

Urdu, Awadh and the Tawaif: the Islamicate roots of Hindi cinema

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This essay was originally meant to chart the relationship between the Hindi cinema and Muslims, specifically Muslim women. There are two ways of doing this. One is to survey the people involved in the making of Hindi cinema—actors, directors, song-writers, composers, technicians, producers—and to cull from them the Muslim personnel. This list would read like an honour roll of Bombay filmdom, but given the acute under-representation of Muslims in virtually every sector of public life, such an enumeration would be salutary. These names could be winnowed further to sift out Muslim women; the individuals on this residual list, given that they suffer the double handicap of gender and community, would glow with that special lustre reserved for exceptional beings. Such an exercise would be legitimate both as enquiry and as homage.

The alternative would be to examine the archetypes of Muslim women vended by Bombay's film industry: *tawaifs*, *begums*, *khatons*, matriarchs in *pardah*, pubescent victims of Gulf-rich lechers, the presence, absence and nature of the "modern" Indian Muslim woman in Hindi films—such types and categories could be multiplied.

Of these two methods, the first is a census operation and the second a taxonomy: both serve their purposes, but neither encompasses the singular relationship between Hindi films and Muslim-ness. Since Muslim-ness sounds both vague and objectionable, I shall try to explain what I mean with a parallel: the relationship between, say, post-war American fiction and Jewishness. Let us assume that a literary critic sets out to explain why ambitious American novelists are always writing about outsider protagonists in search of themselves. And the reason, he discovers, is that Jewish giants like Bellow, Malamud, Singer, Salinger, have,

through their explorations of Jewish marginality in the context of the Holocaust, made confessional narratives, questing heroes and metaphysical rumination staples of American fiction. So when our critic speaks of Jewishness and the American novel, he refers not only to an ethnic enclave within a literary form, but to a shaping force that has been constitutive of that form. Similarly, when I speak of Muslim-ness (of which more later) and the Hindi cinema, the reference is not only or even mainly to its Muslim personnel nor to its repertoire of ghetto stereotypes, but to a cultural influence that has determined the very nature of this cinema.

Before showing how this might be so, the key word in this argument, Muslim-ness, has to be made usable. What need does this awkward neologism answer? The need is this: not just in the academy, but in everyday life we come upon things that we reflexively associate with a religion or a religious community. Onion domes and scalloped arches are cues for "Islamic" or "Muslim"; likewise, *trabeate* forms and *gopurams* are qualified in our minds as "Hindu". An earlier generation of art historians used such adjectives freely, without self-consciousness.¹ This is harder now. Today, when such an association occurs, both academic rigour and secularist scruple combine to caution us that there are no building manifestoes hidden in the Quran, nor are Hindus bound to a single architectural idiom.

The warning is well taken. In the words of Marshall Hodgson, merely because the faith is Islam it does not follow that the culture of Muslims can be properly called Islamic, for the simple reason that

...the society and culture called 'Islamic' in the second sense are not necessarily 'Islamic' in the first. Not only have the groups of people involved in the two cases not always been co-extensive (the culture has not simply been a 'Muslim culture', a culture of Muslims)—much of what even Muslims have done as a part of the 'Islamic' civilization can only be characterised as 'un-Islamic' in the first, the religious sense of the word.²

For example, Muslim mausolea, such as the Taj Mahal or Humayun's tomb to name only the best known, associated in every subcontinental mind with medieval Islam or Muslims, are

Zoya Hasan ed., *Fighting Hierarchies: Gender, Communities and the State* (Kali, Delhi, 1994)

built in direct violation of the Islamic stricture that no durable memorials should be raised over graves. To call such monuments, or the architecture they represent, Islamic, would be to travesty the word.

And yet the popular association between Islam and certain social forms and cultural patterns deserves a name. To call Delhi's Jama Masjid Indo-Saracenic instead of Indo-Islamic is merely to sin in a more fugitive way. To douche our terms till they are religion-free is disablingly chaste because any understanding of social reality is built on overlapping categories and leaking definitions. Therefore, following Hodgson, I propose the term, "Islamicate". It has a double adjectival ending on the analogy of "Italianate", in the Italian style, which refers not to Italy itself directly, not to just whatever is to be called properly Italian, but to something associated typically with Italian style and with the Italian manner. One speaks of 'Italianate architecture' even in England or Turkey. . . *Islamicate would refer not directly to the religion, Islam, itself, but to the social and cultural complex historically associated with Islam and the Muslims, both among Muslims themselves and even when found among non-Muslims.*"³

The attentive reader would have noticed that having promised a definition for "Muslimness" I have supplied Hodgson's gloss on "Islamicate". I have switched boats for three good reasons: one, Islamicate, while every bit as awkward as Muslim-ness, sounds more scholarly; two Hodgson's marvellous definition cannot be detached from the term it defines; and three Muslim-ness is a noun whereas in Islamicate I have a ready-made adjective.

The argument of this essay can now be re-stated, using Hodgson's term: while the house of Hindi cinema has many mansions, its architecture is inspired by Islamicate forms. The most obvious example of these Islamicate forms is Urdu. It is ironical but true that Hindi cinema is the last stronghold of Urdu in independent India, its last haven in a sea of linguistic bigotry. It is appropriate that this be so because the Hindi film has been fashioned out of the rhetorical and demotic resources of Urdu.

Consider the language of its titles: *Alam Ara, Mughal-e-Azam, Awara, Sahib, Bibi aur Ghulam, Farz, Khamoshi, Safar, Muqaddar ka Sikandar, Namak Haram, Bawarchi, Sholay, Andaz, Qayamat Se Qayamat Tak, Ishq, Ishq, Ishq, Waqt, Baazi, Masoom, Deewana, Aaj ki Awaz, Dushman*. . . the list is endless. A census of all Hindi film

titles would reveal that a large majority incorporate Perso-Arabic loan words.⁴ This small fact points the way to a larger conclusion; namely, official Hindi, the "national language" the language of sarkari (state-owned) radio and television, has little to do with the vocabulary or, more importantly, the rhetorical and emotional registers of Hindi cinema. These are Urdu's domain.⁵

This is not too large a claim and it is based on more than a count of film titles. The screenplays and lyrics of Hindi films are written mainly in Urdu. Even where the language spoken and sung is colloquial, the key words, the words that resonate are borrowed from Urdu's Perso-Arabic lexicon. Urdu, for example, is the language of war and martyrdom in Hindi films, it is the language men die in:

*Kar chaley hum fida jaan-o-tan saathiyon,
Ab tumharey havaley watan, saathiyon.*

(Haqeeqat)

Or the first two lines of the patriotic song sung by Lata Mangeshkar in the aftermath of the Sino-Indian war which, legend has it, moved Nehru to tears.

*Ai mere watan ke logon,
Zara aankh mein bhar lo paani,
Jo shaheed hue the unki
Zara yaad karo qurbani.*

Watan, shaheed, qurbani, fida, jaan-o-tan, these are the words that carry the emotional charge of these lines. The same lexicon supplies the words and phrases for lovelorn yearning:

*Mere mehboob qayamat hogi
Aaj rusva teri galiyon mein mohabbat hogi.*

(Mr X in Bombay)

The titles, lyrics and dialogue in Hindi films are shot through with words like these, and they are irreplaceable because their equivalents in literary Hindi don't resound in the same way. It is possible, of course, to render *dil, khoon* and *kismat* (heart, blood and destiny) as *hriday, rakt* and *bhagya* but it doesn't often happen.⁶

Any number of examples can be cited to show how the stock emotions of Hindi cinema are named and evoked by Urdu, but the point needn't be laboured. The question is, how did this come

to be? We can offer some provisional answers. The pre-history of Hindi cinema is located in theatre and the language of this theatre—the Parsi theatre of the 1870s, for example—was Urdu. Any repertory company that aspired to a national, metropolitan audience as opposed to a provincial one, had to operate in a language that had the largest possible urban middle-class reach. This language was Urdu. The same logic applied to cinema.

Why wasn't this language Hindi? Because the administrative and literary traditions of Islamicate empire survived into the colonial period and received the patronage of the colonial state. Under the aegis of the British, Urdu succeeded Farsi as the language of administration in north India, just as Urdu had gradually supplanted Farsi as the language of the cultivated Islamicate elite. Official patronage and the weight of history queered the pitch for the debutant player, literary Hindi in search of its Sanskrit roots. Urdu, the language of public affairs, of the State, had more opportunities and more arenas in which to extend its range. In pidginised form, it became the vernacular of the Indian army; it was the language of law and justice. When the Anglican missionaries translated the Bible for a north Indian readership, they rendered it into Urdu. Even outside its home territories, in a city like Bombay, it served as a lingua franca. The other great strength of Urdu was that it possessed an array of expressive conventions in a standard idiom. Whatever its other defects, the systematic appropriation of Persian models created a self-consciously literate audience, responsive to dramatic utterance and allusive cues, whereas Hindi was apprenticed to Sanskrit, a language divorced from secular usage for centuries. It was hardly surprising then, that it was Urdu which supplied a language for cinema.⁷

Being the language of administration and consequently of official discourse, Urdu was the most plausible and credible idiom in which to render the public context of any situation. For example, one of the great set-pieces of Hindi cinema, the courtroom scene, is unimaginable in any other language. Despite the anglicised ambience of the court, where the lawyers wear starched bands, where the man with the gavel is called "milard" (milord), where the words he bellows while pounding his desk are "arder, arder" (order, order), the real protagonist of courtroom drama is Urdu at its most magisterial: *mujrim*, *saboot*, *chaslim-o-deed gawah*,

qatl, *vakil*, *insaaf*, *masoom*, *gunehgaar*, *bayaan*—the words resound and build to a crescendo as the judge pronounces sentence: *dafa number . . . tazirat-i-Hind ke tehad*...and then the punishment, sometimes *umr qaid* (life-term) but preferably, for the sake of drama, *saza-i-maut* (death sentence). The unjustly accused hero, on the other hand, is freed with that noble exoneration: *ba izzat bari* (honourably acquitted).

But it is worth remembering that Urdu is not just the formidable medium of justice and the State, it is also the dialect in which people routinely live their lives. For most people in north India or Hindustan, everyday objects, occupations, relationships and conditions are named in Urdu: *dukandar*, *sabziwallah*, *makan-malik*, *kirayedar*, *karigar*, *mistri*, *jamadar*, *bawarchi*, *chaprasi*, *sahib*, *shaadi*, *barbaadi*, *bukhaar*, *ilaaj*, *dawa*, *daru*, *karobar*, *daftar*, *kachehri*, *nashita* (shopkeeper, vegetable vendor, landlord, tenant, craftsman, labourer, sweeper, cook, peon, master, marriage, calamity, fever, treatment, medicine, liquor, office, courtroom, breakfast).

I am not trying to claim that Urdu became the language of cinema because it approximated more closely to "natural" speech as opposed to a more conected, more "synthetic" Hindi. Like any literary language, Urdu was highly wrought—in its most Farsi-fied form, even overwrought. Its users often revelled in its difficulty and its conscious artifice. My point is that like any metropolitan, pan-Indian form, with a diverse audience, the Hindi film had to create and refine an idiom for cinema over time. To begin with, however, since the early talkies were not notable for naturalism, a mannered literary idiom was no handicap. On the contrary, Urdu's ability to find sonorous words for inflated emotion suited the purpose of stylised melodrama. A fine example of Urdu as handmaiden to the grand manner is Sohrab Modi's *Sikander* with Prithviraj Kapoor at his declamatory best in the title role.

In fact it could be plausibly argued that Urdu didn't simply give utterance to the narratives characteristic of the Hindi cinema, it actually helped create them. Certainly the conventions of early Urdu theatre bear a remarkable resemblance to those of the Hindi film. For example, the Urdu plays performed by the Parsi theatre like *Indersabha* and *Gul-e-Baqawali* were entirely sung, a reminder that the song and dance format of the talkies has theatrical roots. More than that, like latter-day films where the hero

and heroine blithely change costumes and locations half a dozen times in the space of a single song, early Urdu theatre was marked by a fine disregard for the classical unities of time and place, for "authenticity" for the dangers of anachronism.

Bharatendu Harishchandra was among the harshest critics of the Parsi theatre (not surprisingly, given that he was pioneering an alternative dramatic tradition in Hindi) and his barbs bear a family resemblance to Satyajit Ray's strictures on commercial Hindi cinema. Commenting on one of the rare Hindi offerings of the Parsi theatre, Kalidasa's *Sakuntalam*, after it had been staged in Banaras, he noted with satisfaction that the production had not been a success. Pramath Nath Mitra and Thibo Babu, great scholars both, had left midway, protesting that the director was cutting Kalidasa's throat. The immediate provocation had been the way Dushyanta pranced onto stage swinging his hips; but this, we learn from Bharatendu, was the least of the Parsi theatre's absurdities: he had seen performances where Krishna had appeared in breeches. These theatre-wallahs had no conception of *deshkaal*, he wrote scornfully, their pronunciation of Sanskrit words was appalling, and it was just as well that they soon ceased to dabble in Hindi theatre and returned to their stock-in-trade, Urdu plays such as *Indersabha* and *Gul-e-Baqavali*.⁸

However, to the chagrin of committed Hindi dramatists, high-minded Hindi drama failed to strike roots. Despite the artistically successful production of plays like *Janaki Mangal*, *Randhir Prem Mohini* and *Satya Harishchandra* in Banaras and Kanpur, Hindi theatre remained still-born; no repertory company emerged, mainly because there wasn't an audience to sustain one. This, according to one history of Hindi drama, was because theatre-goers weren't discriminating enough to appreciate good plays, their tastes having been corrupted by the vulgarity vended by Parsi theatre.⁹ In precisely these accents did "cineastes" (as distinct from the paying public) first lament the inability of quality films to achieve commercial release and then mourn the untimely death of the "parallel" cinema.

It is evident from this that the Parsi theatre's formula didn't work in Hindi. Language was the critical variable, not theme or substance, as the successful adaptation of Hindu mythology in *Indersabha* demonstrates. Ascribing intrinsic qualities to a language is nearly as bad as talking about its special genius, but

literary traditions do have specific traits and it is worth hazarding the argument that the operatic abandon of the Parsi theatre and the Hindi cinema is a *function* of the metaphoric extravagance of Urdu.

It is certainly arguable that the opposite is true; that a preference for Hindi produces a cinema of studied naturalism. The films of the new wave were characterised by a radical downscaling of song and dance—a narrative detained by songs was an unsuitable vehicle for unremitting realism. The new seriousness looked to Sanskritised Hindi for its film titles. It wasn't an accident that the early films of Benegal and Nihalani had names like *Ankur*, *Nishant*, *Manthan*, *Bhumika*, *Aankrosh* and *Ardhasatya*. The titles reflect the anxiety of this largely subsidised movement to distance itself from the commercial cinema and its bazaar Urdu.

Urdu was only one part of the legacy of Islamicate empire. "The legacy of Islamicate empire" is short-hand for the impact that the practice of the Islamicate state and its ruling elite had on the culture of the colonial middle classes and, for our purposes, the cinema that they made.

Islamicate empire bequeathed to Hindi cinema much more than a medium and a vocabulary: it provided it with images of the good life, a model of the man about town, a stereotype of cultivated leisure and the ingredients for rentier decadence. All of the above were derived from a part-fantasised vision of nawabi Lucknow, which was nostalgically remembered as the last bastion of a beleaguered Islamicate culture, the culture of the Urdu-speaking elite.

Awadh produced the archetypes but the cinema's use of them wasn't limited by place or time. Just as "mughlai khana" has become synonymous with Hindustani haute cuisine, "nawabi ayyashi" is the standard for rentier decadence. The greatest film in this genre, Guru Dutt's (or Abrar Alavi's) *Sahib, Bibi aur Ghulam*, is set in a Hindu household in nineteenth century Bengal. Based on a Bengali novel and a re-make of a Bengali film, its ambience is, nonetheless, straight out of nawabi Awadh. A joint family, a stucco mansion, the zamindar lost in his racing pigeons, an idle younger brother given to drink and courtesans, his bored, neglected wife confined to the *zanana*, the family honour threatened by her indiscretions, its prosperity destroyed by intrigue and a changing world, and the end of an era signalled by the younger

bride's paralysis, the choti bahu's murder and the poignance of the ruined haveli.

The pigeons are significant because they are associated with the refined uselessness of Lakhnavi leisure; they symbolise the decadent obsessions of an elite insulated from the world it inhabits. It is ironic that when Ray made his first Hindi film, *Shatranj ke Khilari*, not only did he choose to set it in the spiritual home of the commercial cinema, he also used the very same conventions and stereotypes that Guru Dutt had, to represent a decadent, overripe culture. Chessmen replace pigeons by way of obsession, the fate of the state of Oudh instead of the fortunes of a zamindari hinge upon the obliviousness of the protagonists, but the class they belong to, the way of life that is passing are essentially the same. The frustrated wives in the *zanana*, the dancing girls, the stock motifs for picturing a self-indulgent elite overtaken by history, are faithfully used.

In fact this Islamicate idiom for rendering the decline and fall of the landed aristocracy is so hegemonic that even when the theme is used outside the ambit of Hindi cinema, the treatment remains the same. The outstanding example of this is again a film by Ray, *Jalsaghar*. A zamindar once famous for his soirees, is now fallen on bad times. Attended by a single servant in a peeling mansion he relives the casual extravagance of the old days (instrumental in bringing him to his present pass) when the finest musicians in the country had graced his music room. Infuriated by a social climbing merchant's presumptuous patronage of the arts, he decides to show him his place by staging the one valedictory mehfil, and pawns his last valuables to raise the money for it. The chandeliers, the carpets, the wine-bibbing patrons reclining on their bolsters, even the real life persona of the singer, Begum Akhtar, and her geographical provenance, Faizabad (in her early career she was called Akhtari Bai Faizabadi and Faizabad was till 1775 the capital of Awadh), remind us that social suicide in the grand manner was patented in Islamicate Awadh, the Mother of all Decay.

The ambience created by these props infects Ray's cinematic sensibility. This is evident in the images he uses: a toy boat capsizes in the room where a mehfil is in progress at the precise moment when the zamindar's wife and child drown in a distant

ferry: an insect struggles in a wine-glass; a spider weaves its web over the zamindar's portrait (as time mothballs his world)—in a realist/naturalist film, the symbolism would be embarrassingly florid. But *Jalsaghar* is not a naturalist film; it is a dramatised elegy about the passing of a cultivated, if decadent, way of life and these images are surrogates for the symbols and conventions a *shayar* might use. They are as appropriate to the tone of this film as the elaborately ruined haveli was to the mood of *Sahib, Bibi aur Ghulam*. *Jalsaghar* ends with the zamindar mounting a horse and galloping recklessly till he is thrown and killed—this, too, is fitting, for an elegy requires a death, and Ray is a scrupulous mourner.

The occasion for this essay was the Hindi cinema and Muslim women. Within the frame of the argument developed here, it might be more useful to explore the Islamicate inspiration behind one of the stock female roles in the repertory of Hindi cinema, the vamp. The vamp in Hindi cinema is a hybrid creature. One line of descent is obviously Hollywood, where she is a beautiful and unscrupulous woman who uses her wiles to seduce men and generally lead them to ruin. Something of this aspect survives in her Indian avatar. The Bombay vamp incorporates another Hollywood strain, the moll: her wiles often further the designs of her boss or paramour, the villain.

Her Indian bloodlines lead directly to the *tawaif*. The *tawaif* was not merely a prostitute, though she served that purpose; pure prostitution was the domain of the *randi*. The *tawaif* catered comprehensively to the needs of the cultivated man-about-town, she was more the accomplished courtesan, a sort of geisha. If Awadhi lore is to be taken seriously, it was the *tawaif* who undertook the social education of the sons of the gentry. She taught them a proper appreciation of the finer things in life: music, dance, conversation and etiquette—the legendary courtliness of Awadhi manners, Lucknow's *nazakat* and *felizeeb* were her stock-in-trade. In this sublimated understanding of the *tawaif* even her dance, the *mujra*, is not an erotic performance but a choreographed ritual of salutation. The word *mujra* is related both to *majra* which indicates a place where anything runs or is made to flow, and *mijra'i*, a person who pays his respects, such as a servant or a minister.¹⁰ The dance floor, thus, becomes a

theatre in the round in which the *tawaif* and her patrons from polite society stage their little drama of politesse, where everyone knows their lines, where every cue finds its rehearsed response.

The most literal rendering of this rarefied conception of the *tawaif* is to be found in Muzaffar Ali's film *Umrao Jaan*, but in the generality of Hindi films, the *tawaif* is a more carnal figure. This doesn't necessarily result in a visually explicit film; it simply means that the *tawaif's* accumulated experience in sensuality counterpoints the heroine's modesty (if she is married) and virginity (if she isn't). Since virtue and sexuality (at least assertive sexuality as distinct from demure succulence) can't co-exist in the same woman in the Hindi film they are often split into two female bodies, the heroine and the scarlet other woman. The *tawaif* is the other woman socially institutionalised. In *Sahib, Bibi aur Ghulam*, Rehman, the decadent, *tawaif*-visiting zamindar, makes this clear to his wife, Meena Kumari. Irritated by her entreaties to spend his time at home with her, he taunts her with the inadequacies generic to the wifely state: can she beguile him with song, can she dance for him, or drink with him, can she be his companion in *nasha* (intoxication)? When she does all this, he stays a while—and then goes back to the *kotha*, because a domesticated husband calls his virility into question.

In *Lal Pathar* the *tawaif* is no longer a faceless courtesan, threatening the wife's peace of mind at a distance; she is, as played by Hema Malini, a central character in the film, intriguing against Raakhee whose marriage to Raj Kumar threatens her long liaison with him, whose *suhagan* (wifely) state reminds her of the respectability that she, a *tawaif*, can never achieve. It is when the *tawaif* turns malevolent that she begins to shade into the Hollywood seductress to produce the vamp of Hindi films: Nadira, Helen, Bindu, Aruna Irani . . .

Given her *tawaif* lineage, it is not surprising that the Hindi film vamp invariably dances. While the dance is as hybrid as her pedigree, its debt to the *mujra* is everywhere apparent. If the idiom of the *mujra* is Kathak, freely and suggestively interpreted, the vamp's cabaret is founded on movements and mannerisms borrowed from the *mujra* (the pirouetting, the scissored legs, the underlip caught between the teeth, the arched and wiggled eyebrows, the coyly wrinkled nose), mixed and matched with everything from the belly dance to the flamenco, the whole choreo-

graphed for the big screen and the close-up camera.

The metamorphosis of the courtesan into the cabaret dancer leaves her role as the other woman unchanged. While the hero may have no liaison with the vamp, while she might not be part of a triangular relationship, she remains in the scheme of the Hindi film and for its audience, one half of its bifurcated woman, the heroine's alter ego. As an object of desire the heroine is unsatisfactory, blurred by virtue and the soft-focus of romantic love—but the flaunted carnality of the vamp invites uncomplicated lust. She allows her male audience the privilege of voyeurism without guilt, just as the *tawaif* does when she dances the *mujra*, only without the charade of courtliness.

It is a commonplace of Indian film journalism that over the past ten years the vamp has become a rare creature, nearly extinct. The obvious explanation is that a new breed of dancing heroines have stolen the navel in her gown, the set-piece cabaret. The zest with which Madhuri Dixit in *Dayavan*, or *Sridevi* in *Mr India*, or Kimi Katkar in *Hum*, bump and grind their way through routines that Helen would have found venturesome, leaves the vamp with nothing to do. It is tempting to argue that this evolution mirrors a corresponding change in society, that as women step out of seclusion or the *zanana* and take charge of their lives, female sexuality becomes less pigeonholed and furtive, and more the prerogative of the girl next door—so that where once the hero had to go to a nightclub, now he just goes to college. It's tempting but untrue. These latter-day Meena Kumaris keep their Rehman not because the *zanana* and its obverse, the *kotha*, have been rubble by modernity, but because they have been bridged by it. Though the *tawaif* and the begum have been joined, the result is not the whole woman of feminist aspiration, but the drawing-cum-dining of the suburbs, or that legendary object of consumerist passion, the two-in-one.

This essay has argued that the relationship between Hindi cinema and Islamicate culture is a subject larger than the Muslim Social as a genre or the stock Muslim characters that live in Hindi films. It is not exhausted by the study of films like *Mere Mehboob* or *Nikaah*, nor by anatomising the noble Pathan, the thwarted begum or the purdah-ed *khatoon*. Urdu, Awadh and the *tawaif* have been instrumental in shaping Hindi cinema as a whole—not just some "Muslim" component of it.

In using the term Islamicate to describe the three protagonists of this essay—Urdu, Awadh and the *tawaif*—I have been uneasily aware of the other words that could have been used to name them. Nawabi Awadh and its decadence could be classified as feudal or semi-feudal according to taste. Likewise the *tawaif* could be seen as a variant on patterns of prostitution and concubinage found everywhere in patriarchal society. The reason I have used Islamicate instead of these other terms is two-fold: first, weapons of mass destruction like “feudal” and “patriarchal” tend to level the landscapes that they light upon. Second, Islamicate seems to correspond to the association that my hypothetical producers and consumers of Hindi films might make between Urdu, ghazals, qawwalis, nawabs, *tawaifs*, begums, on the one hand, and some notion of Islamic or Muslim culture and history on the other. When Indians cease to make this association, Islamicate will become an irrelevant term. It is inapplicable, for example, to *jalebis* or *sivain ki kheer*, even though Muslim migrants brought them into India. No one makes that connection any longer. Until that happens to the subjects of this essay, the term fills a hole in our vocabulary. And till that secular kingdom comes let us give thanks for the Hindi film: the unpartitioned homeland of the people of al-Hind.

Notes

I would like to thank S. M. Aztuddin Hussain, Saleem Kidwai and, most especially Asha Gupta for their advice and information.

¹ Notably, James Fergusson in his path-breaking work, *History of Indian and Eastern Architecture* (London: 1876, 2nd ed. 1910). The influence of his book endures. *The Penguin Guide to the Monuments of India*, Vols. I & II (London: 1989), classifies the subcontinent's monuments into six categories: Buddhist, Jain, Hindu, Islamic, Rajput and European.

² Marshall G.S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization. Volume One: The Classical Age of Islam* (Chicago: 1974), p.57.

³ *Ibid.*, p.59.

⁴ I have no quarrel with those who would claim them for Hindustani rather than Urdu, except to point out that Hindustani, a well-meant brainchild, was orphaned early. The communal passion behind the Hindi-Urdu war left it unsuitable for general adoption.

⁵ This is a good place to explain what I mean by Urdu. Schematically, the urban lingua franca of non-peninsular India forks into two literary dialects, Hindi (Sanskritic) and Urdu (Perso-Arabic). The more self-conscious practitioners of

both are mainly committed to mutual incomprehensibility. In a republican India, Hindi, being the national language, has the assistance of the State and the official media in this esoteric endeavour. In this essay, Urdu is used in a residual sense, i.e. any usage which, unlike government Hindi, is accepting of the lingua franca's Perso-Arabic heritage. This encompasses everything from Bombay's argot to Chalib: the linguistic range of Hindi cinema.

⁶ It does happen sometimes though:

*Aao sajan mohe ang laga lo,
Janam safal ho jaaye;
Hriday ki peerha dekh ki agni . . .* (Pyasa)

⁷ To the extent that Urdu's pre-eminence is attributable to the patronage it has historically received from the State, its position is vulnerable to changes in policy. If a purged and Sanskritised Hindi endures as the official language of the Republic and its media, Urdu's influence on the Hindi film might well wane. Two interviews from the *Sunday Times of India*, (November 1, 1992), could be straws in the wind. The first interviewee is the mainstream film maker, Subhash Ghai:

Interviewer: But why have you titled it *Khubnayaq*? Will the masses know what it means?

Subhash Ghai: It means "The Villain". I did think about a simpler title but this is the most apt one. In any case, we've been hearing such difficult words on Doordarshan's Hindi samachar bulletins and in serials like *Mahaabharata* that I think our vocabulary has improved.

The second interview was with the avant-garde director, Mani Kaul:

Interviewer: Wasn't your film entitled *Ahamaq* before?

Mani Kaul: It was but strangely the word "idiot" is more popular. I asked a taxi driver whether he knew what *ahamaq* meant and he said he didn't.

⁸ Gulab Rai, *Kavya ke Roop: Natak aur Ablincatra*, (Delhi: 2004 Vikrami), pp.50-55. Bharatendu's loathing of the Parsi theatre is understandable given his advocacy of a sober, shuddh Hindi. The Parsi theatre, like the Hindi film, didn't value sobriety and wasn't acquainted with "authenticity" as this breezy verse from *Indersabha* demonstrates:

*Raja hoon main gaum ka, inder mera naam,
Bin pariyon ke deed ke, mujhe nahin aruam.
Sunao re mere dev re, dil ko nahin karar,
Jaldi mere vaste, sabha karo taiyar.
Takht bichao jagniaga, jaldi se is uan
Mujhko shab bhar bajhna, mehsil ke darmyaan.*

This cheerfully colloquial idiom makes the celestial *darbar* of Indra seem like a night out at a *mujra*.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Steingass, *Persian-English Dictionary*, p. 1176.