

SOCIAL GENRE IN SOUTH ASIAN CINEMA: STUDY OF PAKISTANI AND INDIAN FILM NARRATIVES

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Abstract

Cinema is a unique instrument of media to be used for gaining political and cultural objectives. South Asian Cinema is considered to be the source of presenting societal change, political challenges, and evolving cultural identities through cinematic expression on big screen. This study is a comparative analysis based on genre theory, feminist film theory, and Gramscian cultural hegemony to investigate the development of the social genre in Pakistani and Indian cinema. The study assesses eight exemplar films using thematic and textual analysis: Arth (1982), Bombay (1995), Lagaan (2001), and 3 Idiots (2009) from India, and Khuda Kay Liye (2007), Bol (2011), Manto (2015), and Cake (2018) from Pakistan. The findings show that cultural restrictions during the Zia-ul-Haq administration caused a discontinuity in Pakistan's engagement with the social genre, which was followed by resurgence in the post-2000 era. On the other hand, during the same decades, Indian cinema continued to consistently produce socially conscious films. The analysis shows how cinema responds to various ideological frameworks while negotiating topics of gender, nationalism, religion, modernity, and state power in both situations. The study highlights that comparative research on South Asian social film shares cultural negotiations and regional differences that are missed by single-nation analysis. The focus of the study was socio-political discourse in content of Pakistan-India selected films. This study provides a pathway to explore cultural and political controversies between film industry of Pakistan and India for critical studies in cinematic studies. This study is about the impact of cinematography on nations in shaping public opinions about diverse cultures.

INTRODUCTION

Cinema is an important instrument of media that has many significant objectives rather than entertainment. Throughout the world, cinema has a political role that targets the cultural domination of other countries, conveying and delivering political messages and attracting other nations. (Beasley, 2019)

Scholars have conducted research on South Asian to understand divisions of cultures, religious and political ideology of nations of Asian region and format of production and content. (Dickey, 2010) Thomas discussed Indian cinema as source of entertainment with representation of internal

regional cultures. (Thomas, 1985) The relationship between cinematography and the socio political representation is complex and multi-faceted. Nations have used film as a cultural, political, and ideological forum to debate national identity, morality, history, and nationhood. Social subjects related to class, gender, religion, nationalism, migration, and modernization, economy and political violence have been portrayed in the films. (Williams, 2002) A recent study discussed that modern cinema has genres related to society that reflects attitudes of society, political economic structure and cultural identities followed by national anxieties in the contexts of films. (Lu, 2023) Filmmakers produce films to reinforce the traditional shift or authority change in political transition which effect on the nations for public opinion shaping and civic engegmanent. (Mor, 2012) In the postcolonial archives, South Asian Cinema represented powerful portrayal of sub-continent division. After 1947, Pakistani and Indian filmmakers have portrayed national ideologies through historical stories of migrations, effects of shift in political regimes, censorship systems due to religious ideological influences, and market realities to differentiate cinema paths of both countries. Indo-Pak cinema displayed visual presentation of trauma of migrants, loss of cultural identities and displacements of relations and assert to narrate the legacy of partition. (Sahi, 2025) In the reference of South Asian Cinema, it has been observed by researchers that multiculturalism and complex interplay of religious ideologies followed by ethnic identities has been portrayed in Indian cinema to communicate cultural unity after partition of sub-continent. A analysis of film Pinjar reveals that social tension and religious conflicts are dramatized their identities and cultures. (Hassan, 2024)

On the other hand, Pakistani cinema after 1947 also reflected cultural shifts and transformation in ideological framework of nation portrayed in stories of migration. Researchers highlighted that a great political and social change has been actively displayed in the content of Pakistani films to present intergenerational friction in the nation. (Shams, 2025)

Considering Pakistan Film industry the era of the 1960s and 1970s is considered as “Golden Age” due to color screen, technological advancement and

emergence of legends. The storylines of the films in this era remained on socio political and cultural dimensions with national themes. (Ahmed, 1992) Scholars considered Pakistani cinema as foundation of national film industry representing cultural and political images of sub-continent. (Gazdar, 1997)

The social genre was rather strong in Pakistan during the 1960s and 1970s, but its growth was halted in the 1980s by General Zia-ul-Haq's military rule, which imposed religious restrictions and moral control on artistic output. As a result, artistic inventiveness and thematic diversity declined due to freedom censorship restricted by Zia ul Haq. (Gazdar, 1997). Only after the early 2000s did films like Bol (2011), Manto (2015), and Khuda Kay Liye (2007) bring back socially conscious cinema as a medium for public discourse. As seen by films like Arth (1982), Bombay (1995), Lagaan (2001), and 3 Idiots (2009), which tackled changing discourses on gender, secularism, nationhood, and economic development, Indian cinema, on the other hand, continued to engage with social topics. (Saeed, 2017)

The common interesting boundaries shared by Indian and Pakistani cinema are related to history, traditions, language and culture which have been enrooted before partition. Although there are much political conflict between countries but cinema, music and folk story have friendly cross border sharing interests. (Prasad, 1998) Indian films were put on ban to be viewed in Pakistani Cinema but audience of Pakistan has great interest in watching Indian films for cultural exchange. (Lyon, 2008) In the Era of Pervaiz Mussharaf, considering media freedom, Pakistan restarted imports and collaboration in film industry with India to reestablish cultural links. (Viridi, 2003) Research studies show that Indian Cinema has expanded the context with Pakistani cinema for film renaissance. However there is lack of studies on the operational dynamic of film industry and social genres of both countries. (Baskaran, 1996) Studies have examined that Indian Cinema has more influence on audience by highlighting power, wealth, cultural identities and social political subjects to describe the social genre in films. (Dudrah, 2006) Number of studies is observed on shared histories and transitional aspects in south Asian Cinema in the context of cultural and regional connections. (Kaur, 2005)

This study employs a thematic framework influenced by feminist film theory, cultural hegemony, and genre studies; this study explores comparative analysis of Pakistani and Indian films under the social genre to fill the research gap. The current study highlights that the social genre in the film provide ample room to filmmakers for building contentious narratives about identity, power, and cultural change the society to influence global audience by reflecting national socio-political situations.

The objective of this research is therefore twofold: first, to analyze how the social genre has grown differently in Pakistan and India since Partition; and second, to investigate the role of cinema as a site of cultural negotiation in both national settings. The study shows how cinematic narratives react to historical upheavals, ideological pressures, and audience expectations by contrasting themes of a few chosen movies from both industries. By redefining South Asian film as a comparative area of study rather than a compilation of discrete country case studies, this method adds to larger discussions in media and cultural studies. It further illustrates how the social genre functions as an ideological and interpretive arena where filmmakers interact with issues of resistance, modernism, and tradition.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1 The Social Genre in South Asian Cinema

Throughout history, the social genre in film has acted as a mirror of societal realities, tackling issues of family, morality, class relations, religious identity, and political transformation. According to academics like Rajadhyaksha (1993), Dwyer (2006), and Gokulsing and Dissanayake (2004), this genre is a dominant narrative form in South Asia that is influenced by post-independence nation-building processes, regional culture, and colonial legacies. Indian cinema, particularly through parallel cinema and mainstream productions, sustained a constant engagement with social issues from the 1950s onward, while Pakistani cinema entered a period of ideological disruption in the 1980s, later restoring social narratives through post-2000 film revival movements. (Rao, 2007)

Both sectors adopted similar thematic concerns in the early decades following Partition, especially with regard to gender roles, identity formation, and the trauma of nationhood. However, distinct cinematic paths were shaped by the political differences between the two states. (Ahmed, 1992) As social change and political reform occurred in India, films about caste, secularism, economic mobility, and women's issues changed. (Scrase, 2002) Authoritarian censorship in Pakistan limited themes of nationalism, Islam, feudalism, and patriarchy, which hindered narrative creativity until the post-2000 renaissance. Because the majority of current research examines these films alone rather than in relation to one another across history and ideology, there is a noticeable vacuum in scholarship. (Shah, 2024)

2.2 Genre Theory

Genre theory provides a useful lens for examining how the social genre adapts to shifting ideological and historical contexts. (Chandler, 1997) Scholars such as Altman (1999) argue that genre is both a textual and cultural construct shaped by industry practices, audience expectations, and socio-political conditions. (Space, 2012) In South Asia, the notion of genre is less rigid than in Hollywood and often blends drama, realism, melodrama, and political commentary under the social genre umbrella. (Branstons, 2006) This hybridity permits film industries to address sensitive issues under culturally acceptable frameworks while maintaining audience engagement. (Shafiq, 2020) Social cinema in Pakistan and India often fuses personal and political narratives, making genre both a representational strategy and a site of negotiation. (Kumar, 2023) Over time, film industries in both contexts have used the social genre to articulate anxieties regarding modernity, tradition, religious identity, and gender politics. (Siddiqui, 2025)

2.3 Feminist Film Theory

Feminism is a movement in society to represent myths about women in the society associated with culture. These movements have impacts in films thus Feminist film theory, particularly Laura Mulvey's (1975) critique of the masculine gaze, provides critical insights into how gender is represented and challenged in South Asian cinema. (Smelik, 2007) Women in Pakistani and Indian movies have

traditionally been portrayed through patriarchal glasses, representing honor, sacrifice, and morality. (Rehman, 2016) However, social films have increasingly challenged these stereotypes by depicting women as agents overcoming societal restrictions. (Yousaf, 2017)

Films such as *Bol* (2011), *Arth* (1982), and *Cake* (2018) challenge gender conventions by highlighting experiences of oppression, agency, and resistance. Feminist frameworks enable us to investigate how cinematic tales reflect broader social changes involving gender roles, family structures, and cultural expectations. (Mistri, 2024)

2.4 Cultural Hegemony and Ideology

Antonio Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony offers another interpretive framework for viewing cinema as a medium that both reproduces and challenges dominant beliefs. (Sardar, 2024) In Pakistan, General Zia-ul-Haq's Islamisation policies of the 1980s affected film content through moral regulation and censorship, promoting specific ideological viewpoints on gender, nationalism, and religion. (Imran, 2016) In contrast, Indian cinema operated under a plural political framework, allowing directors to confront contentious social topics using metaphor, dramatization, and realism. (Sengupta, 2011)

The films examined in this study demonstrate how cinematic narratives serve as bargaining instruments between state power, cultural norms, and popular sentiment. By incorporating ideological arguments into story structures and character development, social films in both countries shed light on the ongoing conflict between conformity and critique. 2.5 Comparative Context

Existing study rarely compares Pakistani and Indian cinema, despite their shared histories and cultural continuities. Iftikhar (2019) and Kabir (2013) underline the importance of transnational approaches to South Asian film studies. Comparative study provides a better understanding of how political regimes, censorship, and ideology shape the evolution of the social genre. This study fills a research gap by investigating how similar themes—such as gender, identity, religion, and state power—appear differently and merge in both industries.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study uses a qualitative, comparative research design to examine the evolution and portrayal of social genres in Pakistani and Indian cinema. Rather than testing hypotheses, this study investigates how film narratives reflect, negotiate, and adapt to sociopolitical circumstances in both countries. A comparative lens allows for the detection of convergences and divergences that would otherwise be concealed in single-nation research.

3.2 Case Study Approach

A multiple case study method based on Yin (2003) and Stake (1995) is employed to explore selected films as cultural and ideological texts. Each film is a "case" that illustrates larger historical, political, and social debates in its respective national cinema. This technique allows for more depth, contextualization, and interpretive freedom while maintaining geographical comparability. (Stake, 2013)

3.3 Film Selection and Sampling Frame

The films in this study were chosen using purposive sampling based on their thematic significance, socio-cultural influence, critical reception, and contribution to the social genre. Eight films were chosen, four from Pakistan and four from India, encompassing various decades and political eras:

Pakistani Films

- *Khuda Kay Liye* (2007)
- *Bol* (2011)

- *Manto* (2015)
- *Cake* (2018)
- **Indian Films**
- *Arth* (1982)
- *Bombay* (1995)
- *Lagaan* (2001)
- *3 Idiots* (2009)

These films exhibit significant alterations in narrative style, ideology, and cultural negotiation, providing a longitudinal look of the social genre in both countries.

3.4 Data Analysis Method

The study uses thematic analysis, based on Braun and Clarke (2006), to interpret reoccurring patterns, discourses, and ideological conceptions in films. Film scripts, language, character arcs, cinematography, and narrative framing were examined to derive meaning from larger cultural and political contexts.

The analytical process involved:

- Initial viewing and note-taking
- Coding and theme identification
- Cross-case comparison
- Contextual interpretation

Themes were organized around key areas emerging from the theoretical framework:

- Gender and agency
- Religion and nationalism
- Censorship and ideology
- Tradition and modernity
- State power and identity

3.5 Theoretical Integration

The analysis was informed by genre theory (Altman, 1999), feminist film theory (Mulvey, 1975), and Gramsci's Cultural Hegemony to comprehend narratives and ideological negotiation.

This multifaceted approach allowed for a critical understanding of cinema as a venue in which prevailing narratives are both perpetuated and challenged.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

This study relied on publicly available films and secondary material; there were no human subjects or ethical issues. Proper academic citation is used, and interpretations are based on established theoretical frameworks.

4. Findings and Discussion

This section provides a thematic and comparative analysis of selected Pakistani and Indian films from the social genre. It investigates how historical

circumstances, political ideologies, and cultural anxieties influenced the narrative forms and social commentary of cinema in both contexts. The research revealed four major themes: (1) disruption and resurrection vs. continuity; (2) religion and identity; (3) gender and patriarchy; and (4) nationalism, conflict, and the state.

4.1 Pakistan: Disruption and Revival of the Social Genre

State censorship under General Zia-ul-Haq caused major ideological upheaval in Pakistan's film industry in the 1980s and early 1990s. The imposition of Christian morality inhibited cinematic expression, leading to the demise of socially involved films. The industry suffered from lower production quality, brain drain, and a lack of narrative experimentation. The rebirth of Pakistani cinema began in the early 2000s, fueled by directors looking to incorporate social commentary into mainstream tales. Films like *Khuda Kay Liye* (2007) and *Bol* (2011) have reinstated cinema as a forum for discussing religion, extremism, gender, and modernity. Manto (2015) examined historical memory and censorship, whereas Cake (2018) used family drama to explore generational conflict, migration, and women's responsibilities in changing Pakistani society.

These films represent a resurgence of the social genre after years of ideological restriction. They use cinema to negotiate the tensions between Islamic identity, global impact, and cultural plurality.

4.2 India: Continuity and Evolution of Social Cinema

Unlike Pakistan, Indian film has maintained an uninterrupted association with the social genre. Social storylines remained a vital part of cinematic output from the new wave and parallel cinema movements of the 1950s to the 1980s, as well as modern commercial films.

Arth (1982) questioned patriarchal norms by emphasizing women's agency in marital and emotional conflict. *Bombay* (1995) used melodrama to negotiate sensitive national conversation while dealing with communal violence and religious polarization during the Babri Masjid conflicts. *Lagaan* (2001) employed historical allegory to examine colonial tyranny, class hierarchy, and collective resistance.

Three Idiots (2009) criticized the strict school system, economic aspirations, and generational pressures.

These films represent ongoing public discussions about nationhood, capitalism, secularism, and personal liberty. Unlike its Pakistani equivalent, Indian film possessed the necessary infrastructure and narrative consistency to sustain its social genre without interruption.

4.3 Religion, Identity, and Ideology

Both Pakistani and Indian cinemas engage deeply with religious identity, but through different ideological conditions.

- In Pakistan, religious discourse is often tied to state power, moral legitimacy, and post-9/11 identity politics. Films like *Khuda Kay Liye* tackle radicalization, diaspora identity, and global Islamophobia.
- In India, films like *Bombay* explore Hindu-Muslim relations within a multicultural society, framing religious conflict through the lens of pluralism and secular nationalism.
- Gramscian theory illuminates how cinema functions as a space for negotiating hegemonic ideology either reinforcing dominant narratives or challenging them.

4.4 Gender and Patriarchy

Feminist film theory highlights the recurring portrayal of women as contested figures in both industries.

- Pakistani films like *Bol* and *Cake* foreground the struggles of women navigating patriarchal and religiously sanctioned constraints.

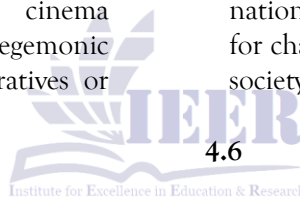
- Indian films like *Arth* and *3 Idiots* challenge domestic subservience, agency, and gendered expectations.

While patriarchal institutions exist in both industries, the forms of resistance differ: Pakistani storylines emphasize negotiation within traditional constraints, whereas Indian cinema uses more direct critiques of gender norms.

4.5 Nationalism, Conflict, and the State

National identity is a central theme across both contexts but manifests differently.

- Pakistani films often address internal tensions—censorship, extremism, migration, and identity crises tied to Islam and postcolonial trauma.
- Indian cinema frequently frames nationalism as pluralistic and reformist, albeit contested. Films such as *Lagaan* and *Khuda Kay Liye* use historical and contemporary conflicts to redefine national identity. Thus, cinema becomes a platform for challenging the authority of state narratives and society norms.



Comparative Insights

A side-by-side reading reveals:

Dimension	Pakistani Cinema	Indian Cinema
Historical continuity	Interrupted by Islamisation	Continuous since 1950s
Ideological regulation	Strong state/censorship presence	Film freedom within democracy
Revival trajectory	Post-2000 social resurgence	Ongoing thematic evolution
Gender representation	Negotiation within tradition	Assertive feminist challenges
Religion & identity	Islam, extremism, modernity	Secularism, pluralism, conflict

This comparison underscores that while the **social genre functions as a critical discourse in both nations**, it adapts uniquely to each cultural and political context.

5. Conclusion

South Asian cinema's social genres provide a significant cultural lens through which societies articulate and negotiate identity, ideology, and social

change. This comparative study of Pakistani and Indian cinema shows how historical factors, political regimes, and sociocultural constraints have affected the emergence of socially engaged film storylines in diverse but interconnected ways.

During the Zia-ul-Haq dictatorship in Pakistan, the social genre was severely disrupted by censorship and Islamization policies, which curtailed artistic expression and critical discourse. The genre's rebirth

in the 2000s, shown by films like *Khuda Kay Liye*, *Bol*, *Manto*, and *Cake*, indicates a renewed interest in issues such as gender, religion, trauma, and modernism. The renaissance reflects filmmakers' desire to reclaim cinema as a platform for public discourse, historical reflection, and ideological critique.

In contrast, Indian film has maintained a consistent engagement with societal topics across several decades. Films such as *Arth*, *Bombay*, *Lagaan*, and *3 Idiots* show how filmmakers tackled changing social concerns about identity, capitalism, secularism, and generational strife. Unlike Pakistan, the absence of total ideological rupture enabled Indian filmmakers to adapt and evolve their storylines in response to shifting political and cultural situations.

The comparison illustrates that, while both sectors use cinema to explore issues of nationality, identity, and social justice, their paths diverge due to different historical and political developments. Pakistani movie displays an attempt to rebuild the social genre following ideological disruption, whereas Indian cinema exemplifies an evolving continuity influenced by plural democratic discourse.

Religion, gender, and state power emerge as major themes in both contexts, although the techniques of portrayal differ. Pakistani films frequently address Islam, censorship, and internal conflict, whereas Indian films emphasize secularism, intercommunal interactions, and liberal critique. Gendered storylines also differ: Pakistani films negotiate opposition within conventional frameworks, whereas Indian cinema presents more direct challenges to patriarchal norms. This study advances media and culture studies by pushing beyond national boundaries and reframing South Asian cinema as a comparative field. Thematic, ideological, and historical examination indicate how the social genre serves as a dynamic place for both hegemony and resistance. Future research could broaden this investigation by examining regional cinemas, digital platforms, and postcolonial film reception in South Asia and the Diasporas.

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