

Engaging with Hindi Cinema in a Vedic-Islamic Context:

Pluralism, Liminality, and Diasporic Khoja Ismailis

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Abstract:

A discourse in Bombay cinema, that veers from the dominant reflection of Hindutva views in which Muslims are constructed as alien and dangerous Others, depicts a pluralist Indian society characterized by intersectionality between religions. Such portrayals resonate in particular ways with South Asian groups, like the Satpanth tradition of Khoja Ismailis, which have historically emerged from Vedic-Islamic interaction and occupy a liminal in-between space. Those Khojas who have migrated to East Africa and Canada over several generations have lost touch with elements of their South Asian cultural heritage due to pressures of cultural westernization and religious Arabization / Persianization. However, they have maintained their centuries-old ginan literature that articulates Shia concepts in Indic languages, culture, and symbolism. They find an intertextuality between these hymns and Hindi film's themes and music that draw from tropes of Indic scripture. Compared to the kinds of identifications favoured by Islamist and Hindutva forces, the religiously hybrid characteristics of the Khoja Ismaili community coincide with a more pluralist and less essentialist set of portrayals in Hindi cinema. They have responded well to the ways in which their co-religionists in Bollywood have creatively used Indic and Islamic religio-cultural resources in the face of religious nationalism. The examination of this group's engagement with Bollywood affords insight into one of the several countervailing discourses that continue to flourish in complex national and global settings despite the heavy constraints imposed by nationalist power politics.

Keywords: Bollywood; Hindutva; Muslim; Khoja; Ismaili; Ginan; Satpanth; Bhakti; Diaspora.