

On Hindi cinema's hybrid roots

A celebration of Bombay cinema's Islamicate origins at a time when Bollywood seems to be losing its sheen

Mahmood Farooqui

letters@hindustantimes.com

It is not often that a solitary article spawns two international seminars, and two excellent edited volumes. But Mukul Kesavan is exactly the kind of thinker who can set off big intellectual currents with throwaway remarks. His 1994 article *Urdu, Awadh and the Tawaif: the Islamicate roots of Hindi Cinema* provided the impetus for Ira Bhaskar and Richard Allen's 2009 collection *Islamicate Cultures of Bombay Cinema* which studied Bombay cinema through the lens of the "Muslim Social, the Historical, the Courtesan film and the new wave Muslim social." It was critiqued for "confounding the very motivation of Kesavan's article" which had maintained that the very nature of Bombay cinema, and not just some aspects of it, had been determined by an Indo-Muslim or Islamicate culture. This latest, comprehensive collection is a response to that critique.

The cinema produced by Bombay, sometimes known as Bollywood, today faces its acutest existential crisis. The assault is not only technological viz the rise of digital platforms, or the debilitating popularity of films from the South and from Hollywood, but ideological. It is daily discredited and assaulted for its liberalism, its apparently anti-Hindu content, and for the Muslims who dominate it. Bollywood is losing not just its numbers, it already seems to have lost its *iqbal*, the prestige that made filmmakers and actors more than stars -- opinion makers, influencers. Therefore it is supremely ironic, and also consoling, to read a collection of articles celebrating Bombay cinema's Islamicate roots.

The term Islamicate, coined by Marshal Hodgson, is used to describe cultures and aspects of culture influenced by Islam which are not necessarily Islamic, or Islamist, like ghazal poetry, or qawwali. Kesavan's contention was that not just the themes, but

the very nature of the films made in Bombay, especially in depiction of scenes of love, dialogues and ways of comportment was Islamicate. I shall add my two bits to this by highlighting the deep, pervasive, and abiding presence of the notion of *sharafat*, and of *sharif* people in many different kinds of films, across the ages. In *Awara*, Prithviraj Kapoor asserts, "*Sharifon ki aulad hamesha sharif hoti hai... aur chor daaku ki aulad hamesha chor daaku hoti hai.*" The idiom and the expression are laced with the language of *sharafat*, an Islamicate value par excellence. It is a notion of comportment, of upbringing, conduct and exemplary behaviour which continues to imbue a family/protagonist with values, even in these blighted times.

In its early years, much of Bombay cinema, and of other regions, adopted the conventions and tropes which were first developed by Parsi Theatre whose heyday lasted from roughly 1870 to the 1930s. It was Parsi theatre that first developed the genres of the mythological, the musical, the historical, the Muslim social, the Persianate love stories and others. Sunil Sharma writes about the popularity of films inspired by Persianate literary traditions *ie* the stories of Shirin Farhad, Laila Majnun, Rustam Sohrab and of Alexander the Great. Many of these were Persian *masnavis*, long narrative poems, by such stalwarts as Amir Khusrau, Nizami and Firdousi. But they proved immensely popular with Indian audiences.

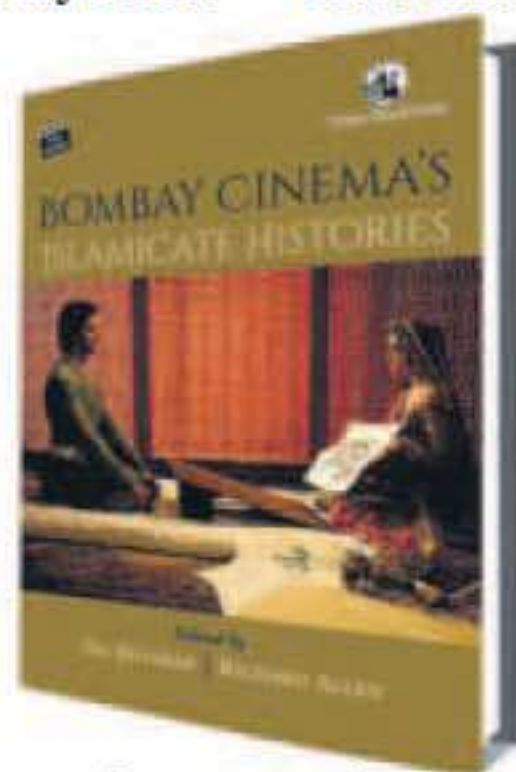
These Persianate films were different from the genre of the Oriental. Rosie Thomas writes that the key to "India's oriental fantasy film was its setting within an imaginary world outside India. Although sometimes coded as quasi Arabian and/or ancient Iranian, this was in fact a hybrid never-never land." The story of Ali Baba was especially popular right from the beginning and Rosie suggests that India's first full-length feature film could well have been Hiralal Sen's *Alibaba* in 1904. India's first gramophone recording of 1902 by Soshi Mukhi and Fano Bala comprised song

extracts from popular theatre shows of the time, including *Ali Baba*. *Tales from the Arabian Nights* were long a staple of British and European theatre, but the Indian filmmakers drew "eclectically on both transcultural orientalist trends and local traditions." They drew upon a Hollywood genre of music called "Arab Spice", which was not Arab music, but Arab music as presented by Hollywood. Scalloped arches, Arab spice music, international look, the Ali Baba films inspired such high brow artists as Modhu and Sadhona Bose, sometime associates of Tagore, as well as low brow and popular films such as made by Wadia Movietone.

This exotic orient is set somewhere to the West of India but can easily be domiciled in India's cultural traditions.

This book comprises many excellent articles, of which I only mention a few. It is an excellent volume about Indian cinema, especially its tremendous hybrid roots before independence, many of which were uncontainable even within the Congress-style inclusive secularism. My only quibble is that there is no mention here of the consumers, the people who wrote *farmaishes* to the radio, who wrote fan letters and watched films 10 times over. What did they make of it all? Be that as

it may, at a moment when its Islamicate roots seem more of an embarrassment to Bombay, I wonder how long before these associations become unmentionable. Only last week, my sister-in-law sent me a video containing vox populi where Shah Rukh, Aamir and Salman are abused and people hatefully assert their intention to boycott their films. Where we go from here at a time of RRRs and KGFs is difficult to tell. On the other hand, a recent cover of Mehdi Hasan's famous ghazal *Mujhe Tum Nazar Se Gira to Rahe Ho* by two young Indians Lisa Mishra and Adarsh Gaurav has rapidly amassed 9.9 lakh views on Youtube. There is that too.



Bombay Cinema's Islamicate Histories
Edited by Ira Bhaskar and Richard Allen
424pp, ₹2,295
Orient Blackswan

Mahmood Farooqui's latest work is *Dastan-e Raza*, a Dastangoi presentation on the life and times of Syed Haider Raza, one of the greatest painters produced by modern India.