

Muslim Subalterns in Hindi Films: A Comparative Study of *Saudagar* and *Gaman*

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Abstract: *The representation of Muslim subalterns in Hindi films offers a nuanced perspective on the portrayal of marginalised Muslim communities in Indian cinema. In the early years of Hindi cinema, films like “Mughal-e-Azam” (1960) showcased grandeur and nobility, often focusing on Mughal history and aristocracy. However, these depictions were far from the everyday lives of ordinary Muslims. Therefore, the presence of Muslim characters, especially from lower socio-economic and cultural backgrounds, remains limited in mainstream cinema, with many stories still untold. Films like Saudagar and Gaman played a critical role in Hindi cinema, as they were among the films which portrayed non-elite Muslim or Muslim subalterns in the decade of 1970. Muslim subalterns are also known as the Pasmanda (non-elite Muslim) community. The term “Pasmanda” refers to the marginalised and backward classes within the Indian Muslim community, often overlooked in the mainstream discourse of Hindi cinema. This research study explores the representation of Muslim subalterns in the late twentieth century of post-colonial India and traces its trajectories in contemporary public culture in India. It does so by analysing the national and gender politics of Hindi cinema in two Hindi films, Saudagar (Merchant), directed by Sudhendu Roy, based on the Bengali story Ras by Narendranath Mitra, released in 1973 and Gaman (Departure), directed by Muzaffar Ali and written by Hriday Lani, released in 1978. The article emphasises the gendered biases, females in a subaltern household, and politics of urban migration in post-colonial South Asia.*

Keywords: Gender, Hindi Cinema, Muslim Subalterns, Public Sphere

INTRODUCTION

There was a voice, an elite, educated Muslim voice that could be heard before and after the partition of India. Throughout this period, it is also represented in Hindi cinema as these elites focused on influencing Indians to write and portray their way of history. The image by which that voice is most remembered is their representation in Hindi cinema. This study focuses on the study of public culture in a newly independent nation. The colonial period witnessed censorship of public culture, but with independence, it evolved into a more democratic and communicative form than in the past. This study focuses on two films released in the 1970s. This article examines the contradictions and possibilities in the representation of Muslim subalterns in Hindi films.

MUSLIM SUBALTERNES

The caste system exists in every religious community in India, and the idea that caste existed among Muslims in the Indian subcontinent was neither new nor novel. Using evidence from decennial censuses, Ghaus Ansari argues that “Muslims in India were divided into three broad categories, which he called the *ashraf* (noble born), *ajlaf* (mean and lowly), and *arzal* (excluded)”¹. The last two categories, *ajlaf* and *arzal*, are Muslim subalterns also known as the *Pasmanda* community. The term “subaltern” refers to social, political, and geographical populations outside the hegemonic power structure and “Pasmanda” refers to the marginalised and backward classes within the Indian Muslim community, often overlooked in the mainstream discourse. However, caste exists among Muslims and, as a rule, displays a high degree of ambivalence. This contradiction has different opinions and expressions and has resulted in two separate propensities among Muslims.” Many Muslims, who admit that caste differences exist among them, often advance the argument that, rather than caste, some other term should be used to designate castes” in Muslim societies.² In this way, terms such as ethnic groups, *biradaris*, or groupings analogous to castes have been considered and utilised as substitutes.³ A.R. Momin⁴, Jalil Farooqui⁵ and others altogether deny, as stated by Imtiaz Ahmad, that “the existence of caste among Muslims, arguing that Islam is an egalitarian religion and does not recognise distinctions of caste and status honour. Such Muslims refuse to recognise that Islam and Muslims are not necessarily coterminous and that there may be a gap between Islamic beliefs and ideology and actual social behaviour. Both tendencies arise from Muslim anxieties about their position in India.”⁶

Imtiaz Ahmad, in his work, categorically questions the analysis of the academicians who argue that, rather than caste, an alternative term should be used to designate social

divisions among Muslims, guided by the anxiety that if caste were to be used, it would betray an affinity with Hindus. Throughout history, the Muslim community was very significantly formed “through conversion from indigenous groups, and the fear that it might relapse back into Hinduism has prompted it throughout history to clearly distinguish itself from Hindus by evolving diacritical distinctions, which they feel are more Islamic and set Muslims apart from Hindus”.⁷ However, although people will allow arrangements much like caste do happen with Muslims, they’d really rather different words were employed to name Muslim castes.

Conversely, Muslims who tend to reject that caste exists within the Muslim population do so, as they want to show the group as all the same, given its position as a minority in India. Benur (2004) traces this dimension in the context of the rise of a nationalist movement in India. He writes:

“The Hindu nationalists, using religion and culture as the bases of nationalism, tried to push only the Hindus as the ‘national’ community and the Muslims as the ‘illegitimate’ residents of India. The Muslim elites also tried to project the Muslims as a religious monolith and advanced the theory of a distinct ‘Islamic’ identity of the Muslims. However, because Muslims were divided by caste hierarchy, it was inconvenient for them to project Hindus as monoliths. Hence, they proposed the theory of ‘unity in diversity’ and argued that Hindu culture was the unifying force behind the so-called diversity of Hindus. The Hindu elites, i.e. the Brahmanical upper classes, pushed the Brahmanical value system and philosophy as the ‘essence’ of so-called Indian culture. The Muslim elite adopted a similar view about Muslims, reducing everything to Islam. So, it was contended that the Indian Muslims are without any caste system and they are one homogeneous community.”

This Tendency has been attributed to sociologists who show a remarkably uncanny ambivalence toward caste among Muslims. At the behavioural level, they are willing to admit that there are elements of caste in Indo-Muslim society. When the discussion shifts from behaviour to ideology, they recoil from their position, seeking to add caveats or hedge around the issue by unabashedly admitting that when they apply the term in the context of a Muslim group, they are using it in a loose sense. Nevertheless, caste divisions and groups exist among them. Thus, Indo-Muslims are a heterogeneous social and cultural group. With the beginning of Hindi cinema in Bombay (Now Mumbai), the portrayal of Muslims was limited to elites.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND EARLY REPRESENTATION

The representation of Muslim subalterns in Hindi films offers a nuanced perspective on the portrayal of marginalised Muslim communities in Indian cinema. In the early decades of Hindi cinema, films like “Mughal-e-Azam” (1960) showcased grandeur and nobility, often focusing on Mughal history and aristocracy. However, these depictions have been removed from the everyday lives of ordinary Muslims. During the nineteen seventies, as parallel cinema films came out, film-makers such as Shyam Benegal and Govind Nihalani started to look into stories which were far more down-to-earth and lifelike. Movies such as *Mantaban*

(1976) and *Aakrosb* (1980) began to suggest the widespread unfairness experienced by many different groups of people, though showing Muslims who were less powerful and had no status in society was not done very much in those times. The period of liberalisation led to a wider range of stories being told, but in the mainstream, Muslims were either left out of big commercial films or shown as criminals, people who used violence for political ends, or as funny people. However, some films – *Bombay* (1995) and *Fiza* (2000) – did begin to deal with difficulties between religious groups and with what they did in the lives of average Muslims. The contemporary era has seen a more pronounced focus on the lives of Muslim subalterns. Movies like *Gully Boy* (2019) depict the struggles of young Muslims from the slums of the metropolis Mumbai, reflecting their aspirations and challenges in a rapidly changing urban landscape.⁸

Historically, Hindi cinema has tended to portray Muslims in stereotypical roles, often oscillating between two extremes: the noble aristocratic Nawab and the exotic villainous outsider. Early Bollywood films such as *Mughal-e-Azam* (1960) and *Pakeezah* (1972) romanticised Mughal and Nawabi culture, presenting a sanitised and glorified image of Muslims. Post the 1990s, especially after the demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992, the representation of Muslims in Hindi films began to change, reflecting socio-political tensions in India. Films began to depict Muslims as victims of violence and prejudice, often highlighting their marginalised status.

The predicament around Muslim identity in India that Right-wing supporters are fuelling has also engulfed Hindi cinema. Where once films showed “Muslims as rulers, poets and aesthetes, they are now often depicted as terrorists, gangsters and despots, according to Nandini Ramnath.”⁹ The broader themes after 1990 are: A) Victimhood and Marginalisation: Films like *Bombay* (1995) and *Fiza* (2000) depict communal riots and the consequent victimisation of Muslims. These narratives often show Muslims as victims of a larger political agenda, striving to find their place in a polarised society. B) Resistance and Agency: Some films present Muslim characters as agents of resistance to oppression. *Garm Hava* (1973) is a seminal film that portrays the struggles of a Muslim family in post-Partition India, capturing their resistance to being uprooted from their homeland. C) Intersectionality and Everyday Struggles: Recent films such as *My Name is Khan* (2010) and *Mulk* (2018) delve into the intersectionality of religion, class, and politics. These films portray Muslims dealing with everyday prejudices while also highlighting their contributions to the nation’s sociocultural fabric. D) Subversion of Stereotypes: Films such as *Dhobi Ghat* (2010) and *Lunchbox* (2013) present Muslim characters in more nuanced and everyday common roles, subverting traditional stereotypes. These films often focus on individual stories that intersect with broader social issues, thus providing more rounded portrayals.

The depiction of Muslim characters, especially from lower socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds, remains limited in mainstream cinema, with many stories still untold. Films like *Saudagar* and *Gaman* played a critical role in Hindi cinema, as they were among the films which portrayed Muslim non-elite or Muslim subalterns in the decade of 1970. The term “Pasmanda” refers to the marginalised and backward classes within the Indian Muslim

community, often overlooked in the mainstream discourse of Hindi cinema. The political and cultural backdrop of the 1970s played a significant role in shifting Muslim representation from elites to subalterns.

SAUDAGAR (1973)

The Hindi film *Saudagar*(1973)¹⁰, directed by Sudhendu Roy, is a vital work portraying Muslim subalterns' lives by exploring socio-economic struggles and interpersonal relationships. The film, starring Amitabh Bachchan and Nutan, is an adaptation of Bengali writer Narendranath Mitra's short story *Ras* and delves deeply into themes of poverty, exploitation, and the harsh realities of marginalised communities.¹¹ It was selected for Foreign Language Film at the 46th Academy Awards from India but was not nominated.

Saudagar tells the story of Moti (Amitabh Bachchan), a small-time jaggery (*gur*) trader, and Mahjubhi (Nutan), a widow who helps him in his business by creating jaggery. Moti, keen on improving his business and social standing, decides to marry Phoolbanu (Padma Khanna), a younger woman from a more prosperous background.

Moti cunningly exploits Mahjubhi's labour and support to gather enough money for *mehar* (bride price). Once he saves enough, he marries Phoolbanu and discards Mahjubhi. However, Moti soon realises that Phoolbanu is beautiful but lacks Mahjubhi's skills and dedication. Therefore, his business suffered. The narrative then illustrates the economic and social forces at work and the difficulties of Moti's conflict between moral and emotional dilemmas.

Themes and Motifs of *Saudagar*

The film presents a distinct portrait of exploitation, most obviously of women, within groups that society neglects. Mahjubhi's work and competence are vital to Moti's success, but he dismisses her when he achieves a higher status and position. The film opposes the social norms which maintain gender and economic inequality. Mahjubhi is representative of a Muslim woman, a widow, abandoned by society and exploited financially, despite her contributions. Thus, it reflects the gender and social inequalities of Muslim subaltern society.

There are ethical issues at the centre of Moti's story. Initially, he acts selfishly, but Moti subsequently recognises Mahjubhi's worth and is distressed, which develops his character arc in portrayal. The subdued bond between Moti and Mahjubhi depicts unspoken affection and sacrifice. Mahjubhi's silent endurance and Moti's eventual realisation of her importance reveal the emotions beneath superficial actions.

The film is celebrated for its performances, with Nutan receiving widespread critical acclaim for her portrayal of mahjubhi. Amitabh Bachchan, playing Moti, imbues the role with depth, demonstrating his talent for characters experiencing complex emotions. Ravindra Jain's score, containing the famous songs like "*Sajna Hai Mujhe Sajna Ke Lije*", enhances the story's emotional impact and strengthens the overall effect.

Saudagar gives a thorough picture of Muslims of more humble means - the difficulties they experienced in society and with their money, and the involved connections

between people in the group, connections which both helped and hindered. The movie does not use common, expected characterisations; rather, it shows, in a way that feels genuine, the conditions Muslims were in when few opportunities were available to them. Mahjubhi is especially important, as she represents continuing on despite trouble, and not letting difficulties in society and the economy beat you. *Saudagar* is still a vital piece for grasping the issues with society and the economy that Muslims without power were dealing with. It is remembered for its affecting story, its characters who seem real, and it is not reluctant to show being taken advantage of and the arguments people have inside themselves about what is right.

GAMAN (1978)

Gaman is another film that is the focus of this research study. *Gaman* (1978)¹², directed by Muzaffar Ali, is a poignant Hindi film that captures the harsh realities of rural migrants, mainly focusing on the lives of Muslim subalterns. The film is noted for its sensitive portrayal of migration, economic hardship, and quest for a better life.

Gaman concerns itself with the narrative of Ghulam Hasan, the role played by Farooq Shaikh, a young man who moved from a village in Uttar Pradesh to Mumbai in the hope of finding employment. Leaving his wife, Khairun, played by Smita Patil, and his sick mother, hoping to send money back home to support them, Ghulam encounters many difficulties in Mumbai, whilst getting to grips with the difficult city environment; he gets a job as a taxi driver, but has to deal with the isolation, unfair treatment, and loneliness of his new existence. The film shows his demanding passage, characterised by nostalgia and continual concern for his family and those at home.

Themes and Motifs

The central idea of *Gaman* is the migration of people from rural areas to urban centres in search of jobs and better opportunities. The film depicts displacement and its emotional and psychological impacts on migrants. This shows the financial struggles faced by migrants in the city. Ghulam's difficulty in earning enough as a taxi driver exemplifies how precarious this type of work is, with constant concern about having sufficient money.

Ghulam's time in Mumbai is marked by being on his own and feeling sad: even amongst lots of people, he can't really be of the city, or keep in touch with his family in his village.

The vanishing of customs is also a topic in the film, as it displays the cultural shock migrants go through; Ghulam, having grown up a Muslim in the rural village of Uttar Pradesh, has trouble becoming a part of city life in Mumbai. *Gaman* balances the themes of hope and despair. The despair of his daily struggles gradually overshadows Ghulam's initial hope for a better future, yet he continues to hold onto the hope of reuniting with his family.

Gaman gives a considerate, realistic narrative of Muslims who do not have much money, and their issues in society and the economy and how moving affects them; the character of Ghulam Hasan is what happens to many rural Muslims who go to cities to do well, but often end up being taken advantage of and having a difficult time.

Gaman is acclaimed for its realistic narrative, strong performance, and evocative music. The film's soundtrack, composed by Jaidev, includes the iconic ghazal "Seene Mein Jalan", sung by Suresh Wadkar and the beautiful folk song "Aap Ki Yaad Aati Rabi" sung by Chhaya Ganguly. These songs enhance the film's emotional depth and create a haunted atmosphere.

Spivak sees potential while applying the Derridean method in "Measuring the silences" of the subaltern. At the end of the film, the main lead does not board a train because of financial issues and the landlord's exploitation, as his wife cannot single-handedly make money to repay the landlord." The situated subject, the Derridean subject, is possible even when the subject is fixed. In these cases, the self is centred, but the "world" moves, and, on Spivak/Derrida's account, to understand politics, one must deconstruct this "moving" of the world around the subject."¹³

Upon its release, *Gaman* was appreciated for its sensitive handling of pressing social issues. It received critical acclaim for its direction, performance, and music. The film's stark and realistic portrayal of migrant life struck a chord with audiences and critics. Farooq Shaikh's portrayal of Ghulam is subtle and profoundly moving, capturing his character's quiet desperation and resilience. Smita Patil's performance as Khairun is equally compelling, highlighting the strength and vulnerability of a woman waiting for her husband's return.

REPRESENTATION OF MUSLIM SUBALTERN IN SAUDAGAR AND GAMAN

Hindi cinema is remarkably plentiful and diverse, yet it frequently resorts to existing stereotypes and insufficient representation, most notably in the case of marginalised communities such as the Muslim population.

I. Stereotyping

Stereotyping of Muslim individuals and identity is evident in *Saudagar* and *Gaman*, although each film does so in different ways. *Saudagar*, a tale of affection, trickery, and regret, tacitly upholds the notion that a Muslim is naturally unlucky; they endure complex personal difficulties which quite often lead to dangerous circumstances. To portray Muslims in this fashion risks simplifying the intricate concept of Muslim identity in India into uncomplicated characters.

Nonetheless, *Gaman* tackles the demanding themes of emigration, love, and loneliness, and presents a more nuanced depiction of its Muslim protagonist. Nevertheless, this portrayal is not without common typecasting, as the central figure is invariably portrayed as hopeless, without a sense of belonging. Despite the sensitivity of the narrative, the movie inadvertently perpetuates the widespread assumption that being Muslim is invariably associated with hardship, and thus diminishes the possibilities for alternative depictions that do not cast them as either the injured party or the villain.

II. Underrepresentation

A definite problem within Hindi cinema is the limited number of Muslim narratives, which are especially visible when the central characters in *Saudagar* and *Gaman*

are contrasted with the industry's usual output. Although both films position Muslim people at the core of their storylines, the marginalisation of other minority communities illustrates a marked scarcity of voices able to supply varied perspectives. The small number of Muslim producers and writers in the industry exacerbates this, as stories and concepts from Hindu creators typically determine what is produced.

III. Industry Biases

As with the wider society, the Bombay cinema industry operates within a framework of preconceptions which generally prioritise commercially viable stories over realistic storytelling. A film's blockbuster commercial success frequently depends on the pre-existing popularity of concepts with audiences; thus, there is little inclination to explore challenging and complicated issues. Issues such as those within the Muslim experience may be perceived as unappealing to the mainstream public.

In *Saudagar* and *Gaman*, filmmakers grapple with these industry biases, yet their attempts to portray Muslim identity still require concession to the overarching imperative of money making. Although *Saudagar* highlights the sensationalism of melodrama and individual conflict, *Gaman* endeavours to illustrate socio-economic realities; however, neither succeeds in altering the prevailing situation. The industry's agenda-setting function is therefore apparent, as it moulds public perceptions and sentiments regarding minorities and compels film makers to reconcile their artistic ambitions with the need to generate revenue.

The 1973 film *Saudagar* is extremely important when considering the social and economic issues faced by the *Pasmanda* Muslims of India. It is famous for its powerful narrative, fully developed character, and honest depiction of injustice and moral struggle. The film's capacity to address complex societal issues while simultaneously relating a compelling, personal story ensures its lasting significance in Indian cinema. The character of Ghulam in *Gaman* embodies the considerable number of Muslims migrating to cities, who experienced not merely financial hardship, but also the challenge of preserving their customs and religious beliefs in urban environments which did not always welcome them.

The film does not shy from showing the systemic issues which contribute to the marginalisation of Muslims – limited prospects for income, societal prejudice, and the precariousness of employment in a city.

CONCLUSION

The representation of Muslim subalterns in Hindi cinema is changing, and contemporary films are trying to provide a reasonable and more straightforward portrayal. Although getting to a thoughtful, suitable, and more inclusive and accurate representation of the community is still in progress, the audience looks for in Hindi Cinema. A wider range of people and stories are needed to show the complexities of Muslim communities in India. Even with this progress, the portrayal of Muslim subalterns in Hindi films is not without criticism.

In Conclusion, *Saudagar* and *Gaman* deal with the hard question of Muslim representation in selected Hindi films, taking into account what the audience will think and

whether the films can make money. While the films intend to show the problems their people have, they point to a bigger issue in Indian Hindi cinema: getting past what people already believe, offering different ways of showing things, and questioning what is usually accepted. It is the responsibility of filmmakers to cultivate stories which embrace the multiplicity of identities, and thus enrich cinematic dialogue and foster a more tolerant cultural environment.

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