Identifying Challenges: Minority Identity Formation and Media Cultural Isolation in India

Aishwarya Chatterjee*

Media Studies, Institute of Leadership, Entrepreneurship and Development, Kolkata, India

*Corresponding author: Aishwarya Chatterjee, Sr. Faculty, Media Studies, Institute of Leadership, Entrepreneurship and Development, Kolkata, India, Tel: 09674705451; 09432645051; E-mail: aishwarya.chatterjee@gmail.com

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Abstract

'Secular' India has around 79.8% of the population of Indians practicing Hinduism and 14.2% adheres to Islam, while the remaining 6% adheres to other religions (Christianity, Sikhism, Buddhism, Jainism and various indigenous ethnically-bound faiths). The minority population has always tried to maintain amiable relationship by sharing their culture and history with all other communities. This is apparent through the fact that Indian films based on the largest minority background have always remained extremely popular among viewers and has been treated as one of the leading parameters of cultural and sociological expression throughout the world. It is not difficult to imagine and experience the effects of films in various aspects of societies – cultural, sociological, psychic and political. The Hindi mainstream cinema undoubtedly has a tremendous influence on Indian psychology. Literature behind the history of Indian cinema can be traced back from the 1920s when the era had seen the colonial rule. On top of this, observers claimed that during this period the Hindi film was a melting pot of cultures and Indian 'secularism'. Hindi cinema is neither politically innocent nor conveys an unequivocal secularism. It has many times predicated the politics of inequality and escapism.

'Minority' in India have faced marginalization and discrimination since postcolonial foundation. The situation in India can thus function as an example for the West, as the effects of the war on terror may replicate the transformations Indian 'Minority' go through elsewhere. Despite the nation's proud self-identification as secular and democratic, 'Minority' who defied partition and remained in India are tacitly considered second-class citizens and their loyalty is always questioned.

This paper is in an attempt to study the shifting trend in representation of the 'Minority' in popular culture and mainstream cinema. It is also an attempt to study the change through the pre independence era, then through the first 25 years after independence and finally from the 90s till date.

Keywords: Minority; Media; Films; Culture; Secularism

Introduction

'Minority' in India have faced marginalization and discrimination since postcolonial foundation. The 'Minority' community has been represented in Hindi cinema alongside with their shifting roles with time. The main purpose of this paper is to identify the challenges faced by the 'Minority' protagonist, and stereotyping of positive or negative characters in Bollywood movies. For example, earlier they were portrayed as Nawabs and Sultans, in later years they were presented as terrorist and now they are being shown as modern 'Minority' in a number of recent films (who are neither nawabs nor terrorist). A shift has also been noted, from 'Minority'-terrorist image of extremely negative (as terrorists) to the neutral (close to positive) in movies like New York, Kurbaan, Dhoka, My Name is Khan and finally with a different image in the recent movies where Indians are also becoming pro-Pakistani such as Tiger, Total Siyapa, Veer Zara. The paper concludes with the argument that Bollywood changes 'Minority' portrayal according to the global or Indo-Pak scenario, which effects people's perception about 'Minority' and changes their global image. Incidentally 'Minority' has become main target of stereotyping in the world; they are usually portrayed in a negative role [1]. This stereotyping of 'Minority' is not a new phenomenon it has been going on since ages in western media through its TV shows, movies, cartoons and other programs but the problem became severe after 9/11 attacks and came to limelight.

This representation of 'Minority' in Media has affected the audience thought process about them in general. Cinema as a media is a weapon to create and even maintain an image of the 'Minority' community. 'Minority' were often publicized as terrorist through the eyes of media, which created an image notion to typecast them as terrorist in real life, soon people reminisced them as terrorist.

This strategy is also followed by Indian media; the role of 'Minority' has kept changing with accordance to their representation in movies through decades. In Indian Movies role of 'Minority' are often confused as Pakistanis or 'Minority' terrorist villain and even given every possible negative role [2].

However, in recent development it is seen that there has an immense change in the 'representation of 'Minority'' in and through Indian cinema. In India all communities have a strong history together. Their religious and cultural relationship keeps changing, at times creating a mixed feeling of hatred and brotherhood.

Hypothesis

Every study has some objectives which the researchers have proved. The hypothesis for this paper is discussed below:

- Cinema has an impact either strong or weak on the masses
- Cinema is the mirror of the society
- The journey of 'Minority' culture through the pre independence era in Indian cinema
- The modification in 'Minority' community that was reflected in the first 25 years after independence
- Then current setting of 'Minority' in Indian cinema from 90s till date.

Background

Works on "the history of Indian cinema" can be traced back from the 1920s. During this period, writers paint an industry constrained by colonial rule in its infancy. India art, music, literature, mythology and folklores have always been heard beyond the boundaries of communal values. All Indian viewers and readers have always found interest in all sorts of genres including religious mythology and biopics. Films like Hatim Tai, Ali Baba and Aladdin was a point-of interest too. With time the interpretation of social group changed. Whether this advocated the syncretic of "Hindu-Musalman" and was it successful in achieving the fusion of different religions, cultures, or philosophies is a matter of concern. The observers claimed, during this period or also in the later decades, that the Hindi film industry is a melting pot of cultures and an example of Indian 'secularism'. But Hindi cinema is neither politically innocent nor conveys an unequivocal secularism. Its 'social' film is predicated upon the politics of inequality and escapism. Since the narrative structure of every film converts it into history, it is not difficult to see why the history is as old as Indian cinema itself.

A Musaalman's Journey through the Pages of History if Indian Cinema

The early 1920s saw the rise of several new production companies. Most films made during this era were either mythological or historical in nature. Since then Bollywood has been producing films with 'Minority' characters with a number of productions like R S Choudhury's Anarkali, Humayun by Mehboob Khan, Shahjahan by A R Kardar. This trend continued into the 1950s with production of films like Baiju Bawra by Vijay Bhatt, Mumtaz Mahal and Nandlal Jaswantlal's Anarkali.

All these films portrayed themes taken majorly from historical events which conveyed the realistic scenario of those times. The films spoke about that depicted the zenith of the Mughal regality and not about the conditions of the 'Minority' immediately prior to, and at the wake of, the Independence and division of India, with the birth of Pakistan [3].

Later, in the 1950s and 1960s, Hindi films well-defined the mainstream, while it colonized the religious minority. 'Minority' characters dominated the historical, fictional and non-fictional story line of cinema. In this social context the audience saw the creation of Barsaat ki Raat, Mere Mehboob, Ghazal, Mere Huzoor, Mehboob ki Mehendi, Pakeezah, Bahu Begam, Chaudvin ka Chand etc. All followed a stereotyped 'Minority' ambience that was present in the plots and thus conveniently avoided the identity crisis of the 'Minority'.

During the 1970s and the 1980s Hindi cinema remained anchored to Nehruvian India. Pakeezah was only well received among educated audiences, Urdu-lovers and lovers of good cinema, though later it became a powerful hit and went on to be the second highest grossing Hindi-Urdu film of the year [4]. Garam Haowa, narrated about the then state of post-partition India, a 'Minority' businessman and his family struggle for their rights in a country which was once their own. It has been noticed that with the onset of the 1970s Hindi cinema, the 'Minority' characters had already started taking a backseat. The character of Zohra Bai in Muqaddar ka Sikandar and Rahim Chacha in Sholay can be cited as the best examples.

With the rise of Eighties came the period of electronics - the threat posed by television and video was tremendous in terms of losses to the film industry. However, films were made but the conventional formula for success tumbled. The trend of stories changed its facet from social interest, love, family life, and fantasies to social evils like rape -trauma, humiliation and insensitivity. 'Minority' depiction and their character representation took a turn. This decade gifted the Indian audience with hits like Coolie, where the main protagonist was titled Iqbal and the negative character was Zafar Khan. Both the characters portrayed ''Minority' role play'. There were films which also mirrored social issues in Indian 'Minority' society. Films like Nikaah, was stimulation against Islamic patriarchy. Bazaar was another film which precisely portrayed the real issue of Indian 'Minority' families arranging marriages for their very young daughters with very old men who had made fortunes in the Gulf countries. Thus this film had a sympathetic take on the economic dilemma, and gender discrimination ensuing from that, amongst the 'Minority' in India. The representation of the 'Minority' in popular culture and mainstream cinema kept on changing through the years reflecting many aspects that included social understandings and misunderstandings.

A new flow of challenges came through a fresh modification in portraying 'Minority' community in films. In lieu of consequences, it created a different aspect of creating a public

opinion. Since, the early 1990s witnessed the coinciding of events, with the raise of Kashmir rebellion, the destruction of the Babri Masjid and its fallout – a transition has taken place in the portrayal of the 'Minority' [5].

By the end of 1990s, the Indian cinema showcased the 'Minority' as 'terrorist' and that increasingly appeared as a threat to India. On the other hand keeping with the changing political climate and discourse of the country, we witnessed Roja being the most recognized film of this genre. This film was amongst the first to display an interdependent relation between Kashmir, Pakistan and 'Minority'. Another exceptional film during this decade was Bombay, which highlighted the necessity of Hindu-'Minority' harmony in the changing face of the country, through the portrayal of Hindu- 'Minority' marriage. Probably the increasing marginalization of the Indian 'Minority' in the 1970s and 1980s reinforced the phenomenon.

A discussion further, 1990 onwards

The early 90's saw the rise of romantic and action based story line with Khans in action. We got several block busters from Shah- Rukh, Salman and Amir Khan. Before we proceed further with the discussion of the films of this decade, there is another factor which is of no less importance. The irony being that, they all were Indian 'Minority' but rarely played 'Minority' characters on screen. Thus the question arises, whether they feared that their 'Minority' names, would affect the success of those movies. But at one point, they were a step ahead of their predecessors of Bollywood who even changed their real name for the sake of reel name's safety. Like Dilip Kumar whose birth name was Muhammed Yusuf Khan, Madhubala (Mumtaz Jehan Dehlavi), Ajit (Hamid Ali Khan), and Johnny Walker (Badruddin Jamaluddin Kazi), Meena Kumari (Mahjabeen Bano) but they neither experimented with their names nor risked their fame [6].

The Khans in this decade gave back to back hits like Dil wale Dulhania Le Jayenge, Kuch kuch hota hai, Andaz andaz aapna, Bazigar, Hum aapke hai Kaun, Akele Hum Akele Tum, Hum Dil De Chuke Sanam, Jab Pyaar Kisise Hota Hai, Sajaan, Duplicate, Yes Boss and Ishq, Dil Hai Ki Manta Nahin, Baazi, Dil, Pardes, Judwaa, Hum saath saath hai, Khabi haa Kabhi naa, Dil to pagal hai and Hum Hain Rahi Payar ke. But the element of surprise is that all the role plays and the type of characters played by the pillars of Bollywood were Hindu characters.

Scenario of recent times, 2000 onwards

Later, with the end of the 20th century, and the starting of 2000 saw Bollywood producing movies like Maa Tujhe Salaam, Pukar, Ghulam-e-Mustafa, and Mission Kashmir which were signature to a renewed cinematic narratives. This genre recognized the 'outside' threat perception as the root cause of Indian nationalism under threat without any scope of introspection or problem-detection from within. With time Bollywood and its audience changed it's thought and reframed 'Minority' with a negative approach. Bollywood portrayal of the Pakistanis in 'Other' augments in its pan-sub continental

thinking distorted imagery of the 'Minority'. The 'Minority' in the movies were started to be publicized as 'terrorists', who were always trying to shock the 'basis' of Indian 'democracy'.

On the other hand there were also films with characters like – Inspector Saleem of Sarfarosh (1999) who rightly interpreted the meaning of Musaalman as 'musaalam iman' (one who submits to God), which being one of the greatest hit of this genre. Other films of this category can be recalled as Border and LOC. But in these movies there where 'Minority' characters who were shown as patriots and positive Indian whom viewers would appreciate. In more or less recent films like Gadar – Ek Prem Katha and Veer-Zaara, cross-border 'love story' have been attempted successfully and ran brisk business. But, surprising enough was that the success of both the films rested on the fact that the female lead characters were 'Minority' and Pakistanis.

Thus, it was well accepted by the audience as an echo of triumph of India nationalist superiority. The fact that all these films were made during the whole decade of the 1990s and till early part of the second millennium, which is known as the highest point of Hindutva politics in India, shows the political and cultural involvement in Indian popular culture.

The global thematic shift in the portrayal of 'Minority' changed after 9/11 incident and Bollywood, not been an exception. But, the stylish playboy 'Minority' 'terrorist' has also made an appearance in many popular films. The Indian popular heroes acted in these films. There were popular films like Fanaa and Fiza, thereby sociologically broadening the definition of Islamic terrorism [7].

Fanaa clearly portrayed that the boy next could be a dangerous 'terrorist' with ambiguous political loyalties. Same way Fiza, portrayed a 'Minority' boy from Mumbai turning towards "Jihad" as an after effect of Babri Masjid communal riots in Mumbai.

The female characters in both films – Fiza (sister of Amaan) and Zooni (lover of Rehaan) - were shown as extremely submissive and subjugated by the male protagonists. While following carefully the significance of the cinematic language imbibed in these films, it is identified as a problem. They were portrayed as secular-nationalist 'Minority' women with a soft connection for the ''Minority' terrorist'.

Some recent films have proved to be the melting point of culture and secularism. The list of those exceptional films during the recent times is not at all dismal. The film Dev (2004), by Govind Nihalani, exposed the multifaceted relation between majority-minority communal prejudice, along with socio-political ambiences and communal tensions in Mumbai. The film ends with optimism as Farhaan; the 'Jihadi terrorist' renovates himself into a secular 'Minority' practicing law.

Pooja Bhatt's Dhoka sets itself apart even within the exceptional bracket. The film is about a police officer, named Zaid, whose wife Sara becomes a 'jihadi' suicide bomber. The film remains neutral not taking sides as far as tainting a particular religious community, responsible for terrorism, is

concerned. It rather condemns the spread of terror in the name of religion and rejects terror.

Nagesh Kukunoor's two films, Iqbal and Dor, portray many features absolutely contrary to the popular beliefs. Iqbal is a character who has a strong desire and dreams to play for the Indian national cricket team. His winning over his battle against all odds of a rural, poverty-stricken, physically challenged 'Minority' boy. The protagonist's religion was not an important factor and never played a vital role in the development of the narrative of this film. Essentially this can be considered as a vital breakaway from any previous film entailing a 'Minority' character. The film Dor portrays the story of two 'Minority' women – Meera and Zeenat. This film shows Zeenat as an independent and brave woman who has lived her life in her own terms and ready to go to any extent to save her husband's life. The character breaks the stereotype of the purdah system as an inherent part of Islam.

Bollywood presented Kabir Khan, a former hockey star, who was misunderstood as a traitor, a person who betrayed his country. Later he begins coaching the Indian women's national hockey team to prove his loyalty to the nation in the blockbuster movie Chak De! India

In the recent years arrived another character 'Sultan' a Salman Khan starrer Sultan. The film depicted Sultan Ali Khan, a middle-aged wrestler, who gives up the sport after his son's death. However, years later, circumstances force him to revive his career and win back the respect of his loved ones. All audience loved Sultan as the hero without bothering about his religion. Another Shah Rukh Khan and Nawazuddin Siddiqui starrer Raees was a film said to be based on criminal Abdul Latif's life that runs an illegal alcohol empire in a Gujarat shrouded in prohibition.

Audience today has broken down all barriers and boundaries of social, religious and cultural fences through Indian cinema. Entertainment and a proper plot are the key factors of success, setting aside the religion of the good and bad characters of the movie.

Conclusion

From the beginning of the 20th Century, films have been treated as one of the leading parameters of cultural and sociological expression throughout the world. It is well within the scope of critical argument that more often than not the mainstream Hindi films have misrepresented and also misinterpreted the 'Minority' protagonists/characters in a negative way–as terrorists, anti-nationals, anti-socials, non-modern and feudal.

Although there have been attempts to display 'Minority' lives in India in a genuine way, the general trend of film-making lacks integrity and sincerity to show the day to day offense of 'Minority' in India. The standardized imageries of 'Minority' characters were as bearded men with rosaries, the Arab scarves donned by ''Minority' terrorists', the hijab, the topi and the burqa – shown in popular Hindi films have harmed the 'Minority' identity in the public domain, rather than adding to the distinctiveness of the Indian 'Minority'.

Today, saying that cinema in India is mere escapist entertainment would be an understatement. To say that it is passion bordering on hysteria would not be an absurd hyperbole. The 21st century is when Indian cinema finally found some sort of a balance between the ever genres of popular commercial and parallel cinema putting aside the division of religion and culture. Today Bollywood has become a culture beyond just religious and cultural relationship that keeps changing, at times creating a mixed feeling of hatred and brotherhood. Bollywood in contemporary times is tuning with the rhythm of secularism of culture.

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