

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 religious-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.

Introduction

India's upper crust has been the biggest beneficiary of neoliberal economic policies instituted from 1991. In 2017, the richest 1% had financial growth of 73% while half the

population's finances rose only 1% (Oxfam International, 2020). Indian neoliberalism has increasingly meshed with Hindutva (Nanda, 2009), the religio-social and political policy promoting Hindu and upper caste hegemony. Utilizing Hindutva rhetoric, the Bharata Janatiya Party (BJP) government has enhanced its power by channelling the have-nots' resentment towards minority scapegoats. Populist news media have been complicit in promoting suspicion about Indian Muslims, who have been particularly demonized by Hindutva propaganda (Fact Alive, 2020). This tendency has dovetailed with Hindi film's dominant depictions of inter-communal relations.

Bombay cinema's employment of Muslims, its portrayals of Islam, and its viewers all have multiple dimensions that need to be considered in their complexity. This paper touches on these issues with particular attention to Bollywood's viewership, whose diversity remains understudied. It foregrounds the specific audience of diasporic *Satpanthi* Ismaili Khojas who do not fit into a monolithic category: they are Muslim and also draw on themes that underlie Vedic worldviews. Examining the group's engagement with Hindi cinema opens up possibilities for appreciating the multiple and complicated relationships between this film culture and its spectators. It enables insight into one form of apolitical response to the socio-political pressure on Bollywood to conform to a Hindutva-driven nationalism.

This article posits that, compared to the kinds of identifications favoured by Islamist and Hindutva forces, the religiously hybrid characteristics of Khoja Ismailis coincide with a more pluralist and less essentialist set of Bollywood portrayals. It contextualizes Khoja viewers within Bombay film's relationship with diaspora, religio-cultural liminality in Indian society, cinematic treatment of Muslims in previous and contemporary portrayals, and music's role in sounding a counterpoint to Hindutva power politics. In the last few decades, Ismailis along with other Muslims have been engaged in countering adverse depictions of Islam in dominant western portrayals (Cummins, 2021). The Aga Khan Trust for Culture has been actively involved in preserving major historic sites of Muslims to emphasize their civilizational contributions. Khoja music producers in Bollywood have been developing material in modes that stand in contrast to Hindutva nationalism's conflictual discourses.

Members of the group under examination have a multi-layered identity as South Asians, Indians, diasporians, Muslims, Shias, Ismailis, and *Satpanthis* which influences their responses to Hindi cinema. The *Satpanth* Khoja community's particular religious and cultural outlook emerged centuries ago, based on Islamic and Vedic sources; it resisted being categorized as either Muslim or Hindu in essentialist religious terms (Asani, 2011). This began to change in the early 20th century as the group's leadership encouraged a more (Perso-Arabic) Islamic identity and westernization. Yet, aspects of its practices and outlook have generally remained in a liminal and fluid space that is both Islamic and Indic. This diasporic study deals primarily with those Khoja Ismailis who migrated from Gujarat to East Africa and then to Canada; the latter sites have substantial presence of the transnational community. Ismaili audiences in India and Twelver and Sunni Khojas are outside the scope of examination.

Despite being distanced from India for generations, Hindi cinema has remained a constant presence among a significant proportion of diasporic *Satpanthi* Khojas (Alibhai, 2020; Janmohamed, 2020; Mega Art Entertainment, 2021). Such resilient interweavement with Bollywood over the last century contains "domination, resistance, and hybridity all in the same venue" (Hirji, 2010: 213). The transnational group's intersectional readings of Mumbai's film have

been shaped by their particular constellation of socio-cultural experiences. They view it through the lenses of their own Vedic-Islamic tradition (Alibhai, 2020), providing an alternative to the religiously monolithic, “muscular” cinematic conceptions of nationalism (Bannerjee, 2017).

Satpanthi Khojas and Their Diaspora

Satpanth manifests a particular historical confluence of Islamic and Vedic religious worldviews. Its preacher-saints (*pirs*) taught about the true *guru* in the form of a Shia Imam descended from the Prophet Muhammad through his daughter, Fatima, and Ali ibn Abi Talib. *Satpanth* (“Path of Truth”) was the Indian manifestation of *Da’wat al-Haqq* (“Invitation to Truth”) that had been initiated in Arab and Persian lands (Khan, 2004). The group’s Persian *pirs* were active in western India from around the 14th century, developing the faith’s unique indigenous expressions in Gujarat, Punjab, Sindh and Rajasthan. The followers of *Satpanth* were named by Pir Sadardin (d. 15th century) as “Khojas,” derived from the Persian honorific “*khwaja*” (lord) and corresponding to the Indian term “*thakkur*” (Asani, 2011).

Ismaili *pirs* articulated their beliefs transculturally in Indic languages, cultures and symbols. Their Khoja followers revered the Imams in Persia as Ali’s successors, to whom they sent religious offerings. *Satpanth* produced a unique lyrical tradition of *ginans* (derived from the Sanskrit *jnana*, “knowledge”). Like Sufi preachers in the subcontinent, *Satpanth*’s *pirs* drew from Indic scripture to explain their path (Halani, 2018). The “Vedas and their derivative and subsidiary traditions—spiritual (Vaishnavite bhakti), legal (dharma as defined by Manu’s Laws) and mythological (Mahabharata, Ramayana, Puranas, etc.) ... were seamlessly fused together into the Ginans by the spiritually inspired creative genius of the Pirs” (Alibhai, 2020). The hymns were composed in Gujarati, Khari Boli (proto Hindi-Urdu), Punjabi, Sindhi and Siraiki/Multani (Esmail, 2002) and are still sung in contemporary religious gatherings of South Asian Khojas and their diaspora. This literature comprises “about one thousand works whose lengths vary from five to four hundred verses” (Kassam, 1995: 2).

The group’s Imams lived in Persia for generations, with leadership handed down from father to son. In the 19th century, the Imam acquired the title of Aga Khan, which his successors continue to bear. Aga Khan I moved to India in 1842. Whereas the vast majority of Khojas gave him their allegiance, some dissented and launched legal challenges against his authority in British colonial courts. Justice Arnould, who presided over the Aga Khan Case of 1866, “carefully sifted through the evidence he had gathered from witnesses, looking for elements that he could fit with the framework of the categories ‘Islam,’ ‘Muslim,’ ‘Hindu,’ ‘Sunni,’ ‘Shi’a,’ and ‘Isma’ili’ deduced from scholarship of Western historians of Islam” (Asani, 2011: 107). The judgement, which affirmed the leadership of Aga Khan I, came to be seen as an authoritative legitimization of the Imam’s claims and identified the community as “Shia Imami Ismaili.” This interpretation became pivotal to the Aga Khans’ positioning of their community in India and transnationally.

The term “Ismaili” became instrumental in distinguishing the Aga Khans’ Indian adherents from the other Khojas who had challenged his status and had declared themselves to be either Sunnis or Twelver Shias. Henceforth, *Satpanth*’s hybrid Indic character was systematically downplayed in favour of the group’s Arabic and Persian aspects to develop an essentialist form of an “Ismaili Muslim” identity (Asani, 2011; Karim, 2021). References to “*Satpanth*” and “Khoja” became increasingly rare in the community’s institutional terminology. Certain *ginans* that were

deemed to have “Hindu” content were prohibited from recitation in 1975. Ismaili research and cultural organizations increasingly turned away from *Satpanth*. 21st century Khojas find themselves in an in-between space which, on the one hand, continues to resonate deeply with their Indic narratives, and on the other, engages profoundly with Islamic symbolism. This liminality has influenced their positioning vis-à-vis other religious communities and socio-cultural phenomena like Hindi film.

Khoja merchants had been participants in the centuries-long Indian Ocean trade, with settled communities appearing in East Africa in the 1830s (Daftary & Hirji, 2011: 204). They became disadvantaged as Indians in Africa under 20th century European race-based colonialism. Aga Khan III felt that his followers would have to “in general adopt British and European customs” to succeed (Aga Khan III, 1954: 190). Therefore, the Imam embarked on a policy that sought to distance his adherents in Africa from their Indian roots and to westernize them. This worked to some extent in producing individuals who sought to be European in speech, thought and clothing. Gujarati and Khojki, the community’s primary written languages, were dropped from Aga Khan schools’ curriculum with the result that the community was increasingly distanced from its ancestral *Satpanth* literature.

Racially-based policies in Europe, North America and Australia restricted non-white immigration until the second half of the 20th century. Husain Rahim, thought to be a Khoja, arrived in Vancouver in 1910 from India. He played a key role in supporting the Indian passengers on board the Komagata Maru ship during their two-month standoff with the Canadian government in 1914 (Simon Fraser University Library, 2011). Subsequent historical records do not indicate Ismaili immigration until the 1950s, with the community growing substantially from 1972 when thousands of Indians expelled from Uganda moved to Canada. *Satpanthi* Khojas are generally well-settled in the country and are experiencing ongoing growth through immigration. Most new members now come directly from India and Pakistan. The community in Canada also comprises Ismailis of Iranian, Afghan, Syrian and Tajik origins.

Khojas have expressed concern about Hindutva nationalism in India and are in favour of a pluralist engagement between communities (Moir, 2021; Virani, 2021). Toronto-based Khoja novelist M.G. Vassanji’s *The Assassin’s Song* (2007), tells the story of a contemporary religious leader in a Gujarati village living in a socio-political environment that acknowledges only monolithic identities, but who strives to maintain a self that is not essentialized as either Hindu or Muslim. The book clearly alludes to the Vedic-Islamic fluidity and hybridity that characterize Khojas.

Hindi Cinema and Indian Diasporas

Diasporas have a complicated relationship with Mumbai’s cinema, which provides idealized images of India and its transnation. Whereas all diasporic Indians do not watch Bollywood, a significant proportion continue to maintain the cinematic umbilical cord to the motherland. They simultaneously consume media products from other sources like Hollywood but Bollywood is generally seen as *their* film culture (Gillespie, 1995) – even more than movies made by diasporic South Asians. Parents make children watch Hindi movies as part of cultural maintenance (Mishra, 2002). Bombay cinema offers vicarious fulfilment for a range of diasporic desires to be derived from displays of religious symbols, mythological narratives, *dharmic* values,

ancestral tradition, homeland imagery, cultural affiliation, and linguistic and musical familiarity (Karim, 2018). The fictional presentations are usually not congruent with the reality of lived experiences of diasporas, who, nevertheless, frequently suspend disbelief and continue to turn to Bollywood.

Different trends can be identified in Mumbai cinema's depictions of diaspora in the periods before and after the Indian economy's capitalist liberalization. The policy of national self-sufficiency under Jawaharlal Nehru, prime minister from 1947-1964, was reflected on the screen as mistrust of foreign influence. For example, a main character in the hit 1949 film *Andaz* ("Style," Khan, 1949), who is a diasporic Indian from Africa, is presented as being a westernized disrupter and an extra-national / extra-marital interloper. The closing dialogue warns didactically about the corrupting influence of foreign cultures. One can imagine that Indian diasporians in Africa, including Khojas, who watched this film experienced incongruence and cognitive dissonance (Janmohamed, 2020).

Taqdeer ("Destiny," Salaam, 1967), *Ek Phool Do Mali* ("One Flower, Two Gardeners," Goel, 1969) and *My Love* (Sukhdev, 1970) served up Africa as a foreign location for sub-plots contributing marginally to storylines centered in India. Hindi film's African sojourn ended when it began earnestly to set morality plays pitting Indian against western sites in movies like *Purab aur Paschim* ("East and West," Kumar, 1970), *Doli* ("Bridal Palanquin," Rao, 1970) and *Hare Rama Hare Krishna* ("Engage Me in Your Service, Rama and Krishna," Anand, 1971). They presented British, American, and Canadian societies, respectively, as having corrupted Indian diasporians who needed to be repatriated to the national fold's purity. Even though small communities like Khojas were not depicted, such portrayals generally tended to make their members somewhat suspicious of western countries' influences on young expatriates.

A sea change in Bollywood's portrayal of diasporas, coinciding with economic liberalization policies, occurred in the 1990s. The "seminal text" (Mishra, 2002: 250) of the wildly popular *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* ("Lovers Win Brides," Chopra, 1995) was a pivotal cinematic and socio-cultural marker. Bollywood's producers, a significant part of whose box office revenues had begun to come from western countries, dropped the sharply polarized representations between Indian residents and diasporians (Hirji, 2010). This paralleled the government's newly-established "Non-Indian Resident" (NRI) category that re-shaped "the 'India' community as a national but global community" (Ray, 2003: 33). At the climactic end of *Dilwale*, the *dharmic* (i.e. devoted to traditional Indic values) diasporic hero is given permission to take his beloved back to London by her father who represents the patriarchal nation (Ray, 2003). With this, the real life diasporian symbolically received legitimacy as part of the Indian "transnation" (Appadurai, 1996). An increasing number of movie plots, e.g. *Pardes* ("Abroad," Ghai, 1997) and *Yaadein* ("Memories," Ghai, 2001) came to centre around the lives of current or former diasporians. However, the positive characters living abroad had to uphold *dharmic* values (Mishra, 2002), which have long been obligatory requirements for Bollywood's heroes.

Nation, Cinema and Muslims

Whether the setting is India or diaspora, nationalism is a primary currency of Hindi cinema. Even before independence, "the combination of image and spectator was, consciously or unconsciously, figured as a microcosm of the future nation-state" (Prasad, 1998: 123). Scores of

films narrate the nation, leaders, military, heroes, politics, patriotism, sacrifice, tradition, values, fight for independence, struggle against the nation's enemies, and steadfastness against betrayal.

Such portrayals of the ostensibly secular state are often fused with Hindu sensibilities. The “implied viewer” is Hindu, who is imagined as a “devotional subject” (Gehlawat, 2010: 4). Bombay cinema has integrated the concept of *darsana*, a “relation of perception within the public traditions of Hindu worship” (Prasad, 1998: 75). Films have been repackaging motifs from the religious epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* since the early 20th century (Gokulsingh & Dissanayake, 1998). Hindu symbols and ceremonies are fused almost seamlessly with plots about romance, crime fighting, social struggles, or politics.

What then of India's 200 million Muslims? The bulk of Mumbai productions have Hindu protagonists with the occasional Muslim character as friend, sidekick or buffoon and increasingly “terrorist, foreign spy, mafia don, fraudster, invading barbarian and villain” (Dhawan, 2020). (Sikhs, Christians, Parsis, and other communities' members are also depicted in secondary roles.) Despite these stereotypical portrayals, cinematic discourses about Muslims as well as Muslim actors' participation in the Bombay film industry are characterized by complexities.

Prior to the populist rise of Hindutva, a political ethos of a secularist and pluralist India was integral to the dominant national discourse and was echoed vigorously in Hindi cinema. The cultural critic Ziauddin Sardar comments that

the India of my childhood was a land of cultural pluralism where what mattered was not one's personal creed, but how one related to this rich diversity, what one contributed towards the evolution of multicultural, multiethnic, multilingual identities, how one promoted harmony and a sense of peace among different groups. Of course, there were always disputes and conflicts. But the source of these conflicts were never ethnic or religious but, as in *Ganga Jamna* [Bose, 1961], a feudal heritage, or as in *Mughal-e-Azam* [Asif, 1960], a different set of principles, or as in *Pyassa* [Dutt, 1957] and so many other films, tradition and modernity. (1998: 62)

Religious diversity was deliberately portrayed. Montages of various houses of worship (Hindu *mandirs*, Islamic *masjids*, Sikh *gurdwaras* and Christian churches) were displayed. Artistes of Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Christian, Jewish and other backgrounds performed cinematically in the others' normative religious contexts.

Numerous movies with Muslim themes were successful. Bhaskar and Allen (2009) offer a categorization of “Muslim Historicals,” “Muslim Courtesan Films,” “Classic Muslim Socials,” and “New Wave Muslim Socials.” Muslim religious and cultural sensibilities were shown in popular fare like *Mere Mehboob* (“My Lover,” Rawail, 1963), *Mehboob Ki Mehndi* (“Lover's Henna,” Rawail, 1971), and *Nikaah* (“Wedding,” Chopra, 1982). Courtesan films, like the hits *Pakeezah* (“Pure,” Amrohi, 1972) and *Umrao Jaan* (Ali, 1981), romanticized the standardized female Muslim role of the *tawaif* (“courtesan”) who dances for moneyed male clients. Relationships between Hindus and Muslims were explored thoughtfully in films like *Garm Hawa* (“Hot Winds,” Sathyu, 1973), *Salim Langde Pe Mat Ro* (“Don't Cry for Salim the Lame,” Mirza, 1989), while generally conforming to Bollywood's entertainment format. This continued later in *Mammo* (Benegal, 1994), *Bombay* (Ratnam, 1995), *Sardari Begum* (Benegal, 1996), *Refugee* (Dutta, 2000), *Fiza* (Mohamed, 2000), *Zubeidaa* (Benegal, 2001), *Veer-Zahra* (Chopra, 2004),

Khakee (“The Uniform,” Santoshi, 2004), *Fanaa* (“Destroyed,” Kohli, 2006), *Shaurya* (“Valour,” Khan, 2008), *Jodhaa Akbar* (Gowariker, 2008), and *Kai Po Che!* (“I Have Cut!” Kapoor, 2013).

However, the pressure on Bollywood to deliver darker Muslim characters has grown since Hindutva’s rise and BJP’s electoral success. Maidul Islam describes Bollywood’s dominant depictions of Muslims in recent times as absent, mythical and terrorist (2019). Violence linked to the assertion of the 1990s Kashmiri separatist movement and the 9/11 attacks prompted Bollywood’s fixation on the figure of the Muslim terrorist. Films with such characters include *Roja* (Ratnam, 1992), *Sarfarosh* (“Daring,” Matthan, 1999), *Pukar* (“Call,” Santoshi, 2000), *Mission Kashmir* (Chopra, 2000), *Maa Tujhe Salam* (“Mother, I Salute Thee,” Verma, 2002), *Qayamat* (“Final Judgement,” Baweja, 2003), *Yahaan* (“Here,” Sircar, 2005), *Fanaa* (Kohli, 2006), *Lamhaa* (“Moment,” Dholakia, 2010), and *Omerta* (Mehta, 2017). (*Fanaa* has both thoughtful and dark characters.) They have dovetailed with Hindutva-driven propaganda about Muslims, reinforcing their images as a threat to India.

In addition to movies’ contemporary stories, a strong trend has emerged to re-write the past. The integral presence of Islam among indigenous Indians is being re-shaped to externalize the religion’s adherents.

In representing complex medieval histories through the lens of a religious conflict akin to the “clash of civilizations” trope, *Padmaavat* [Bhansali, 2018] bears similarity to *Bajirao Mastani* [Bhansali, 2015], *Tanhaji* [Raut, 2020] and *Panipat* [Gowariker, 2019]. All of these films repeat the trope of a Muslim horde at the gates of a Hindu India. Communalising complex historical and cultural processes of absorption and assimilation, these discourses only serve to “other” Muslims, presenting them as alien to the land. The success of this rhetoric is visible in the box office success of these films and in the political success of candidates who whip up communal hysteria by referring to Indian Muslims as descendants of Khilji and Aurangzeb [Muslim rulers who are usually presented negatively in dominant Indian texts].

(Dhawan, 2020)

The actually-existing peaceful hybrid intersections of Hindus and Muslims almost never appear on screen. Instead, the Indian Muslim is religiously essentialized and made an alien Other. This is remarkable for a number of reasons. Firstly, the strong presence of Muslim professionals in the Indian film industry as actors, directors, producers, script-writers, lyricists, playback singers, music directors, choreographers etc. Secondly, a secular tradition in the Indian polity which had, until Hindutva’s prominence, limited cinematic demonizations of Muslims and promoted pluralism. Thirdly, the 1,300 year-old presence in India of Muslims, most of whom are ethnically native to the country. Furthermore, linguistic, cultural, and religious elements deriving from immigrant Muslim peoples arriving in previous times have been so completely indigenized into Indian ways of life that it is difficult to imagine contemporary India without them.

Occasional productions do counter the Hindutva-coloured productions; for example, *Kurbaan* (“Sacrifice,” D’Silva, 2009), *My Name is Khan* (Johar, 2010) and *Azaan* (“Prayer Call,” Chadha, 2011). An additional exception is *Haider* (Bhardwaj, 2014), which stands out in having “sensibly dealt with the Kashmir question with seriousness, honesty, and integrity” (Islam, 2019: 117). Based on an adaptation of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* by Vishal Bhardwaj and Basharat Peer (a Kashmiri-American journalist), it engages with a humanity that takes the viewer beyond

hackneyed presentations of the conflict in Kashmir, India's sole Muslim-majority state. Another critically acclaimed depiction of Indian Muslims' trying situation is *Mulk* ("Country," Sinha, 2018). It addresses the underlying impression that all adherents of Islam have disloyal leanings and have to display their patriotism continually. But whereas these films delve into some of the personal complexities that Indian Muslims face, their record in examining the broader socio-economic causes that lead to structural marginalization and radicalization is weak (Iwanek, 2018).

The contemporary engagements of Bollywood's Muslim personnel with Hindi films' nationalist themes have been fascinating. Paradoxically, the marginalization and demonization of Islam's followers occurs with the simultaneous popularity of several major Muslim performers. Part of the pressure on Indian Muslims to foreground their patriotism stems from the existence of neighbouring Pakistan as a Muslim homeland, established upon pre-independence India's partition in 1947. Subsequent wars between the two states and their respective intelligence services' attempted destabilization of each other's countries have exacerbated the situation (Perkovich & Dalton, 2016). Yusuf Khan, a highly-respected thespian whose stage name was the Hindu-sounding Dilip Kumar, had many leading roles as an Indian nationalist e.g. *Shaheed* ("Martyr," Saigal, 1948); *Leader* (Mukherjee, 1964); *Kranti* ("Revolution," Kumar, 1981). When Pakistan's government awarded him its highest civilian honour in 1998, right-wing Hindu politicians demanded that he return it "to prove his patriotic credentials" (Chatterjee, 1999), but he was able to withstand their pressure due to his standing in Indian society.

However, not all major Muslim stars have been immune to Hindutva's force. They have to school their performances to narratives that still centre Hindu masculinity, valorise Indian history as Hindu, and suspect even Muslim celebrities as the "other." For example, recently, Shah Rukh Khan and Amir Khan both had to apologize on social and electronic media in the wake of a popular back lash – critiquing them as anti-Indian – for their publicly expressed despondency at the rise of sectarian violence in India which they saw as a blow to democratic secularism.
(Banerjee, 2017: 80)

An insidious patriotism test seems to stalk those Muslims who achieve success. Very rarely has Hindi cinema overtly confronted this issue. One notable exception is *Chak De! India* ("Let's Go, India," Amin, 2007). The Muslim captain of the Indian men's field hockey team, played by Shah Rukh Khan, is ostracized from the sport and driven from his home by neighbours when he is thought to have deliberately thrown a crucial game to Pakistan's team. Written by a non-Muslim (Jaideep Sahni), this artistically and commercially successful movie stood up to Hindutva ideology by presenting another discourse on nationalism based on inclusivity of gender and region.

It is clear that Mumbai cinema's interactions with Muslims are complex and complicated. Despite Hindutva's forceful pressure, some story writers, producers, directors, actors and others have been endeavouring to offer alternative discourses. Whereas this effort is similar to the work of individuals and institutions in western countries to counter "Islamophobia," it has unique and distinct characteristics that draw from India's particular discourses. The following section discusses similar creativity in Bombay cinema's music that draws from the sub-continent's cultural heritage.

Religious Hybridity, Pluralism and Music

South Asia's strong tendencies of religious hybridity (Gottschalk, 2000; Kassam, 2010; Khan, 2004) have been concealed by dominant socio-political and media discourses that present individuals in essentialized religious categories as Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Sikh, Jain, Buddhist, Zoroastrian, Jewish, animist, atheist etc. Indian society experienced considerable ferment between the 12th and 16th centuries when the Vedic *bhakti* (an Indic mode of populist worship) and Islamic Sufi movements intermingled. Sainly figures such as *gurus*, *sants*, *babas* and *pirs*, who were interested in spiritual truth rather than religious orthodoxies, circulated in the sub-continent. Several "*panths*" (paths) or "*guru-pir*" groups emerged, the most prominent of which is the *Kabir Panth*. These traditions resulted from pluralist engagements of Vedic and Islamic thought and practice. Individuals subscribing to this broad movement have fluid and dynamic identities, which are not seen as exclusively Hindu or Muslim.

The lyrical devotional genres of *granth*s, *shabads*, *banis* and *ginans* constitute shared literatures of *guru-pir* religious traditions. Muslim preachers adopted Indic languages, symbols and modes of worship to produce religious musical forms that overlap in the devotions of several contemporary communities in the sub-continent. Asani states that

The *shaykhs* of the Chishti Sufi order, for example, promoted the creation of devotional poetry on Islamic mystical themes in local languages which, in its attitudes, expressions and similes, was strikingly similar to that written by poets influenced by the tradition of *bhakti* devotionalism.

(2002: 8)

Guru Nanak incorporated the hymns (*shabads*) of the Muslim saint Baba Farid (Khwaja Fariduddin Ganjshakar) into the Sikh holy book *Guru Granth Sahib*.

However, this grounded reality of fluid identities was reconstructed into monolithic and ossified categories by "British epistemological imperialism" (Gottschalk, 2000: 29). The decadal Census of India, initiated in 1872, pigeonholed persons as solely "Hindu," "Muslim," "Sikh" etc. These uniform identities were further reinforced through the Hindu and Muslim representational politics that ultimately led to the sub-continent's political partition. The growth of Islamism and Hindutva have pushed the hybrid manifestations of South Asian identities further into the background. Yet such perceptions of the self survive: some groups which are formally Muslim invoke Vedic figures and substantial numbers of Hindus supplicate at the shrines of Islamic saints (Gottschalk, 2000).

Several older movie lyrics link the names of respective Hindu and Islamic deities (Ishwar and Allah, Ram and Rahim) echoing the religiously-hybrid *panths*. Highly successful Hindu and Muslim playback singers sang songs from each other's traditions with considerable depth of emotion. An example is the very moving and popular *bhajan* (devotional song) "Man tarpat Hari darshan ko aaj" ("I long to see Hari today") in *Baiju Bawra* (Bhatt, 1952), which was respectively written and sung in an entirely Hindu context by the Muslims Shakeel Badayuni and Mohammad Rafi. The ability to compose lyrics that have profound meaning in another's religious worldview and to vocalize them in a heartfelt manner is a testament to a superior level of intersectional pluralism.

There were cinematic attempts to reconcile Hindus and Muslims in the aftermath of Partition. The film storylines of *Dhool Ka Phool* (“Blossom of Dust,” Chopra, 1959) and *Dharmputra* (“Son of Dharma,” Chopra, 1961), produced and directed, respectively, by B.R. Chopra and Yash Chopra were mirror images of religious intersectionality. (These Hindu brothers had left their home in Lahore when it became part of Pakistan.) *Dhool* is about a Muslim man raising a Hindu child and *Dharmputra* depicts a Hindu family bringing up a Muslim child. The films embraced a co-existence that eschewed communalism but respected both faiths. “Tu Hindu banega na musalman banega” (“You will be neither Hindu nor Muslim”), *Dhool*’s classic song, emphasizes humanity over religious identity. Its critique of nationalism also stands in stark contrast with the present. “Ae Mere Pyare Watan” (O, my beloved nation) in *Kabuliwala* (“Man From Kabul,” Gupta, 1961), displayed Bombay cinema’s confidence to sing lovingly of a nation other than India.

Occasionally, Hindi film, a cinema that usually insists on indicating characters’ creeds overtly or symbolically, expresses religious liminality by erasing religion in certain portrayals. For example, *Heer Raanjha* (Anand, 1970), based on a story by Punjabi Sufi poet Waris Shah (d. 1798), narrates universal themes that barely mention religious identity. Chandramukhi, a key character in various versions of *Devdas* (Barua, 1935; Bhansali, 2002; Roy, 1955), appears religiously ambiguous. Even though Hindi cinema generally presents the role of courtesan that she plays as Muslim, her name leans towards a Hindu identity and she bears a *bindi*, a Hindu symbol, in the 1955 film. There is a toggling back and forth in the 2002 movie’s song and dance performances: “Maar dala” (“Killed me”) is clearly in a Muslim cultural mode and “Kaahe ched mohe” (“Why does he tease me so?”) is about Krishna’s interaction with Radha – figures from Indic scripture.

Hindi cinema’s songs have often signalled religious pluralism by mingling references from various faiths. This is not the same as the serial depiction, orally or visually, of places of worship, deities or personages of different traditions that maintains the distinctness of the respective religions. The *qawwali* musical genre, which has Sufi origins, has substantially drawn Hindus as performers and audiences in South Asian society (Manuel, 2008: 380). However, Mumbai’s cinema usually locates its performances in Muslim contexts. One exception of sorts is “Shirdiwale Sai Baba” (“Sai Baba of Shirdi”) in *Amar Akbar Anthony* (Desai, 1977) where a Muslim *qawwali* singer performs at a temple dedicated to the saint Sai Baba, whose teachings were an amalgam of Hindu and Islamic faiths. *Barsaat ki Raat* (“A Rainy Night,” Santoshi, 1960)’s climatic *qawwali* “Yeh ishq ishq hai” (“This is love”) is a brilliant expression of religious pluralism: Sahir Ludhianvi’s verses intertextually suture various religious traditions in singing of Sita, Krishna, Radha, Meera (Hinduism), Allah, Muhammad (Islam), Buddha (Buddhism), Moses (Judaism and Islam) and Jesus (Christianity and Islam). Bollywood’s recent *qawwalis* have become less ecumenical, but whereas the lyrics were previously in dominantly Sunni contexts they now often resonate with Shia sentiment in emphatic mentions of Ali.

Indian Muslims involved in Bollywood’s music production have been lyricists, composers and singers of very popular nationalist songs. They occupy liminal religio-political spaces that are complex and complicated (Bhabha, 1994). Even as Hindutva’s power has intensified, A.R. Rahman, a Hindu convert to Islam and a prolific virtuoso, has produced nationalist materials for *Roja* (Ratnam, 1992), *Lagaan*¹ (“Agricultural Tax,” Gowariker, 2001), *The Legend of Bhagat Singh* (Santoshi, 2002), *Swades* (“Homeland,” Gowariker, 2004), and *Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose* (Benegal, 2004). His studio album *Vande Mataram* (“I bow to thee, Mother”), released on Indian

independence's golden jubilee in 1997, was a critical and commercial success. Its exceedingly popular track "Maa Tujhe Salam" (Mother, I salute thee) used an Islamic greeting (*salam*) to address the Indian motherland. Hindutva supporters attacked it but the work's creative strength and appeal made it a success. Also noteworthy is Rahman's collaboration with Pakistani *qawwali* singer Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan in another song in the collection. These various strands of Rahman's oeuvre delineate intricate spaces where such Muslim producers of contemporary Indian culture operate; they also underline the possibilities for the weight of artistic excellence to counter Hindutva's political power.

In 2017, the Khoja Ismaili brothers Salim and Sulaiman Merchant recorded "Mera Desh Hi Dharam" ("My country is my religion / moral duty") as a tribute to the Indian armed forces on the 70th independence anniversary. Its video displays military hardware in war games with explosions and staccato gunfire in low volume, which is counterintuitively juxtaposed with gentle tonality of *Desh* ("Country") *raga*, evoking simplicity, pastoralism and peace. Many *ginans* of the *Satpanth* tradition, to which the Merchants belong, are in the same *raga*. The production stands in strong contrast to frequent Bollywood depictions of martial nationalism replete with chest-thumping rhythms punctuated by blaring trumpets. Among the many movies for which "Salim-Sulaiman" have directed music, several have explored complexities relating to Muslims in India, including *Chak De! India* (2007), *Kurbaan* (2009) and *Azaan* (2011). They also scored the music for *Qayamat* (2003), which is about a Pakistani-planned terrorist attack in India, and, on the other hand, produced a 2015 non-film anti-terrorism song, "Khalipan" ("Emptiness"), dedicated to Pakistani victims of a militant Islamist group.

These productions can be seen as public expressions of a musical duo who are drawing on their religio-cultural heritage to respond to a cultural environment besieged by extremist ideologies. Like hundreds of millions of other South Asians, they are caught between the Hindutva and Islamist militancies. Their compositions are attuned to a gentle nationalism couched in humanity. Salim-Sulaiman's approach has been to draw creatively on the musical store of Hindi cinema as well as the hybridity of Indian *panths* including their own Khoja tradition to offer counterpoints to extremism.

Khoja Diasporas and Hindi Cinema

Khoja diasporians share in the relationship of other South Asian expatriates to Bombay's cinema, ranging from avid fans to critical viewers. Whereas they may be offended by aspects of Hindi cinema (Virani-Murji, 2019), they have been drawn to its tellings of traditional South Asian moral concepts and social phenomena that have similarities with their culture. Alibhai (2020) identifies three motifs in the "olden goldies" that resonate with older Khoja generations: religious themes drawn from the Indic epics, the notion of romance as a meeting of souls, and family relationships.

Those Khojas who have their political socialization in African and western countries have engaged with their countries of current residence rather than connecting emotionally with the Indian homeland through Hindi film's nationalist themes (Karim, 2011). Furthermore, their growing affiliation with western cultures and their embrace of Islamic identity (Hirji, 2010), on the one hand, and Bollywood's drift away from religio-social pluralism and towards Hindu nationalism, on the other, have had a general effect on their relationship with Mumbai's cinema.

The current flattening out of Muslim representation in Bollywood film does not reflect the pluralist and hybrid reality of Khoja Ismailis living in diaspora. Even though their desire to see their own aspirations reflected on the screen remains unfulfilled, many continue to be drawn to Hindi film as entertainment (Mega Art Entertainment, 2021).

A handful of individuals from the Khoja community in India participate in Mumbai's film industry, including Dimple Kapadia (actor), Aly and Karim Morani (producers), Salim and Sulaiman Merchant (music composers), and Farhad and Sajid Samji (script writers). However, no known character or storyline has appeared in Bollywood films specifically narrating the group's experiences in India or diaspora. A Canadian Ismaili respondent in Hirji's research states that the portrayal is "always Muslims in general" (Hirji, 2010: 174), not specific groups like Khojas. It is usual for Hindi film to depict stereotypical adherents drawn from orthodox Sunni groups with little shown of the diversity among Sunnis and even less of Shia Muslims. Hindi movies almost never broach the inter-religious hybridity that is actually present in Indian society. Even its earlier portrayals of inter-faith pluralism largely kept Hindus as Hindus interacting with Muslims as Muslims; the possibility of the two religions coming together in a more profound and intersectional engagement appears to be beyond Bollywood's conceptualization or is filtered out as being too different from the cinematic norm.

It would seem that those viewers in India and diaspora who are steeped in the intermingling of Vedic and Islamic worlds would be receptive to the depiction of such intersections on the screen. Ray (2003) shows how the composite cultural worldviews of Indian diasporians in Fiji are shaped by their readings of Indic religious texts, the singing of *bhakti*-inspired *bhajans* of the Hindu-Muslim *Kabir Panth*, and watching Bombay cinema. A similar intertextual link exists for *Satpanthi* Khojas between the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, their lyrical *ginan* tradition (which amalgamated Shia beliefs with Indic tradition in *bhakti* contexts), and Hindi film. There are multiple overlaps in concept and terminology between these cultural resources. For example, the lyrics of the *Meera bhajan* "Jo tum todo piya" ("If you break our relation, beloved") which appears in *Jhanak Jhanak Payal Baje* ("Anklets Jingle", Shantaram, 1955), *Meera* (Gulzar, 1979), and *Silsila* ("Chain of Events," Chopra, 1981), express a worshipper's utter dependence on Krishna in *bhakti* mode that aligns with several *Satpanthi ginans* e.g. "Aadam aad nirinjan ("In the beginning of the beginning"), telling of a similar relationship between adherent and Imam. Additionally,

in the film *Baiju Bawra* (Baiju the Insane) [1952], the vocabulary and theme in the song ... *Man tarpat hari darshan ko aj...* (The soul craves to see my lord today...) could easily have come from some *Ginan*—the line in the song, *Bin guru gyan kahan se paun* (Without the guru where will I seek knowledge?) expresses an idea central to *Satpanth*, that without the *gurpir* (Pirs) there is no spiritual knowledge *jyan* (*ginan*).

[Parenthesis in the original] (Alibhai, 2020)

Alibhai also notes the intertextuality between *Raja Harishchandra* (Phalke, 1913), the first silent feature Bombay film, about the legendary royal family of Raja Harishchandra, Tara Rani and Rohidas from Indic scriptures and their mentions in *ginans*, e.g. "Eji Amar Te Ayo" – "The Command Has Come" – recited during an annual Ismaili commemoration. Whereas such comparisons are not overtly made in communal religious education, Khoja preachers have occasionally referred to Hindi movie songs to underline aspects of faith.

Ironically, despite pluralism becoming a catchword among Ismailis as various community members from South Asia, Central Asia, Iran, Syria and elsewhere immigrate to Canada, the pluralist hybridity of *Satpanth* is not examined in this context (Karim, 2013). The removal of Indian languages and the diminution of *Satpanth* in Ismaili education over the last several decades has resulted in significant loss of the 700-year old tradition among diasporic Khojas. There is diminished understanding of *ginans*' meanings and their relationship to the Indic religio-cultural context. Nevertheless, those who hear these hymns in *jamatkhanas* (Ismaili places of worship) or on CDs and Internet databases (University of Saskatchewan Library, 2018; Heritage Society Ismaili.net, n.d.) cannot help but recognize their melodies' and terminology's similarity with certain Bombay cinema songs. Hindi film music is frequently played or performed at non-religious private and communal gatherings (e.g. The Ismaili USA, 2020). Contemporary diasporic Khoja compositions of devotional *geets* (songs) often draw from Bollywood's compositional styles and are mostly in Hindi rather than the community's vernaculars like Gujarati.

A major development in diasporic Khoja engagement with Mumbai's cinema is the emergence of Salim and Sulaiman Merchant as major Bollywood music producers. Their innovative multi-contextual productions – film music, studio recordings of patriotic songs as well as pieces commemorating Hindu and Islamic occasions, including those specifically in honour of the Ismaili Imam – offer a new way for Khojas in India and diaspora to interact with Mumbai's contemporary cultural industry. Salim Merchant has also featured as a solo performer on *Ismaili TV*, a global streaming service.

Salim-Sulaiman's compositions contain Islamic phrases and Indic religious terminology. For example, in their "Baalam Ji" ("Respected spiritual beloved") (2018), *baalam* (spiritual beloved) and *sahib* (religious master), which are used in *bhakti* and Sufi senses, resonate with *ginanic* uses of these words. (Notably, the song is marketed to commemorate *Holi*, a Hindu festival.) Various other productions for Islamic Eid festivals, lyrics in praise of Ali, collaboration with Pakistani singers (Rahat Fateh Ali Khan and Abida Parveen), and performances celebrating Aga Khan IV's Diamond Jubilee in India and diaspora make it possible for Khoja followers of "Salim-Sulaiman" to engage with their music in multi-layered manners. Hybrid in-between spaces can be dynamic and generative (Bhabha, 1994). The brothers' creative uses of Vedic and Islamic religio-cultural resources, in what are publicly-distributed musical pieces, simultaneously make possible multiple ways of speaking to their co-religionists in their identities as South Asians, Indians, Muslims, Shias, Ismailis, and *Satpanthis*. This multiplex communicative mode provides a liminal, pluralist counterpoint to the power politics of religious nationalism that threatens to reduce India and its diasporas to monolithic and conflictual dimensions.

Conclusion

Canadian Khojas' responses to Hindi cinema's discourses have been shaped by their particular religious, cultural, and political socialization. Those whose families migrated to Africa and those among them who then moved to Canada have become distant from India's domestic affairs; the politics of the country where they are resident are more pertinent to them. In contrast to the Indian government's neo-liberal construction of the NRI transnation as an economic and political project, this group's (and probably similar diasporas') relationship to the sub-continent is primarily cultural and religious. Hindi cinema's nationalist content is of marginal interest to most Khoja diasporians. As Muslims but also as people who inhabit a Vedic-Islamic space, they do not

identify with the BJP's and Bollywood's dominant Hindutva discourses. And in common with the *panth* movement in general, the Khoja preference is for a pluralist ethos.

The literary body of *ginans* is a primary source of this diaspora's ancestral heritage, but it is eroding due to language loss, marginalization in the community's research and educational endeavours, and proscription of certain hymns deemed too Hindu. Perso-Arabization and westernization in the group's religious and socio-cultural contexts, respectively, have steadily distanced diasporic Khojas from their Indic roots. This is also happening even as Ismailis are drawn to contemporary ideas of a pluralism that paradoxically seem reluctant to acknowledge the dynamic intersection of Vedic and Islamic worldviews that produced *Satpanth*. Despite the geographic and cultural distance from the land which their ancestors left for Africa, contemporary diasporic Khojas continue to be intrigued by the mutual intertextuality of Vedic discourses with both their *ginanic* tradition and Hindi film. The lenses with which they tend to view Bollywood's offerings favour intersectional interpretations over the essentialization of identities promoted by Islamist and Hindutva forces. There is in this also a latent resistance to the Perso-Arabization of the *Satpanth* tradition (Karim, 2021).

Diasporic Khoja interpretations of Hindi cinema constitute one distinct form of interpretation of this cultural source among many. Examination of this group's readings help to interrogate the dominant trends that construct Bollywood's viewership in uni-dimensional and monolithic categories of "majority," "minority," or "diasporic." Such scrutiny also offers a nuanced approach to understanding the multifarious receptions of Indian society's depictions. The work of some Khoja personnel in Bollywood offers additional insight into the manners in which Muslim and other cultural producers in India are creatively communicating with multiple audiences: national, religious, diasporic etc. Various countervailing discourses continue to flourish in complex national and global settings despite the heavy constraints imposed by nationalist power politics.

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Endnotes

¹ For an in-depth analysis of *Lagaan* (2011) see Prasad in this issue.

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