

At last, a cross-border film!

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Language, music and film are three components of culture that the Indian and Pakistani peoples share so intimately with each other that it is astonishing, indeed shocking, that there hasn't been a rich history of exchange of cultural products and artefacts and free movement of artistes and writers between them for over half a century.

Music admittedly appears a bit of an exception here. And yet, barring Pakistani singers such as Abida Parveen, Mehdi Hasan and the Sabri Brothers, who have regularly performed to large audiences in Indian cities, there are few musicians who frequently visit each other's countries, including an amazingly inspiring group like "Junoon", which would cause a riot in every big Indian city. (Some Indian *ghazal* and *bhajan* singers complain that they rarely get reciprocal visas to perform in Pakistan. But that's another matter.)

At the level of classical music, nothing matches the phenomenon of the sixties and seventies, when Salamat Ali and Nazakat Ali took India's connoisseur audiences by storm with the sheer suppleness of their voices.

Similarly, since Faiz Ahmad Faiz's death, there haven't been nearly enough literary encounters or *mushairas* in Urdu/Hindustani/Hindi, involving writers, poets and critics from both countries—although there are distinguished writers of Urdu in India, many of them Hindus and Sikhs, including Gopichand Narang, who is currently president of India's prestigious Sahitya (literary) Akademi. In fact, Urdu/Hindustani/Khadi Boli, that beautiful common language of undivided North India now itself stands partitioned with a highly Sanskritised Hindi currently dominant in India, and an increasingly Arabised Urdu taking hold in Pakistan.

Take books. There is very little Pakistan-India co-publishing or official trade in books, even textbooks, where the scope is immense in "non-controversial" subjects like the natural sciences. An agreement in principle to free the trade in books was more or less reached, but the relevant protocol has been hanging fire for three years.

There are a few honourable exceptions though, such as a short list of books by "international" publishers like Oxford University Press (including my own "*South Asia on a Short Fuse*", co-authored with Achin Vanaik, OUP-Karachi).

Even more significant is the recent publication in India of the legendary singer Malka Pukhraj's memoir, "Songs Sung True", by that remarkable feminist press, Kali for Women. This book would have probably run into serious legal hurdles had it been published in Pakistan because it contains a good deal of material about the pre-Partition period, including Pukhraj's appointment to the Court of Jammu and Kashmir.

This is a worthy example of citizens' mutual "cross-border" defence. But the overall scenario is dismal.

As far as films go, video-copies of the latest Bollywood releases reach shop-shelves in Pakistan within days, sometimes before they are premiered in India. (The reverse process once operated in respect of plays on Pakistan TV). Audience interest and taste in the two countries are similar, as are "formulas" for successful films.

And yet, there hasn't been a joint India-Pakistan cinematic venture for a long time; to the best of my knowledge. True, some directors have explored themes like Partition, Hindu-Muslim tensions, terrorism, Kashmir, espionage, etc.

However, barring directors like Shyam Benegal in "parallel cinema" (sub-mainstream, low-budget films), who made the remarkable "*Mammo*" in 1995; few filmmakers have questioned state-promoted stereotypes of Pakistan-India hostility. Recent Bombay "formula" hits like "Hero" — the most expensive Hindi movie ever made — and "Sarfarosh" and a slew of other films do just the opposite, say people far more knowledgeable about commercial cinema than me. There is little room for a people-centred



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film on India-Pakistan issues in the 200 movies Bombay churns out every year.

This void is about to be filled by Bollywood director Mahesh Bhatt, who is planning to make what he calls an "audacious" film

on Partition's trauma. Bhatt, who courts political controversy as easily as he scores commercial success, says his project is essentially a "South Asian Schindler's List", centred on a Muslim who saved Hindus during the communal carnage of 1947. (Steven Spielberg's "Schindler's List" is the story of a German businessman who saved 1,000 Jews by employing them in an armaments factory.)

Bhatt told me he believes that Spielberg, who has directed blockbusters like "Jaws", is an excellent model to follow: "World audiences were exposed to hundreds of films which portrayed Germans as demons. Finally came a film which depicted a German with a golden heart. That made the world weep". Bhatt wants to do the same to the predominant stereotype of the Pakistani prevalent among Indians.

"My story dares not to demonise my brother, at whom I have been told to look ... as an enemy for half a century", says Bhatt. The inspiration for the plot came to Bhatt from an account he stumbled upon while reading a range of books on Partition, which he describes as a "gash" across Northern India, "which ripped apart people who belonged to the same racial stock".

This account is the story of an anonymous courageous Muslim policeman who prevented a mob from killing over 200 Sikhs locked in a home. To Bhatt, this offered an opportunity to look "affectionately" at a people whom we have systematically "demonised in our movies."

The film's plot is fictionalised around very different characters, though: a Hindu Maharaja from the North-West Frontier Province and his massive entourage travelling on a royal train through Northern Punjab to Amritsar to marry a beautiful young girl, Chandini, his 26th wife. Also travelling with him are his pet horses and two stable-boys, Imraan and Asif. Imraan and Chandini find themselves thrown together and develop strong mutual attraction.

Partition is announced just as the train stops to refuel. Riots have broken out and incensed Muslim mobs are looking for "revenge" in Punjab for crimes committed by Hindus in UP. Imraan saves Chandini from them, while proclaiming that his religion compels him to protect the oppressed from the oppressors. Asif, always the purist disapproving of mixed liaisons, joins the mob, but Imraan has already spirited Chandini to safety. The mob ultimately kills Imraan.

Bhatt feels it's a Bollywood-style plot, but a powerful one. He wants to shoot the film in Pakistan and hopes to get some help from some of the 13 Pakistani MNAs and Senators who recently visited India, besides Sevy Ali, a Pakistan-born UK-based producer.

One fervently hopes that Bhatt will be permitted to shoot the film in Pakistan-unlike Deepa Mehta who wanted to do a part of "Earth" there. Such cooperation could kickstart greater cultural exchanges between the two countries, or rather peoples.

It is simply impossible to sustain mutual hostility and inimical stereotypes without erecting barriers and preventing exchanges. Bhatt's film could catalyse a wholly new phenomenon in Bollywood, where a kind of Pakistan-bashing fatigue seems to be setting in—going by the reception the MNA-Senators got from the Mumbai film industry. There may well be a commercial reason for this friendliness: Some estimates suggest that Indian movies could earn \$35 million a year from Pakistan.

Whatever the motives, films like Bhatt's will serve to transform perceptions, smash stereotypes, and alter mindsets. Nothing could be more welcome than this as India and Pakistan move towards a long-overdue thaw. Nothing could accelerate the normalisation process better.