

Rise and Fall of Cinema on Mcleod Road

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The history of cinema in Pakistan is actually the history of cinema in Lahore. And Lahore, everybody well understands, has always been the hub of the Pakistani film industry. This briefly skims the past account of cinema in the sub-continent while focusing on Pakistani cinema. Lahore has always been considered a metropolis where thinkers, writers, scholars, poets and artists flourished. The city ignited several significant cultural, social, political, intellectual and artistic movements, which affected the lives of the people of the sub-continent in numerous ways. The Pakistani film industry is credited with having produced some of the most distinguished filmmakers, actors, writers and directors.

Cinema was introduced to India on the 7th of July 1896, when the Lumiere Brothers' *Cinématographe* showed six short silent films at Watson's Hotel in Bombay. French film company, Pathé opened an Indian office in 1907; the first foreign film production company in the country. In the same year, a purpose-built cinema theatre was constructed. The year 1918 saw the introduction of the Indian Cinematograph Act modeled on that of Britain defining issues like censorship and cinema licensing. With the establishment of Phalke's Hindustan Film Company, the first Indian serial, Patankar's *Ram Vanvas*, with a length of 20,000 feet was made. The same year witnessed the release of the first South Indian feature, Rangaswamy Nataraja Mudaliar's *Keechaka Vadham* by *Draupadi Vastrapaharanam*.

Following these successes, film operations were initiated in Lahore. At first, the silent film, *The Daughters of Today*, was released in 1928. But it was to be later in 1929–1930, when *Husn Ka Daku* was released that the film industry was established in essence in Lahore's Bhati Gate locality. At the time, the city had nine operational cinema houses. Films shown at these cinemas were mostly local productions from Bombay and Calcutta, while seldom from Hollywood and London. Kardar, a

F.1

Poster of the film, "Teri Yaad"
Pakistan's first feature film

professional calligraphist, was accompanied by his fellow-artist and friend Muhammad Ismail, who would make the posters for his films. These early efforts of film production would later be called *Lollywood*, a blend of Lahore and Hollywood.



The creative energy of Lahore's film crowd began to express itself as soon as the trauma of partition subsided. Cinematographers were not prepared for the Partition. They had no choice but to migrate. At that time the centre of all film activities was Bombay and the Pakistani film industry had no proper equipment for making films which was a major factor in the downward trend at the time. Pakistani film directors, faced with scarce resource, adopted a minimalist approach due to the non-availability of technical equipment and the lack of artists as well. All renowned directors, producers, music directors were in India but luckily Noor Jahan, Khurshid Anwer, Rashid Atry and Nisar Bazmi were in Pakistan to sustain the film industry in its infancy. Against all odds, the fledgling Pakistani film industry was able to produce its first feature film, *Teri Yaad* on 7th August, 1948, premiering at the Prabhat Theatre in Lahore.

F.2

Santosh Kumar, a legend of the Silver Screen

The 60's decade is often cited as being the golden age of cinema in Pakistan. Many star-actors were introduced during this period who later became legends of the silver screen like, Santosh Kumar, Mohammad Ali, Zeba and Rani. In September 1965 in the aftermath of the armed conflict between India and Pakistan, all Indian films were banned in cinemas in Pakistan with immediate effect. The ban already existed in 1952 in West Pakistan and since 1962 in East Pakistan, but was exercised rigorously after the '65 war. Pakistani cinemas did not suffer much from this verdict. Instead they gained better viewership for their films.



Eventually the ban on Indian cinema rebounded on the industry it sought to protect. Without competition, Pakistani cinema went into a decline churning out cheap imitations of Indian products and stereotypical films devoid of innovation or creativity. Talented directors like Ahmed and Shaukat Hussain Rizvi, legendary film maker of the classic, *Jugnu* soon stopped making films altogether.



F. 3

Zeba and
Mohammad Ali,
legends of the Silver
Screen

Following the separation of East Pakistan, the Pakistani film industry lost its Dhaka wing and the number of cinemas speedily declined. This generated a massive brain drain and singers like Runa Laila departed for Bangladesh leaving Pakistani industry on the brink of disaster yet again.

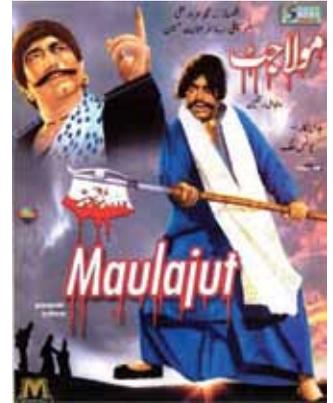
The mid-70s saw the advent of video cassette recorders in Pakistan. Films from all over the world were copied on tape and the audiences at cinemas dwindled. The majority of people preferred to watch films in the comfort of their homes. This led to the beginning of film piracy, and movies were sold in the cassette market on the day they premiered in cinemas. This further added to the decline. The current owners of the cinemas confess that financial constraints left them with no choice but to auction the family theatres.

Following Zia-ul-Haq's military coup (1979-87), the attempts to Islamize the country were launched and one of the very first victims of this effort towards a socio-political change was the film industry. The imposition of the new registration laws for film producers was filmmakers be degree holders. This proved to be a major constraint as many of them were not educated to that degree and this led to their abandoning the industry. New tax rates were introduced which further culminated in decreasing cinema attendances. The government, as part of its new ideology had obviously decided to discourage the industry and thus closed most of the cinemas in Lahore by force for paltry reasons.

F. 4

'Maulajut' portraying
the 'gandasa culture'
in film industry

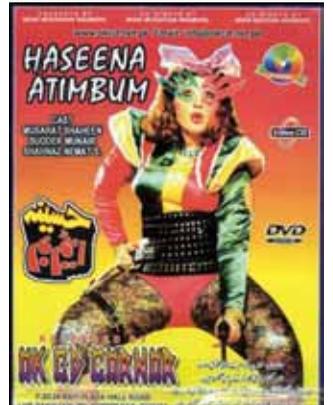
The city, nevertheless, kept producing films. The period between '94 and '96 saw a 50% rise in the production of Urdu films despite stifling censorship policies and a culture that never recovered from the setback of the 80's. Growing censorship policies, that discouraged displays of affection, induced filmmakers to focus on violence as an attraction for the audience. As a result, violence-ridden Punjabi films overshadowed the Urdu cinema. This film sub-culture came to be known as the 'gandasa culture' in the local industry. In addition the quality of the ambience of the cinemas declined and the middle class began to avoid the 'increasingly dilapidated and rowdy cinemas'.



F. 5

From 'gandasa
culture' to soft-core
pornography

Backed by powerful politicians, Pashto filmmakers were able to get around the censor policies and infested their films with cheap styled soft-core pornography to get maximum viewership. This tossed away the romantic and loveable image of Pakistani cinema. Being a female actor associated with film productions became, understandably, taboo. Enthusiasm for visiting the cinema soon disappeared and not even Pakistan's first science fiction film *Shaani* in 1987, directed by Saeed Rizvi and employing elaborate special effects, could save the industry from failing.



The factors which contributed to the decline of the Pakistan film industry were: the loss of East Pakistan's talented actors and singers; the inception of television and the infiltration of non-artistic financiers, who had no or little background, either in the arts, or business. Consequently, senior film-makers (directors and composers) went into voluntary exile and the industry was taken over by those rich people who invested money for purposes other than artistic ends.

McLeod Road – the Cinema Node

The prime location of theatres was on McLeod Road, named after Sir Donald Friell McLeod, Lieutenant Governor of the Punjab, 1865-70, who was also one of the founders of the Punjab University.



It was designed as a broad avenue at the time of the layout of the ‘civil station’ of the city by the British. It was easily accessible for locals as well as visitors, linked directly with the Railway Station, and provided spacious parking facilities. Cinemas that catered for large scale movement of people found this road attractive and it became the focal point of the film exhibitors. Lakshmi Chowk, the prominent crossing of the McLeod Road, and its surrounding area was the focal point of Lahore’s film industry crowd. By the evening, Lakshmi Chowk would be full of *tongas*, with film stars, top film directors and producers thronging the teahouses and discussing of films. Large numbers of Lahore cinema-goers have their excellent memories attached to the Ratan, Moonlight, New Empire, Mubarak, Odeon, Naz, Capital and the Plaza Cinema; much to their despair cinemas are rapidly becoming history. Royal Park, opposite Lakshimi Chowk, was the hub of the film industry and people from outside Lahore would visit and wait for hours to have a glimpse of their favourite actors and singers.

An epoch making event occurred when the movie *Aan*, was first screened in the Ratan Cinema. The film, having super-star actors such as Dileep Kumar, Premnath, Nimmi and Nadira, was directed by the legendary director Mehboob Khan. The film was the first of its kind to earn a gross total of more than Rs.15 million, a huge amount at the time. *Aan* was one of those films that set new standards and completed its golden jubilee at Ratan Cinema. *Aan* will always be available on recorded DVDs; the cinema that first featured the film in Pakistan will now have only memories of the pioneering theatre. The cinema served as one of the main sources of entertainment to those who migrated from India to Pakistan and for those who felt the need to vent in the depressing times of early partition. *Aan*, *Babul*, *Anokhi Ada*, *Chaman* and

many other famous movies were released first at the Ratan Cinema and they did excellent business. It appears that the cinemas of the McLeod Road have only a short life left. They will soon become just another memory of their historic role. Nevertheless, they leave an indelible mark of their former glory.

Cineplex or smaller cinemas should be introduced for the revival of cinema for more professional work and Indian films should be shown in our cinemas. Cinema is not just a place to watch films, but should also be a place of enjoyment for the whole family. Cultural changes cannot be interrupted by films; we should be confident of what we are doing. There should be more competition without any state help. Women should be given respect so that they would not hesitate in coming to cinemas, even when not accompanied by a male.

Now it appears that all those talented people either disappeared or are lost somewhere during the blind march for so-called progress. And, it is extremely important that almost all the people of Pakistan should try their best to find that lost genius. While concentrating on the many challenges yet to be met within the dominion of media and cultural representation, it is strongly advisable to continue to rediscover, reclaim, rewrite, and support cinema culture in Pakistan.

Endnotes

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