

The Role of Cinema in Secular India

Javed Akhtar

A very good evening ladies and gentlemen. And thank you, Titoo, for this kind and generous introduction. And thank you, also, for reminding me of my death* because recently I had started feeling immortal.

I did not have the fortune of meeting Mr Subhas Ghosal but I have heard about him from many people. And they talk with such reverence, such dedication, such respect, that it is awesome. And sometimes I feel that if I leave two people with this kind of respect, I will believe that my life was worth living.

Today, I have to speak about cinema – Indian cinema and secularism. I must at the very outset tell you something that you would anyway know within a minute or two. I am neither a political scientist, nor a sociologist; not even a film scholar. But I am a practitioner. I joined the film industry when I was 19½, after my graduation. And I wrote my first film, *Sarhadi Lutera*, for Rs100 per month.

(Recently, a Pakistani channel asked me, “Which was your first film?”

I said, “*Sarhadi Lutera*.”

They said, “*Sarhadi Lutera*? Was it about Pakistan?”

I said, “Maybe you are thinking that because of the ‘*lutera*’; but, no, it was not about Pakistan.”)

So, whatever thoughts or observations I will share with you has been learnt at work from whatever I have seen over the last four decades.

I will be stating the obvious if I say that art exists to entertain but that there is a difference between art and the circus.

Art (and literature and cinema) record contemporary aspirations, dreams, fantasies and social problems; they measure the hurts and happinesses of the common man. In a way, art becomes the historian of the common man. And our cinema does that too – however exaggerated and distorted a mirror it may be.

Indians are a movie-loving nation. Cinema is extremely important to an average Indian. But, surprisingly for a very long time, the intelligentsia, the intellectual circles were totally indifferent to it. They were contemptuous of it. I am not here to defend the intellectual level of our cinema.

You can, quite understandably, have certain reservations about it. But you cannot ignore it. It is a very important phenomenon.

As our middle-class and upper-middle-class got more confident there developed a very condescending attitude – “Oh! I love Hindi films. My wife is very fond of it,” and so on.

One attitude is as wrong as another. Because, if we are really sensitive, if we have our antennae in the right place and we can receive messages, there is a lot we can learn about society by looking at films.

Hindi cinema, like any form of art, has its own drama. Now, if you ask for stark realism, it may not offer you that. But then, opera doesn't offer you realism, Kabuki doesn't offer you realism; but that doesn't make them irrelevant.

As a matter of fact, dreams don't offer you realism. Cinema is a kind of a dream. And dreams have a different reality. When you are sleeping, your liver, your kidney, your stomach, your heart – everything is working. And the brain also works, because if any part of your body stops working it will die. But if the brain keeps working, then how do you sleep? So, nature has found a strange solution. It changes the grammar of your thinking. Instead of thinking in sharp focus your brain starts dreaming; it takes reality and softens it, turns it into symbols. And it is for the psychoanalyst to analyse what the dream means.

I think Hindi cinema is also a kind of a dream. It is not reporting, but if we are able to decode what is happening, we'll be able to understand what the collective psyche is thinking or fantasizing. What are their aspirations, and what are their fears?

If you make a list of the villains of Hindi cinema, you can write the socio-political history of this country for the last sixty years. In the '40s, in an average Hindi picture, the villain was a *zamindar* or *jageerdar*. In the '50s, when we were thinking of a socialist pattern of society, the average villain was a rich man, a factory owner, a capitalist, the *seth*. In the early '60s, as the process of urbanization started, the villain was the underworld boss of a big city. And by the '70s this underworld gangster became the hero. In the '80s, to nobody's surprise, the villain was a policeman or a politician. In the '90s, quite understandably, the villain was Pakistan. And now, we don't have villains because villains have a frightening resemblance to us; so we are not willing to look at them.

Hindi cinema started with the emergence of the talkies. The first film that was made in 1933 was by a Parsee gentleman – Ardeshir Irani. The title of the film was *Alam Ara*. It had 50 songs and it had Muslim characters. So you see, minorities had the first claim on the talkies – especially the Muslims.

If you look at the pictures of the '30s, or the '40s, what interests me is the language. It is a perfect synthesis of Urdu and Hindi. I think purity of language is a perverse luxury that only those can afford who are not interested in communication.

Look at the songs of Pankaj Mallik:

*Jhadte hain phool phagun ke, phagun ke mahine mein.
Mein tumse judha hota hoon, ek dard liye seene mein.*

Now the first line – ‘*Jhadte hain phool phagun ke, phagun ke mahine mein*’ – can be a line from any UP folk song. The second line, ‘*Mein tumse judha hota hoon ek dard liye seene mein*’ is a line from a *ghazal*. It is predominantly Urdu. It is also very urban.

A language or a metaphor is secular. This is totally understandable because if you want everybody to see your film, if you want to communicate with everybody, you will have to be secular. The producer cannot afford to be selective about his audience. He is desperate; he wants everybody. So, he has to be secular.

And even today, it is so.

If I am writing dialogue, I will not use “*Kya tumhe ye haq hai?*” because I feel that people will not understand ‘*haq*’. So, I’ll say, “*Kya tumhe ye adhikar hai?*” Yet, I will not say “*Kya tumhe ye avashakta hai?*” I will write, “*Kya tumhe ye zaroorat hai?*”

A language that is not mentioned now was Hindustani. Indian cinema started in Hindustani. And Urdu and Hindi were both used in a very expedient manner, and you could take a word from either. Both these languages co-existed. But, language is not merely words. Language is the vehicle of culture. Kill a language and you kill a culture.

In many of those so-called “social” pictures made in the 1930s and the 1940s you will see the character says ‘*Aadaab arz hai*’. Not many people know the background of ‘*aadaab*’. ‘*Aadaab*’ is the plural of ‘*adab*’ which means ‘respect’. I remember in my childhood in Lucknow, liberal Muslim families would avoid ‘*salaam wal-e-qum*’ because it was religious and use ‘*aadaab*’ which was a secular greeting.

I think the utopia of secularism that India has seen and the perfect synthesis of culture that India has ever seen – forgive me for this immodesty – was in Avadh, in Lucknow. There were Muslim poets who wrote poem after poem on Krishna, Ram, Shiva. There were Hindu poets who wrote about Muslim traditions, wrote great literature in Urdu. And we see this attitude reflected even in the older pictures.

In 1947, there was a watershed in Indian history. India went through the trauma of Partition. This was an event that was beyond the idiom of Indian cinema. Indian cinema just couldn't handle it and pretended that it hadn't happened. For many years, Hindi commercial cinema did not touch this dramatic event with a bargepole. And for many years, strangely enough, no film was made where the protagonist was a Muslim. There was a total silence.

The first film after Partition with Muslim characters, that was made in 1959, was *Chaudvin ka Chand*. And it was a great hit. It was a blockbuster followed by films like *Mere Mehboob*, *Mere Huzoor*, *Bahu Begum*, and so on. And most of these pictures were extremely successful at the box office.

Now, these films, to my mind, were rather dangerous because they created a Super-Muslim.

This Muslim was a poet, or a *nawab*. He lived in a *haveli* with chandeliers and *chilmans*. He would only talk in poetry. And the women were very beautiful – all of them. It was a world that never existed – rather like in cowboy movies where there was a Hollywood-created cowboy culture. It was a world created by cinema.

(My brother, who lives in the USA, once went to a party and met some Indians. And one of them, who was a Hindu, asked him, “Where are you from in India?”

He said, “I'm from Lucknow.”

“What's your name?”

“Dr Salman Akhtar.”

“Oh! *Aap musalmaan hain? Lucknow se aaye hain? Apke ghar pe to roj mujra hota hoga?*”)

So, this is how a Muslim was created who was wonderful. He wore beautiful *sherwanis*, the women wore *shararas* and stood behind a *chilman*. And then they would recite a *sher*. And this man in a black *sherwani* would recite another *sher*. With a *shamma*, a chandelier, a *gautakiya*, and so on.

So now we had two Muslims. One who I saw in *Mere Huzoor* and *Chaudvin ka Chand* – such a nice man. Wonderful person. And another who was my neighbour, who owned a cycle shop, and did not remember any *ghazals* at all. Totally prosaic.

Now, though I may not be a Muslim hater *per se* (I like this *naawab*, this poet, even this *tawaif*), but this man, this neighbour, I found uncouth. So, I had the right to dislike him because I liked the other wonderful Muslim.

And even he – this cycle shop owner – believed that actually just a few years ago he was wonderful. But because of me, his neighbour, he had been reduced to this condition.

So, this representation took both people away from reality.

This good Muslim, through some process of osmosis, somehow, from some back door, entered the so-called “social” film. Again, it was representative of society. (Like in the Cabinet – there was a time, you will remember, when we used to have one token OBC, one token Schedule

Caste, and one token Muslim minister.) So, in these “social” movies we started getting a token good Muslim. A *Pathan* who is a great friend dies for his friendship; an old woman is love and compassion personified; a poet and, of course, the *tawaif*.

The Muslim “social” reciprocated and included a token good Hindu in it – a very nice person. In *Mughal-e-Azam* there was Durjan Singh, who saved Anarkali – for Salim, of course, not for himself. Token characters are supposed to be asexual.

Another strange phenomenon, I realised, is that secularism and religious tolerance in Hindi commercial cinema is exclusively the Hindu’s responsibility. You can show a character whose name is Vijay (or Ramesh, or Ashok, or Vinod) picking up a Koran and touching it to his eyes and, with total reverence, putting it somewhere. Or he is saved by a *billah* 786, which is the numerological number of *Bismallah-e-Rahmaan-e-Rahim*; or he enters a *dargah* and the green *chaddar* of the *dargah* flies and saves him from the villain, and so on.

But you cannot show and I don’t know why – I’m sure Muslims have not written letters to producers saying ‘Don’t do this’ – you cannot show a Muslim saved by *Ganesha*’s *murti*. No Muslim has picked up the *Gita* or *Ramayana*, put it against his eyes with reverence and prayed. This I have not seen.

I have never seen, in a commercial film, a Muslim character playing Holi although, as a matter of fact, in India, millions and millions of Muslims celebrate Holi. If you go to the National Museum in Delhi you will see a painting that was done by the court painter of Jehangir – his name was Mansoor – of Jehangir playing Holi. But that’s the only visual I have seen.

Religious tolerance. You have films against untouchability; about child marriage; about widow re-marriage; but never a film about any social menace or wrong religious practice of a minority. Never.

(There was a film called *Nikah* that was about divorce and so on, but it was about particular characters unlike *Sujata* or *Achut Kanya* where you are questioning the basic tenets.)

You can show a temple where the smuggler has hidden drugs, or jewellery, or gold behind an idol. But this cannot be done in a mosque. I have no idea how or why this convention is so. But when I look at our society I see a similarity.

We have in India this kind of treatment with kid gloves as far as minority malpractices are concerned – both social and religious. In India, under Muslim Personal Law, you give rise to a Muslim community with special laws not available to it in most of the Muslim countries. And

you do not touch those special laws. You feel “Oh! How can I do that? It’ll hurt the religious sentiments of the minority,” and so on.

But things are not so linear – as we see in our society. Our society is contradictory, paradoxical. On the one hand there are laws that are not available to Muslims in Bangladesh, in Egypt, in Tunisia. And, at the same time, you have the Bombay riots and Gujarat genocide. And nobody gets arrested. Nobody is sent to jail for that. It is a contradiction. On the one hand you are changing the verdict of the Supreme Court through Parliament; on the other hand, people are assaulted and women are gang raped. And not one person goes to jail? Not one person is arrested?

We show sensitivity towards minorities as long as they are with themselves. But when it comes to interaction – *Achhut Kanya*, *Sujata*, *Julie*, *Bombay*, *Veer Zara* – where there is inter-communal or inter-caste marriage, the boy will always be from a good, high-caste Hindu family. So, the message is that if you want to have some kind of integration it will be on our terms and conditions. Once again, no Hindu organization has written letters to the producers. But the producer, whose intellect and IQ is most probably of a single digit, has his ear to the ground. He knows what society will take and what society will not accept.

Now, if I bring up this topic with those producers and filmmakers, they will be shocked and outraged. And their shock and outrage will be genuine because they honestly don’t know why they have done what they have done. It is like talking to a fish about water.

Can the fish see where there is water? In the same way, most of us live in a particular ethos without questioning it. We inhale it. We take in the pollution. Please understand that I am not being judgmental; but, that is how it is.

In the ’60s or the ’70s a “social” film would not have been titled *Jai Shiv Shankar* or *Ram Lakhan*. And I repeat – the producer had no agenda on his conscious mind at all. There is nothing wrong with the title *Ram Lakhan*; it is a very good title. But you will never find a title of this sort in the ’50s, the ’60s or the ’70s... right up until the ’80s. And again it was very much in sync with what was happening in our society.

Tezaab was the first regular commercial picture where the main villain was a Muslim. *A Pathan*. It had never happened before. I am quite convinced that if you talk to that filmmaker, he will not know how it happened. He probably felt he was simply looking for an interesting character and he had lost the earlier fear about showing a Muslim.

Again, it is not a matter of coincidence that for the first time in Hindi commercial cinema a marriage between a Hindu boy and a Muslim girl was shown only after 1992 – after the BJP came into power and after you realized that you could win an election without the Muslim vote. So, if you can win an election, you can also make a film. It had never happened before... it was taboo. It was a wrong taboo. It should not have been like this, but that is how it was.

I remember a film that was made in the ’60s – *Mujhe Jeene Do* – where Waheeda Rahman played a Muslim prostitute and Sunil Dutt was a dacoit. And they get married. And there was so

much explanation... there were two marriages with a *maulvi* and a *pundit*. And, in any case, the Muslim community would not have owned the prostitute.

(Recently, you must have heard that some people had certain reservations about some of Hussain's paintings and some *mullahs* were asked, "How do you react to them?" They said, "*Hum to maante hi nahin hain paintings ko. Bilkul theek hai aap jo keh rahein hain. Yeh to kaam hi kharab hai.*")

When Pakistan became the villain some pictures differentiated between the Pakistanis and Indian Muslims; some did not. But very quickly the law of diminishing returns became applicable to these films. And they stopped.

Indian cinema has been, I think, rather insensitive with Christians, because a Christian character would be either a good-hearted drunkard or Miss Mona – Mona Darling. For a very long time, the vamp used to be Julie or Rita or Mona, but then heroines started to wear the same kind of clothes. The moralities of society were changing. So once Sunita or Sheetal began wearing such short dresses you didn't need Mona Darling. So, Mona Darling went out of fashion.

Now, I think the kind of secularism that Hindi cinema has captured or depicted is as real, as false, as contradictory, or as faulty as the secularism of our society. And at the same time it is as desirable because, defective as it is, it is still secularism.

I have great hopes of our future because I feel that the worst is behind us. There was a time when we had pretensions. There was a time when we dropped the mask. And the face, I'm afraid, was not very pretty. But, now, we are moving towards healthier attitudes. By 'we' I don't mean 'you' and 'me', I think it is a little too late for us, and our prejudices and biases are too deep. I wonder if my generation can be cured. But I have great hope for the generation of today – people who are in their early 20s or late teens. I find them healthier people. And, of course, it has started reflecting in cinema.

Indian cinema had taken a dip; not only as far as secular values were concerned, but aesthetically. Because if you have bad values you have bad morality. And if you have bad morality you have bad aesthetics.

For a very long time the powers that be, the so called secular forces of this country, thought that tolerating minority fundamentalism was also a part of secularism. Unfortunately, they did not

pay the price for it. The price was paid by somebody else. But I see that, in the political market, communalism is not a saleable commodity any more. The worst is behind us.

You know, society does not live in watertight compartments – the same people who go to political rallies also go to college and to the cinema house. The same people are involved in everything and their involvements overlap each other.

So, it is not a matter of coincidence that in the '80s, when India saw the worst face of communalism, the Indian film industry made the worst films and produced the worst songs. In all honesty, I find a relationship between “*Sarkaile khatiya...*” and Mr Advani’s speeches. They come from the same package. A society that listens to this sort of speech will also listen to this kind of song. It’s a package deal.

And it is not a wonder again that, as the communal temperature started going down, it reflected in our cinema. Now, communal temperatures don’t go down in only one particular community. Communalism is a kind of a monolith. All the communities will be communal; or all of them will come down on the communal scale. And they are coming down. And this reflects again in cinema; this reflects in politics; this reflects in music; this reflects in poetry; this reflects in lyrics... everything. Things are changing.

Recently, I saw a film – *Sarfarosh*. Could we imagine a film like *Sarfarosh* in the '50s when we were pretending to be totally secular? This is a secular film where there are no pretensions. We are asking uncomfortable questions and we should be. Grown-up people ask uncomfortable questions.

Or, *Rang de Basanti*. Or, *Iqbaal*. These are important films. They give me hope.

You know, in our commercial cinema, quite often we don’t use surnames. So, we have Mr Ramesh and Ms Neeta because if have surnames we will indicate the caste and the region, and, of course, the character should be pan-Indian. I wish to see a day when a character’s name is Aslam or Amjad or Zarina – just like Ms Neeta, just like Mr Ramesh.

They should not be saints. I see them as normal people. Let us not treat the minority community with kid gloves; nor look at them with prejudice. Both are equally wrong. But I think, ultimately, Hindi cinema is moving in the right direction. The new films will have characters who are not all evil and, thankfully, they are not all good. They reflect the secularism that society should look for and that Hindi cinema should reflect.

Thank you.

December 19, 2006

** In his introduction Titoo Ahluwalia had said that Javed's works would live on long after he and us, the audience, had both departed.*