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“Say Shava Shava!”: Self-Censorship, Changing States and the Cultural Economy of Punjabin in Bombay Cinema.

My paper explores the post-1947 cinematic depiction of Punjabis by commercial filmmakers located in the motion picture industry of Bombay, India. The paper discusses both important cinematic themes and symbols as well as crucial ‘background factors’ that are used by and which influence filmmakers in their depiction of Punjabis. These are derived from a sense of cultural heritage, regional location and pride, strategic colonial discourse (which continues to percolate into the construction of identities), and the impact of powerful postcolonial political dramas upon such a construction of self-hood, and on dramatic demarcations of otherness.

The paper focuses in particular upon an influential cinematic style of presenting the Punjab and Punjabi in Bombay film which grew in strength and commercial popularity from the mid-1960s onward. The paper focuses especially on the phenomenon of *self-censorship* applied by Bombay filmmakers in the development and embellishment of this cinematic style hereafter referred to as *Punjabin*¹. The form of censorship found to operate in the imagining and building of cinematic *Punjabin* was not one explicitly applied or demanded by government regulations or social organizations; it has been found to emerge from Bombay filmmakers’ *self-applied silence* on the gruesome violence, emotional and material loss and cartographic damage and dislocation caused by the tumultuous Partition of the Punjab in 1947.

This self-censorship of Bombay filmmakers stems from a deep sense of both political and personal loss and betrayal, shame and disgust with ‘the games of politics’ (*siyasi khel*), as well as a sharp sense of the commercial (non-)viability of unsavoury stories or ‘bitter memories’ (*karwin yaadein*). The silence of Bombay filmmakers on Partition has been followed by another interesting development; this has been the gradual expansion of a particular kind of Punjabi world in film, one that is infused with the colours, delights, comforts and ‘traditional values’ of *Punjabin* as remembered, imagined and even commercially estimated by mainstream filmmakers. This Punjabi world is also sharply marked by *Punjabin* being embodied, negotiated and positively defined almost entirely

¹ The term *Punjabin* refers to a commonly-held, all-encompassing view of Punjabi culture, society and ‘being Punjabi’ as an individual. The term thus refers both to larger structures of social organisation (such as kinship networks, caste identities, religious beliefs and practices, understandings of gender roles, etc.) as well as to ‘individual Punjabi values’ (such as bravery, resilience and heartiness). For more on *Punjabin* as well as the ‘performance’ and internalisation of roles as per norms set by culture, gender, colonial discourse, etc., see Butler (1997), Fox (1985), Darling (1977), Said (1979), Hobsbawm (1983).

by Khatri Hindu Punjabis. Cinematic *Punjabiyyat* is thus marked either by the near-total invisibility or the caricaturing and/or demonising of the Punjabi Other, the Sikh and the Muslim. The unquestioned dominance of the upper-caste Hindu Punjabi as film hero has also led to the development of a cinematic *doxa*, an idea developed further in this paper.

This cinematic Punjabi world has expanded markedly, becoming the dominant backdrop to most plots in contemporary Bombay cinema. Indeed, this ‘imagined continuity’ has been fuelled further by powerful recent events and phenomena, including the Khalistan Crisis and controversial caste-based reservations of the 1980s, and the energies and violence of economic liberalization and Hindutva in the 1990s.

This paper makes the fundamental point that the particular form and implications cinematic *Punjabiyyat* has taken in mainstream Bombay films post-1947 have been originally, powerfully and enduringly shaped, constricted and both given and denied space and meaning by the silences and shames surrounding the Partition of Punjab. The paper presents both ethnographic arguments and theoretical categories which, together, explain and confound the significance of the strong cinematic imagery of Punjabi culture as an eternal fount of rejoicing, resilience and revival. Finally, the paper presents a discussion of the changing nature of the postcolonial Indian State, and the manner in which this phenomenon has both affected and, in turn, been powered by cinematic *Punjabiyyat*.

The paper carries excerpts from ethnographic fieldwork carried out in the Bombay film industry from late 2003 until 2005.

I. Side-stepping the Partition. **Historical ‘Puzzles’ of the Secular and the Sectarian, ‘Us’ and ‘the Others’.**

This section engages largely with the writings of Gyanendra Pandey (and other Subalternists) on Partition and its treatment in ‘mainstream’ history-writing since 1947. Pandey writes of violence in Indian historiography (and in wider fields) treated either as representing aberration or absence. Pandey speaks of ‘aberration’ in the sense of violence in Indian history-writing analyzed as “something removed from the general run of Indian history: a distorted form, an exceptional moment, not the “real” history of India at all.”²

The country’s ‘real history’ has instead been given its (homogenizing or ‘normalizing’) contours almost entirely by a centralized state. Pandey writes of the journey of this postcolonial state/State:

“(it)...has spoken...more and more brazenly on behalf of a get-rich-quick, consumerist “middle class” and its rural (“rich peasant”) allies...The “fragments” of Indian society...which...represent “minority” cultures and practices – have been expected to fall in line with the “mainstream” (Brahmanical Hindu, consumerist) national culture. This “mainstream”, which represents in fact a small section of the society, has indeed been flaunted as *the* national culture.”³

² Gyanendra Pandey’s ‘In Defense of the Fragment: Writing about Hindu-Muslim Riots in India Today’, Ranajit Guha (ed.) *A Subaltern Studies Reader, 1986-1995*, Oxford University Press: Delhi, 2000, pp. 1-34, esp. p. 1

³ *ibid*, pp. 2-3

Pandey also analyzes ‘nationalist’ historiography in India as affording further power and legitimacy to this ‘mainstream’ State, creating and encouraging strong demarcations of thought and practice via ‘neat binary categories’. These include oppositional categories such as secular/communal, national/local (where ‘local’ is largely read as anti-national) and progressive (or economic)/reactionary (or cultural). This ‘modern’ historiography has propounded “notions of a natural Indian unity and an Indian national essence. This historiography has elevated the nation-state...to the status of the end of all history, so much so that “History” in schools, colleges, and universities in India, still ends for the most part in 1947.”⁴

The power and patronage enjoyed by this kind of history-writing has been remarkable. It’s historiographical meta-narrative has presented an appealing picture of an essentially peace-loving and secular people, led in unity towards freedom and modernity by an inherently progressive and equal (Congress-constituted) ‘State’. In this scenario, state power is shown to be constantly inspired by a beatified Gandhi, inflected with his humane ideals. Pandey critically examines the role of this meta-narrative in creating major, and perhaps, culpable absences in both Indian history and in (urgently required) contemporary understandings of identities, communities and the violence based upon these which erupts in India with ‘bewildering’ frequency. He emphasizes that the grave silences that actually surround such crucial moments of mayhem in Indian history, especially the all-too-critical Partition of 1947, have led to such serious gaps in understanding and knowledge as to leave academics and others unable (and perhaps even unwilling) to fully explain, account for, detail or act against contemporary communal violence.

In his writing which is academic, anguished and angered, Pandey tries to explain the complex and enduring silences in diverse quarters around 1947’s Partition:

“The reasons for this suppression...are not hard to find. Differences and strife between Hindus and Muslims persist in India today...there is the real danger of reopening old wounds. In addition, there is no consensus among us about the nature of Partition. We have no means of representing such tragic loss, nor of pinning down – or rather, owning – responsibility for it. Consequently, **our nationalist historiography, journalism, and filmmaking have tended to generate something like a collective amnesia**...they have represented Partition and all that went with it as an aberration...an accident, a “mistake” – and one for which not we but “others” were responsible.”⁵

The ability to blame ‘others’ for the very *occurrence* and the gruesomeness of 1947’s Partition has survived, taking on a convenient role in contemporary situations. Pandey finds this ability, this tendency oft-repeated in his difficult travels through the remnants of the Bhagalpur riots of 1989 (which saw nearly one thousand Muslims lynched in their homes, fields and while traveling on trains and buses, with forty thousand people eventually moving into makeshift relief camps as their property was looted and destroyed). As a member of a People’s Union for Democratic Rights (PUDR) investigative team, Pandey found himself confronted either by sheer silence on the chaos which had engulfed Bhagalpur and its outlying rural communities, or by loquaciousness

⁴ *ibid*, p. 3

⁵ *ibid*, p. 8. Emphasis added.

on the topic of ‘others’. The ‘others’ here were a motley group of actors, including ‘criminal caste’ gangs from ‘outside’, villainous political leaders in Patna and Delhi and a vicious and corrupt administration. Pandey quotes from newspaper articles:

“The Bhagalpur riots are not so much the product of sectarian [‘communal’] feelings as a calamity brought about by **the criminals**...The criminals are armed with rifles, guns, bombs, axes, choppers, spears, and the blessings of [powerful] political leaders. What can the people do? [*Bechari janta kare to kya kare?*]...both [Hindu and Muslim] communities wished to live together in peace and friendship but **the criminals ultimately succeeded in spreading the poison among them**”⁶

How did this happen? How did ‘the criminals’ succeed? How could neighbors, traders, co-travelers and students fall upon, violate and murder people they knew and had shared social space and physical proximity with? How did differences in religious faith suddenly, in one cataclysmic moment (or perhaps after months of preparation), become far more critical than values attached to life, humanity and the dignity of the self and others?

It was in seeking answers to these questions and in trying to understand the very forms this sectarian violence took that the PUDR team came up repeatedly against the other aspect of reporting violence in India; this was silence. It is this silence which makes us return again to the question of *self-censorship*, exploring how the Bombay film industry, dominated by Punjabis (many of whom trace their roots back to areas given over to Pakistan) has, fifty nine years after the event, made only one ‘blockbuster’ explicitly on Partition.

II. Tricks of Memory: Partitions’ Many Voices and Silences.

In 1947, Lord Mountbatten, last Viceroy and Governor General of India, presented a Plan for Partition, transferring power to the new and independent nations of India and Pakistan on the fourteenth and fifteenth of August. Mohammad Ali Jinnah was elected Pakistan’s first President and Jawaharlal Nehru India’s first Prime Minister. The anti-Partition provincial government of Punjab (headed by Khizar Hayat Khan and comprising Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs from the Congress, Unionist and Panthic parties) fell under Muslim League agitation to dislodge local governments.

As the exiting Raj allocated areas to both nations, massive rioting broke out, taking in its wake entire towns, cities and the Punjab countryside. Over six million Muslims (now ‘Pakistanis’) had to cross over from India to Pakistan while over four million Hindus and Sikhs (now ‘Indians’) had to make the opposite journey. In as short a time as two months, more than twelve million people switched countries, often on foot in columns (*kafilas*) that stretched up to four hundred thousand people. Horrendous arson, lynching, looting, rapes, kidnapping and forced conversions broke out between the three communities. Women were violated, their breasts cut off, foetuses ripped out of wombs, human beings

⁶ *ibid*, p. 15. Newspaper extracts from articles printed in *Navbharat Times* (19 November 1989) and *Sunday Mail* (14 October 1990). Emphasis added.

torn apart and trains dispatched full of corpses. Nearly one million people died in individual and group violence. Hundreds took their own and their (usually female) relations' lives rather than undergo violation, capture and/or killing by those of an 'enemy faith'. Close to one hundred thousand people found themselves in refugee camps where, once the borders had been finally drawn with devastating cruelty, representatives of the governments of both the new States arrived to 'recover captured women' from 'their side'.

Property, honour, values, lives and even a basic trust in humanity were all lost. Crucially, so was 'memory'. After almost fifty years since 1947, Veena Das still confronted silence from victims and their families while attempting to unearth experiences of Partition (Das:1995). Butalia and others have also written of the solid silences (and often the self-disgust) with which Partition victims faced or withdrew from 1947 (Butalia:1998, Das:1995, Khilnani:1995, Menon and Bhasin:1998, Pandey:2001).

In presenting his case for Partition having *been* sheer violence (as opposed to a political process that was 'accompanied' or 'overtaken by' violence), Gyan Pandey posits the possibility of 1947 being India's historical 'limit case'. The highly personalized aspects of the butcheries of Partition take it *beyond* explanation, leaving people reluctant to remember their roles and experiences of the same, turning it into an 'incomparably unique' event which defies too much detail of all its horrors. Thus, suggests Pandey, Partition has been studied (and recounted) in India as an event which had its 'causes', 'factors', 'origins', 'reasons' and 'effects', but not as a mass of actual actions, a body of traumatic experience itself. In a sense, Pandey writes, this method of re-shaping recollection enables survivors to come to terms with the event and move on beyond it (Pandey:2001).

This is, however, evidently a highly open-ended way of coping. Pandey himself states that the Partition *created* the postcolonial Hindu, Muslim and Sikh, imbuing each with a popular set of characteristics largely based upon the communities' roles, as remembered and recounted, in the violence of 1947. How then can we understand the operation of 'silence' with the long shadows of Partition still looming powerfully over the contemporary creation of religious categories?

Following Partha Chatterjee's argument about modernity and tradition being compartmentalized in colonial Bengal, each neatly segmented into 'the home' and 'the world' which held their own necessary demands (Chatterjee:1993), I suggest Partition history takes on two forms. The first is *inner* history, the most personal memories of the violence and the shames of 1947. These can be said to deal with the body and its desecration, the violation of one's own honour as a human being, a gendered person and a kin member; these are kept mostly to oneself and shared at most with close family members (who also understand the need to keep these well-covered with silence). The second is *outer* history which is not as disturbing (and perhaps not as personal or physical), which can be shared with the visiting historian, recorded in the existent archive and passed on (in terms of 'they' and 'them', 'us' and 'we', very rarely as 'I' or 'me') into popular parlance. It is possible that many Partition survivors and refugees categorized their memories in such a way, choosing to speak of one set and silencing the other.

Not all witnesses of Partition have been silent though; writers like Saadat Ali Manto, Bhisham Sahni and Amrita Pritam have written true-life accounts and fictionalized

versions of the horrors of 1947. In post-1947 India, the Progressive Writers Association (PWA) and the Indian Peoples Theatre Association (IPTA) engaged with prose, poetry, drama and other forms of representation (and lament) about what happened during the Partition. Stories by noted writers (such as Manto and Ismat Chughtai), which both recounted Partition and also urgently questioned existing social hegemonies (of patriarchy, religion, sexuality and class) were quickly denounced as ‘subversive’ or ‘dangerous’. Both Chughtai and Manto were tried for ‘obscenity’ in India and Pakistan respectively (Gopal:2005) and new, all-too-neat demarcations were created. ‘Radicals’ talked about Partition, butchery and the perverse, grotesque pleasures of rape, torture and murder that had been witnessed in 1947. ‘Mainstream’ or conventional society did not.

Generally, the Bombay film industry has placed itself in the latter category, preferring to be ‘conventional’ and providing people with ‘safe entertainment’ rather than controversial and disturbing pasts and presents. In a research conversation, Madan Gupta, a film distributor, told me: “I would never back some ‘period film’ which drags people into depression and sadness (*dukh aur pareshani*). Those films rarely run anyway (*flop ho jaati hain*). Who wants to see all that? It’s much better to make films which can give people a positive message (*acchi soch*), a good time (*maza*).” Interestingly, Gupta rejected the ‘radical/conventional’ categorization:

“Who is truly ‘radical’, the people who go on and on about the past and how terrible everything is? Or the people who work hard to give others beautiful dreams, strength, positiveness? I think, the latter. The film industry has been consistently giving Indian public messages of courage and hope, not to keep crying over what has happened but to move on. The night which has passed is gone, the morning beckons to me now (*jo raat gayi, so baat gayi, ab subha mujhe bulati hai*). That’s my own personal motto and that’s what a lot of people, inside and outside the industry, like to see in films also.”

Madan Gupta, film distributor (research conversation).

The following section explores which kind of history and what sort of *Punjabiyaat* the Bombay film industry chose to depict and develop in its cinematic negotiations of India, post-1947. The section examines in particular the work and memories of one filmmaker, Yash Chopra, who can be credited for having created the strongest sense of cinematic *Punjabiyaat* in Bombay films.

III. 1947-1962

Partition, *Punjabiyaat* and ‘Filmi’ Punjabis: States and Styles of Citizenship.

In 1947, the Bombay film industry was also going through flux. Many of its leading artistes, writers, music composers and so on (Noor Jehan, Ghulam Haider, Roshanara Begum, Khursheed, etc.) would have to leave for Pakistan. Interestingly, several Muslim cinema professionals (largely from Uttar Pradesh and other parts of the country) decided to stay in Bombay, while the film industry also witnessed the arrival and settling of non-Muslim Punjabis from the playhouses, radio stations and colleges of Lahore, Multan, Peshawar and Rawalpindi. Prominent amongst these were Prithviraj Kapoor (a major theatre and film actor whose sons, Raj, Shammi and Shashi would become legendary film

stars; the family's fourth generation is now in films), the Chopras (Baldev Raj and Yash, who would become extremely successful producer-directors; they head the second generation of Chopras in films), the Anands (Dev, a popular film star and his director siblings, Chetan and Vijay), G. P. Sippy (a major film producer; the Sippys remain involved in films⁷), lyricist Anand Bakshi, playback singer Mohammad Rafi, actors Sunil Dutt, Manoj Kumar and Balraj Sahni, and the producer-director of several 'hit' mythologicals and social dramas, Ramanand Sagar.

In her detailed and insightful biography of Yash Chopra, Rachel Dwyer describes the 'mainstream' producer-director as: "...one of the most powerful people in the Hindi commercial film industry...a leading figure...for over 40 years as a director...a major producer since 1973...**he is a public figure, not only in the film industry but also as a representative of the industry to the wider world...**his name is synonymous with romance, glamour and beauty."⁸

In his conversations with Dwyer, Chopra identifies himself completely as a Punjabi; Dwyer quotes Chopra:

"...I'm proud of being Punjabi. I was brought up as a typical Punjabi...I was in Punjab before I came to Mumbai, I know its culture or atmosphere better than any other, its music, costumes and so on. I'm fond of robust food. I like its characters. The Punjab is a state of five rivers, *panch ap*, the people are robust, healthy and extrovert. The land is fertile. **It's not the Punjab now; two rivers are on that side [in Pakistan].** Its culture is great, its music mind-blowing; romance, passion and beat are there. **Punjab has kept its culture...**Punjabis were the first to shed barriers...They are very enterprising."⁹

Interestingly, while Yash Chopra emphasizes the fact of 'the Punjab' no longer being the same geographical entity he was born and raised in, he stresses the vitality and survival of its 'culture'. This is a popular understanding of Punjabi culture, as having 'survived' even the geographical splitting of the region, living on in and being recreated by 'its' people. 'Culture' here takes on a form of its own, becoming a living, breathing, organic entity, a being which has survived and prospered after a major physical trauma. It is an interesting point to note that many Punjabis who survived Partition themselves (and passed on a sense to their young of how much courage this survival demanded) personify 'culture' in this way, making it a heroic and valuable thing, imbuing it with a *soul*, a 'heart' of its own and cherishing many aspects of it.

Yash Chopra himself was brought up in a Punjabi Hindu Khatri family, belonging to the lower middle-class urban and professional strata of undivided Punjab. Typical Khatri surnames are Chopra, Khanna, Dhawan, Kapoor, Malhotra, Puri and Tandon. Khatri are

⁷ G. P Sippy is the father of Ramesh Sippy, director of the legendary 1975 blockbuster *Sholay* ('Embers'). Interestingly, Ramesh Sippy also made *Buniyaad* ('Foundation'), a major television soap opera which chronicled the journey of a Hindu Punjabi refugee family settling down in post-Partition India. The other remarkable television drama also made in the late 1980s was *Tamas* ('Darkness'), based on the 1947-centred novel by Bhisham Sahni. *Tamas* was directed by the well-known 'art film' director, Govind Nihalani (whose own family had also migrated from Pakistan to India). *Tamas'* scenes of Partition violence in fact led to real-life sectarian tension and conflict (as well as Public Interest litigation) in parts of northern India.

⁸ Preface, Rachel Dwyer's *Yash Chopra: Fifty Years in Indian Cinema*. Roli Books: New Delhi, 2002. Emphasis added.

⁹ *ibid*, p. 25. Emphasis added.

described by Malcolm Darling as “allied to the great warrior caste of the Kshatriyas”¹⁰ (though unable to claim any major distinction in warfare), having been famous administrators, courtiers and the founders and teachers of the Sikh religion. Darling describes the Khatri as one of the three main money-lending castes of the Punjab (the ‘insidious Bania’ and the ‘oppressive Arora’ being the others), estimating the Khatri as ‘a trifle more human’ than his rivals in the business of finance.

The Punjabi Khatri had varied interests, involved in agriculture as well as money-lending (which he preferred to provide for trade over farming). The industrious caste group is categorised by Darling as ‘the most influential’ in the Punjab, about whom the popular proverb existed: “Even if a Khatri puts ashes on his head...he will make a profit.”¹¹

Rachel Dwyer describes the Khatri as: “a dominant caste in the post-independence film industry”¹², noting that Yash Chopra’s family also belonged to the Arya Samaj. The Arya Samaj in Punjab had two main areas of focus; the first was social reform and re-affirming the *kshatriya-tej* or martial valour of Aryas (Hindus related to ‘manly Aryans’). The Arya Samaj accepted the (conveniently linear) colonial narrative of European ‘masculinity’ having ‘rightfully’ overcome a weak, feminine, even hermaphrodite-like India (which had been previously emasculated by ‘Muslim invaders’). The only way this enslaving debilitation could be ended was by referring back to the ‘golden past’ of Hinduism and being unafraid to stress on its more virile aspects (Nandy:1983, pp. 24-25). The second focus was on Hindu religious protectionism, communal organization (around one priesthood, one book, one belief; this was on the lines of a monotheistic Christianity and Islam) and the religious conversion (or ‘re-entry’) of those who had ‘strayed’ from the Hindu fold (Jones:1976).

Enjoying a tense relationship with both local Muslim and Sikh groups, the Arya Samaj in Punjab became allied with the paramilitary extremist Hindu group, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (or the RSS). As a teenager in 1946, Yash Chopra was a member of the RSS, viewing it, reports Dwyer, as a ‘sports club’ where boys played games, performed a daily drill and practiced *yoga*. However, the young Yash Chopra also learnt how to make petrol bombs (Dwyer writes intriguingly: “Presumably as part of the RSS efforts...for use in riots”¹³) which, he forgot to once inform his sister-in-law, he had stored in her clay oven. He also indulged in some 1946-mayhem, joining a band of looters in a watch shop, etc.

However, his darker recollections of the Partition make apparent the enduring and disturbing quality of the impressions of violence made upon his mind (as opposed to what otherwise appears interestingly as juvenile high-spiritedness). Dwyer records Chopra’s recollections of 1946-47:

“I have vivid memories about this time. I remember seeing killings, lootings, burning – so much killing, the whole of a train being butchered. During the riots, there were bodies everywhere.

¹⁰ Malcolm Darling’s *The Punjab Peasant in Prosperity and Debt*. Manohar Book Service: New Delhi, 1977, p. 177

¹¹ *ibid*, p. 177

¹² *ibid*, p. 26

¹³ *ibid*, p. 35

People would stop the train, killing people. There was a strange fever against the other community. A strange hatred came to my mind.”¹⁴

Worried by his own activities (which, beyond the *making* of bombs and the shop-looting, remain unclear), Chopra’s family decided to send him away to Rohtak where his sister and brother-in-law were stationed. Chopra’s memories of this time are indicative of the nightmarish, spooky emptiness left behind by the communal catharsis:

“I couldn’t go anywhere, couldn’t get food, and we had only *dal*...all the fields were empty, everyone had fled because this was a Muslim area. I picked mushrooms. There was nothing else. I still have a passion for mushrooms...we couldn’t go out. There was no one there...I used to walk around all day for three months as there was nothing else to do.”¹⁵

Yash eventually joined his elder brother Baldev Raj in Bombay in 1950. Baldev, or B.R. Chopra, had already become a well-known film director who, as per Dwyer, used his Arya Samaj-based social concerns to make ‘social dramas’ or films which served a social purpose. Yash Chopra initially assisted BR on his films and then directed his first film *Dhool ka Phool* (‘Blossom of Dust’) in 1959. The film portrayed the upbringing of a child who had been deserted by his unwed mother who, in turn, had been abandoned by her callous lover. An elderly Muslim raised the boy and the song *Tu Hindu banega na Musalman banega, Insaan ki aulaad hai, insaan banega* (‘You will be neither Hindu nor Muslim, you were born of human beings, you will be a humane being’), written by Yash Chopra’s close friend, the well-known Urdu poet, Sahir Ludhianvi, became famous. The film was a hit, strengthening one of the most enduring and significant themes of Bombay films, that of the lost-and-found protagonists whose religious and class identities are often ‘lost’ or interchanged, remaining somewhat unclear and open-ended even after being ‘found’.

The film’s success encouraged Yash to begin his second project. *Dharmaputra* (‘Son of Duty’, 1962), writes Dwyer, was one of the few films in Bombay cinema which referred directly to the Partition. Its convoluted plot depicted a Muslim boy adopted and raised by a Hindu family. During the tensions of the Partition, the (Muslim/Hindu) protagonist joins anti-Muslim rioters in setting fire to Muslim homes. He is suddenly informed of his own Muslim parentage and just as a mob descends upon him, he is saved by a police party. Yash Chopra tells Dwyer how: “I passed through the riots, 1946 and ’47. I was going around the roads seeing it with my own eyes. I portray it on screen...We had to create the atmosphere of 1947 in a studio.”¹⁶

Significantly, *Dharmaputra* won Chopra a National Award for both Best Hindi Film and Best Director in that year, marking the State’s stamp of approval on films which dealt with the thorny issue of Partition and religious difference, albeit with an emphasis on unity, friendship and ‘Indian-ness’. However, the film was not a commercial success and its disappointing failure at the box office appears to have sharply affected Chopra’s initial footsteps down the avenue of ‘realistic’, reform-orientated cinema.

¹⁴ *ibid*, p. 34

¹⁵ *ibid*, p. 35

¹⁶ *ibid*, p. 54-55

The following section explores Chopra's work and artistic viewpoint developing instead along the slowly-emerging path of *Punjabiyyat* in commercial Bombay films.

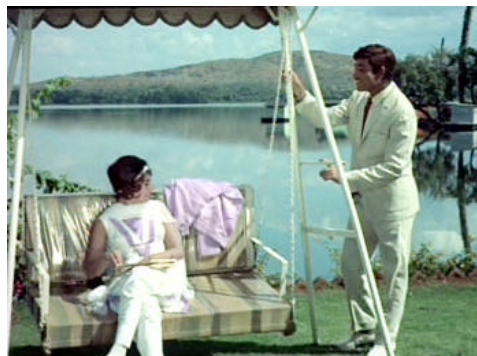
IV. 1965-1995 **The Punjabi as Poet, Playboy and Patriot.**

“It's natural that Punjabis dominate the film industry. After all, no-one can tell stories of love and war better than them! You see, the Punjabis are frontier people, they have always been exposed to violence, to sex, to hardships. All of Punjabi folk culture revolves around these themes. Therefore they make the best movies, great action thrillers, great love stories.”

Subhash Ghai, film director-producer (research conversation).

In 1965, Yash Chopra released *Waqt* ('Time'), the first Hindi-Urdu multi-starrer which went on to become a commercial super-hit. In the film, the patriarch Lala Kedarnath, a prosperous, self-made Punjabi merchant, is separated from his wife and three sons by a devastating earthquake which kills thousands of 'northern Indians' and forces victims into relief camps and towns far away from their loved ones. The film depicts the separate journeys and travails of each family member, their incidental 'unknowing' encounters with each other, and finally, their emotional re-union.

Waqt broke new ground in the styling and picturisation (and even the writing of characters) seen in Bombay cinema. Yash Chopra used 'foreign touches' (evidently derived from Hollywood pictures, art magazines, jazz music, etc.) to depict the lifestyles of a confident and upbeat Punjabi elite, enjoying the comforts of plush bungalows, manicured lawns, five star hotels, flowery orchards, private motorboats and fast cars. The film abounded in Mehras, Vermas, Seths and other Khatri characters, and while all its men were handsome and strong, all its women were 'sparklingly beautiful' (*zohra jabeen*).



***Waqt* ('Time'), 1965: Yash Chopra's Post-Partition Punjabi Elite.**

Waqt made absolutely no apologies for the luxuries its characters possessed; the film also stressed the privations of Kedarnath's wife and youngest son, who (minus an older male lead) struggled to make ends meet at the bottom levels of respectable society. The underlying notions of Punjabis-on-the-move, their energy, optimism and resilience run throughout the film. Upon being re-united, the aged and impoverished Lala Kedarnath

and his sons once again establish a successful business (this time in Bombay), fearing nothing but the whims and fancies of ‘changing times’.

In significant ways, *Waqt* may be read as Chopra’s second (and vastly more successful than the first) cinematic metaphor for Partition. He was away shooting his new film when his wife Pamela commented to me:

“You know, I don’t think anyone has ever asked him directly about whether the earthquake in *Waqt* was actually Partition! I assumed it was a reference to the Quetta earthquake of the 1930s. But it could well be about 1947, what with the lost brothers and the migration to Bombay...he doesn’t like to talk much about those times.”
Mrs. Pamela Chopra (research conversation).

Chopra’s lack of communication on Partition has, interestingly, gone together with his disavowal of ‘politics’. Dwyer records him saying in his biography:

“I don’t believe in politics and bloodshed in the name of religion. You should not kill, but **they** have only one reply to every argument: kill him! You have to take sides. **I don’t want to make a political film where you have to comment.**”¹⁷

Who is the ‘they’ Chopra refers to here? Politicians, religious leaders, mischief-makers or all of the above? Once again, we find echoes of ‘the others’ reported by Pandey, those on whom eruptions of sectarian violence in ‘co-existing’ communities can be blamed. Along with Chopra’s brushing aside of ‘politics’ (and presumably, also his own political past) and his explicit choice to *not* make political films, we find the filmmaker annoyed at ‘governmental’ attitudes towards *Waqt*. He recounts how he went to release the film overseas:

“We went...in London...(to) the Indian Film Society established by Krishna Menon. I was very excited because the Indian High Commissioner was coming. However, he just spoke against the film and the industry. **I say that we have rich too, not just weeping and poverty. Should we publicise ourselves as a country of snake charmers and *Pather Panchali*? I was very, very upset...It’s not a crime to be rich. The upper classes behave better.** For romance and complex emotions, it’s better to appear rich.”¹⁸

It is clear that by 1965, the central preoccupation of Yash Chopra’s (emerging) *Punjabiya* was not as much Partition as class; his films thereafter have been consistent in their (defiant, then normative) portrayal of Punjabis as *rich*, upbeat and ‘modern’. What is also interesting is the governmental attitude towards the same, shifting from disapproval of a flamboyant cinematic celebration of richness and consumerism in the 1960s, to approval and award in the 1990s (when Yash Chopra and his production house have been awarded various State honours).

In 1965, what did please (and influence) Chopra very much was the commercial success of *Waqt*: “The public liked it. People copied the clothes, hairstyles, dances...all

¹⁷ *ibid*, p. 35

¹⁸ Rachel Dwyer’s *Yash Chopra*, pp. 60-63. Emphasis added.

these small things became the rage. We follow trends and we set them. We take from life and life takes from us.”¹⁹

Achieving commercial success, and not governmental approval, became the aim for most ‘mainstream’ Bombay filmmakers. ‘The State’, however, remained a crucial part of cinema until the 1990s, relegating *Punjabiya* on-screen to a colourful but secondary cultural ‘detail’. Negotiating citizenship and ‘modernity’ remained the central preoccupation of most Bombay films. Even in *Waqt*, the separated family members ‘find’ each other in a court of law, embracing tearfully under the benevolent auspices of a ‘witness’ (or perhaps, catalyst) State. Through the 1960s, Raj Kapoor and B.R. Chopra’s films earned both commercial success and official approval, their themes revolving around the nature of the (expanding) postcolonial, socialist State, the contradictions therein and the possibility of citizen-heroes fulfilling the potential offered for social equality and reform. These films were also upbeat and ‘modern’; their heroes, however, were far from rich and stylish Punjabis and their settings were usually rural communities or the proletarian margins of urban existence.

Meghnad Desai writes of the ‘tragic hero’ films of the 1940s being followed by a new trend in 1950s and ‘60s cinema where the hero changed from being a ‘passive victim’ to a confident winner. Desai analyses B.R. Chopra’s 1957 film *Naya Daur* (‘New Era’) where:

“Dilip Kumar...played a rustic character who takes on the challenge of development and progress. The film, with its background of community development, was quintessentially a product of the Nehru era...a valorization of collective effort. *Naya Daur* was a mega hit...here was Dilip Kumar playing the rural young man...as a dynamic go-getter. This was not only because Dilip Kumar had changed: it was more because India itself had changed with him.”²⁰

Through the 1960s and ‘70s, *Punjabiya* continued to consolidate itself and grow on-screen, fleshed out by ‘youthful films’ targeting a young and ‘trendy’ audience which wanted to partake of the delights offered by pop music, nightclubs, travel and Coca Cola. The 1970s saw Yash Chopra direct hit films like *Kabhi Kabhie* (‘Sometimes’, 1976) and *Trishul* (‘The Trident’, 1978) where Khatri heroes emphasized their Punjabi *joie de vivre*, strength, optimism and romantic sides. Significantly, the Punjabi hero of these years expressed himself often through his use and appreciation of courtly Urdu poetry²¹. Some of the most interesting features of Yash Chopra’s cinematic *Punjabiya* can be noted here; his heroes were fond of complex Urdu *shayari* and his heroines wore tight *churidaar-kameezes* (which he had initial reservations about, thinking it would look ‘too Muslim’ but changing his mind during *Waqt*). This cinematic construction of a ‘composite *Punjabiya*’, which included the best of ‘Muslim culture’ in India, is even

¹⁹ *ibid*, p. 63

²⁰ Meghnad Desai’s *Nehru’s Hero: Dilip Kumar in the Life of India*. Roli Books: New Delhi, 2004, pp. 42-43

²¹ The popular film heroes through the 1960s-1980s were, with few exceptions, Punjabis themselves. These included Rajendra Kumar, Manoj Kumar, Sunil Dutt (followed by his son, Sanjay), Dharmendra Deol (and later, his sons Sunny and Bobby), Shammi and Shashi Kapoor (followed by their nephew, Rishi), Jeetendra Kapoor, Anil Kapoor, Vinod Khanna, Rajesh Khanna, etc. A major exception was Amitabh Bachchan, the most charismatic and enduring (and interestingly, the most ‘angry’) star of the 1970s, who has been publicly identified more with his father’s Uttar Pradesh *Kayastha* background, and not as much with his (Punjabi Sikh) mother’s.

more fascinating when set against the backdrop of major Muslim stars (like Dilip Kumar, Madhubala and Meena Kumari) having previously adopted 'Hindu' screen names. The actor Aamir Khan commented:

“Those times were extremely sensitive and a lot of major filmmakers were not ready to take commercial risks, just because of someone’s name. So actors like Yusuf sahab took on names like Dilip Kumar, and so on. The funny thing is, everyone, the filmmakers, the audiences, *everyone knew* they were Muslims! So it’s not clear how that really worked out. Perhaps it didn’t make a big difference either way but they wanted to cover the risk factor.”

Aamir Khan, film star (research conversation)

The fact of these stars having adopted 'Hindu names' was evident though; perhaps this was attributed to the violence of Partition and the need felt to offer a *public* attitude of 'flexibility' or 'broad-mindedness' regarding religious identity. (Extremely controversially, one could suggest this taking-on of 'Hindu' screen names was a kind of 'public conversion' whereby Muslim stars 'merged' with the Hindu mainstream in order to ensure popular support). By the 1990s, however, it becomes clear that the religious identity of cinema actors does not constitute a 'risk factor' in the minds of film professionals any longer. Whether it actually constitutes a kind of *benefit*, however, is the topic of my research elsewhere.

In any event, Yash Chopra's *Punjabiya* made considerable progress through the 1970s. Even his 'angry young man' films (*Deewar*: 'The Wall', *Trishul*: 'Trident' and *Kala Paththar*: 'Black Rock') featured the traumas and strengths of Khatri heroes who contested right and wrong as laid out by society and the postcolonial State. *Punjabiya* remained, however, more a means of basic location for the hero (who, in the 'Punjabi way', was usually fair, tall, sharp-featured, brave and romantic) than the central theme of a plot. This remained the form of engagement the hero had with the State or his/the heroine's family in duels over love (read 'class'). It was only in the 1990s that *Punjabiya* changed and thrived on-screen, becoming *the* mirror and propellant of film celebration and self-fashioning.

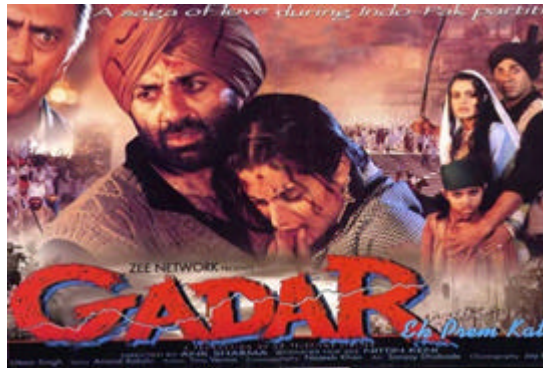
V. 1995-2005

The Postmodern Punjabi and the Mustard Field: Having A Riot.

Punjabiya in Bombay cinema changed sharply in the 1990s. Earlier, the films of Yash Chopra and others had emphasized the *spirit* of being Punjabi, the resilience of the region's 'composite culture', the placement of the Punjabi against the much vaster backdrop of a modernizing India. In 1995 came Yash's son, Aditya Chopra's first film *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* ('The Brave Will Take the Bride') which became one of the most successful Bombay films of all time. The film featured a love story initially set in Britain's immigrant Punjabi community and then expanded in 'the Punjab'. The hero, Raj Malhotra, pursues the heroine, Simran, to 'Punjab' where her 'traditional' father insists upon arranging her marriage to his friend's son. Both Simran and her mother plead with Raj to elope with Simran but he insists she play-act her engagement out while he tries to win her father's approval.

The film begins with Simran's homesick father expressing his deep desire to return to 'his Punjab', the movie then rolling out against a backdrop of lush mustard fields, dancing 'Punjabi peasants' and a train chugging along to the song *ghar aa ja pardesi, tera des bulaye re* ('Return home, oh foreigner, your country calls to you')²². Remarkably, the Punjab is now the 'country' ('India' is relegated to being an imagined repository of cultural and gendered values of modesty and propriety), and the highly enjoyable *DDLJ* depicts a Punjab where a tiny number of Sikhs only faintly inhabit the peripheries of three scenes. *DDLJ's* Punjab is overwhelmingly Hindu and Khatri, a place of beauty, richness and 'great traditions', which do not require outright challenge but rather, gentle persuasion into a more liberal (and consistently patriarchal) lifestyle. Interestingly, Raj and Simran do not settle down to live amidst the fields of Punjab; they are shown finally departing (for London) on a train, cheerful and victorious after their brush with 'our traditions'.

Cinematic *Punjabiyaat* saw another significant train journey. This occurred in the 2001 blockbuster *Gadar: Ek Prem Katha* ('The Riot: A Love Story'). This has been the only commercially successful Bombay film made entirely around and within the Partition. *Gadar* opens with a train full of murdered Sikhs arriving from Lahore into Amritsar in 1947; the Sikhs at the station begin a frenzied 'revenge-lynching' of Muslims. In this, the Sikh hero, Tara Singh (who is also rioting) pauses for a moment to look into the anguished eyes of Sakina, a young Muslim girl he had previously fallen in love with.



The 2001 super-hit *Gadar* ('The Riot'): The title here reads 'A saga of love during Indo-Pak Partition'.

A few scenes later, Sakina gets separated from her family during their escape to Pakistan and Tara Singh saves her from another murderous Sikh mob by 'marrying' her and 'converting' her into a Sikhni before it. Her life and honour thus saved, Sakina soon falls in love with Tara and the couple marry, his disapproving family accepting the marriage. Their peace is short-lived though; Sakina finds her family is alive and well in Lahore and contacts her adoring father²³, now a major politician. He devises a scheme to

²² Dipesh Chakrabarty describes similar imagery about 'Bengal' found in nineteenth century prose (which depicted Bengal in harder, more 'real' terms) and poetry, which dwelt more 'idyllically' on the province's evocative natural beauty and emotional power; in Chakrabarty's *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. Princeton University Press: Princeton, N.J., Oxford, 2000, esp. pp. 170-172, 178

²³ Interestingly, both the stern and highly 'traditional' patriarchs of *DDLJ* and *Gadar* were played by the same actor, Amrish Puri, who was renowned for his talent and 'authoritative' voice.

take her alone to Pakistan and keep her there, planning to marry her off to a Muslim once she has forgotten the ‘exigencies’ of Partition.

Tara Singh and his little son follow Sakina to Lahore where for love of his wife, Tara agrees to convert to Islam. The last straw comes, however, when Sakina’s father demands that Tara denounce India in public. The ‘dam of his tolerance’ (*sabhar ka pul*) is broken and with Sakina’s wifely approval, Tara Singh runs amuck, meeting ‘Muslim violence’ with greater violence of his own, eventually rescuing his wife and child from an oppressive other. The film remains noteworthy for its unabashed jingoism; its reconstruction of Amritsar station and the rage of the Partition are also similarly powerful.

In both *DDLJ* and *Gadar* (and a host of hit ‘Khatri dramas’ which released through the 1990s; these include *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai*: ‘Something Happens’, *Kaho Na Pyaar Hai*: ‘Say It’s Love’, *Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gham*: ‘Sometimes Happiness, Sometimes Sadness’, *Dil Chahta Hai*: ‘The Heart Desires’, *Kal Ho Na Ho*: ‘Tomorrow May or May Not Be’, *Chalte Chalte*: ‘While Traveling’, *Baghban*: ‘The Gardener’, etc.), *Punjabiyaat* has been celebrated but in an altered form.

Suddenly, Urdu poetry has diminished sharply from Bombay film music, replaced increasingly by Punjabi folk songs, proverbs and slang. The Khatri has taken over *Punjabiyaat* almost entirely (*Gadar* has been a remarkable exception to this and significantly, it is a film set in 1947 which only depicts the violence played out between Muslims and Sikhs in Punjab; the Hindu here is absent from the screen). The film heroine now performs key (gendered) Punjabi rituals of prayer and fasting while the hero is defined by his wealth (measured by ‘the look’ of the film, the investment made in designer clothing and sets, flashy cars, foreign locations, elaborately ‘simple’ song sequences, etc.) and his access to Duty Free, rather than his bond to the nation and Duty thereby.



2003’s hit film *Kal Ho Na Ho* (‘Tomorrow May or May Not Be’): *Punjabiyaat* in New York.

Punjabiyaat in this decade has been powerfully shaped by the events of the 1980s and 1990s, namely the Khalistan Crisis in Punjab, clashes over caste-based reservations, the triumphant political arrival of an aggressive Hindutva and the approval granted by a withdrawing State to a ‘liberalized’, rich and consumerist middle class. Interestingly, it is as the economic and rhetorical space of the State shrinks that this cinematic *Punjabiyaat* expands; it is as the political challenges to the Indian State grow more urgent that this *Punjabiyaat* takes on the form almost of a *doxa* where it is no longer a matter of note that

commercial cinema's most successful characters are all upper-caste Hindus. It is as complex social tensions and pressures narrow areas of identity, while zones of economic opportunity widen, that cinematic *Punjabiya* both cuts out the regional (and historical) Other while expanding itself to include and celebrate 'Non-Indian Punjabis'.

An interesting case here has been Yash Chopra's 2004 hit *Veer Zara*, the love story of an Indian Sikh hero (a *mona-Sardar*, 'shaven' or 'short-haired Sikh') and a Pakistani Muslim heroine from Lahore. Set in the 1970s (remarkably, at a time of great tension between the two nations), *Veer Zara* makes no mention of Partition, of violence or military aggression. The film remains silent on 1947 while expounding fulsomely on the natural beauties of the Punjab, its overarching, 'unifying' culture and the power of love. *Veer Zara* is thus a significant example of the contradictions (and possibilities) inherent in cinematic *Punjabiya*; the film invokes cultural nativism but avoids 'the nation', accepts nation-hood but emphasizes 'love' and agency between individuals which can circumvent the same.



***Veer Zara* (2004): Silent on 1947 and the Partition, the film displays glowing imagery of 'the Punjab' and *Punjabiya*.**

Remarkably, contemporary *Punjabiya* has also taken on the features popularly understood to have been ascribed to it in colonial times; these include Punjabis being martial, manly, willful, courageous and large-hearted. These, however, were features ascribed by colonial writers to the 'martial races' of the Punjab, the Jat Sikhs and select Muslims groups, and certainly not to the 'devious' Khatri money-lender. Cinematic *Punjabiya* (and the self-fashioning of a community which views itself as physically displaced, yet socially and cultural flourishing) can thus be dated to a highly significant silence surrounding its origins, to *self-censorship* and complex choices made about its composition, colours and predilections, and now, to an appropriation of an absent Other's colonial past and 'record'. Its continued progress makes for crucial political viewing.

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