lagaan* portray the past in a heroic light, allowing it to function as contemporary national myth, other films have attempted to link the past to the present, articulating popular fears and discontents. Films such as *16 December* and *Tango Charlie* (2005) attempt to apply the post-Independence history of India to contemporary conflicts and thus to threats and challenges facing the nation. However, *Rang de Basanti*, the last film under discussion in this essay, meshes India's colonial memory with contemporary reality to construct a contemporary nationalist discourse. More importantly, perhaps, the film is the first attempt at moving beyond Fanonian ideals of postcolonial relationships to an uncharted space where the former colonised and colonisers may meet in equality, with mutual respect and in recognition of a shared past.

The film brings together Sue (Alice Patton), the granddaughter of a British colonial jailor, James McHeneley (Steven Mackintosh) to India with a group of young university students in Delhi. Sue, a filmmaker, is looking for the 'third kind of man', which her grandfather has described in his diary when referring to the *ganam dal* (hot headed) revolutionaries of the Independence movement. She plans to film their story, although her own channel in the UK has cut the budget for such

a film, suggesting that she focus instead on Gandhi because 'Gandhi sells'. In India, she begins filming on a shoestring budget and with a group of reluctant actors. Slowly, through shared experiences, the Indians, as represented by the group of students, and the British, as symbolised by Sue, also begin to communicate across the faultlines of history, sharing both guilt and pleasure, and a closely bound past.

More relevant to our discussion is the marginalisation and erasure of memories and discussions of the Partition from the narrative. Although the contentious position of the Muslim minority in India is indicated by the film, with Aslam's father demanding that he retain no contact with the majority population, and his brother hinting at an extremist hate-filled form of Islamism, Aslam's desire to fully participate in the nation is privileged as the dominant image. His talent as a poet and his 'secular' clothing of jeans and loose shirts are indicators of an 'educated' Muslim who can participate fully in the nation's destiny. The contrast is clearly established with his brother and father, who are depicted as 'old-fashioned' or uneducated and, in both cases, marginalised from the destiny of a post-liberalisation, globalised India. Of course, DJ's family is also similarly marginalised, while Ajay's is marked by the absence of a father ostensibly sacrificed at an earlier date for the benefit of the nation-state. This link is not incidental, as the film very clearly centralises and privileges the aspirations and challenges facing a nation where more than half the population is under twenty-five years of age.

However, the film also establishes the idea of national identity as a constantly renewing process rather than a fixed ideal, where all extremes are not only unacceptable but also detrimental to the integrity of the nation. Laxman Pandey (Anul Kulkarni) is initially shown as a passionate Hindu fundamentalist, active in politics and fighting against the apparent 'Western corruption' of Indian values. His devotion to the nation is never in doubt, although his definition of the nation in fanatically narrow terms is posited as dangerous and self-destructive. His increasing awareness of the complexities of politics and his eventual overcoming of hatred for Aslam as a Muslim are at the heart of the self-reflexive national identity offered by the film. Laxman begins by calling Aslam a 'Pakistani', an idea that is echoed by Bismil suggesting that Ashfaqullah would be safer in Afghanistan amongst his 'own people'. The journey of both Laxman and Bismil to finally recognising the Muslim minority—symbolised by Aslam—as an integral part of India's reality and future is foregrounded repeatedly.

The joint deaths of Ashfaq and Bismil by hanging, and of Laxman and Aslam, are crucial to this ideal of a national identity as a constant process requiring joint sacrifices from both majority and minority communities. The director chooses to focus on Laxman's and Aslam's joined hands in the moment of their deaths, reinforcing the sacrifices needed from both communities for the nation's changing needs.

Rang de Basanti makes a clear correction between the past and the future, where the two can never be entirely delinked. As DJ says, India's trouble is 'having one foot in the past and the other in the future'. However, (re)visioning and (re)presenting can allow for alternative views of history, and therefore alternative ideals for the future. The future, the film suggests, lies in picking up passions and ideals from the past while adapting them to new realities. The initial shot of Bhagat Singh reading Lenin is cleverly echoed by Karan's disdainful distribution of his father's wealth, just as Bismil's religious fervour is reflected in Laxman's early passionate activism for the Hindu fundamentalist cause. The past shall influence our present, the film asserts, but we can draw what we need from it to shape our own future.

Closing Credits: Conclusion

Commercial Hindi cinema has long played the role of popular historian and narrator for the country, constructing images that affirm, challenge and subvert hegemonic discourses offered by the state, the majority community and the socioeconomic-political elite. In negotiating this space, Hindi cinema has attempted to represent and decipher historical changes for the masses, as well as anticipate them. This role has required popular cinema to address issues of internal dissent as well as external threats, especially the historically traumatic and contentious relationship with Pakistan. Over the past sixty years, Hindi cinema has careened between extremes of xenophobic and aggressive nationalism, especially in times of war with that neighbour, and a paternalistic pacifism that appears to deny that neighbour state its validity as a separate nation. Popular Indian discourse on Pakistan has been perceived by that nation as an Indian refusal to accept its identity as a separate state. At the same time, attempts to maintain peace within the borders have meant that all discourse on Hindu-Muslim relations within India have been consistently tainted with memories of the Partition.

Recent cinema, however, reflects a dramatic shift in discourse, reaching instead to an earlier past as well as reflecting upon a post-Independence reality to construct a national identity that does not include references to Pakistan. Thus, Hindu-Muslim relations within the country can be framed in an internal context. The positive aspects of this development are easy to see. However, this trend in popular discourse-making does risk erasing a traumatic element of the country's history.

Yet, perhaps, it is time, sixty years after Partition, to move beyond its imprisoning discourse. With a growing population that has no direct memory of either colonialism or Partition, the needs for national histories and myths have also changed. For identities to be relevant, histories must be (re)covered, revised and (re)presented. At the same time, the process of a constantly self-renewing popular discourse on national identity(-ies) must be considered a maturing, a true coming-of-age for both the nation and popular Hindi cinema.

Notes

1. Extrapolated from figures at www.cia.gov/publications/factbook/geos/in.html. Accessed 11 June 2006.
2. A corollary of the Pakistan-centric discourse in Hindi cinema has been the Partition-based films, of which *Gadar* (2001) was the most vocal representative. A full discussion of these films is beyond the scope of this essay. However, it must be noted that an ideological shift has also occurred in the (re)presentation and (re)vision of this event in Hindi commercial cinema.
3. Further discussion would be necessary regarding the differences in subjectivities reflected in films made by Muslim filmmakers like Khalid Mohammad (*Fiza*, 2000) and primarily Hindu ones like Vidhu Vinod Chopra (*Mission Kashmir*, 2000).

Filming the Line of Control

*The Indo-Pak Relationship through
the Cinematic Lens*

Edited by

Meenakshi Bharat
Nirmal Kumar

MIDDLEBURY COLLEGE LIBRARY

 **Routledge**
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON NEW YORK NEW DELHI

First published 2008
Reprint 2010
by Routledge
912 Tolstoy House, 15-17 Tolstoy Marg, New Delhi 110 001

Simultaneously published in the UK
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, OX14 4RN

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

© 2008 Meenakshi Bharat and Nirmal Kumar

Typeset by
Star Compugraphics Private Limited
5-CSC, First Floor, Near City Apartments
Vasundhara Enclave
Delhi 110 096

Printed and bound in India by
Sanat Printers
312, EPIP, Kundli, Haryana - 131 028

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or utilised in any form or by any electronic, mechanical or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage and retrieval system without permission in writing from the publishers.

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record of this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-0-415-46094-1

To the ties that still bind us