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Bombay Cinema's Islamicate Histories

Abstract

This is a book review of Ira Bhaskar and Richard Allen, eds., *Bombay Cinema's Islamicate Histories* (Intellect Ltd, 2022).

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Author Notes

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Bhaskar, Ira and Richard Allen, eds., *Bombay Cinema's Islamicate Histories* (Intellect Ltd, 2022).

Bombay Cinema's Islamicate Histories, edited by Ira Bhaskar and Richard Allen, highlights the centrality of Islam, Muslims, and “Islamicate” forms and aesthetics in the history of the film industry in Bombay. In doing so, it not only reveals overlooked cinematic pasts, it also effectively demonstrates that modern Indian history is inextricable from the history of Islam. Given the recent efforts of the Hindu-nationalist-dominated Indian state to forcibly erase Muslims from Indian pasts, and to portray Islam as a “foreign” religious and cultural interloper, the book is a timely corrective. Moreover, as Hindu-nationalist narratives are increasingly foregrounded within mainstream Hindi-language films, including 2022's *The Kashmir Files* and *Samrat Prithviraj*—as well as in India's other film industries—*Bombay Cinema's Islamicate Histories* offers an important reminder that Muslims have never been marginal to Indian cinema.

This volume is distinct from other recent considerations of this theme, such as Jasbir Jain's *Muslim Culture in Indian Cinema* (Jaipur: Rawant Publications, 2011), Roshni Sengupta's *Reading the Muslim on Celluloid: Bollywood, Representation and Politics* (Delhi: Primus Books, 2020), and the editors' own previous work, *Islamicate Cultures of Bombay Cinema* (New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2009). Its novelty is due to the breadth of the contributions and their varied methodological and disciplinary perspectives. The editors seek to tie these contributions together not as a singular narrative, but as a series of intersecting interventions. This model, ultimately, reveals what the editors' term “the deeply constitutive nature of Islamicate traditions for Indian culture as a whole” (29). Moreover, it highlights the plural nature of the “Islamicate histories” referenced in the title. Chapters in the book analyze and complicate forms and aesthetics popularly

recognized as Islamicate, while others uncover the influence of Muslims and Islam on a wide range of Bombay's cinematic practices.

The book's wide-reaching introduction is notable for its efforts to both define—and in some cases disentangle—the terms of the study, especially “Islamicate,” but also “Bombay cinema.” In a collection as extensive as this one, this definitional base is useful. As such, in this review I begin with a brief note on Bhaskar and Allen's understanding of the scope, aims, and definitions of the study, before turning to how the varied contributions contribute to this scope and expand upon previous work in the field. For Bhaskar and Allan, “Bombay cinema” is a distinctly broad category that extends beyond “Bollywood,” which they use to refer only to post-1991 (post-Indian economic liberalization) Hindi films (1-2). Bombay cinema incorporates the broad range of the Hindi-Urdu film industry based in the city, from the silent films of the early twentieth century to contemporary Bollywood blockbusters. The term, as used in the volume, also highlights pre-filmic traditions of performance that shaped the city's film industry, notably the “Parsi theater” productions explored in the first chapter (37-63), as well as styles of musical performance and visuality that informed film.

The term “Islamicate” is drawn from Marshall Hodgson's three-volume *The Venture of Islam*, first published posthumously in 1974, and has been continuously debated and reimagined over the subsequent decades. As used in *Bombay Cinema's Islamicate Histories*, it references cultural, social, and aesthetic forms that have developed in societies where Muslims are influential or dominant, but which are not necessarily exclusively associated with the religious practice of Islam (8-10). The editors anticipate several critiques of their use of the term. The most significant of these are the concern that the term diminishes the inherent overlap between the “religious” and the “cultural,” concerns that “Islamicate” homogenizes Muslim cultures, and concerns that it

overly differentiates Muslims in contexts where they are minorities (9-12). However, both the editors and several of the volume's contributors suggest that "Islamicate" remains the most effective way to engage with myriad shifting "forms and idioms" that have been "constitutive" of Bombay cinema from its inception through the present day (20).

The editors' close attention to these terms reflects the aim of the volume to examine the multiple intersecting ways that "Islamicate" forms have shaped Bombay cinema. Likewise, the volume clearly aims to analyze how Islamicate forms and aesthetics have been reshaped through their cinematic encounters. While adopting a variety of methodological approaches, the volumes' chapters all speak to these broader aims. In addition, the chapters coalesce around three key intersecting areas of analysis. First, many of the contributions to the book reorient analyses opened by Mukul Kesavan in his 1994 article exploring "Islamicate features" of Bombay cinema, which highlighted the Urdu language, Awadhi/Lucknavi Nawabi culture, and the figure of the *ṭawā'if*, or courtesan (13). Second, several highlight the intersections between cinema and the social-political worlds experienced by Indian Muslims, studying practices of representation and their relationship with social experience. And finally, many of the chapters analyze shifts in the meanings embedded in the Islamicate aesthetics and forms that are used in Bombay cinema, wrought through both filmic encounters and social, political, and religious change.

Kesavan's 1994 article, "Urdu, Awadh, and the Tawaif: The Islamicate roots of Hindi cinema" looms large throughout the book, framed as foundational by both the editors and several of the contributors. At the same time, even in those chapters that focus on the specific markers identified by Kesavan (such as Shweta Sachdeva Jha's chapter on "the *ṭawā'if* as a poet") the emphasis is often on expanding our understanding of the social and cinematic space of the Islamicate. Jha's work does this by reading the popular imagination of the *ṭawā'if*, as well as poetry

composed by *tawā'ifs* beyond the early history of film, and into the popular print culture that preceded it (pp. 106-121).

Indeed, several of the early chapters of the book are concerned less with the cinematic forms of the Islamicate than in locating the histories of aesthetic and narrative practices that eventually shaped Bombay cinema. These include Kathryn Hansen's treatment of Parsi theater (37-63), Peter Knapczyk's discussion of Sufi romance and Shi'i elegy in the early modern period (83-105), Kavita Singh's analysis of Mughal painting traditions (107-154) and Najaf Haider's study of representations of Mughal justice and love (155-181). In these cases, as well as in Sunil Sharma's article on the Persian *masnavī* (narrative poetry) tradition in Bombay's Persianate cinema (64-82), the chapters expand the definition of the Islamicate elements of Bombay cinema proposed by Kesavan and other earlier scholarship. As Sharma argues, aesthetics, narratives, and practices that scholars characterize as "Islamicate," "Orientalist," and "Persianate" have historically overlapped, intersected, and informed each other in Bombay cinema (65). As such, a broad accounting of the Islamicate in Bombay cinema must also consider the influence and interpenetration of these other categories.

In chapters that remain focused on the cinematic form, we encounter the expansion of the spaces of the Islamicate through a consideration of the multiple linguistic influences and narratives within Bombay cinema. This includes those that seem to complicate Kesavan's centering of Urdu, Awadh, and the *tawā'if*. For instance, Phillip Lutgendorf's chapter on Kathak dance in the film *Jhanak Jhanak Payal Baaje (The Ankle Bells Sound)* (1955) analyzes a filmic disavowal of "Islamic courtly patronage" and the *tawā'if*, designed to assert an invented, "pure," Hindu tradition and masculinity for Kathak dance (295-313). In this chapter and others, we encounter cinematic critiques of the Islamicate, that draw on Islamicate aesthetics in an attempt to subvert them.

In addition to expanding on earlier identifications of key elements of the Islamicate in Bombay cinema, many of the chapters in this collection also contribute to our understanding of practices of representation and their relationship with social experiences of Indian Muslims. Among the most notable of these contributions is Allen's analysis of *pardā*, or veiling, and its relationship with mistaken identity in "Muslim Social" films (320-346), as well as Shohini Ghosh's study of Salman Khan as both a Muslim superstar and as a form of Bollywood's engagement with working-class Muslim audiences (347-369). To this end, the book contributes to our understanding of representations of Muslims as actors, Muslims as audience, and "Muslim" as a social category in modern India.

Speaking to this last consideration, "Muslim" as a social imaginary or category, Hilal Ahmed analyzes representation through the frame of "Muslim presence." Through a study of the 2018 film *Padmaavat*, notorious for the backlash it sparked among Rajput, upper-caste, and Hindu-nationalist organizations, Ahmed argues that there are "metaphorical imaginaries" that constitute the Muslim presence in Indian popular culture, which include the imagination of Muslim homogeneity, religiosity, and historicity (183-184). Allen and Ghosh's analyses similarly provide space for readers to consider how these imaginations of "Muslim presence" are both represented and challenged on screen.

A final major area of analysis that several chapters within the study emphasize is the degree to which Islamicate aesthetics, forms, and meanings have shifted over time. In the case of the final article in the volume, Ranjani Mazumdar's study of representations of "terrorism" and "conspiracy" in Bollywood, we explore the emergence and shifts of new idioms that frame the presence of Islam and Muslims in the city as intrinsically conspiratorial (370-397). The emphasis

on what Mazumdar calls the “shifting horizon of meaning” is felt not only in chapters on present forms of Bombay cinema, but also in those that take a longer historical view.

For instance, Bhaskar’s contribution on the uses and forms of *qawwali*, or Sufi devotional music, in Bombay cinema traces the significant shifts in the presentation and content of *qawwali* and Sufi idioms from very early Bombay talkies through contemporary Bollywood (259-294). Rosie Thomas’ contribution outlines a similarly shifting trajectory for the “Alibaba story” from the 1920s through the 1980s, which also considers pre-filmic representations of the story, and representations in languages other than Hindi-Urdu (203-228). Shikha Jhingan’s chapter on the use of the *ghazal* as a musical genre in Bombay cinema adopts the term “sonic journey” (229-258). This likewise serves to highlight the fact that Islamicate forms in cinema are never static, and change through interventions of technology, audience response, and cinematic norms. Thomas, Jhingan, and Bhaskar all also contribute to the first key feature of the book, the broadening of the scholarly understanding of cinematic Islamicate forms and features. As such, their chapters highlight the fact that these various spheres of analysis should not be understood as separate and distinct, but rather as overlapping narratives that provide through-lines between the volume’s many highly varied chapters.

For all its emphasis on the plurality of Islamicate contributions, narratives, and histories within the Bombay film industry, the book says surprisingly little about the cross-regional and cross-linguistic exchange of Indian cinematic idioms. In many of the narratives of the book, the Hindi-Urdu Bombay film industry is positioned as largely separate from the rest of India’s (and South Asia’s) many other film industries. This is not to suggest that the already lengthy volume required expansion to consider India’s other filmic traditions, or that a book titled “Bombay cinema” is obligated to look to other cinematic centers. Rather, references such as Thomas’ to the

“Alibaba story” in films produced in languages ranging from Bengali to Telugu (204-207) suggest that the interpenetration of Islamicate idioms and histories may be an area deserving of future research. Readers who are interested in the trans-linguistic and trans-regional circulation of cinematic practices—including those deemed “Islamicate”—might read the book alongside recent scholarship on India’s many other cinematic traditions. These include S.V. Srinivas’ *Politics as Performance: A Social History of The Telugu Cinema* (2013), or Selvaraj Velayutham’s edited volume *Tamil Cinema: The Cultural Politics of India's other Film Industry* (2009). Likewise, reading the book in conversation with Ali Khan and Ali Nobil Ahmad’s *Cinema and Society: Film and Social Change in Pakistan* (2016) on Pakistani cinema, and Fahmidul Haq’s work on Bangladeshi cinema, might shed light on the potential trans-national adaptation of Islamicate filmic traditions across South Asia.

Similarly, the book is suggestive of potential future areas of research that connect the Islamicate visual aesthetics and sonic worlds of Bombay cinema to the Islamicate in a wide range of other South Asian artistic traditions. Chapters such as Singh’s on Mughal painting and representations of the past (134), and Haider’s on literary and visual representations of Mughal justice (155), stretch the boundaries of how we understand film history and place Bombay cinema in conversation with other artistic practices. This important work might be productively built upon through more explicit scholarly efforts to consider Bombay cinema not only as a distinct area of study, but as part of a continuum of Islamicate arts in South Asia. At the same time, although Bhaskar and Allen engage with many of the critiques of “Islamicate” in their introduction, like Salma Siddique’s recent article “Islamicate” in *BioScope* (2021), they challenge us to look more closely at the “indeterminacy” of the term. Read together with Siddique’s study of the “ethical commitment to absence or recessivity” of Islam and Muslims bound up in the term “Islamicate,”

several chapters in this volume might ultimately suggest new potential avenues for renewed analysis of the cultural and artistic forms of the Islamicate (Siddique, 119).

Ultimately, by adopting broad definitions of “Islamicate” and “Bombay Cinema” the book significantly expands on the previous work of the editors, as well as several of the contributors. As the editors themselves note in their introduction, the book reorients arguments in their 2009 book *Islamicate Cultures of Bombay Cinema*, which restricted its study to genres of Bombay cinema that the authors understood to have “sustained and elaborate” Islamicate narratives (15). In addition, it draws together multiple threads developed in recent studies that consider Bombay cinema through a variety of lenses other than the Islamicate, including those represented by Ranjani Mazumdar’s *Bombay Cinema: An Archive of the City* (2007) and Rosie Thomas’ *Bombay before Bollywood: Film City Fantasies* (2013). To this end, it is a significant contribution to the scholarship, not only for the ways that it resists contemporary Hindu nationalist narratives, but also because it highlights the potential intersections in multiple contemporary trends in the study of Islam, Muslims, and the Islamicate in South Asian film.