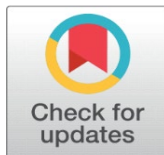
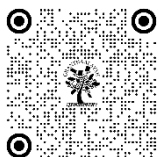


CONTEMPORISING PUNJABI CINEMA: CHRONOLOGY AND CULTURE

Dr. Harneet Kaur ¹

¹ Associate Professor, PG Department of English, Guru Gobind Singh College for Women, Chandigarh, India



Received 08 January 2024
Accepted 23 February 2024
Published 28 February 2024

Corresponding Author

Dr. Harneet Kaur,
hksandhu78@gmail.com

DOI
[10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i1.2024.885](https://doi.org/10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i1.2024.885)

Funding: This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Copyright: © 2024 The Author(s). This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

With the license CC-BY, authors retain the copyright, allowing anyone to download, reuse, re-print, modify, distribute, and/or copy their contribution. The work must be properly attributed to its author.



ABSTRACT

Indian Cinema is a complex and layered structure with Mumbai based Bollywood productions calling the shots. However, cinema in various languages of India, based out of the many different states is what lends the colour of diversity and the flavor of the local to cinema in India. The present contribution seeks to look at Punjabi cinema through the lens of masculinity, caste, and the evolution of themes. A brief historical perspective on Punjabi cinema is imperative to locate contemporary themes and depictions in the correct light. Cinema in Punjab has evolved over the last fifty years from the depiction of the rural Jatt hero of the 1980s to the NRI Jatt hero of the 2000s. The music industry of Punjab is also inextricably linked to Punjabi cinema as many singers feature as actors and heroes in films. The same is not true for female singers, bringing in the issue of gender and at times, toxic masculinity in Punjabi cinema. The women in Punjabi cinema are either young enchantresses or matronly mothers, who pamper the hero in equal measure. The paper will examine in detail some protagonists of Punjabi cinema who resonate across decades and are glorified till date. The issue of the usually upper caste hero and his family controlling the village with guns and goons has been a recurring image throughout the course of Punjabi cinema. Bollywood, too, cannot do without its fix of at least one Punjabi song, remixed or original and one character who belongs to Punjab. Thus, the chapter will bring out the nuances of Punjabi culture as depicted in Punjabi cinema, adding to the existing scholarship from a more contemporary context.

Keywords: Punjabi Cinema, New Age Cinema, Culture, Society, Diaspora

1. INTRODUCTION

Indian cinema is a culturally complex and multi-layered industry. It is also the largest source of entertainment for any audience globally. Tackling social, political, religious and local issues in a variety of languages, Indian cinema is much more than Bollywood, a term offered as an equivalent to the Hollywood of the west. Films made to cater to the Hindi speaking-understanding audience are produced largely in Mumbai, but it is the regional cinema of a linguistically complex country like India, which provides it diversity and heterogeneity. To arrive at a definitive exposition of Indian cinema, therefore is not an exercise required for the present context. It would centre more on a quantitative reliance than a cultural or linguistic explanation. Indian cinema has contributed significantly to the economic and employment

sectors of the nation building and made Mumbai the metropolitan entertainment capital of the country it now is. The vast Indian hinterland is reflected in the colour and flavour of the cinema of many Indian states. Regional identity and cultural memory have not got their rightful due in Bollywood productions, except clichéd depictions of the brash Punjabi, the money-wise Gujarati, the anglicised Goan or the poetic Bengali.

The present attempt, however, seeks to focus on the complex regional cinemas which are made for a specific linguistic audience. The paper will examine how the Punjabi film industry has evolved since independence and focus on the New Age Cinema later. This can be achieved by understanding how Punjabi cinema has largely been a male dominated project, both onscreen and behind the cameras. The caste dynamics of Punjab are visible in the depiction of the upper caste male hero who is seen equally at ease in rural, urban, and international settings. Regional cinema does not have the financial backing that Bollywood does, with the exception of South Indian cinema. Not much scholarship in the form of book titles in English is available on Punjabi cinema, hardly any on New Age Punjabi cinema. There has been a heavy reliance on media publications earlier and online scholarly resources now. To understand the titles of Punjabi films, they have been translated in the notes to convey the essence and nuances and also to suggest how they evolved over the years. A sincere effort has been made to include the latest developments in Punjabi cinema in the present context.

2. HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF THEMES IN PUNJABI CINEMA

Pre-Partition Punjabi cinema can be said to have begun with *Daughters of Today* (1928), a silent film and *Heer Ranjha* (1932) a sound film. Lahore was the movie capital of the undivided Punjab. Films like *Husn ka Daku* (1929), *Heer Ranjha* (1932), *Pind di kudi* (1935) went on to become hits in pre-partition Punjab. The partition of India hit Punjab and cinema inherited the pangs of the birth of a new nation. Various film makers from Lahore shut down their studios in the face of violence and moved to Bombay. Punjabi cinema lost its Urdu, Sindhi, and Pashto nuances with these remaining on the other side of the border, while Dogri cinema went its own way, located mainly in Himachal Pradesh and the Jammu region. According to film historian Bhim Raj Garg “Partition hit the film industry by destabilising two film hubs of undivided India — Calcutta and Lahore” [Garg \(2017\)](#). Further, it has been said that “Bombay’s Hindi cinema itself is nothing but a cinema of a Punjabi diaspora, with its sagas of twins separated at birth, family feuds resolved by matriarchal diktat and wives performing rituals for the longevity of their husbands” [Rajadhyaksha \(2016\)](#). The film industry also established itself deeply in Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, and Bengal, with their own discourses, culture and representations, in the post-Independence years.

Cinema as an industry in the regional-nationalist context created a new matrix which took roots in Punjab as well. The human and economic resources which came to Bombay from Lahore after partition stayed in Bombay and did not contribute much to Punjabi cinema in Punjab as such. *Shaheed* (1948) with Dilip Kumar heralded the rise of nationalistic cinema and went on to become a super hit. This was also the time when Raj Kapoor and Dev Anand set up their own production houses. Till 1955, Indian Punjabi films were released in Lahore, but this practice was discontinued due to increasing hostilities between the two nations. Independent India’s first Punjabi film, *Chaman* (1948) was released in Lahore. Other films of this period include *Lachhi*, *Mundri* and *Pheray*, all made in 1949. In the following years,

Punjabi cinema produced a considerable output and *Satluj de Kande* (1964) became the first Punjabi film to win a National Film Award.

Regional new cinema emerged in the latter half of 1960s and was flourishing by the next decade. A massive landmark of Punjabi cinema, *Nanak Naam Jahaaz Hai* released in 1969. Based on a religious theme, it featured the stalwart Prithviraj Kapoor, I S Johar and Vimmi in lead roles. The film's release marked the 500th year of the founder of Sikhism, Guru Nanak Dev's birth. Such was the cultural impact of the film that it saw huge queues when released. It won the National Film Award for Best Punjabi Film and Best Music. The music of the film was in the form of shabads, (devotional hymns), two of them sung by Bhai Samund Singh, famous Hazuri Raagi of Sri Darbar Sahib, Amritsar. The theatres were enveloped in a semi-divine aura when it was screened with premises being washed after every show and the audience covering their heads during screening. However, the film's depiction of a miracle went against the very tenets of Sikhism and some criticism was levelled against the film makers for bringing together romanticism and religion. This was one of the first visible cases where popular culture came in conflict with the religious beliefs of the community. However, this was not enough to deter the popularity of the film. Its iconic status in the Punjabi film canon can be gauged from the fact that it was re-released several times in the following decades, once in 2015 too.

After the stupendous success of *Nanak Naam Jahaaz Hai*, the Punjabi film industry saw a huge impetus in its outcome. Two distinct kinds of genres emerged, one continuing the religio-divine themes and the other, romantic comedies set in rural backgrounds. Of the former, distinct productions include, *Nanak Dukhiya Sab Sansar* (1970), *Man Jeete Jag Jeet* (1973), *Dukh Bhanjan Tera Naam* (1974), *Sawa Lakh se Ek Ladaaun* (1976). The last film also courted controversy for its depiction of the protagonist as a clean-shaven Nihang, which is not possible because Nihangs are baptized Sikhs who do not have shorn hair and beards. Fake beards on the soldiers in *Sawa Lakh se Ek Ladaaun* also caused Sikh political parties to object. Films with divine themes have always treaded a thin line when it comes to the depiction of the Sikh Gurus or their teachings. There was also a parallel output of romantic films like *Kankan de Ohle* (1970), *Mele Mitran de* (1972) and *Teri Meri Ik Jindri* (1975). Two distinct kinds of genres emerged, one continuing the religio-divine themes and the other, romantic comedies set in rural backgrounds. Stalwarts like Rajesh Khanna and Rekha had cameos in *Sawa Lakh se Ek Ladaaun* and *Saal Solvan Chadya* (1977) respectively. Rajesh Khanna also played the lead in *Til Til da Lekha* (1979), a film which won two Punjab State Government Awards. *Teri Meri Ik Jindri* introduced Dharmendra's cousin Veerendra, who emerged as a superhit lead actor of Punjabi cinema in the coming years.

An iconic film *Chann Pardesi* was released in 1980, starring future heavy weights like Raj Babbar, Amrish Puri, Om Puri, Kulbhushan Kharbanda, Sushma Seth and Rama Vij. Written by Baldev Gill, it is a poignant story of a small knit village community in which agrarian issues, marital discords, feudal relationships and oppression of women figure as prominent issues. The film was rooted in the rural Punjabi ethos and yet created a storm in Bombay. According to Aparajita Krishna, Raj Kapoor wrote to the Punjab Government commending the film and saying that the artists involved in its making could contribute to Punjab's culture significantly [Krishna \(2020\)](#). This cult film was re-released in May, 2022 by Dolby Digital, re-enforcing its status in the canon of Punjabi cinema.

The 80s saw Dharmendra move to Bollywood completely and Veerendra, his cousin, emerging as Director, Producer, Writer, and actor in the world of Punjabi cinema. In his short career of 12 years, Veerendra was a part of around 25 films like

Lambardarni (1980), *Balbiro Bhabhi* (1981), *Sarpanch* (1982), *Batwara* (1982). This was also the time when Punjabi films of Pakistan like *Maula Jatt* (1979) greatly influenced the film industry on this side of the Radcliffe Line. *Maula Jatt* holds a special place in the Pakistani Punjabi film canon because of its gore, violence, raw justice, and the attempts of the government to have it banned. It is at this point in the history of Punjabi cinema that the 'Jatt' (a caste of land owners mostly) first finds mention in film titles like *Putt Jattan De* (1983), *Yaari Jatt Di* (1984), *Vairi Jatt* (1985), *Jatt te Zameen* (1987), *Jatt Soormay* (1988). Veerendra was killed during the filming of *Jatt te Zameen* and few of his films were released posthumously. His killing by gunshot in 1988 at the age of forty could never be unravelled, being blamed on professional rivalry and on Sikh hardliners at different times. Punjab had entered a tumultuous phase of militancy and uncertainty at this time¹ and the entertainment industry was a target for the militant groups. A popular Punjabi singer, Amar Singh Chamkila, his wife and two accompanists were also gunned down in 1988. His songs divided opinion, with one school saying that they were obscene, unsuitable and the other saying that they depicted a true picture of Punjabi society and culture. He had to appear before the Sikh High Seat, the Akal Takht in Amritsar to apologise and seek forgiveness. His songs have seen a revival over the years and there is still a consistent fan following, despite his work's complicated relation with Punjabi culture and society. These were two setbacks to the Punjabi cinema and music industry which unsettled the industry for some time.

A seminal film, *Laung da Lishkara* released in 1986, featuring Raj Babbar, Gurdas Mann, Om Puri. The film discussed class distinctions vis-à-vis human relationships and had an iconic music score which is hugely popular today also. The 80s ended with a film which is a landmark in the history of Punjabi cinema, *Marhi da Deeva* (1989). The cast of Raj Babbar, Pankaj Kapur, Deepti Naval, Om Puri, Parikshit Sahni, Kanwaljit Singh delivered iconic performances. Based on famous Punjabi novelist Gurdial Singh's novel of the same title, it went on to win several awards. The film has been discussed in detail in the paper later.

Two stars emerged in the horizon of Punjabi cinema in the 1990s, Guggu Gill and Yograj Singh. They figured in films like *Qurbani Jatt Di* (1990), *Anakh Jattan Di* (1991), *Jor Jatt Da* (1991), *Badla Jatti Da* (1991). Priti Sapru emerged as the female lead in these years. These years saw mixed reactions from the audience as they did not go to cinema halls due to threats by militant groups. The video cassette industry flourished at this time as did the rental industry. These were years when Punjab's economy was destabilised and issues of religion, culture, extremism inter-twined. An important film of these years was *Jatt Jeona Morh* (1992) which gave Guggu Gill the status of a superstar in Punjabi Cinema. Made on a budget of Rupees 30 Lakhs, it went on to become a blockbuster. Based on the story of a man who becomes a bandit, it depicted a Robin Hood like character who took from the rich and gave to the poor. *Jagga Daku* (1991), with Yograj Singh in the titular role, also narrated the life of a 'heroic rebel' of Punjab, who seeks to protect the rights of villagers against feudal landlords. Like Jeona Morh, he too becomes an outlaw after rebelling.

1998 saw the release of *Train to Pakistan*, a film made partly in Hindi and Punjabi. Based on Khushwant Singh's novel depicting the pangs of partition, it was later dubbed fully in Punjabi. The film focussed on the weeks post-partition and the violence that happened when people from both sides of the border migrated.

¹ Operation Bluestar was launched by the Indian Army in 1984, resulting in significant damage to the holiest place for Sikhs, the Golden Temple in Amritsar, followed by the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. Large scale riots targeting and killing Sikhs happened across North India, leading to the emergence of radicalism.

Though it cannot be classified as a Punjabi film in its true genre, but the ethos and the trauma that came with it touched chords when the dubbed version came out.

The period between 1992 and 1999 did not see any major hit Punjabi film. But in 1999, a very different film *Mahaul Theek Hai*, written, produced and directed by veteran TV artist, Jaspal Bhatti, who also acted in it, was released. The film belonged to an altogether new genre in Punjabi cinema, the comic satire. According to Baljinder Nasrali, Jaspal Bhatti had already made a name as a critic of society's flaws and the common man's problems with his shows on Doordarshan, *Flop Show* and *Ulta Pulta Nasrali* (2010). Taking a huge risk by not adding any caste or revenge angle to the film, by not offering any glorified version of Punjab's masculine discourse, Jaspal Bhatti's film targeted the Punjab Police and politics, which was in itself a daunting agenda. Literally translated as 'The Times are Right', the film actually pulled the Punjabi cinema industry out of its dark phase, marred by militancy and economic downfall, and brought audiences back to the theatre. The film's premiere was held at Tihar Jail in true Bhatti flavour, where inmates and jail officials saw it together and the credits were uniquely written, Overacting, Sound Pollution, Editing Jumps, Fighting Spirit, Music Driver, Underground Singers, Sets and Upsets, Costume and Rag Designer, Misdirection. Such a film is uniquely placed in the history of Punjabi cinema and has had no equal till date for its central premise, wit, humour, and cerebral quality.

Another note-worthy film, *Shaheed-e-Mohabbat Boota Singh* also released in 1999. It was based on the real life story of Boota Singh, who belonged to Ludhiana and Zainab, a Muslim girl rescued by Boota Singh from a volatile mob during the partition violence. They get married but Zainab is taken to Pakistan and separated from her husband and child. The real Boota Singh went to Pakistan to get his family back as did the reel version. But they could not be united and Boota Singh took his own life. His grave is in Lahore and revered till date by love struck youngsters. The film won the National Film Award for Best Feature Film in Punjabi at the 46th National Film Awards and was screened at several international film festivals.

The start of the new millennium saw the release of *Jee Aayan Nu* in 2002, which proved to be a pivot for the complete revival of the Punjabi film industry. Before this half of *Yaari Jatt Di* in 1984 had been shot in the UK and appealed to the Punjabi diaspora. *Jee Aayan Nu*, though not fully shot abroad, had as its theme, the return of a Punjabi family to its native village after spending decades abroad. It marked the debut of singer Harbhajan Mann as a hero and tugged at the heart strings of Punjabis with its nostalgia for the land of birth. Continuing this theme, the same team presented *Asa Nu Maan Watna Da* in 2004. According to Times of India, 'The movie shows the struggles of NRIs in adjusting to a completely different culture, at the same time it shows how the society resists in welcoming them as a permanent member of their world' *Times of India*. (2020). This was a transitional phase in the Punjabi film industry as the themes moved away from the rural backdrops to diaspora oriented stories. Similar films included *Des Hoyaa Pardes*, *Dil Apna Punjabi*, *Munde UK De*, *Lakh Pardesi Hoye*.

Jaspal Bhatti presented a unique film, *Jija Ji* in 2006. A comedy, based on an irritating brother-in-law who is a typically Indian phenomenon, the film presented a gamut of relationships in typical Bhatti comic fashion. Once again, Jaspal Bhatti had gone against the grain by making a simple film which depicted the day-to-day life of common people, with no foreign locations, no loud song and dance and no romantic overdose.

In 2010, came *Mel Karade Rabba*, which became the highest-grossing Punjabi film ever. Gippy Grewal, the popular Punjabi singer made his acting debut with this

film, carrying forward what Gurdas Mann and Harbhajan Mann had done earlier. This point also marked a temporary pause in the NRI-hero oriented stories which had pulled audiences to theatres. The following year, 2012, again saw a revival of Jatt titled films like *Jatt & Juliet* and *Carry on Jatta*. The former had Diljit Dosanjh as the hero and the latter had Gippy Grewal as the main lead, both iconic Punjabi singers. Both films saw sequels, a first in Punjabi film industry and a trend-setter for later years. *Jatt & Juliet 2* (2013) was also released in Pakistani cinemas, bringing Punjabi cinema full circle [Subramanian & Anand \(2014\)](#). In an interview with Business Standard, the producer, Gunbir Singh Sidhu says that he believes that Pakistan is the biggest market for Punjabi films [Roy \(2014\)](#). This was also the first Punjabi film to be launched on 'Blu-Ray' for Home Entertainment, entering the league of Tamil and Telugu regional cinemas. Films like *Nabar*, *Bikkar Bai Sentimental*, *Dastaar*, *Punjab Bolda*, *Haani* (all 2013), did not do well at the box office but still made their presence felt. *Chaar Sahibzaade*, based on the four sons of Guru Gobind Singh, the tenth Guru of the Sikhs released in 2014. It was a pioneering concept in more than one way, it was 3D and one of the few films based directly on the lives of prominent Sikh religious figures. The film became a huge success and related to audiences across all ages. Another such film *Nanak Shah Fakir* (2015) faced a ban and faced protests from Sikhs for direct portrayal of historical figures, like Guru Nanak's parents and sister. The issue reached the Supreme Court, which ordered the release of the film. The film won three National Awards, for Best Feature Film on National Integration, Best Costume Design and Best Make-up Artist.

Here, once again two different genres of Punjabi films emerge, one, the slapstick comedies discussed above and the other, based on social issues. A very initial attempt at social problem based films was *Mitti* (2010), describing the lives of four friends who work as muscle men for a political party but when they see the wrong doings of the leader who wants to grab land at any cost, they rise against tyranny. The film sank at the box office as audiences were deprived of glamour and spectacle of typical Punjabi films. However with these years, the actual coming of age New Age Punjabi films began, which had social issues, large scale immigration and cultural identity as their themes. A landmark film, *Anhe Ghore da Daan* (2011), directed by Gurbinder Singh, portrayed the plight of farmers, and went on to win National Awards for Best Direction, Cinematography and Best Feature Film in Punjabi at the 59th National Film Awards of India. The film was showcased at various film festivals all over the world and was highly praised for its craftsmanship, camera angles and colour palette. Presenting an unseen Punjab on-screen it depicted caste based oppression and the conflict between capitalism and rural economy. Another film of the same genre, also directed by Gurbinder Singh, *Chauthi Koot* was produced in 2015. It figured in the Un Certain Regard section of the Cannes Film Festival and was based on two of Sahitya Akademi award winner, Waryam Singh Sandhu's stories.

Post 2015 years saw a new type of Punjabi cinema emerge in which the films were set in the past, sometimes before independence like *Angrej*, *Bambukat*, *Lahoriye*, *Rabb da Radio* etc. They depicted a nostalgia and yearning for the rural agrarian way of life with their mud plastered sets, homely costumes, and regional dialects. The plots were simple and light without any angry or comic Jatts, more like a next door neighbourly depiction of villages of Punjab. A film which brought together artists from Pakistan and India, *Chal Mera Putt* came out in 2019. It was a path-breaking film in the sense that it was a collaboration between two cultures with the same language separated during the painful partition of India. Artists like Iftikhar Thakur, Nasir Chinyoti, Akram Uddas from Pakistan worked alongside

Punjabi actors like Amrinder Gill and Simi Chahal. The film was not allowed to be released in Pakistan but was a huge success all over the world. The film has already seen two sequels in 2020 and 2021.

3. WOMEN IN PUNJABI CINEMA

Punjabi cinema has consistently enunciated Raewyn Connell's concept of 'hegemonic masculinity' in the last five decades, with its quest for the 'real' man. It is the men's world that women have to fit in, as power and patriarchy go hand in hand. This is true not only of Punjabi films but also of its society, as the man has to demonstrate his superiority over women and the upper caste vendetta seeking man over the marginalised 'other' man. Violence, toughness, risk-taking, competitiveness and control are the markers of the Punjabi man in films. The woman in Punjabi cinema has mostly been depicted along two diametrically opposite roles, one, the mother or the care giver and the beloved or the lover. The onscreen depictions of folklore based characters like Heer, Sahibaan, Sassi did not allow for much variation in characterisation as Punjabi audiences are familiar with these stories. Women in Punjabi cinema are idealised versions seen through the man's eyes, deeply embedded in patriarchal norms. So, the Punjabi film heroine will be light-skinned with long hair and the matron/mother will be plump and usually a nag. One of the earliest Punjabi films to have a central female lead was *Badla Jatti Da* (1991). The film was initially titled *Gulabo*, but the distributors pressurised the film makers to add the word 'Jatt' to its title and the entire promotional material had to be re-made. Sunita Dhir (later Faculty at Department of Theatre and Television, Punjabi University, Patiala) played the character of a woman whose entire family is killed by a prominent village figure. She raises her son to seek revenge from that family in a truly feudal setting. Though the film was a huge blockbuster yet Dhir was not paid as much as the male leads of those days. However, after almost three decades she says in an article in *Hindustan Times*, "Punjabi cinema does not make female-oriented films like Mother India. Despite playing the lead in *Badla Jatti Da*, I was paid less than the men. I have played crucial roles in several films but have never been paid as well." The leading ladies of those days included, Priti Sapru, who also directed films like *Qurbani Jatt Di*, *Mehndi Shagna Di* and *Sardari* in 1997, creating a new path for women in Punjabi cinema. The female characters could hardly be called leads or heroines, except for the glamour they provided. They were presented as docile, obedient daughters, sacrificing sisters, devoted wives, and mothers. Sometimes feuds arise in these films because of the 'honour' of women and the hero takes it upon himself to avenge the deed. The harassed woman would hardly be the heroine, who had to be pure and unblemished in order to fit into the patriarchal discourse. Honour and prestige are attributes ingrained in the psyches of Punjabis, and cinema has only added to the glue holding it there.

Among some films which carved out niches for themselves like Deepti Naval in *Marhi da Deeva* and Divya Dutta in *Shaheed-e-Mohabbat Boota Singh*, both delivered stellar performances as characters which did not follow the established norms for women characters of Punjabi cinema. Kirron Kher in *Punjab 1984* was the epitome of the mothers who lost their young sons in the troubled years of militancy. Her truthful and accurate portrayal of the mother who has gone through years of trauma tugged at the heart strings of the audience.

The male-centric discourse of Punjabi cinema led to the phenomena of the singer-actor/hero with Gurdas Mann in *Laung da Lishkara*. Harbhajan Mann in *Jee Aayan Nu* carried forward this trend. Other male singer heroes include Diljit Dosanjh and Gippy Grewal, both of whom have excelled in comic roles. The meteoric rise of

Sidhu Moosewala in the music industry and as a hero in films like *Moosa Jatt* and *Yes I am a Student* (2021) was cut short as he was murdered in May 2022, raising several inter-related issues like gang wars, extortion threats, professional rivalry in a visibly masculine film and music industry. These central characters in films were all-in-one versions of the super man, who could romance, fight, kill and deliver a social message at the same time. On the other hand, very few female singers have made it as leading ladies in films, with some exceptions like Miss Pooja in *Channa Sachi Muchi* (2012), *Pooja Kiven aa* (2013) and *Ishq Garaari* (2013). This can be attributed partially to Punjabi cultural discourse where opportunities for both sexes are not equally balanced. In British India, legendary singer Noor Jehan had acted in several films like *Pind di Kudi* (1935), *Khandaan* (1942) and *Mirza Sahibaan* (1947), the latter being her last film to be released in pre-partition Punjab. Nimrat Khaira, an established Punjabi female singer has acted in films like *Lahoriye*, *Afsar* (2018), and *Saunkan Saunkane* (2021). These films do have powerful women characters but not in the same league as their male counterparts.

It was not till 2010 that Punjabi cinema saw the first film directed, produced and written by a woman, when Ish Amitoj Kaur made *Chhevan Dariya*. Punjab is referred to as the land of five rivers, the film offers an interesting take on what could be Punjab's sixth river. In an interview with Harminder Kaur, Ish Amitoj calls the 2000-2010 decade 'a period of renaissance for Punjabi movies.' She goes on to say, 'Be proud to be associated with good cinema, which showcases your culture in a meaningful way in front of the whole world.'

Recent years have seen some women-centric stories like *Channo* (2016), *Gelo* (2016), *Daana Paani* (2018), *Needhi Singh* (2017), *Gudiyaan Patole* (2019), *Ardab Mutiyaraan* (2019). The last two films had young girls as central characters, girls who could challenge the way society operates. Successful heroines today include Neeru Bajwa, in *Jatt & Juliet*, Sonam Bajwa, Sargun Mehta, Mandy Thakkar, Japji Khaira. *Saavi* made by *Nabar* director Rajeev Kumar, showed the plight of an eighteen year old Gujjar girl, Saavi, married to a four year old boy, continuing the ancient practice of 'vatta-satta', the exchange of brides in families. The film did not have much impact on the box office but raised pertinent issues related to the custom which treats women as commodities to be bartered, with or without consent. Hailed as the proponent of new Punjabi cinema, Rajeev Kumar recently announced his next film *Rakaans*. He says that the film will be the first truly feminist film and is based on the life choices of four different women. One film which rendered some hope recently was *Maa* (2022) starring Divya Dutta in the title role. Her depiction of the strong assertive mother is in sharp contrast to earlier versions of the Punjabi mother as she struggles to keep her family together. Today, actresses like Nirmal Rishi, Anita Devgan, Prabhsharan Kaur, Neeta Mohindra, Jaswant Daman, Rupinder Rupri play character roles and no Punjabi movie is complete without them. They can be seen in the role of indulgent mothers, grandmothers, wives, matriarchs who provide emotional nourishment to the men of the family. They are in perpetual search mode for prospective alliances for their 'puttars,' Punjabi for sons. The strong hero outside the home takes shelter and sustenance in maternal bonds and occasional religiosity. Their presence does little or nothing for the plot, however their portrayals do highlight Punjabi culture, food, attire, and mannerisms. However, Punjabi cinema as a reflection of Punjabi culture and societal norms has to go a long way in establishing a strong feministic discourse.

4. CASTE AND CULTURE IN PUNJABI CINEMA

The institution of 'caste' as such is not present in Punjab if the society functions as envisioned in the teachings of Guru Nanak Dev, the founder of Sikhism, who strongly critiqued the caste system and ritualism of Hinduism. But, the on-ground reality tells another story as the faith has changed over the years and the Jatt Sikhs have remained dominant in the state with control over politics and religion, also because they are the majority land owners. The marginalised, both because of caste and economics, have been largely ignored in Punjabi cinema. Standard Punjabi film themes have been a Jatt seeking revenge, patriotism, big fat weddings, student life at College/University and NRI nostalgia. The valorisation of the Jatt culture with hyper-masculine violent hero has been a stock theme over the years. The image of a well-endowed hero with good towering physique and strength captivated the audiences. The usage of the word *Jatt* in film titles during the 1980s became the password to box office success and presented a glorified image of the land owning community to the audience, invoking a culture of patriarchy, caste lines and economic disparities. The characters in these movies were broadly of two types, the landed and the marginalised, sometimes involving a forbidden romantic angle across these barriers. Film critic Gagandeep Singh says, 'These films showed severe fights among the community members on trivial issues rather than exploring the real issues, the community has been facing' [Singh \(2014\)](#). *Laung da Lishkara* has immense cultural value for its depiction of a class and caste conscious society in which it is unthinkable for the protagonist, a Canada returned eligible bachelor of the richest upper caste household in the village and the housemaid to get involved romantically. The hero seeks to transcend barriers of class and is met with resistance from his mother and family. *Marhi da Deeva*, a slow-paced film, was acclaimed for its 'critical realism'. It depicted a tragedy of society and culture with its portrayal of Jagsir, who belongs to a low class and is doomed to die childless because of his parents' unacceptable marriage. He is exploited by the upper class landlord whose land he tills, showing the plight of landless farmers. Such workers called 'seeri' in Punjabi are symbols of caste-based segregation and economic oppression. The film did not do well at the box office, probably because of its strong critique and mirroring of Punjabi society. According to film critic Gurwinder Lotay, director Surinder Singh said in an interview that he visualized his film as a comment on the social-economic conditions, class barriers and economic prejudices that separated man from man [Lotay \(2019\)](#). In a decade where almost all Punjabi films had Jatt protagonists, *Marhi da Deeva*, stood out with a low caste central character and his suffering. Rajeev Kumar's, *Siri*, depicts how the labourer is also a partner in farming and also suffers when farmers are exploited at the hands of loan sharks and market economics [Kaur \(2020\)](#).

Jatt Jeona Morh portrayed the Hindu *bania* (merchant) community as exploiters of the weaker sections. The protagonist of the film robs Hindus and gives away the loot to the poor. Many versions of this tale emerged over the years with some depicting Jeona Morh as a petty thief. The fact that he was shown as a devotee of Mata Naina Devi, a Hindu Goddess created ripples in the Sikh community. Naina Devi's temple is located on the top of a hill in the Shiwalik range and it is said that Jeona Morh died by leaping off the cliff there. He is said to have been betrayed by a person from the Dogra community. Today, the location is marked in the temple premises and devotees visit both the place and the shrine. Jeona Morh is the prototype of the modern day gangster of Punjab, [Singh et al. \(2016\)](#), a recurrent image in contemporary Punjabi music. The music of the film included a superhit song *Jeona*

Morh chattar chaddaan chaley (Jeona Morh on his way to donate a precious umbrella to Naina Devi) written by Dev Tharikewala and sung by Surinder Shinda, both legends of Punjabi music industry. The song narrated the life story of Jeona Morh and criticised his detractors. Jupinderjit Singh says, 'A ring of halo appears to surround Punjab's gangland: Jeona Morh and Jagga Daku are a part of the folklore.' The film no doubt glorifies the concept of 'steal from rich and give to poor' but it remains a hallmark of Punjabi cinema and his story has entered the idiom of Punjabi culture.

When films once again adopted the Jatt in their titles in the 2010s, the hero in *Jatt & Juliet* and *Carry on Jatta* was not the angry, vengeful, macho hero of the 1990s. The Jatt protagonist now was a slightly comic character, who could laugh at himself and the flaws in his character. This was a new updated version of the rural Jatt, who now lived either in an Indian capital or in a foreign country, successfully navigating his way through. He did not wear the dress of his rural cousin of the 80s and 90s Punjabi films and was not blood-thirsty. He did not till the land of his forefathers but worked like all other people. Other such films were *Jatts in Golmaal* (2013) and *Jatt James Bond* (2014). The titles too were a little anglicised and not the masochistic proverbial angry young man in titles like *Vairi Jatt* etc. the women in these films too were not village damsels with markers of their culture, but young confident women in western attire. However, their lives continued to be controlled by the men in their families.

On the other end of the spectrum were avant-garde films like, *Anhe Ghore da Daan*, which was based on Gurdial Singh's 1976 novel and showed the gross inequity of society over only one day in the life of a rural Punjabi family. The title of the film derives from Hindu mythology as Rahu on a chariot driven by blind horses to settle his scores with elite Gods. The film opens with a scene in which the protagonist's, (a Dalit Sikh) house is being demolished as the landlord has sold the land for an industry to be built on it. The village elders plead with the Jatt landlord but to no avail. The brother of the protagonist is a rickshaw puller in a city and is barely able to make ends meet. He ruminates about coming back to his village while his family wants to shift to the city in search of a better future. This poignant dilemma of the marginalised in Punjab had hardly ever been depicted in Punjabi cinema in such bleak colours. The starkly real characters, who were actual villagers picked by the Director, sans makeup and costumes were in sharp contrast to the elaborate song and dance routines of contemporary Punjabi films. The stoicism of the marginalised Dharma and his family is almost like the misery of the Joads in *The Grapes of Wrath*, who are faced with intense economic hardships and are unable to cope with the demands of industrialisation. *Chauthi Koot* carried forward the mantle of Gurdial Singh as a New Age Director, who changed the idiom of Punjabi cinema. It is one of the few films in the world of Punjabi cinema to focus on terrorism in the state but in a very muted way. *Chauthi Koot*, translated as the fourth direction, has as its strong point, subtlety which enhances the feel of terror engulfing the film. The characters are caught between the extremists on one side and the military forces on the other, '*Chauthi Koot* brings back the troubled phase of separatism in Punjab with a refreshing absence of political prevarication. The location and the characters are so truthful as to dissolve the distance between the screen and the audience' [PTI \(2016\)](#). These films depicted 'the other' in true New Age terms and shifted the focus of audiences from the song, dance, and fight spectacle of conventional Punjabi cinema. They were minimalistic but not myopic and did not convey the sense of 'plenty' in their predecessors.

The desire of Punjabis for 'foreign' is strongly reflected in the films of the 2000s. Shot in Canada mostly, these films went on to increase the number of prospective emigrants from Punjab. *P.R.*, released in May, 2022, showcases the dream of almost every Punjabi household in which at least one member desires to settle abroad permanently. *Nabar* (2017) translated as 'rebel without a cause' depicted the 'extreme fixation of Punjab's youth with the foreign lands and their desperate measures like selling off their assets, home and property, even raising loans to acquire the green card' TNN. (2017). A film titled *Kaneda* released in late 2022. The title plays on how the word Canada is pronounced in India and has become a part of Punjabi vocabulary. Films like *Chal Mera Putt* also show how the entire Asian continent is obsessed with this desire to leave their countries for greener pastures abroad. It depicted the problems illegal immigrants face as they live nameless lives in the shades and face constant threats from immigration authorities. The fear of being deported looms large on their heads while they also support their families back home. Both Indian and Pakistani Punjabis come together in this struggle for livelihood. The Jatt protagonist abroad has a special task before him, the preservation and upholding of cultural norms wherever he may be.

With this evolution in themes and character, there has also come about a distinct change in the aesthetics of Punjabi cinema. Sets, costumes, locations and picturization techniques have seen a gradual change from the amateurish efforts of the eighties to contemporary times. The song and dance routine of Punjabi cinema is no longer an impromptu move around trees and in fields. These have become highly choreographed with professional dancers and exotic locations. Several period pieces like *Rabb da Radio*, *Angrej*, *Lahoriye* etc have paid special attention to costumes and locations to give them authenticity and an air of genuineness. Highlighting the locales which are popular these days, writer Sandeep Singh Sandhu says that producers scout for locations which still have a rustic touch, 'The south-Malwa region... this jungle and its periphery evolved to be a preferred choice among film directors eager to highlight the real Punjab and its culture through their movies. The natives' traditional Punjabi lifestyle evokes interest among production houses of the Punjabi cinema.' The Majha region with cities like Amritsar and Gurdaspur and have evolved more and are comparatively urbane. However, Chandigarh, Mohali and their surrounding areas with educational institutions, shopping malls, fine dining restaurants and lush roads continue to be a staple in recent movies.

5. THE ECONOMICS OF PUNJABI CINEMA

Regional cinema accounts for half of the total revenue of Indian cinema, within this, two-thirds comes from South Indian cinema and the rest from other regional cinemas. The Punjabi film industry is worth more than Rs 500 crore today, with half of the costs being recovered overseas. A regional industry worth a few lakhs has become a multi-million enterprise. Investment is pouring in and there are record breaking returns. Punjabi films are hugely popular in Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, western UP. After a difficult period in the 80s and till mid90s, the turnaround came when Man Mohan Singh, who had worked with Yash Raj films, made *Jee Aayan Nu* in 2002. That *Carry on Jatta 2* (2018) is the highest grossing Punjabi film ever, says a lot about its audience. The film is light-hearted generic romantic comedy with a successful music score. On the other hand, *Chaar Sahibzaade* made in Rs 20 crore garnered around Rs 70 crore, stressing how the Punjabi audience does want films related to religious themes onscreen but several complicated theological issues do not support such films. The younger generation especially responded to the film as it showed the exemplary courage and bravery of

the young sons of Guru Gobind Singh. Mass film bookings were made by educational institutions for their students in theatres.

2019 was the landmark year of Punjabi cinema with films like *Shadaa*, *Chal Mera Putt*. The song *Laung Laachi* from a film of the same title became the first Punjabi song to get one billion views on Youtube. Films like *Siri* do not see the light of the day easily as New Age cinema in Punjab is not considered financially viable. Gurnaaz Kaur says *Siri*, 'took over a year for him to releases since getting funds for such subjects isn't easy, highlights the agrarian crisis, not just of small farmers, but, more importantly, of farm workers.' Anmol Sidhu directed an unconventional film *Jaggi* (2021) based on emotional relationships, bullying and mental harassment among Punjabi youth deflating the myth of machismo. Expectedly, the film ran into financial rough waters. He says that at one time the filming had to be stopped and he had to go in for crowd funding to keep the project afloat, stressing that 'for the growth of cinema focus must shift from profits to risk-taking and experimentation.' (Sheetal). *Anhe Ghore da Daan* was funded by NFDC, otherwise it may never have reached its audience. Today, film makers are more ready to spend on location, cinematography, costumes, and packaging. Technicians and experts are sourced from Mumbai to add polish to the production. Successful production houses like Eros International, BIG Pictures, UTV Motion Pictures, T-Series, Tips Industries are taking a keen interest in Punjabi cinema and investing huge amounts banking on the current upward trend in cinema going audiences. Kamal Jain of Eros International says, 'It's a potential market which cannot be ignored. Multiplexes emerging in small towns are also fuelling the growth of Punjabi cinema.' (Subramanian). Evidently, multiplexes with their overall experience of shopping, dining, and recreating have added to the growth of Punjabi cinema.

Today, no Hindi Film is complete without a remixed Punjabi song, with the Punjabi music industry being India's largest non-film music industry. Themes of super hit Hindi films like *Dilwale Dulhaniya le Jayenge*, *Pardes*, *Veer Zaara*, *Rab ne Miladi Jodi*, *Singh is King*, *Maachis*, *Jab We Met*, *Tanu Weds Manu*, *Udta Punjab*, *Vicky Donor*, *2 States*, *Rocky aur Rani Ki Prem Kahani* are either based in Punjab or touch upon Punjab in their content. It is obvious that audience acceptance of Punjab and Punjabi music is high in India and abroad and there is a strong linkage between Bollywood and Punjabi cinema. The addition of a state-of-the-art film city in Punjab could open new frontiers for New Age Punjabi cinema, providing infrastructural support and resources needed for film production.

6. CONCLUSION

Films have always represented society, culture, values, and norms of their stakeholders. Through this analysis of themes like cultural glorification of the feudal set up, patriarchy and women in Punjabi cinema, issues of diaspora and the migrant experience, it can be gauged how it has taken five decades for Punjabi cinema to move out of the two generic traps, of slapstick comedy and cultural glorification, into which it fell. The New Age cinema of today, with one odd exception like *Marhi da Deeva* in the past, emerged from the deep schism of the angry Jatt and the comic hero. The normal human being with universal emotions like uncertainty, passivity and helplessness challenged the impetuous characters shown earlier. There is a certain gravity and solemnity in the characters seen in Punjab's new cinema with movies like *Anhe Ghore da Daan*, *Chauthi Koot*, *Nabar*, and *Jaggi*. They are not blood-thirsty, vengeful men ready to kill or be killed. But, these films are made for a niche audience. This is the real Punjab today, though the music industry of the state presents an entirely different image. The stakeholders of Punjabi cinema must

realise that they can no longer separate the image from the imagination. The audience now is much more aware and mature in this internet-crazy world where comparisons can be made quickly. The fact is that Punjab's film and music industries are so inter-twined that they present a complicated unravelling beyond the present scope. Online streaming platforms have provided a new avenue to film makers in the form of short films and web series, which have picked up the third option for their themes. The recent success of *Tabbar* (2021), a web series focused on the family and what drug trade and mental health issues do to that family. The culture of Punjab may have achieved global recognition through Punjab's films, but it is time for a serious re-look and re-orientation for writers, producers, directors, and actors [Sheetal \(2022\)](#). Film festivals in India and abroad have recognized New Age Punjabi cinema in a big way, honouring talented directors like Rajeev Kumar. Navtej Sandhu, with short films like *Nooran* (2013), *Kambdi Deorri* (2014) and *Gawachi Pagg* (2016) made a mark at the Cannes Film Festival. These were films with themes which were not the norm in Punjabi cinema, as can be seen from the study presented here and presented an alternative understanding of Punjabi culture and society. In the future too Punjabi cinema will be a more global phenomenon due to a strong diasporic presence. The stakes are high now and Punjabi cinema needs to re-invent itself with experimentation, professionalism, and a new narrative.

7. NOTES

Titles of Punjabi films translated in alphabetical order to convey meaning, the word Jatti meaning the female. For names 'N' has been used.

Afsar – The Officer

Anakh Jattan Di – The Jatts' Pride

Anhe Ghore da Daan – Alms of the Blind Horse

Angrej – The Foreigner

Ardab Mutiyaraan – Spirited Women

Asa Nu Maan Watna Da – Pride in the Homeland

Badla Jatti Da – Revenge of the Jatti

Balbiro Bhabhi - N, the sister-in-law

Bambukat – The Motorcycle/Bike

Batwara – The Partition/ Division

Bikkar Bai Sentimental – N, the Sentimental

Chaar Sahibzaade – The Four Princes

Chal Mera Putt – Come on Son

Chaman – The Sky

Chann Pardesi – The Distant Beloved

Channa Sachi Muchi – Beloved, the Truth Please

Chano- N

Chauthi Koot – The Fourth Direction

Chhevan Dariya – The Sixth River

Daana Paani - Livelihood

Dastaar- The Turban

Des Hoyaa Pardes – Unfamiliar Homeland

Dil Apna Punjabi – Punjabi At Heart

Dukh Bhanjan Tera Naam – Thou Are the Saviour (scriptural origin)
Gawachi Pagg – The Lost Turban
Gelo - N
Gudiyaan Patole – Dolls and Doll Houses
Haani – *The Peer*
Husn ka Daku – The Beauty and the Bandit
Ishq Garaari – Stuck in Love
Jagga Daku – N Bandit
Jaggi - N
Jatt Jeona Morh - N
Jatt Soormay – The Valiant Jatt
Jatt te Zameen – The Jatt and Land
Jee Aayan Nu - Welcome
Jija Ji – Brother-in-Law
Jor Jatt Da – The Might of the Jatt
Kambdi Deorri – The Trembling Threshold
Kankan de Ohle – Beyond the Fields
Lachhi - N
Lahoriye – Of Lahore
Lakh Pardesi Hoyal – Foreigner no More
Lambardarni - The Lady Squire
Laung da Lishkara – The Shine of the Nose Ornament
Mahaul Theek Hai – The Times are Right
Man Jeete Jag Jeet – Conquer Your Own Mind, then the World (scriptural origin)
Marhi da Deeva – The Light on the Tomb
Maula Jatt – N, the Jatt
Mehndi Shagna Di – The Auspicious Henna
Mel Karade Rabba – May God Unite Us
Mele Mitran de – The Celebration of Friends
Mitti - Earth
Munde UK De – Boys of the UK
Mundri – The Ring
Nabar – *The Rebel*
Nanak Dukhiya Sab Sansar – O Nanak, The Entire World is in Pain (scriptural origin)
Nanak Naam Jahaaz Hai – O Nanak, You are the Saviour (scriptural origin)
Nooran - N
Pheray – The Nuptials
Pind di kudi – The Lass from the Village
Pooja Kiven aa – How are you Pooja
Punjab Bolda – *Punjab Speaks*
Putt Jattan De – The Sons of Jatts
Qurbani Jatt Di – The Sacrifice of the Jatt

Rabb da Radio – God’s Radio
Rakaans – The Womenfolk
Saal Solvan Chadya – On the Threshold of Youth
Saavi - N
Sardari – Of Sardars
Sarpanch – The Headman/Squire
Satluj de Kande – On the Banks of Satluj
Saunkan Saunkane – The Co-Wives
Sawa Lakh se Ek Ladaaun – The One will Triumph over Lakhs (scriptural origin)
Shadaa – The Bachelor
Shaheed – The Martyr
Shaheed-e-Mohabbat Boota Singh – N, The Martyr
Siri – The Farm Hand
Tabbar – The Family
Teri Meri Ik Jindri – We are Soulmates
Til Til da Lekha – The Exact Account
Vairi Jatt – The Vengeful Jatt
Yaari Jatt Di – The Friendship of the Jatt

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

REFERENCES

- Garg, B. R. (2017, August 13). Post-1947, India’s First Punjabi Film was Released in Lahore. *The Tribune*. Retrieved on May 16, 2023.
- Kaur, G. (2020, October 01). National Award-Winning Director Rajeev Kumar’s Upcoming Movie, *Siri*, Highlights the Plight of Farm Workers in Punjab. *The Tribune*. Retrieved on May 31, 2023.
- Krishna, A. (2020, August 1). Chann Pardesi- Reuniting with the Cult Classic. *The Daily Eye*. Retrieved on May 19, 2023.
- Lotay, G. (2019, August 25). Deepti Naval on 'Marhi Da Deeva' As it Completes 30 Years of Release. Retrieved on May 19, 2023.
- Nasrali, B. (2010). *Punjabi Cinema Te Sahit Samkali Sandarbh*. Ludhiana: Chetna Parkashan.
- PTI (2016, August 5). 'Chauthi Koot' Review: It will Stun You Without an Effort. Retrieved on May 25, 2023.
- Rajadhyaksha, A. (2016). *Indian Cinema- A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford, UK: OUP. <https://doi.org/10.1093/actrade/9780198723097.001.0001>
- Roy, V. C. (2014, May 20). The Engineer Who Produces Blockbuster Punjabi Films. Retrieved on May 23, 2023.
- Sheetal (2022, May 05). Eye on Social Change. *Tribune Lifestyle*. Retrieved on May 31, 2023.
- Singh, G. (2014, June 22). Reel vs Real Punjab. Retrieved on May 30, 2023.

- Singh, J., Watts, A., & Khanna, M. (2016, May 8). The Gangs of Prosperous Punjab. Retrieved on May 20, 2023
- Subramanian, A., & Anand, J, (2014, February 28). Punjab Takes Centre-Stage with its own String of Movie Hits. Business Today.
- TNN. (2017, January 17). 'Nabar' Wins National Award for Punjabi. Retrieved on May 24, 2023.
- Times of India. (2020, May 7). This Day That Year: 16 years ago on this day Neeru Bajwa's Debut Punjabi Movie 'Asa Nu Maan Watna Da' was Released. Retrieved on May 21, 2023.