

PREFACE

Cinema in Pakistan emerged as an influential industrial and cultural form during the twentieth century. Film production in Lahore dates back to the 1920s silent film era, and consequently its history extends much earlier than the founding of the country in 1947. By the mid-1950s, Karachi and Dhaka also emerged as important centers of production, leading to the rising numbers of films released in many languages, including Bengali, Punjabi, and Urdu, and later in Pashto and Sindhi. This book focuses primarily on Urdu cinema from Lahore from 1956 through 1969, a period I designate as constituting *the long sixties*. An era of relative political stability that witnessed considerable economic, social, and infrastructural development, this stretch of about a dozen years extends across the reign of the military ruler Mohammad Ayub Khan (1958–69).¹

Lahore Cinema: Between Realism and Fable is a formal and contextual analysis of social and experimental Urdu films from Lahore made during the long sixties. The final chapter focuses on a recent Punjabi film that revisits many of the concerns of the earlier cinema. The films I analyze in this book traverse realism and fable, history and fantasy, narrative and lyric, and marshal diverse cultural lineages from South Asia. These include premodern orality, colonial-era theater, progressive writing, and Hollywood genre conventions and tropes. An important concern of this study is the evocation of a public sphere by cinema and its effects, which traverse social hierarchies and are discrepant with nationalist political horizons.

Lahore Cinema has been informed by the growing scholarship on the cinema of South Asia, but it must be stressed that the focus of this work remains uneven. In the last two decades, research on Indian—and especially Bombay—cinema has substantially contributed various approaches to diverse bodies of film and its institutions. This work is salient for my analysis because I examine films whose industrial practices, themes, and forms have many parallel and shared developments between Lahore and Bombay. Ravi Vasudevan's writings on midcentury Bombay cinema's formal

values and their relation to society have been valuable, including his analysis of the rise of the “Muslim social” film from the mid-1930s, which, this study argues, continued to flourish in Lahore in the fifties and sixties.² This study has also gained from many other scholars’ works on Indian films and filmmaking.³ Indeed, the complex and resonant relays between cinematic genres and tropes between India and Pakistan is a vital consideration for this book.⁴

I have worked on cinema from Pakistan and South Asia for many years, as an artist and a scholar. As a member of the Editorial Advisory Board of the journal *BioScope: South Asian Screen Studies* since its founding in 2010, I have kept abreast of emerging scholarship and key methodological developments in the field of South Asian cinema studies. Increasingly, there is growing scholarly awareness that cinema in South Asia, precisely due to its complex regional interconnections from the very beginning, cannot be solely situated within national frameworks. Film historian Ashish Rajadhyaksha has underscored the degree to which midcentury Bombay cinema was shaped by a diasporic sensibility produced by migrants who had been inhabitants of territories that mostly became part of West Pakistan after 1947: “It has often been said that Bombay’s Hindi cinema itself is nothing but a cinema of a Punjabi diaspora, with its sagas of twins separated at birth.”⁵ Rajadhyaksha has also proposed that a “Lahore effect” resulting from the shared aesthetics between Bombay and Lahore characterized many of the most celebrated productions of Bombay during the mid- to later forties, both before and after the Partition of 1947. This capacious and suggestive conception, which encompasses lineage, form, fable, and reflexivity, is valuable in understanding the Lahore social film during the long sixties and beyond, and its significance is elaborated on in the introduction.⁶

From the outset, cinema in Pakistan was beset by extended crises: paucity of capital, inadequate distribution networks, lack of trained industry personnel, and competition from Bombay films. It has been disparaged for being vulgar and commercial, for failing to achieve artistic value or enact critical consciousness among its viewers, for having low production values, for making recourse all too often to stereotypes and typeage, for relying on melodramatic hooks and popular plot schemas, and for being unable to shake off a parasitic dependence on Bombay cinema.⁷ These generalizations remain largely unchallenged because of the paucity of scholarship on the cinema of the fifties through the seventies.⁸ Additionally, the potential to analyze the important medium of commercial cinema for its complex and

multiple effects on questions of cultural memory, the public sphere, and engagement with modernity has remained mostly unaddressed.

While scholarship on Bombay cinema is far more developed than the study of the social film from Pakistan or other South Asian locations and countries, an emerging body of work is partly redressing this imbalance.⁹ This study draws from and aims to contribute to this body of scholarship whose primary focus is on the lesser-examined developments in South Asian cinemas. Significant new work on Pakistani cinema includes Kamran Asdar Ali's essays on the social and cultural meanings of the social film in Pakistan during the sixties and their relation to transformations in social and cultural life, Lotte Hoek's writings on the multifarious linkages between Dhaka and Lahore industry personnel before and after 1971, and Salma Siddique's work on exchanges between India and Pakistan and infrastructural developments during the first decade following the Partition.¹⁰

Lahore Cinema engages with emerging methodologies for the analysis of South Asian cinema in several specific ways. Firstly, by analyzing an experimental neorealist film from Lahore as being inextricably South Asian, it moves the analysis of neorealism beyond national contexts. This is in keeping with recent efforts in cinema studies to theorize "global neorealism"—where neorealist cinema in various sites is not simply seen as a reflection of Italian cinema but is evaluated comparatively with attention to its own context of production, circulation, and social and aesthetic value. Recent work on melodrama in cinema has also situated this mode in analogous frameworks. Secondly, by examining relays between realism and fable, it situates reflexivity and political awareness across genres, and in doing so questions the assumption that experimental cinema is endowed with criticality and popular cinema is primarily apolitical and a distraction. Commercial cinema draws from both popular and high cultural registers, as exemplified by major Urdu poets and writers who contributed lyrics and dialogue to feature films. Consequently, this study draws from cultural studies' theorizations that understand popular cultural forms as sites for contestation over collective memory and aspiration.

This study also situates Urdu rhetorical forms and cultural valences as being foundational to Lahore as well as much of midcentury Bombay cinema. Until now, scholarship on the latter has neglected to ask a key question of its major films—the evocations of enunciation and lyric in the making of meaning.¹¹ Bombay cinema itself is deeply habituated to the universe of tropes and symbols from the broad North Indian linguistic register, in

which “Urdu” plays a major role. It’s worth stressing that the linguistic resources and cultural resonances associated with Urdu in this study are not proposed as being elite or purist. As a language of a popular commercial form always seeking to expand its audience, “Urdu” here is understood in an expansive register that embraces aspects of neighboring language registers from North India and the Deccan. Hindi, Hindi-Urdu, and Hindustani have also been variously deployed to characterize this cinema. It is certainly not my intention here to assume a partisan stance among long-standing Hindi/Urdu rivalries, especially as popular cinema largely overcomes this by not having to rely on either the Hindi or the Urdu script, and through broader accessibility in its choice of diction. But since my subject is Lahore cinema and its legacies, I seek to investigate the historical, cultural, and affective landscape that emerges from this capacious conception of Urdu for both Bombay and Lahore cinemas.

Moreover, the significance of language in Lahore cinema bears methodological lessons also for a full reckoning of the midcentury Bombay film and its meaning-making as it draws upon a vast reservoir of cultural references. The resilience of the commercial film in the mid- to later twentieth century in both cities owes a great deal to its participation in this larger world, which evokes a cinematic public sphere across and beyond existing social groups, communities, and ethnicities. Indeed, the midcentury social films of both Bombay and Lahore draw from and contribute to a shared and transnational mediatized universe, reiterating analogous narrative tropes, lyrics, and characterization. This is often the case also for the Hindi and Urdu films made in Calcutta, Dhaka, and Karachi. Among the most powerful vectors of social and aesthetic modernization in South Asia, the commercial film provides complex affective and imaginative resources for its audiences to navigate an accelerating modernity and fraught politics by anchoring social change across the terrain of deeper cultural imaginaries.

This book focuses primarily on the Urdu cinema of Lahore during the long sixties (apart from chapter 4)—analyzing a small number of exemplary films that possess formal and narrative depth, evoke multiple cultural resonances, and are largely original works.¹² This is primarily not a study that tackles reception history or stardom. And although gender is a focus of some of the analysis presented here, and scholars such as Kamran Asdar Ali, Nasreen Rehman, and Salma Siddique have contributed to the subject, Lahore’s melodramatic social film of the long sixties awaits a fuller analysis from this perspective.¹³ My readings are based neither on an overarching national framework nor on solely foregrounding issues of identity, typage,

and representation. But while Lahore cinema as a cultural form cannot be understood without taking its complex linkages with Bombay and larger South Asia into account, the production and circulation of films have also been shaped by country-specific policies and reception.¹⁴ The national social and infrastructural context therefore needs to be assessed accordingly. I have striven to maintain a judicious balance between the specificities of the national circumstances and the larger cultural aspirations and imaginaries of the cinematic form.

While this study examines a later era than the periods Vasudevan and Rajadhyaksha have discussed above, the distinctive genres and cinematic tropes that had developed in earlier periods, especially the Muslim social, and the resonances these evoke across time, space, and mediums remain salient, as they reverberate across the long sixties. Although I analyze exemplary films in relation to transformations in society and political economy, it is primarily the aesthetic problems of form, narrative, and language that I am concerned with, and what they enable in their capacity for sensory stimulus and in their social address in the “cinematic public sphere.”¹⁵ Above all, I foreground reflexivity as it evokes historical events and inherited fragments of cultural memory that incorporate fable, or the “cinema-effects” of this promiscuous medium, as it enacts recursive instantiations in form, narrative, and affect.¹⁶ These qualities have arguably rendered commercial cinema in much of South Asia as the most significant cultural form in its capacity to address diverse publics during the twentieth century.

This volume’s introduction begins by sketching the background of Lahore cinema before the midfifties, situating especially the transformations in the wake of the Partition of 1947, which led to the exodus of numerous important personnel but also brought many migrants to Lahore with prior experience in Bombay cinema. A brief account of the development of the film song in Bombay during the forties and fifties follows, as the song constitutes a most significant element of the fifties and sixties social film from Bombay and Lahore. Next, I trace the cultural politics of the Ayub Khan era, salient for understanding how filmmakers negotiated this period of military rule. I subsequently analyze the putative parasitic dependence of Lahore cinema on Bombay by thinking through their mutually constitutive relationship across 1947. An elaboration of the concept of the Lahore effect, a significant and resonant formulation for this study, follows. Finally, I reflect on the consequences of the absence of an official archive for the cinema of Pakistan and of a parallel amnesia among the younger generations with regard to its complex legacy.

Chapter 1 examines the appeal of neorealism for thoughtful filmmakers during the fifties in South Asia and specifically in Lahore. *Jago Hua Savera* (A new day dawns, 1959), directed by A. J. Kardar, with the screenplay and lyrics contributed by leftist poet Faiz Ahmed Faiz, is the only prominent example of a neorealist Urdu film from Pakistan during the long sixties. Its team included personnel from the cultural left in Calcutta, and its elements included dialogue and songs drawn from the Bengali folk background. Set in East Bengal, *Jago Hua Savera* shuttles between a humanist vision of traditional rural life as timeless and perennial and a progressive understanding of rural exploitation and poverty as having become unsustainable. For its local release, it included a color song-and-dance sequence, thus also venturing into a melodramatic register. Rather than analyze the film as a unified totality, I see it as a riven and divided form that is potentially productive as instigation for continued engagement and experimentation.

The focus of chapter 2 is on Khurshid Anwar (1912–84), who began his career as a music director and later worked on several important films during the fifties and sixties as writer and director. In his youth, Khurshid Anwar had been involved in anticolonial activities in Lahore inspired by the revolutionary Bhagat Singh (1907–31) but disavowed Marxism, instead embracing a lyric romanticism in his later film work. Anwar's Lahore films weave centrally around the conflict between the "East" and the "West." They render this tension distinctive by the role music plays in its invitation to heal the unbearable consequences of this divide. In a further twist, the "East" here has a prelapsarian evocation that harks back to a conception of India before its dismemberment at the Partition in 1947. In this sense, this elegiac body of work is suffused with melancholic romanticism and offers an implied address that is sharply at variance with the claims of Pakistani nationalism.

I return again to filmmakers inspired by a broadly leftist vision in chapter 3. An important branch of the All-India Progressive Writers' Association was in Lahore, where many prominent writers were affiliated with this movement since the midthirties. The filmmakers who emerged from this matrix include the directors Khalil Qaiser and Riaz Shahid, and lyricists Habib Jalib and Faiz Ahmed Faiz, who are leading figures in Urdu poetry. These directors and writers made several significant films that tackle imperialism and everyday exploitation in a social and melodramatic register. Their efforts can be understood as enacting a cinematic public sphere that participates in but is also discrepant with nationalist projections. The focus in this chapter is on their social films—including one directed by Iqbal

Shehzad based on a short story by Saadat Hasan Manto—that foreground the broad leftist examination of modern everyday life and address exploitation through melodramatic tropes and lyric poetry.

Finally, chapter 4 jumps several decades ahead to examine a 2013 Punjabi-language production directed by Meenu Gaur and Farjad Nabi. The film narrates the story of three young men who attempt fatal encounters with their lives to leave a society that presents little possibility for forward movement. *Zinda Bhaag* (Run for life) is highly intermedial and reflexive. It returns in many ways to earlier cinema, by juxtaposing realism and fable and activating lineages of cultural memory in oral and cinematic mediums from across South Asia. Its fabling draws on other imaginative modes—literature, poetry, and theater—to transform them into new, fantastic modes of aspiration promised by neoliberal entrepreneurial effort, participation in shadowy economic schemes, and physical migration. This film, made decades after the others examined in the previous chapters, nevertheless serves as an important recapitulation of the salience of the Lahore effect into the present and makes for an appropriate finale to this study.

