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FOSTERING TOLERANCE AND UNITY: ANALYSIS OF SELECT INDIAN FILMS

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ABSTRACT

Life without the intrusion of media in all its forms and manifestations can no longer be imagined on our planet. Be it the print, cinema, television or its most pervasive form, the social media has engulfed the human life processes to an extent that the human mental make-up is defined by the media like never before. The exposure to all that's happening or trending, as it is called by not the citizens but the 'netizens' across globe has had an impact on the way people perceive things influencing their attitudes, behavior, approach, value systems or even as they live in the present times. The immense possibilities that science and technology powered media has, is by far unimaginable. The containment of the disastrous recent covid pandemic, by making people amenable to the new normal through the amalgam of science, technology and media is a case in point. It is in this backdrop of the ubiquitous media that hugely mediates even our relationships within societies, that this paper is formulated to highlight how the cinematic media has been utilized as a tool to mediate tolerance and unity among the Muslim and Hindu religious groups in India. An analysis of a few chosen films for exploring the theme is taken up here

KEYWORDS: *Covid, Cinema. Netizens, Religious Intolerance, Science and Technology*

INTRODUCTION

The Partition of the Indian Subcontinent into two eternally conflicted countries Pakistan and India has been one of the most heinous disasters that history of mankind has witnessed. The traumatic memory of the mutual mass murders of the two communities - Hindus and Muslims have left the psyche scared and has kindled the hatred time and again leading to repeated wars between India and Pakistan, and has fuelled terrorist activities threatening peace and harmony on the borders. The attempts at peaceful coexistence of people of the two religions by humanitarian leaders have not been successful as also the conscious propagation of 'unity in diversity' as the organizing principle of Indian over the years has failed to bridge the differences and prejudices between the religious groups. Yet, efforts to control the strife between the two religious communities by elevating the values of humanity that can transcend the sectarian attitudes are ongoing at several levels in India. The film industry too, because of its extensive appeal to the masses of all sections of the society has left no stone unturned to curb the lurking hatred between the two groups. Films like *Garam Hawa*, *Bombay*, *Roja*, *Veer Zaara*, *Gadar*, *Bajarangi Bhaijaan*, *Earth*, *Black Friday*, *Tamas*, *Firaq* and many others since the time of attainment of Independence have tried to showcase the natural instincts of love and cooperation present in all human beings transcending the barriers of caste, creed and religion. It is ironic that even after the celebration of the 'Amrut Mahotsava' of Indian independence from colonial rule of the British, wrested after a popular and protracted struggle for civil liberties, the concept of India as one Nation and all its people living in harmony with one another is unfortunately, far from reality. The very spirit of nationalism that had pollinated the entire India since the 1920's leading to the upsurge of a united goal of achieving independence, today needs to be revisited, as the very essence of nationalism is fraught with much disparities of thought and action. The post independent India has faced an onslaught of violent attacks, not just from her neighbours but also from within her womb, bringing to the fore the unresolved continuum of differences, hatred, bias existent among the people though they all belong to one Nation. Be it the Godhra incident, the burning problem of Kashmir, the repercussions of operation Blue star, the consequences of the assassination of Indira Gandhi, Rajeev Gandhi, the naxal violence, the attack on Parliament, the Kalisthan threat, the ethnic conflicts in North-East States, almost regular terrorist attacks and many more, all portray a Nation that is disturbed and in throes of pain, suspicion lurking among its peoples for one another divided into castes, classes, communities, religions, race, ethnicities and gender. In fact, in its annual report, the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) which functions under the Union Home Ministry indicated a rise in communal riots in the recent times. (Business Standard on October 12, 2022) As Dr. Ambedkar had so fervently opined in his speech that mere political unity without the social unity would not augur well for the nation, India today is a burning cauldron of various unresolved issues.

Even as early as in the 1920's the national movement had ignited the spirit of Nationalism in the minds of the people of India, the

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violence during the non-cooperation movement clearly hinted at what was to come. Although Gandhiji's faith in the emancipatory potential of nationalism caught the imagination of almost all the leaders of the freedom struggle including Gandhiji, resulting in independence of India, it was the anxiety and apprehension of Rabindranath Tagore about the aggressive edge of Nationalism that eventually came true. It is this vein of thought that has been sensitively captured by films like Arpana Sen in *Mr. and Mrs. Iyer (2002)*, Mani Ratnam's *Bombay(1995)* and the most recent mindboggling *Kashmir Files (2022)* directed by Vivek Agnihotri which are chosen for analysis here.

Mr. and Mrs. Iyer: A Representation of a Mini India

Arpana Sen's *Mr. and Mrs. Iyer* which bagged several national and international awards offers a sensitive projection of the notions of Nation as 'an imagined community', which has been theorized by Benedict Anderson, of how Nation is forged, the obstacles to it and the ultimate triumph of human spirit of love and cooperation. Although on a surface level it appears another Hindu - Muslim love story blossoming under threatening surroundings of communal riots, it offers a wonderful critique of the very making of notions of 'nations' that do not just draw borders on land, but divides minds and hearts too.

The characters of Meenakshi Iyer and Raja Choudhuri alias Jahangir Choudhuri evoke the natural sentiment of love that emanates out of caring and sharing for each other amidst dangers breaking apart the notions of religious differences between them. However a critical viewing of the film unravels it as a critique of Nationalism in India, which has failed to bring the disparate elements of the nation within the cultural-political logic of nationalism. Despite attempts to imbibe the consciousness of being a nation in the popular mind, through props of National boards, flags, captions and quotes, which are highlighted in visual screen shots all through the film, the communal differences among the people that is triggered off into violent hatred at the slightest provocation is sensitively captured. In fact the 'bus' that is headed from the North to the South of India itself is a microcosm of all that India is. Those on board the crowded bus constitute a cross section of Indian life—Muslims, Sikhs, Hindus, higher and lower castes, middle class and poor. Most of the passengers cannot speak each other's native tongues and so all of them need to speak in English, however faulty it is, revealing another ironic dimension of united India that needs to depend on the coloniser's language for its unity. With a focus on rendering the diverse Indian population represnting the regional distinctions, accommodating varied interests and attitudes of its people according to their age, sex, caste, class, religion and race the different people on board the bus comprise the populace of India. The old Muslim couple and their non-intrusive presence, the young gang of teenagers teeming with boisterous uproar, the bored middle-aged adults depending on drinks and cards to while away their time, the young mother Meenakshi with her demanding infant Santanam, the Muslim wild-life photographer Raja alias Jahangir alias Mr. Mani Iyer with his keen eye for human emotions, the newly married couple lost in each other oblivious of all else, the unfriendly older women easily irked by the younger woman's burden of motherhood, the autistic boy representing the disabled misfits in this world of self-reliant able bodied and finally the Jew who ends up betraying the old couple to save his own skin - all of them weave the fabric of Indian ethos of diverse multiplicity of cultures, religions, regions and languages.

The journey of this teaming mini-India stands tested at the outbreak of a Hindu-Muslim riot. In the face of a life threat from a Hindu fundamentalist group, all the passengers pulsate as one group negating the presence of any Muslims in the bus, but its only the Jew who yet again continues the legacy of betrayal by pointing at the harmless old Muslim couple, in order to divert the attention of the Hindu terrorists from himself, anxious of being mistaken as Muslim because of his circumcised reality. Hence, yet again, the betrayal does not emerge from within India, but the one who remains alien to its culture of sacrifice, tolerance and unity. It's from this point; the film clearly satirizes the made-made society, its structures and rhetoric of ethno- religious nationalism which in its attempts to unify people only ends up alienating them from their natural humanity.

The subtle portrayal of Meenakshi Iyer's consciousness and conscience is indicative of the natural instincts of humanity ever present in all versus the identity, bias and attitude formation based on the social grooming, that is repressive of natural harmony and fellow feeling. For instance, after unhesitant acceptance of help with her infant child, rendered by Raja at the beginning of the journey, very appreciatively, mistaking him to be a Hindu and then her sudden withdrawal from him after realizing his Muslim identity is noteworthy of how preconceived notions on the basis of religious differences can thwart the natural feelings of harmony between individuals. However, at the nick of danger, she overcomes her religious prejudice, recovers her humanity and saves Raja from violent extremists by claiming him to be her husband, Mr. Iyer, thereby saving not just his life, but also her humanity. The film from then on focuses on the natural fellow feeling of care and concern flowing between the two, irrepressible by any barriers. The emotional riot foregrounded against the external violent riot is explained in all fineness.

Bajarangi Bhaijaan: A saga of humanity

Directed by Kabir Khan and produced by Salman Knan and Rockline Venkatesh, "Bajrangi Bhaijaan," is a yet another saga of humanity that transcends borders and cultural differences. It is a heartwarming tale focusing the natural compassion that pulsates between fellow humans. Salman Khan in the lead is Pavan, a devout Hindu man who embarks on a journey to reunite a mute six year old Pakistani girl 'Munni' with her family in Pakistan, risking his life in the process. With all his attempts to procure a visa and Passport failed, Pavan enters Pakistan illegally and is chased by the police suspecting him as an Indian informer on the Pakistani soil. The grueling chase by the Pakistani authorities to capture Pavan, whose only intention is to reach the innocent child to her lost home, highlights the minds and hearts that are

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corrupted by the blinding hate that is incapable of perceiving goodness or nobility of heart. The character of a Pakistani reporter, played by the versatile Nawazuddin Siddiqui also showcase the role of media in keeping the wounds raw and open, through the insensitive reporting for monetary gains . The antagonism and violence in the region is sensationalized by the media rather than attempts of reconciliation. Nawazuddin's character appropriately summarizes with the statement "Hatred is easier to sell than love" critically pointing out the agencies that are contributing to the continued strained relationships between the two countries.

However, very rightly the movie also portrays most of the characters, except Rasika's father, as tolerant of other faiths, particularly the Imam who aids Pawan states that his mosque is open to all, and he even bids farewell using Pawan's signature Hindu greeting. It showed how ordinary citizens in both the countries, did not hate the other country, it was the officials who induced the hatred in the citizens. The media, the police, the secret agencies had the "enemy thinking", while people like bus conductor, the teacher at the Madrassa, and the border security officer flow with natural humanity wanting to help Pawan in his noble deed.

The narrative of the movie beautifully intertwines themes of faith, love, and religious tolerance and critiques the man-made political and religious boundaries that erode natural feelings of empathy and unity among people. It openly condemns the military-political establishment of both governments and their mutual antagonism. It also succeeds in portraying jingoism and fundamentalism as the true enemy, and not the individuals who are force fed the ideology of separatism and mutual skepticism.

The climax of the movie is heart wrenching. The movie tries to bridge the ties between the two countries. It eventually becomes a critique of Indo-Pakistan politics and tries to evoke feelings of shared humanity.

Bombay: Love vs. Fanaticism

It is almost in the same vein that *Bombay*, which became a box office hit and won National award for the evocative roles of Hindu-Muslim lovers played by Arvind Swami and Manisha Koirala. As Wimal Dissanayake & K. Moti Gokulsing have opined, Mani Ratnam "has highlighted the self-defeating nature of extremist thinking and xenophobia and stressed the need to take a more rational approach to the whole question of religious loyalties and ethnic affiliations in the context of multiracial, multi-religious India."

Having been fatally attracted to a girl (Shaila Bano) of a conservative Muslim Family, the Hindu boy (Shekar) ends up winning her amidst the opposition of both their families. Escaping their wrath and violence, they elope to Bombay which provides them their safe and anonymous life. With a set of twins, their life is blissful until the communal riots hit Bombay with the demolition of Babri Masjid disturbing it by dividing their union once again on the basis of their religious identities. The film seeks to promote values of secularism by placing the experience of an inter-religious family at the centre of the irrational violence caused by religious strife and has numerous moments that promote communal harmony and religious tolerance all through the film. Just as Jahangir and Meenakshi meet as simple humans devoid of any restrictive religious barrier between them in Mr and Mrs Iyer, the presentation of the post-marriage idyllic life of Shekar and Shaila Bano, before the breakout of riots highlight how their mutual love had enabled them to accept each other that they had no qualms following each other's religious 'codes' too. In a song sequence, there are glimpses of Shaila Bano praying at home with Shekar watching with a content smile and Shekar adorns the distinctly Muslim cap, while Shaila Bano applies a red tikka worn by a married Hindu woman. It is ultimately the twin boys of this couple that bring in the insanity of the religious strife, when they are separated from their family during the riots. It is through their innocent, religiously unmarked positions that the entire strife on the basis of religious differences is presented bringing out the irrational and blind hatred that damages the basic humanity and kindness present in all. Santanam's pure laughter, and the twin kids' blissful minds drive home the corruptive and mind-corroding structures dehumanizing the adult world.

Kashmir Files: Understanding Past to Purge the Present

The recent film Kashmir Files too chronicles yet another score of devastating incidents of violence in post-Independence India i.e. the terrorist attacks on Pundits of Kashmir, an intellectually inclined and prosperous community who became refugees in their own country. It brings to light the most underrepresented genocide, the rise of militancy in Kashmir in the 1990's. In the holocaust that unfolded, more than 400,000 Pundits were forced out of the state and rendered homeless, more than 4,000 were killed and uncountable atrocities were perpetuated against their women and children in the valley. The silence and inaction against such growing extremism of the militants and separatists destroyed the amicability that developed between Hindus and Muslims over generations as well as friendships between individuals and families. Although many question the need for this movie to been made as the exodus of Hindus that took place over 30 years ago is history today as it may rake up the issue now and open the wounds that may impact the already strained communal relations between the Hindus and Muslims, the movie actually ventilated the suppressed anger and hate, so as to go over it, by both communities. Both of these religious groups would introspect and see through the politicians' tactics of reaping benefits by putting them against each other which would bring in a change in their attitudes and conduct fostering unity, tolerance and harmony between the warring factions. The film by presenting the senseless slaughter and its repercussions holds a mirror to the sheer selfish vendetta of a few fundamentalists, thereby purging the negative emotions in the light of reason so as to help build a better environment for the happiness of all.

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CONCLUSION

Thus, with an analysis of these chosen films and many others that are made in order to nurture amiability among the multi-religious nations, it can be easily seen that cinema as a popular medium has been able to shape the perceptions of multitudes of people and bring them to a consensus on chosen attitudes and thoughts. And therefore cinema can be used as a potential tool to hold India together fostering unity among its dissenting factions.

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