

The disappearance of Muslim socials in Bollywood

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It was great to see the name of the movie in English, Hindi and Urdu in both *Mere Brother Ki Dulhan* and *Mausam*. The use of Urdu in film titles is something that has been lost in Indian cinema, along with the film genre called the ‘Muslim social’. The ‘Muslim social’ was a sub-genre of Bollywood drama about love, marriage, family, festivals, customs, rituals and so on, the usual staple of Bollywood cinema. The only difference, which seems major today as it has gone missing, is that the characters, settings and contexts of the film were Muslim. Such films and soaps were not thematically different or qualitatively superior to the usual Bollywood films and soaps. Examples of Muslim socials include *Bahu Begum*, *Chaudvin Ka Chaand*, *Mere Mehboob* and *Mehboob Ki Mehendi*, among others. Muslim socials were being made up to the 1990s, such as *Salma Pe Dil Aa Gaya* and *Sanam Bewafa*. The last examples of Muslim socials that I can remember are on television, which is where all archaic film genres go, and they are *Henna* and *Khwahish*. *Tees Maar Khan* did have an Eid song, which went mostly unnoticed.

Films in which the major characters are Muslim and/or speak Urdu get made only within certain contexts – to make ‘serious’ films like *Kurbaan* (which, for all its good intentions,

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conveys that a Hindu girl is never safe marrying a Muslim guy, as even the most seemingly progressive Muslim professor teaching a course in Islam will turn out to be a terrorist), *My Name is Khan* or, to go back a few years, *Fiza*. But when did you last see a Hindi film in which both the lead characters are Muslim and the film does not take up a socio-political issue?

A Muslim social made today would seem anachronistic, but that is not because Muslim culture has disappeared from India. Muslim culture still exists, in different ways that need new cinematic interpretations. However, I would argue that such a film would seem anachronistic for two different reasons.

The first is, of course, the way in which Indian identity has become conflated with Hindu identity, and with mostly North Indian (Punjabi, Sikh, Jat, UP, MP, ‘from Delhi’, etc.) or West Indian (Gujarati or ‘from Mumbai’) identity in cinema. When did you last have a lead character from Assam or South India, except again in an ‘issue’ film? This conflation is dangerous in its erasure of forms of difference. As a friend pointed out to me recently, it is not just Muslim identity, but all ‘minority’ religious identities – Christian, Parsi, Sikh – that have disappeared from cinema. At the same time, this conflation of India with Hindu is not as simple as it sounds, given that the most popular male actors in Bollywood, who play these generic ‘Rahul’, ‘Raj’, ‘Rohan’, ‘Chulbul’ characters, are Muslim.

What I want to focus on in this commentary, however, is the second reason. Any film that emphasises religious identity in a non-issue-based context seems anachronistic because what we understand and see as ‘natural’ or ‘real’ is a depoliticised, non-religious space. Muslim characters in films today are like Imraan in *Zindagi Na Milegi Dobara*. Imraan knows Urdu literature and poetry. At the same time, the film is the story of 3 friends – 2 Hindu and 1 Muslim – who travel to Spain together, rent luxurious apartments and vehicles, and discover personal fulfilment through participating in extreme adventure sports. In such a context, Imraan’s being a Muslim is incidental and does not essentially affect his being in any way.

Is it conservative to talk of religious identity? Isn't it better to relegate one's religious identity to a de-political, 'cultural' aspect of one's life? After all, doesn't fanaticism lie in a valorisation of religion?

I am not advocating an unquestioning return to traditionalism. Traditionalism is often used to continue exploitative positions, and the disappearance of the Muslim social is also partly due to the traditionalism of conflating India with Hindu identities. But I would like to question this relegation of religious identity to the private sphere.

When you are stuck in a situation where the other person only sees you in terms of your religion, it does not matter if you are more religious or more 'cosmopolitan'. At that time, your religious identity is an issue, whether you like it or not, whether you want it or not. Liberalism would have me celebrate the individual – the glorious, depoliticised, de-ethnicised individual who is the same the world over – whose difference exists at the surface level in terms of clothes, food practices and so on. Religious identity, in this formulation, is 'cultural' rather than political: it affects the personal sphere and is to be kept strictly away from the public sphere. Difference, thereby, is always containable as difference, is never contentious or disturbing. There is a line, wherein difference on one side of the line is 'multiculturalism', is celebratory, and once difference crosses this line, it becomes threatening and fanatic. Because this line is never clearly defined and is subjective, markers of cultural difference can become sources of threat in different situations, such as the veil in European societies or the turban in post-9/11 times in America. I am not comfortable with such homogenisation and sterilisation of difference. Neither does my feminism sit well with a split between the public and the personal. It was challenged by feminism as enabling exploitation. Today, when religion is seen as essentially a private matter, maybe it is time to challenge this split again.