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Films and Religion: An analysis of Aamir Khan's PK

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Films and Religion: An analysis of Aamir Khan's PK

Abstract

Every year, the Indian film industry produces the highest number of films in the world and also figures at the top position for ticket sales, but that does not make the society completely tolerant of how different issues are represented in films. That is a question which *PK* (2014), the biggest Bollywood grosser of all times, raised. This satirical comedy is based on challenging the superstitions labelled as religious practices in Indian society. India, being home to multiple religions and a diverse cultural fabric, supports many layers of understanding about faith, religion, rituals, and beliefs, which form a sensitive issue. The film delves headfirst into the syncretic melee of different faiths in India and it takes direct aim at 'godmen', the guru figures who direct the followers towards following symbols of religion. Hindu groups have been considering it as a blasphemy against Hindu gods and gurus, because of which the film has had to plunge into controversies. There have been protests and attacks. A 'boycott-PK' movement as well as a parallel 'Support-PK' trend have been seen in the real as well as virtual world. It becomes all the more interesting to see the depiction of religion in this film, using strong narratives along with visual representations to deal with the issue of faith. Also, the timing of the film coincided with the prevailing atmosphere of religious intolerance within India. The series of events regarding religion in the Indian society lend a meaning to a study on this film as a mediated reality of Indian society. The study will conduct a qualitative analysis of the film and present a reading of this popular media form.

Keywords

India, Bollywood, PK film, portrayal of Religion, Ghar Wapsi, Aamir Khan

Author Notes

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Indian Film Industry and screen narratives on religion

The Indian film industry is the biggest in the world when it comes to number of films produced every year and has for many years been the world's largest film producing country, with an output in different languages. India also figures at the top position for ticket sales as a vast and growing urban filmgoing public in India supports film culture and circulation (Wadia, 2008).

This speaks about the fervor around films in this country. Film production in India began almost simultaneously with other filmmaking countries, beginning in 1896 (Mazumdar, 2007). In the years after independence, Indian Cinema circulated outside the country to audiences in Russia, The Middle East, and Latin America.

Bombay cinema, popularly known as 'Bollywood' is the largest in India, followed by Tamil and Telugu cinema. Films are typically woven around love and romance, set in the backdrop of social, political, religious or economic crises. Religion is an essential aspect of the narrative as the characters, locations, plot, dialogues, social norms, weddings, rituals, social institutions of marriage, education, etc. represent religious codes and themes, on which the film is generally based. Religion plays such a large role in today's society that it is not surprising that it finds its way into films (Barton, 2010).

India is home to multiple religions, Hinduism being practiced by the majority, about 78.35% according to the 2011 census.¹ Thus, the main religion depicted or most discourses from religious prisms come from Hinduism. The plots of most of the early films, as of plays on the dramatic stage of that time, were religious and mythological. Outstanding among films of the silent era was '*Satyawadi Raja Harishchandra*', made in 1913 by Dadasaheb Phalke

¹ Religious census of 2011 had not been made public from 2011 causing many demands and apprehensions. Abantika Ghosh, Vijaita Singh, "Census: Hindu Share Dips below 80%, Muslim Share Grows but Slower," The Indian Express 24 Jan. 2015 <www.indianexpress.com/article/india/india-others/census-hindu-share-dips-below-80-muslim-share-grows-but-slower/>

(Rao & Raghavan, 1996). Based on a story from the Mahabharata, it was a stirring film concerned with honour, sacrifice, and mighty deeds. From then on, many “mythologicals” were made and took India by storm (Wadia, 2008). Hindu themes are common in films from and about India; however, the attitude to Hinduism expressed in these films varies. On the one hand, there are numerous examples of films that seek to affirm what are perceived to be traditional Hindu values; they typically contain little critique. For instance, there is a long history of Indian devotional and mythological films that have little place for challenges to Hindu norms (Burton, 2013). However, on the other side, a prolonged and consistent religious architecture of films does not make a society completely tolerant of cinematic portrayals of faith and religion.

Religious Sensitivities in India and controversies on films about religion

Religion forms a very sensitive issue in India as there is a low threshold for ‘religious sensibilities being hurt’ and ‘intolerance’ as has been witnessed in the form of communal hostilities leading to deaths of hundreds of thousands during various physical realities and happenings.² Consequently, media portrayals about religion and religious identities are often cautiously carried out whether that is in any genre; news, advertising or cinema. India has had a history of outrageous responses and intolerant behaviour against ‘controversial’ cinematic projections of religions, of which *PK* (Peekay), released in December 2014, is the latest case.

PK is probably the most discussed movie in such controversies, but it is not the only

² During the partition of the subcontinent in 1947, riots of 1948 West Bengal, 1969 Gujarat, 1979-1980 Uttar Pradesh, 1989 Bihar, 1992 Babri Masjid demolition, 1993 Bombay, 2002 Gujarat Riots, 2013 Muzzafarnagar India has witnessed communal violence. See report on communal incidents and riots in India post 1947. ‘Chronology of communal violence in India,’ Hindustan Times, 9 Nov. 2011, <<http://www.hindustantimes.com/archives/chronology-of-communal-violence-in-india/article1-8038.aspx>> and Ranpreet, ‘Seven deadliest riots that shook India,’ India Tv News, 12 Nov. 2014, <<http://www.indiatvnews.com/news/india/seven-deadliest-riots-that-shook-india-27728.html?page=3>>

movie which faced such threats in India in the recent past.³ There are various other films, mostly Hindi that have faced hostilities from different religious organisations, groups and communities for being 'controversial' and 'hurtful' towards religions, religious symbols, rituals and practices ("Amir Khan's *PK*," Times of India, 2014).

For its depiction of communal riots, huge controversy surrounded *Bombay* (1995), while Deepa Mehta's *Fire* (1996) talked about a taboo issue of 'homosexuality' at a time when it was not even discussed in the public sphere and it was considered as anti-Hindu and violating Hindu religion by Shiv Sena⁴, a Hindu Parochial party (Bhatia, 2010). Shiv Sena also raised objection to a *Kurbaan* (2009) poster starring Saif Ali Khan and Kareena Kapoor as it showed Kareena's bare back, and Karan Johar's *My Name is Khan* (2010), starring Shahrukh Khan and Kajol, was controversial well ahead of its release with Shiv Sena when Shahrukh Khan made a comment about Pakistani cricket players not coming to play in the IPL (Indian Premier League- a cricket tournament), resulting in attacks on cinemas and booking centers.

Mehta's *Water* (2006) also faced controversy by Hindu nationalist groups because the film was considered to be a disrespectful and an offensive attack on Hindu culture and religion (Burton, 2013). *Water*, which dealt with the issue of widows, was the focus of well-publicized protests against it and caused outrage because of the power and influence of Hindu nationalist political and cultural groups in contemporary India (Nicy, 2014).

Parzania (2007) and Nandita Das's *Firaaq* (2008) were banned in Gujarat as they portrayed families caught in the vicious aftermath of the 2002 communal riots in Gujarat ("Not Just Vishwaroopam," Firstpost.com, 2013). *Jodhaa Akbar* (2008) was opposed by Vishwa

³ After the recent upsurge over 'PK', there have been many debates over freedom of expression regarding religion in India. See Nicy V.P., 'Aamir's 'PK', Kamal's 'Vishwaroopam' and Other Films that Faced Threats from Religious Fanatics'. *IBTimes*, 31 Dec. 2014 <<http://www.ibtimes.co.in/aamirs-PK-kamals-vishwaroopam-other-films-that-faced-threats-religious-fanatics-618916>>

⁴ Shiv Sena is a Hindu Nationalist party from Maharashtra seen as an extremist party. In its four decades of history, there have been many such programmes -- the party first began by asking south Indians to get out of the city, then shifted for a brief moment to Gujaratis, then became an aggressive, anti-Muslim, Hindutva spouting party which is now railing against 'north Indians' which translates as Biharis and UPiites (Bhatia, 2010).

Hindu Parishad (VHP), a far right Hindu group, which along with Hindu Janajagruti Samita revolted against *Oh My God* (2012) which according to them was an attack on age old rituals and beliefs. *Dashtavtar* (2008) was attacked by another Right wing organisation, Hindu Makkal Katchi, for “hurting the sentiments of Hindus.” Sanjay Leela Bansali’s much awaited *Goliyon Ki Raasleela: Ram-Leela* (2013) was trapped in a controversy with Hindu groups when the court banned its release initially.

Other religious groups too have cornered many filmmakers. Sikh groups protested against *Jo Bole So Nihaal* (2005), accusing it of showing the Sikh community in a bad light. *Viswaroopam* (2013), a Kamal Hassan film, faced threat of ban and faced issues in screening the movie when a Muslim organisation Tamil Nadu Muslim Munnetra Kazagham claimed the movie represented the Muslim community as a group of terrorists, while Mani Rathnam’s movie *Kadal* (2013) faced threat and opposition from various Christian outfits. The Indian Christian Democratic Party demanded the deletion of some scenes that they claimed were objectionable to Christians (Nicy, 2014).

PK and its critical time of release

The film, which is directed by Rajkumar Hirani and stars Aamir Khan, is accused of "hurting Hindu sentiments" by various religious outfits who sought to ban the movie (“Increasing Hindu Protest,” hinduexistence.org, 2014). At the time of its release, issues of forced religious conversion were in the news, along with prominent gurus being arrested on charges of murder and rape (Pandey, 2014). With Hindu radical groups like Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), Hindu Samhati, Hindu Jagran Manch, and Bharat Sevashram Sangha having started campaigns of ‘*ghar wapsi*’ (forced re-conversion to Hinduism by Hindu extremists) against Muslims and Christians (Mezzofiore, 2014), anti-‘love

jihad,' (framing a Muslim boy-Hindu girl marriage as love-jihad) and '*Bahu lao, Beti bachao*' (stopping Hindu daughters from marrying non-Hindus and try marrying their daughters instead), the film has appeared at a controversial time.⁵

PK has emerged as one of the most talked about films, more so due to protests that have been hurled at it, and this apart from its being the biggest grosser of the Indian film industry as its record-breaking domestic performance pushed another Khan Christmas release, the 2013 actioner *Dhoom 3*, into second place on the country's list of all-time top-grossing movies (Bhushan, 2015). As film analyst Namrata Joshi put it, "Aamir is a superstar and that is why this movie has reached millions. It has made people think. Religion has been debated in many regional language films and earlier Bollywood films, but Aamir's presence has made the difference this time" (as cited in Pandey, 2014).

***PK* faces hostile reactions**

Given the film's sensitive theme, some religious groups protested against *PK* and even vandalized some cinemas, filing court petitions demanding a ban. But India's Supreme Court overruled them, because the film was cleared by the country's censor board (Bhushan, 2015). It had been under fire even before it was released. The Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) wanted it banned, and its members, along with Bajrang Dal (a radical Hindu group often involved in violence and acts of intimidation) activists, took to tearing up the film's posters and halting screenings. The reason, according to VHP spokesman Vinod Bansal, was "*PK* keeps making

⁵ With BJP coming to power in India in 2014, Hindu organisations like RSS, VHP etc. have begun many programmes which have led to communal disturbances. These include 'Ghar Wapsi', 'Anti-love-jihad', and some communal statements even by elected members of the BJP like Sakshi Maharaj. See 'After 'ghar wapsi' & 'love jihad', Hindu radical groups start 'Bahu lao, Beti bachao' programme in Bengal,' *India TV News*, 13 Mar. 2015, <<http://www.indiatvnews.com/news/india/hindu-radical-groups-start-bahu-lao-beti-bachao-programme-in-wb-48466.html>>

fun of Hinduism.” Members of the All India Muslim Personal Law Board also demanded that the Censor Board removed some scenes in the interest of maintaining “communal harmony” (Rangan, 2015).

Many people have written about this film and about the reasons for controversy surrounding it. *PK* is not the first movie that has taken a controversial but critical look at religious practices in India. The film generated strong reactions due to its simple narrative. It doesn't reach any conclusion on the existence of religion, but simply questions superstitions. It is among films that initiate social debates on issues that matter to the country. Analysts say *PK* is an important movie of this generation. It questions superstitions in a country where religion is deeply rooted in the social consciousness of the people (Pandey, 2014).

Reading *PK* (2014) and its cinematic representation of religion

PK was made by Rajkumar Hirani, a National Award and Filmfare Award winning Indian filmmaker, screenwriter and film producer of Hindi films (“Biography,” filmibeat.com). He has also made blockbusters like *MunnaBhai MBBS* (2000), *Lage Raho Munna Bhai* (2003), *3 Idiots* (2009), and like his earlier films this one too has social significance. Before this film, he highlighted issues of the education system, the rat race for jobs and merit, and revival of Gandhi’s principles or ‘Gandhigiri.’ Hirani is seen using a narration-based treatment for *PK* and it often goes to flashbacks and anecdotes. His films have a typical style of satire through humour.

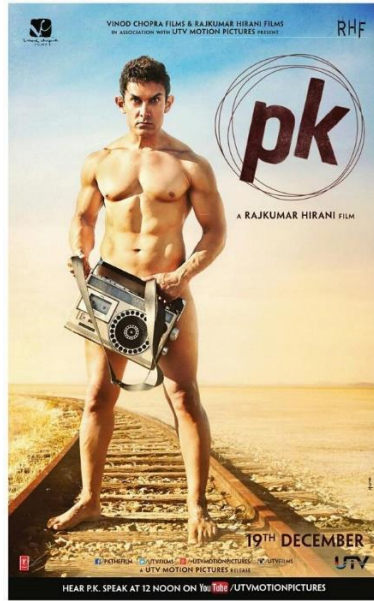


Figure 1: Official poster of PK (bollywoodlife.com, 2014).

Poster

Aamir Khan created a lot of controversy already with the poster of PK. The actor went naked for the first look and successfully managed to grab the eye of the audiences. The poster of PK also created a frenzy on micro blogging site Twitter with the film becoming the butt of jokes. However, according to a report in The Times of India on April 20, 2015, Aamir Khan took it positively and said, "When you (audience) will watch the film then only you will be able to understand the idea behind (the poster). But I would just like to say that the kind of filmmaker, the kind of writer Rajkumar is, he always tries to present the things, his thinking, in a unique way and that's why I am his huge fan." This began a row of controversies over the film.

Plot

PK tells the story of an alien (Aamir Khan)⁶ who lands in India and ends up questioning religious dogma and traditions (Bhushan, 2015). His "remote control" - a device without which

⁶ The Alien is called *Peekay* or *PK* by everyone, which means 'tipsy' in Hindi as he appears lost and different from normal due to his questions on rituals and practices done in the name of religion and culture.

he cannot go back to his planet - gets stolen. From that moment, he embarks on a journey to discover the world. He meets people, "both good and bad," visits places and learns the language. During his trail of ordeals he comes across different contexts and ideas, and eventually starts looking for 'God,' who according to people was the only hope to get him his stolen remote control back. He visits remote temples, mosques and churches. He follows advice given by priests and religious leaders to convince the god of every faith. But Khan's character slowly finds out some self-styled gurus or "godmen" use superstitions and fraud to cheat people (Pandey, 2014). Here Jagat Janani Sahn alias Jaggu (Aushka Sharma), who is a TV reporter plays an important role, as she facilitates PK's meeting with the Baba and PK's subsequent public appearances on TV and with the masses, which popularizes his version of a rational approach towards God.

Towards the end, the antagonist or Godman Tapaswi Baba (Saurabh Shukla), followed by thousands of people including Jaggu's father (Parikshit Sahni), who claims being able to speak to God, is exposed as having lied about PK's remote control device as his own. He had also predicted that Jaggu will be jilted by her Muslim lover from Pakistan, Sarfaraz (Sushant Singh Rajput), which also proves to be a misunderstanding. It happens during a live show, where the truth of Baba and others like him surfaces as an eye opener for people like Jaggu's father.

Characters

PK is an alien, who gets lost after his remote is stolen. He is not able to speak any of the earth's languages, but he can easily learn languages after holding anybody's hand for some hours. He has two personalities- one that of an alien, who does not understand the codes, languages and norms of this planet and second one who picks up the Bhojpuri language (which sounds

humorous when he speaks it) by a transfer mechanism through holding the hand of a prostitute. The overall personality of PK becomes a stereotypical character, who chews pan ending up with a coloured mouth, wears colourful clothes, has a peculiar body language with eyes wide open, and gets an understanding of social codes, symbols, tricks and practices by getting into situations. PK wears a yellow helmet and the logic is to appear prominent for God to spot him easily, as he feels he would be visible to him from a distance. He always carries a tape recorder, (which fell off the thief who steals his remote control device), listens to Bhajans (Hindu religious hymns), and keeps recording sounds, which in the end come out to be of Jaggu only as he loves her.

The entry of Jaggu's character, who is the female lead, is shown through a fun-filled song in the background that has a major violin track base. She is not a typically religious girl as is clear from her characterization and mannerisms, and she is studying in Belgium. She falls in love with a Muslim boy from Pakistan and when she decides to marry him, she goes to a church for solemnising it. She has short hair and wears skirts, jeans and trousers only. Her profession is non-stereotypical as she is a TV reporter and her curious nature fits well with her profession. Jaggu is fond of poetry and that attracts her towards Sarfaraz, who is a Pakistani studying architecture and is a responsible guy as well as he works part time in the Pakistani embassy. Sarfaraz is a boy next door character, who is a cheerful person and loves Bollywood star Amitabh Bachchan. He is a talented poet himself and sings very well, and his charm wins the heart of Jaggu.

Jaggu's mother's reaction towards her mention of her lover being a Muslim from Pakistan is a stereotypical one as she exclaims, "Will you wear a veil? Will you offer *Namaz*⁷?" The film creates a diehard follower of Tapaswi Maharaj in the character of Jaggu's father Jayprakash Sahni, who holds Tapaswi in high esteem and calls him 'Bhagwan' meaning God.

⁷ In Islam, formal prayer is called *Namaz* and there are five daily prayer times for Muslims.

Jayprakash keeps Tapaswi Baba's photographs everywhere in his house for blessings of walls, bathrooms, bed sheets, school bags of his kids and so on and does not do a thing without having a nod from him. Tapaswi Baba even decides timings for performing any sort of tasks. This clearly depicts Jayprakash's reverence towards Baba. He has also been given a 'godbox' by Baba, which has various Hindu deities, for different issues- financial, health, etc. We are reminded that symbolism is part of religion as well as its mediatization (Hjarvard, 2006).



Figure 2: Jaggu's parents are introduced. Cushion cover can be seen carrying photograph of Tapaswi.

Boman Irani, who plays Cherry Bajwa, the news director of the channel that Jaggu works for, is a practical man who believes in showing news that appeals to the masses and winning as much TRP (Television Rating Point) without any controversy. He and his channel opposes any religious news as once after showing a negative story on Tapaswi Maharaj, his followers had manhandled him. In reply to Jaggu's request regarding showing PK on TV (after she finds him on roads distributing pamphlets that read 'God Missing') he tells her looking for god meant religion and that was no news, but if he found him, that would be worth showing.

Religious Codes, symbols and cinematic narrative

PK gets first introduced to the concept of God through a common proverb used in India, uttered by a policeman who refuses to help him find his remote control by saying that policemen are humans not gods. This strikes PK, who feels only God can lead him to his locket-type remote control device so he could return to his planet. This is when PK says that the people of earth might have actually found out who had created them and he sees followers of multiple faiths and their corresponding places of worship.

In a scene where PK is shown in a temple (*Mudrika temple*), he tries to steal money from a Charity-box (which is kept in almost every religious place in India). In order to get away from being beaten up, he quickly pastes stickers of Hindu Gods on his face, so people would not slap him and tells Jaggu, it is similar to why people draw pictures of gods on their walls from outside so people would not urinate there. This identifies a socio-religious practice of India, where civic sense is low and religious sentiments flow high, and this social reality gets established in the next scene. After Jaggu inquires, he says that he is trying to get a refund for the money that he has been offering to various Gods so far for returning his remote control. He calls this a 'deposit' for processing his request. As earlier he was told God will help him, he started believing in God and doing everything to please him from buying idols, to visiting temples, to offering charity.



Figure 3: PK pastes pictures of God to avoid being hit.

PK starts narrating his tale to Jaggu, who keeps inquiring about why he appears different from others and we see a flashback into the past. In one of the scenes, he is told that an idol of god listens to prayers to which PK says, does God not listen directly? He is sent to a temple in which a huge deity is placed. Thereafter, realizing that the charity he offered was not reciprocated, PK goes to the police to complain against God. This is similar to *Oh My God* (2012), in which the protagonist (Paresh Rawal) files a law suit against God.

The film depicts the situations that get PK in much trouble due to his confusion with various codes, symbols and practices followed by Hindus, Muslims, Christians or Sikhs which occur as he sees a Hindu widow, Christian bride, and Muslim burka-clad women. This is what subtly highlights the communal clashes due to differences in manners used for worship. People feel offended due to his behaviour as he does not figure out initially that practices of followers of one religion in their place of worship are not to be used when worshipping at some other religion's place of worship. He sees holy water being offered in a Church, then he takes wine to a mosque; he keeps doing these things until he finds out about different religions. He says that earth had many gods and these gods had their own companies, which people of earth call religions. And every religion had different managers (priests, godmen, clerics) and every

human being belonged to one of these companies. In order to ascertain which company he belonged to, he started looking for a mark/ stamp on new born babies that could determine how it was established that a particular child should follow a particular religion, failing which he decides to follow every religion in order to figure out his true religion.

This paradox is constructed through a song, which has been written to forward the story of the film. It establishes his struggle to search for his creator, who could help him go back to his home. The depiction of various religious practices followed in Hinduism, Sikhism, Islam, Christianity, Jainism, etc. is blended with the lyrics and theme of the song.



Figure 4: Snapshots from the song 'Bhagwan hai kahan re tu'

Hai suna ye poori dharti tu chalata hai

Meri bhi sun le araj, mujhe ghar bulaata hai

Bhagwan hai kahaan re tu, aye khuda hai kahan re tu

I've heard that you run the whole world,

Listen to my prayer too, my home calls me,

O Lord, where are you? O God, where are you?

Hai suna tu bhatke mann ko raah dikhata hai

Main bhi khoya hoon mujhe ghar bulata hai

Bhagwaan hai kahaan re tu, aye khuda hai kahan re tu

I have heard that you show the path to the lost hearts,

I am lost too, my home calls me back.

O Lord, where are you? O God, where are you?

Main pooja karoon, ya namaazein padhoon

Ardaas karoon din rain

Na tu mandir mile, na tu girje mile

Tujhe dhoondhein thake mere nain

Should I worship you (like Hindus do),

Or should I offer you a namaaz (like Muslims do)

Should I offer an ardaas (like Sikhs do)

You are neither found in the temple, nor in the Church, my tired eyes look for you...

Tujhe dhoondhein thake mere nain

Tujhe dhoondhen thake mere nain

Jo bhi rasmein hai wo saari, main nibhaata hoon

In karoDon ki tarah main sir jhukata hoon

Bhagwan hai kahan re tu, aye khuda hai kahan re tu

All the customs that are there (to find you),

I follow them all, I bow my head to you, like these crores, [crore = 10 million]

O Lord, where are you? O God, where are you?

Tere naam kayi, tere chehre kayi

Tujhe paane ki raah hain kai..

Har raah chala, par tu na mila

Tu kya chaahne main samjha nahi

You have many names, you have many faces,

there are many ways to find you..

I walked on all those paths, but couldn't find you...

I didn't understand what is it that you want...

Soche bin samjhe jatan karta hi jaata hoon

Teri zid sar-aankhon par rakh ke nibhaata hoon

Bhagwan hai kahan re tu, aye khuda hai kahaan re tu

I keep on trying, without thinking or understanding,

I follow your insistence with all due respect.

O Lord, where are you? O God, where are you?

All the religions are not mentioned explicitly, and the reference is not to any specific faith, but the point made is that a man simply does not know what he can do to find God.

Though not explicitly said, the first line of the above paragraph can be interpreted as following the *Bhagwadgita* (Hindu scripture), which asks you to keep on doing your duty, without worrying or thinking about the results. Here the protagonist too says that he keeps on trying, following the customs and ways to find God, though here he seems to have lost his patience as he desperately asks God where He is (“Lyrics,” bollymeaning.com, 2014).

This is followed by an emotionally charged scene, where PK breaks down showing his helplessness and he finally decides to search for the ‘Missing God.’ This represents a feeling encountered by people usually as they fail in things or need help. Then he spots a man wearing an exact attire of Lord Shiva (he is an actor performing Shiva in a play, but PK does not know it is fake) and he follows him to Tapaswi’s foundation, where he sees his remote control being publicized by Tapaswi as a gift to him from Lord Shiva who he found in the Himalayas (he says it is part of Lord Shiva’s bead, and calls it ‘manka’). Tapaswi states that Shiva instructed him to construct a grand temple for this emblem. Many Hindu outfits have been furious at the representation of Lord Shiva in the film as demeaning to Hinduism: they “show Lord Shiva going to the bathroom and he is locked up there. They make fun of Mahadev and say that he does not bathe. Aamir Khan wants to make money. He doesn’t care about our gods,” (Ghoshal, 2015).

Jaggu then convinces Cherry to show PK and Tapaswi’s interaction on TV, for which they go to his foundation. Tapaswi holds huge public gatherings and replies to their problems as he says ‘God’ answers their questions through him. PK feels that he is being fooled by a fake god, who is giving wrong solutions, and he challenges Tapaswi to guarantee that his solutions will work. To counter this emerging crisis, Tapaswi creates an uproar by saying that PK might be a Muslim, and that he is against the construction of grand temples. In response PK creates another stir by raising again the question that God did not differentiate between religions as there was no birth mark/stamp (for religion).



Figure 5: A snapshot of the scene, where PK tries to minimize differences between different faiths.

PK by now has declared a war against fake Godmen and managers of religions, who divide people. His TV show asks people to expose such Godmen from all religions. He says that they use fear of people for establishing their business of religion and acting as representatives of god on earth, and demonstrates this by doing the same using a stone as an idol and it works.

Audiences send videos exposing Hindu godmen, Christian missionaries, Muslim priests declaring fatwa, and so on. Forced by this, Tapaswi asks Cherry to hold his face-off with PK and seeing his popularity, Bhairon Singh (Sanjay Dutt) who had helped him after he lost his remote, catches the thief who tells PK that he had sold the remote to Tapaswi. PK realises that nobody was fooling Tapaswi as he was himself a fraud. Just before the show, there is a bomb blast in which Bhairon and the thief get killed and there is no mention of the religion of the perpetrators. PK is shattered but the show takes place, where Tapaswi attacks PK for calling the gods a fraud and missing, for lying about the divine gift he received from Lord Shiva for establishing a temple, and for wanting people to suffer by making them anti-religion and snatching their hopes from them. This is the climax of the film, and here the pinnacle of emotions and logic is constructed through PK's dialogues and outburst. He says that apart from

the one who created humans, there is another god which the ‘godmen’ have created and the latter’s image is just like how they are- lies, taking bribes, adorning the rich.

PK calls such a god a creation of frauds like Tapaswi, and says people should believe in the real God and not the ‘Duplicate God.’ He speaks about the magnanimity of the creator and how frauds like Tapaswi underestimate people and kill in the name of God. Tapaswi calls Muslims the perpetrators of the blast, which is a social stereotype, to which PK responds by taking up the issue of Sarfaraz, who Tapaswi had called a cheat. It is during this show, that the misunderstanding gets cleared and that it is shown that Sarfaraz was still in love with Jaggu and waiting for her. To turn over the situation, the film shows Jaggu’s father himself snatching the remote control from Tapaswi’s hands and giving it to PK, who he hated so much when he began insulting Tapaswi.

Visual depiction and locales

Various locales like temples, mosques, churches, gurudwaras (religious places of Hindus, Muslims, Christians and Sikhs respectively) are shown throughout the film. In its credits, the film thanks famous spiritual Guru Sri Sri Ravi Shankar and his Art of Living Foundation, as significant portions of the film have been shot at Ravi Shankar's Art of Living Foundation ashram in Bengaluru for the depiction of Tapaswi’s ashram, staff, followers, stages, etc. which are important aspects of the film. The director of the film said, "I'm being asked that if I'm against religious gurus, why have I expressed gratitude to Sri Sri Ravi Shankar in the film titles. My answer is that I'm not against religious gurus, I'm only against fake gurus" (“*PK: Why*,” Times of India, January 7, 2015).

In a way ‘religion’ can be seen as a medium in itself; it is sometimes considered to form a channel between the self and God that consists of a set of institutions, authorities and

practices, such as churches, holy texts and preachers. Like media, religion also offers symbols, icons and stories to make sense of the world. Such an understanding has been well voiced by Dutch philosopher Hent de Vries, who claims that without these mediating practices and discourses religion would not be able to manifest itself at all (Zoonen, 2011). Initially when the narrative builds up about search for help from God, PK is shown wearing prayer beads, amulets or talismans, rosaries, and charms along with keeping images of major Hindu Gods, symbols, offering *Namaz*, praying in church, kneeling at a gurudwara and following whatever practices any godmen, preachers, priests, or clergy tell him. He is shown visiting almost all places of worship like temples of various Hindu gods, mosques, churches, and gurudwaras for pleasing 'God'. For this, the film's cinematic narrative effectively uses symbolism and even stereotypes.

Another non-stereotypical place used is Bruges, Belgium as a neutral place for depicting the early life of Jaggu during her studies and her love affair. As there is an inter-religious relationship between an Indian girl and Pakistani boy, which thrives openly in the beginning of the film, it would not have been believable in an Indian setting as there is very little physical contact between the two countries and the possibilities of such a relationship are less. Also there is a resistance to such marriages there than within Indian society. Jaggu's return to New Delhi introduced this city and a giant statue of the Hindu God Hanuman which can be seen in the backdrop of the train.

Conclusion

Indian society is predominantly a religious ensemble. Religion is practised in different ways and there is an extension of belief beyond personal lives into the social order also. An innate component of this religious ethos is the presence of a deep rooted cult of 'godmen' in Indian

society, which encompasses various faiths and cultural practices. There are hundreds of avowed spiritualists and mystics who inspire the devotion of tens of thousands of followers and often lead lavish lifestyles while hobnobbing with political parties that call on them to mobilise voters (“From Radhe Maa to Sarathi Baba,” *Hindustan Times*, 2015). Indian film has been depicting sages and saints from its very beginning, and often in a stereotypical manner that conforms to religious conservatism. Some of these self-styled holy men and women and their not-so-holy acts have been in the spotlight recently. News media too have been reflective of superstitions associated with ‘godmen’ and have exposed highly revered ‘babas’ and ‘gurus’ (as these godmen are called in India).

Baba Asaram’s case, which hit the news in 2014, presents an interesting study in this regard. Asaram and his son Guru Nityanand have been at the top of the ‘guru-devotee’ phenomena having established an empire worth millions of dollars, characterised by fraud, sexual exploitation, political influence and crime. The recent expose of Radhe Maa (Mother Radhe) and Guru Sarathi Baba in August 2015 are but a few in the long list of frauds involved in ‘spiritual or religious-corruption.’ Despite having these cases already as indicators of religious fraud in the society, Hindu nationalists and right-wing groups began a crusade against *PK*, which attempted a revisionist construction of “spiritual-corruption” through cinema.

This film became another example of how intolerance and lack of accommodation in such matters which are called ‘sensitive’ still exists to a visible extent. Such hostile voices only absorb construction of social reality in line with traditional discourses about religion and religious symbols in contemporary cinema. The oppression of art is not just confined to films, but to all forms of expressions. Famed painter M.F Hussain, otherwise known as the ‘Picasso of India,’ was the victim of an altogether more modern curse: India’s politicized religious sectarianism, as he was forced to live in exile during the last years of his life (Tharoor, 2011). Structures of oppression are often resilient and deep rooted; the political

and social changes required to extirpate them cannot be brought about by artistic statements alone (Burton, 2013). This indicates that tolerance cannot be created by expressionism alone but only by the social institutions.

PK created different levels of protest and negative response which ranged from physical vandalism of cinema halls to tearing of posters, and the use of traditional media as well as new media and web 2.0 platforms like social media to hurl abuses at the film, filmmaker, and actors. A hashtag called #boycottPK started trending almost immediately after the movie was released, paralleled with a rival hashtag called #IsupportPK (Pandey, 2014). As discussed earlier, the timing of its release (December 2014) was important because during 2014 religious minorities had been at the receiving end of various 'pogroms' by the right-wing groups and communal statements by members of the ruling Bharatiya Janta Party (BJP) government led by the much-hyped and 'rhetorical-charm' Narendra Modi, who has been a member of RSS, from which BJP emerged (Gopal, 2014).⁸ The gravity of the situation forced US President Barack Obama to express his displeasure about growing religious intolerance in India, even while he was the chief guest during the Republic Day celebrations of India on 26 January 2014, which further provoked many in India (Gowen, 2015).

The ongoing 'communal friction' caused by 'Love-Jihad', 'Ghar Wapsi,' etc. from Hindu organisations like RSS and VHP played a role in determining the reading of *PK* and shaping the social discourses about it. Bajrang Dal has been protesting that the romantic plot line involving an Indian girl and a Pakistani boy is promoting love jihad ("PK storm," Evartha 2014).

⁸Modi does not dispute his links to the extremist Hindu network known as the Sangh Parivar and he was the Chief Minister of Gujarat during the infamous communal riots of 2002 in which thousands of Muslims were targeted. Modi was a leading activist for its secretive and militaristic arm, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) – whose founder expressed admiration for Hitler, ideologies of racial purity and the virtues of fascism. Read further Gopal, Priyamvada, 'Narendra Modi: Britain can't simply shrug off this Hindu extremist,' *The Guardian*, Apr. 14 2014 <<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/apr/14/narendra-modi-extremism-india>>

While filmmakers like Deepa Mehta could easily be blamed for her ‘other’ version of Hinduism that she took wrath for in *Fire* or *Water* because of being based out of India, the PK controversy was not focussed at the filmmaker as in her case; instead it was thrown at the protagonist of the film, Aamir Khan, who has been specifically targeted for his obvious religious background as has been noted by many writers (Shekhar, 2014). This was ironic and was criticized across the different media platforms. The magnitude and prominence of protest and outrage in the case of PK was not seen at the time of *Oh My God* and other films on similar themes, in which the lead was played by Hindu actors Paresh Rawal and Akshay Kumar. Narula, director of *Oh My God* came out in full support of PK, stating “they had protested against my film. In Jalandhar, they had burnt posters and vandalised theatres. But not on this level. The protests against 'PK' are far more vehement” (Shukla, 2015). Even though in Narula’s film the protagonist played by Paresh Rawal takes God to court, still the protests were not as serious. It is also being seen in the backdrop of current political rule and BJP’s context played an important role because Rawal, then candidate for BJP in the General elections, is now an MP (“Why is there so much controversy,” Quora.com 2014).

There has been a long debate on freedom of expression in India and this film only takes it further, exposing various dimensions of curbing freedom of expression and the general approach towards religion and its practices or portrayals. Conservatism in religion has often been instrumental in challenging cinematic representations that weave around revisionist narratives on religion, culture, or values and it becomes more critical when woven through a gendered prism as these perspectives go against a traditionalist approach. The conventional conservatism version of Hinduism which its representatives approve is the only ‘genuine’ version which gets absorbed easily, and films contrasting with this shall continue to face protests. The issues of subjectivity and myopia have been and continue to plague a society like

India, which takes pride in upholding the rhetoric of calling itself a 'secular,' 'diverse' and 'democratic' nation.

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