

Studies in People's History

Book Review: Urvi Mukhopadhyay, *The 'Medieval' in Film: Representing a Contested Time on Indian Screen (1920s–1960s)*

[Arun Bandopadhyay](#)

Abstract

Urvi Mukhopadhyay, *The 'Medieval' in Film: Representing a Contested Time on Indian Screen (1920s–1960s)* (New Delhi: Orient Black Swan), 2013, xiv + 318 pp., hardback ₹790.

It was from the third quarter and more emphatically from the fourth quarter of the twentieth century that film studies emerged as an increasingly attractive field of intellectual work with diverse disciplinary affiliations. One such important area is the study of films from what has been called a broadly historical perspective. Itself a product of the combination of multiple cultural media such as literature, art and photography, cinema was born and evolved as a cultural medium in the twentieth century in the wider socio-political context over time. Its engagements with history are, therefore, both primary and multivalent in its production and reception, producing varieties of images and representations of history, academic and non-academic.

The advent of film as a new technology in historical representation in India in the early twentieth century came in the wake of a longer history of print and audio-visual media in the nineteenth century. The present book is an attempt to explore 'the plurality of perceptions that creates a multi-layered narrative of the historical past' through films. Its author Urvi Mukhopadhyay studies 'the complex socio-political and cultural matrix in which perceptions of the "medieval" age in India' were expressed in filmic representations from the 1920s to the 1960s, with special reference to northern and western India.

However, the author admits from the beginning that constructing the 'medieval' in India is problematic. Though there is a problem with the word medieval even in European history before the advent of modernity in the fifteenth century, the period 'medieval' obviously dates in India from the days of colonial historiography. However, beyond the Hindu–Muslim–British periodisation of Indian history which came into vogue in much of the historical invocations as well as in representations in stories, novels and theatres in the nineteenth century, it was perhaps Vincent Smith who first used the word 'medieval' in Indian historiography from the seventh century onwards. Interestingly, historical representations in the popular media including films often appear to mimic the dominant interpretation of the time, sometimes approving, sometimes challenging the monolithic notions of ideology of 'consensus and hegemony' as formulated by Antonio Gramsci. Situating historical film as integral to analysing socio-political enunciations is, therefore, an articulation of understanding 'commonsensical past', another Gramscian term.

Urvi Mukhopadhyay's book consists of five chapters, besides an Introduction and a Conclusion. Chapter 1 dwells on a range of popular historical representations in novels, theatre and bazaar art in the nineteenth century, analysing the articulation of a 'medieval' or 'Islamic' stereotype against the background of the emerging nationalist attempts to determine a modern/Indian/Hindu self. Here the author tries to cope with both elite, academic history and those popular narratives that lay beyond it.

In Chapter 2, Mukhopadhyay explores the first initiatives towards the establishment of cinematic stereotypes for the 'medieval' past during the 1920s. Here the process of articulating historical milieu for popular understanding is placed against the backdrop of political culture of contemporary nationalist rhetoric as enunciated by Tilak and Gandhi. Here the author mainly analyses the silent era of Indian films, focusing on such early feature films as *Raja*

Harishchandra (1913) or later films like *Laila Majnu* (1922), *Nurjehan* (1923), *Shah Jahan* (1924) and *Shivaji Nu Janma* (1931). Her main argument is that historical perceptions in these films are far from being monolithic and resolved, and they are multi-layered and fragmented.

Chapter 3 covers the early era of the talkies. With the advent of sound technology in the Indian sub-continent, regional linguistic and cultural heterogeneity further complicated and diversified the content and style in the representation of the medieval in cinema. During this era, popular films sought to articulate a series of narratives through negotiations and compromises between various perceptions of the past to capture a nation-wide market. It was during this time that *sant* films were introduced, where the historicist image of medieval 'self-sufficiency' had merged with a notion of traditional 'spirituality' to form a new, plural image of the medieval past. Films such as *Bhakta Kabir* (Hindi, 1942) and *Chandidas* (Bengali, 1932) are important examples of this genre. Another significant exception is the movie called *Pukar* (1939) which narrates the story of a popular call (*pukar*) to end the death penalty in the Mughal judicial system during the rule of Emperor Jahangir, a story in which the Rajput Mangal Singh (Sangram Singh's son), his lover Kanwar, Nur Jahan and Jahangir were all personally involved to demand the abolition of a death sentence issued against Mangal Singh for a murder in self-defence. This choice of the subject matter was significant as it alluded to a contemporary protest against death sentence imposed on the nationalist freedom fighter Bhagat Singh in 1931.

The author examines the 'medieval' in film in the era of communal polarisation during 1940–46. She has noted that even during this period, historical films, because of their commercial interest in capturing wider audiences tended to celebrate the conglomerate and syncretic roots of Indian heritage. Mehboob Khan's *Humayun* (1945) is a typical example of this. It projects a cordial relationship between Mughal rulers and their Hindu subjects even before the days of Akbar. The film's poster also celebrated the heterogeneity of medieval times, depicting two women dressed distinctively in Hindu and Muslim costumes along with the Emperor Humayun, a poster which has been reproduced in the book from the National Film Archive of India in plate 18. However, the celebratory narratives, set primarily in medieval royal courts and elite cultures, indirectly challenged the ideological foundations of the depiction of social harmony at the grassroots level in the *sant* films. Some exceptions of communalist representations of the medieval were also there during this period. And they have been analysed to underscore the contradictions in contemporary perceptions of the historical past.

The last chapter is concerned with contesting visions of the 'medieval' in Independent India from 1947 to the 1960s. In current socio-political studies, this period is generally described as witnessing the inauguration of a new society based on the principles of secularism, democracy and industrial modernisation. The period was largely dominated by the Nehruvian vision of modern India. The author investigates the extent to which this Nehruvian perspective pervaded the articulation of stereotypes of a past whose shadow still loomed over the present. The memory of communal violence around the time of Partition of India in 1947 and its recurrence in several parts of India thereafter were still too immediate to ignore.

Two important films symbolically represent this period. One is Nandlal Jaswantlal's version of *Anarkali* (1953) which revived the theme of courtly historical romance. The director Jaswantlal had previously worked with Imperial Studios under R.S. Chaudhuri, who is credited with making two versions of *Anarkali*, silent and talkie, respectively. Although *Anarkali* narrated the story of the love affair between the Mughal prince Salim and the slave girl Anarkali, it resembled contemporary social melodrama in its narrative style. It involves a romantic relationship between two socially unequal persons that is destined to end in tragedy. Was the inability to overcome social hierarchy a symbol of the claustrophobic nature of pre-modern society or even a reflection of the changing but still unequal society of modern India? This is a question which is not distinctly raised or in any way answered in the chapter. The film presumably had multiple messages, and *The Times of India* in an advertisement labelled 1953 as 'the year of *Anarkali*'.

Mughal-e-Azam (1960) was another historical epic made in the Nehruvian era. The film was originally conceived in 1944, but was disrupted four times before it was finally made in 1960 after at least 10 years of effort and the biggest budget yet by Indian standards. Through numerous repetitions and modifications of the story of *Anarkali*, the thin line between legend and history had already been blurred, and the tale of the slave girl Anarkali had become a part of 'history' in the minds of film-going audiences. K. Asif, the maker of the film, gave this process of fabrication of popular history a twist, ending his film by allowing Anarkali to live rather than die by being buried alive as imperial punishment. This twist at the end of the tale mitigated the cruel image that had been formed of the character of Akbar, otherwise the most revered medieval sovereign in both Western imperialist and nationalist historical writings, including Nehru's secular historiography. The book is a significant contribution in that it establishes historical films as a tool for understanding social history of modern India through their revelation of a more complex pattern of negotiation between the social, economic, cultural and political present on the one hand and the ideas and perceptions of the past on the other. It is based on a considerable number of primary sources and developed over a wide range of secondary sources in an inter-disciplinary framework. Mukhopadhyay explains why historical films as a cultural medium became so important in the social change of modern India during 1920–1960, but partly fails to answer a question she has herself raised why the historical themes in Indian films have receded in the background since the late 1960s. Has this been so because of the subtle changes in the compositions of society and mentality of the people or the changing motivations of the commercial sponsors of the films in India? There can also be a comparative study of the changing characteristics of many 'medieval' films made in India till the 1960s and the notably few historical films made thereafter on the same period. She has given some examples of later historical themes sporadically taken up in Indian films, but there is much left out here. She has not mentioned Satyajit Ray's *Shatranj ke Khilari* (1976) at all, probably treating it as a 'modern' historical film. But the study of the conflicts between the 'medieval' and 'colonial' social and cultural worlds both within and beyond the confines of family as depicted in Ray's film could plausibly come as an extension of the author's 'medieval' in films. Notwithstanding these gaps, Urvi Mukhopadhyay has made a significant departure by her analysis of Indian films dealing with episodes placed in the 'medieval' period of Indian history.