

Partition cinema as a cautionary tale

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PARTITION through the lens of cinema... undeniably, John W Hood's book is a deeply understood and felt account of the tumultuous and tragic period of Indian history. On the face of it, the incredibly well-researched work may appear to be a chronicle. Or a filmography detailing movies that encapsulate the times when the Radcliffe Line tore a nation apart and created a wedge between communities.

However, as Hood describes movies such as Richard Attenborough's *'Gandhi'*, Ketan Mehta's *'Sardar'* and Gurinder Chadha's *'Viceroy's House'*, the idea is to go beyond a mere summation or critical appraisal. We see the agonising past unfurling before our eyes. Through the kaleidoscope of many a film, not all falling in the same artistic parameters though, we walk down the lanes of blood and mayhem. How the momentary lapse of insanity continues to cast its ominous shadow on our present is reflected too. As Hood moves from one film to another, Hindi to Bengali, even Punjabi, not only is Partition reconstructed, but also the context and perspective, which movies often fail to lend to their narratives. He points out how *'Gandhi'* did not address questions like the "blame of Partition". *'Viceroy's House'* may not have been critically acclaimed, but Hood shares that the film brought out certain facts hitherto unknown, like how the hurried par-



TEAR-DRENCHED EARTH: CINEMA AND PARTITION OF INDIA

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tition of India troubled Cyril Radcliffe. From films that caught the popular imagination in India to those like Bangladeshi filmmaker Akram Khan's *'Khancha'*, Bangladesh's official entry to the Oscars, Goutam Ghose's *'Shankhachil'* and *'Khamosh Pani'* by Pakistani filmmaker Sabiha Sumar, Hood reimagines it all with felicity and detail.

Partition affected individual lives and the micro became macro in films like *'Toba Tek Singh'*. Interestingly, though Nandita Das' film on its writer Saadat Hasan Manto is quintessentially a biopic, Hood movingly reminds us of Manto's tragic choice of moving away from his real home Bombay. Be it Deepa Mehta's *'Earth'* or Govind Nihalani's TV series *'Tamas'* or Shyam Benegal's *'Mammo'*, the author's fluency manages to stir you from within. Seismic fallouts of Partition, the creation of Bangladesh in 1971, the anti-Sikh riots of 1984 and the Gujarat riots of 2002 can't go unnoticed. Filmmakers have taken note as well as the author, who does not hesitate in describing the barbarity that danced on the streets of India and Pakistan. Cinematic rendering of these scenes invariably gives you goosebumps. Of course, the intention is not to sensationalise.

To resist the temptation of going for the lowest common denominator of entertainment while writing about cinema is a feat in itself. Massy films like *'Gadar'*, too, are duly mentioned. But the author is not distracted by its

box-office success, or the star value of the films that are the subject of his interest. Names of actors are rarely mentioned. Shunning easy ways to grab your attention, Hood has the reader hooked till you turn the last page. Reading it is as experiential as soul-stirring, especially the way it ends, talking of *'Parzania'* and *'Firtaqa'*, focusing on the mind-numbing details of the Gujarat riots, which lie in the same continuum of hatred and othering that defined the communal riots of Partition. However, the book is not meant to flare up communal sentiments. It calls out movies like *'Kaum De Heere'*, which eulogised the killers of a former Prime Minister.

History will record Partition as a significant event peppered with figures of those displaced and killed. Only art, particularly the potent medium of cinema, can lend heart and soul to the suffering that individuals bore on their skin. Generations are still paying the price for the decisions made by political masters of that era. Hood echoes the same heartfelt anguish in words and the tear-drenched earth's piercing cry comes alive in his book, often perhaps stronger than it might have in the films he describes with a rare insight and perception.

A history buff or cinephile or just a reader keen to know and understand more, the book is for everyone. Not as a teary-eyed summation of movies that walked this path, but as how what should have served as a cautionary tale is recurring ad nauseam. A lesson in and from cinematic history.