

On Mushtaq Gazdar's 'History of Pakistani Cinema'

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There are no history books worth the name in Pakistan. Kids encounter Pakistan Studies as a compulsory subject and the text given in class to cover the last 50 years makes little mention of facts, pleasant and unpleasant. For example, Ayub Khan and his cabinet's relationship with the 1965 war, the MRD movement, and the MQM. As for the presentation of the pre-47 facts: imagine PTV covering Muhammad Bin Qasim's invasion of Sindh, and the PTV reporter solemnly reporting from MBQ's press releases.

Again, there is not a single book on the history of Pakistani existence for the use of the general reader and school going kids. In this history-forsaken land the late Mushtaq Gazdar's book, *The History of Pakistani Cinema 1947-1997*, arrived in 1997.

At Mushtaq Gazdar's recent passing away most writers remembered him as a documentary filmmaker and a fine man. Many people remember him a man who was particularly good to the young. People who have never met him will forever know that from the history book that Mushtaq Gazdar has written.

In writing about Pakistan cinema Mushtaq Gazdar has written a history of the land's culture and the times. Reading this book one cannot separate Pakistani cinema history from, well, history. In reading history thus the subject is no longer the monopoly of regimes. Gazdar shows the cultural processes behind major events. And he tracks these processes through the work, the voice and career of the individual.

An example of the breath-giving freshness of this approach: mention *Maula Jat*, the biggest block-buster of Punjabi cinema (the film established a strangle-hold on the industry for over a decade with its too-successful formula) and all polite conversation ends. But Gazdar gives a first-rate literary analysis of *Maula Jat* against the backdrop of Zia's Martial Law and Bhutto's trial and hanging. The film came out on the eve of the final act of the Zia-Bhutto drama. It's villain, Nuri (played by Mustufa Qureishi) is soft-spoken, polite and wants total power (anyone remember Zia on PTV promising elections, accountability, summary military justice?). The film was a great hit in Punjab and rural Sindh, the Bhutto constituencies.

In five chapters (there are six altogether), one for each decade of Pakistani film making, everything post-'47 is here. Explaining films and following the careers of film makers, Gazdar hits all our historical potholes, from partition through Ayub Khan and his Ministry of Information's Goebbels-like cultural policies (Gazdar's term), 1971 and the rise and fall of Bhutto, and Zia's long martial law, Islamization, and Motion Picture Ordinance. But Gazdar's eyes are firmly on the lives and careers of the directors, the music directors, the lyricists, the actors and producers, and the challenges facing the industry in Lahore, Karachi and

Dacca. We do not get a litany of 'great' leaders and events, but in reading the changes in cinema and culture we get a first-class perspective of the millstones around the nation's neck.

Considering the careers of film people of the generation of Shaukat Hussain Rizvi (director of *Jugnu*, the Dilip Kumar/Noor Jehan starrer, Ghulam Haider (music director who gave Madam Noor Jehan, Shamshad Begum, Lata Mangeshkar and Mohammed Rafi (!) their first major breaks), W.Z Ahmed (producer who owned Shalimar studios at Pune), and Noor Jehan, Gazdar cannot but help look at their individual relationship with partition. For most of these people their careers were cut in half.

Liberal people like W.Z Ahmed, whose film *Roohi* was the first film banned by the censor board for left-leaning sympathies, led the movement to ban Indian films here. It is an evergreen perspective on cross border trade: Indian films were coming into their own, Dilip Kumar, Raj Kapoor, Madhubala, Nargis *et al* were all stars on the rise whereas the Pakistani film makers had literally left their careers behind. The latter wanted to close the doors to Indian films so that they would not have to compete. The result: a lot of imitation and declining standards. Rizvi and Ahmed's output soon came to a standstill. For Madam Noor Jehan, of course, nothing, not even partition, stood in the way.

The book says little about how those, who had to leave Lahore after partition, fared in the Indian cinema business. There is one complete story. Quetta-born Roop K Shorey inherited Kamla Movietone in Lahore. He produced the Punjabi block-buster of 1943, *Mangti* (with an all Lahori cast), and left for Bombay in 1947 when his studio was burnt down by a Lahori mob. In 1951 he produced a block-buster with his film-star wife Meena (the *lara lappa* girl) *Ek Thi Larki*. In 1955 the couple came to Lahore to make the film *Miss 56*. Meera, overcome by the attention given to her by Lahoris, as opposed to Bombaywallahs, decided to stay back. Writes Gazdar, "heart-broken Roop had to take another trip from Lahore, empty-handed... (in the) first losing his livelihood, and then his sweetheart. (He) was never the same man again... and she died a pauper in 1989".

Everything pre-national is here too and that is the first chapter. Here Pakistani readers are finally allowed knowledge of the many lands and many centuries that lie buried beneath our present culture.

So how does Gazdar write a pre-national history of Pakistani cinema when the crippling problem that writers writing Pakistani history face is the problem of beginnings? How do you start talking about things Pakistani if you don't want to admit that once we were Indian?

The question of beginnings makes us anxious because it involves complex questions of identity. If we were Indian why (and when) are we not? Whereas the state monumentally organizes itself around the we-are-anything-but-Indian mantra through its media, foreign policy and military budget, the Pakistani public has welcomed the superiority of the Indian television channels. Recently overheard: a media *seth* in Lahore told a representative of a multinational advertising agency that Pakistani viewers hooked to satellite are 15% going on 100%.

Gazdar's finesse: the history of cinema in Pakistan is really the history of cinema of Lahore. And Lahore, everybody well understands, has always been around. This allows him to embrace the history of cinema in the sub-continent in writing about Pakistan cinema. The

link between the Mumbai and Lahore industries was intimate from the earliest years of cinema in the region (now it is unrequited - our media *seth* goes to Dubai to watch Indian films on a cinema screen).

"Artists and technicians who made it good in Lahore were invariably attracted to Bombay", says Gazdar. A.R Kardar for example, belonged to a landed Punjabi family, lead the Bhatti Gate Group of intellectuals, made silent films in Lahore but eventually settled in Bombay. There he made *Sharda*, *Dulari*, *Dillagi*, *Shahjehan* and *Jadoo* (all famous for Naushad's music as well).

Though In 1935 the first Punjabi film, *Pind di Kuri*, was produced not in Lahore but in Calcutta, the relationship between Lahore and the other film centres was not one way. "Bombay had technical superiority but when sound came to film the technical dominance of Bombay had to contend with the cultural dominance of Lahore. For now a well-written story, dialogues and lyrics became indispensable".

In the first chapter Gazdar moves beyond the national histories. He goes back pre-nation state and gives his understanding of the literary theory of Kautilya Chanakya (the writer of *Arthashastra* from the Mauryan era), the aristocratic attitudes towards art of Akbar and the Mughals, as well as the relationship to art of the courtiers, tradespeople and the peasants over the centuries. From this art history that Gazdar builds up, he speculates about the reason music is so central to film, the infallibility of our filmi heroes (the Krishna legacy) and how Muslim rulers, including the Khiljis, Tughlaqs, Sayyids, and Lodhis, all patronized the arts for strategic reasons: to keep orthodox elements at bay.

Gazdar's reading of cinema, culture and history is provocative because it works. How else does one explain Pakistani cinema's sudden ugliness in the late '70s and '80s. Screens teemed with murder, rape and pillage. As if someone had thrown a switch. It was the beginning of a cruel martial law and cultural atrophy, where with the general bloodying his hands in the Afghan crisis and guns and drugs flooding Pakistan, we became brutal as never before. No wonder *Maula Jat* occurred at the beginning of the decade, and hundreds of its clones thereafter.

The wonderful thing about Gazdar is that he is an optimist talking about a brave industry. He writes about recent releases with genuine excitement. And he has brought to attention some genuine nuggets from the recent past. Rangeela's 1979 hit *Aurat Raaj* is one of them. It is a gender-bender: a women's party wins an election and decrees that men shall wear confining dresses, rear children, and perform house-work. All the top macho film stars of the day worked in the film and did their bit.

What a brave town Lahore turns out to be in the book! The city keeps producing cinema. There is a 50% rise in the production of Urdu films between '94 and '96 despite stifling cultural policies and a culture that has not recovered from the 80's. No matter which general or minister has organized conferences in the name of the betterment of the industry, the filmmakers keep working.

Mushtaq Gazdar's book holds to an elegiac tone and a straight-backed optimism (hard to be both!) and is a wonderful tribute to Lahore. The enterprise of writing a cultural history - the labor in this book, its thorough readability shows - a rare caring about the young of this country.