

DIVIDED CURTAINS AND SWEET SYMPHONIES:

PRE-PARTITION PUNJAB'S CONTRIBUTION TO INDIAN CINEMA

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The book, Pre-partition Punjab's Contribution to Indian Cinema by esteemed Professor Dr. Ishtiaq Ahmed is a distinguished juxtaposition of some first-hand interviews of actors, directors, song writers, producers, composers, music directors and research about the places where these cinephiles once lived, before the divide. The book is the second edition as it was published in Delhi 2022 Aakar Books and this year it published and launched on 17th March, 2023 here in Lahore, Pakistan with some additions to the previous publication. The book is mainly a collection of newspaper articles that the author had been publishing in Lahore based papers: Friday Times and Daily Times. I believe the book portrays the romantic relationship of the author with his hometown, Lahore and it also can be called a memoir about cinema viewing as he has expressed his love for cinema at several places in the book that he has watched *Awara* (1951) more than 25 times. The book also offers insight on 3-4 decades of Hindustani cinema and its makers from Punjab. It draws a sad as well as a sweet picture of Indian cinema, shedding light on the many hearts that were broken during partition – in which entire communities were compelled to leave the places they cherished living in and having to settle in unfamiliar settings. For example, in the book the author recounts an interview (October 1999 & 2001) with Dr. Ramanand Sagar, who was an accomplished director and producer living in Lahore before partition. He shared, "I worked for a while in Delhi but then came to Bombay. I have been in the city for 52 years now. I have achieved outstanding success in film industry, but I still feel like a refugee. The feeling of being a refugee never lets go of you. It is a constant part of one's existence..." He wrote a novel on the incident of partition as well titled, *Aur Insaan Mar Gaya* – in which he had written his story of partition in the novel. Dr. Ramanand's wife who belonged to Shahalmi Gate of Lahore also shared with the author, "Mulk te saadha Lahore hee hai. Aithy te asi pardesi hee aan." (Our homeland is Lahore after all. Here, we are just strangers).

Dr. Ishtiaq also luckily happened to meet another shining star of Indian Cinema, Sunil Dutt, actor, director and producer. He wrote about the story of meeting to Mr. Dutt. It was initially planned as a 20 minutes meeting, but later on with the arrival of Mr. Ishtiaq

– knowing that he himself is a Punjabi – the conversation lasted longer than two hours as the strings of love had not been cut by the drawn borders between.

The author also wrote about his meeting (October 2001) with Raj Babbar, a magnificent Bollywood star whose ancestors once lived in Jalalpur Jatta of Punjab Pakistan. He shared his experience of visiting his ancestral house, "Some years ago I visited Pakistan to attend a Punjabi conference. The receptions at the airport and in the hotel were memorable. I felt that I was at home among my own people. I expressed a desire to visit my hometown and this was immediately arranged. The news spread quickly to Jalalpur Jattan. Some young men from there came to Lahore and escorted me to Jalalpur Jattan. They formed a caravan of motorcycles as we drove into the small town... I was told that a mosque had been built in the courtyard our old house and therefore I was not sure if I would like to go there. I said to them, 'I would be very pleased to go there if you have no objection. Now I know secret of my success. If people pray five times a day in the courtyard of my house obviously then their blessings help me become so successful.'"

During the British period there were four cities that came forward as urban hubs: Bombay, Calcutta, Madras and Lahore. It is interesting to note that all four, where initial art schools were opened in colonial India, three – Bombay, Calcutta, Madras – became film production centers, with Lahore joining soon afterwards and becoming second base for film-making after Bombay. It was further supported by the claim as Lahore had 9 film theatres in the early 1920s. The first silent film was shot in Lahore by G. K. Mehta in 1924 titled, *The Daughters of Today*, and a few years later (in 1929) another film, *Husn ka Daaku*, was produced by Ravi Road Studios in which the acting as well as directorial directed was led by A.R. Kardar, a renowned name in the pioneers of Indian cinema. Also noteworthy in the context of colonisation, "During the British epoch, when films emerged as a brand-new entertainment in the Indian subcontinent, colonial authorities ensured that Indian cinema did not address themes related to the ongoing freedom struggle. So, we were left with boy meets girl themes to enjoy on the curtains."

It is interesting to note that two of the ethnic groups have been dominant on Indian cinema, Punjabis and Bengalis - and the presented book closely traced Punjabi's contribution towards Indian cinema. To my wonder, the Punjabi films were not only being made in undivided Punjab, their viewership was ranging from Delhi, Calcutta, Bombay to Kanpur. A.R. Kardar, who had shifted to Calcutta, did not stop making films in Lahore. He produced the first talkie on the folk story of Punjab, Heer Ranjha, in Punjabi. "We Punjabis are people of rivers who have been living on the banks of 5 rivers since centuries and we have a dynamic relationship with music and singing while we have been drinking sweet water of these rivers that has produced the timeless melodious voices". An interesting thing about Hindi Cinema is the inclusion of songs as an added value in the plots of films which stand apart from the music score of the overall film. These Geets are part and parcel of Indian films to date. While discussing music, the author wrote that Kundan Lal (K. L.) Saigol was one of the popular actor-singers of early 1920s. He was born into a Punjabi family and played the lead in the first Devdas. The author mentioned that although he was a Punjabi, he sang 28 Bangla songs and only two songs in Punjabi are on his credit. When a Punjabi singer coming from a nearby place to Jalandhar came to know about this he remarked, "Hun Tussi Punjabi wich wee gana shuroo kar dita a, assi te tan bhukhe marr jawaan ge" (Now you have started singing in Punjabi as well, we will be starved to death). But Saigol was man of his word and he promised to him that he would not sing in Punjabi again, and he never did.

Female actors and singers were also making their name on the playground of Indian cinema. The author dedicated an entire chapter to Lahore born refined actress Kamini Kaushal, documenting her contribution towards Indian cinema. She was part of the films that won the Grand Prix at Cannes Film Festival as the 1st Asian Film, Neecha Nagar (1946), and she also worked in many other popular movies. The author has penned down a couple of telephonic conversations with Kamini jee as she shared, "Lahore is home and it will always be. It always remains with me as a constant companion wherever I live. Often times, I wander away in my thoughts to Lahore because so many finest memories are associated with that petite city." The author writes about one of her memories, "It was the city of cycles; everywhere you could see people on cycles, we girls went around on the cycles." There is a long list of brilliant actresses and playback singers and the author has given detailed accounts of Shyama Arain, Khurshid, singer Suraiya, the melody queen Madam Noor Jahan, Mumtaz Shanti, Ragini, Munawar Sultana, Swaran Lata, Veena, Manorama, Meena Shorey, Begum Para, Chand Burke, Geeta Bali, Bina Rai, Asha Mathur, Kuldip Kaur, Shamim Bano, Shamshad Begum, Pushpa Hans and many more. All these superb actresses belonged to Punjab, mostly from Lahore, and had ruled on Indian cinema: either this side of border or the other.

You all have heard this well-sung Punjabi song "Chan kithan guzari ai rat wey", which was sung by an illustrious actress and playback singer Pushpa Hans. The author has included an interesting interview with her that shows how we have lived with a communal harmony and in a cosmopolitan environment before the divide. She says, "I started my singing career from Lahore Radio station... Mian Hameedudin from Ferozepur lived on 13 Fane Road (Lahore). His daughter Kishwer was one of my best friends. I used to observe roza along with her." The interview also shows how art forms do not care about all these borders, "When I sang the famous Punjabi song, 'Chan kithan guzari aai raat wey' listeners from Pakistan sent requests for it to be played many times on All-India Radio. In fact, once I performed for jawans on the Jammu border. The Pakistani troops on the other side requested that one of the loudspeakers should be turned in their direction. This was done and we all had great time." The author also gave another example of the significance of music that I believe brings all of humanity to one place no matter which part of the world they belong. He shared an anecdote of a Nepali Hindu who was mesmerised by the Bhajan 'mun tarpat Hari darshan ko a' a music piece from the all-time classic film Baiju Bawra (1952). The Nepali Hindu wanted to pay a tribute to the makers of this Bhajan and he intended to travel to Bombay. To his wonder when he came to know that the Bhajan was composed by a Muslim, Naushad, lyrics also by a Muslim, Shakeel Badayuni, and devotionally sung by one of the best singers of the world, Rafi, so he could not leave before kissing their feet. The art forms build capacities to be pluralistic, promoting coexistence and the embrace of diversity that we have been shown in the book artistically. It doesn't take much effort to follow the path of humanity, it reminds me an opening lyric of a film (Devta, 1956) song written by Sahir Ludhianvi and sung by Muhammad Rafi:

توہندو بنے گانہ مسلمان بنے گا
انسان کی اولاد ہے انسان بنے گا

The author is a photographer and visual/performing artist - and his works may be accessed at <https://visura.co/waqasmanzoor/about>.