

## FOCUS

# Controversy in Lollywood

No longer just 'movies for lorry drivers', today's Pakistani cinema is taking on the country's biggest taboos. **Eve Ahmed** reports



"A goon-bashing hero, intent on protecting his beloved..." "Their movies cater to the uneducated and those from a traditional background, like lorry drivers." "Song-and-dance Cinderella stories..." These comments from disillusioned film fans reflect the general malaise currently surrounding the Pakistani film industry. Leading arts commentator, Aina Mirza, is forced to admit that, "Without doubt, the Pakistani film industry, notorious for

churning out romantic sagas, does not have a good reputation."

It was not always so. India used to boast four major film centres – Lahore, Calcutta, Madras and Bombay – but, upon Partition in 1947, when that country became the two independent states of Pakistan and India, many of Lahore's film makers, being Hindu, fled the Islamic state for India. Lollywood's loss was Bollywood's gain.

Broadcaster Bhagwant Sagoo reminisces about the golden days of Pakistani cinema:

"The first Pakistani film ever released was *Jen Yaad* in 1948. *Chan Way* in 1951 was directed by the famous singer and actress, the so-called 'Melody Queen' Noor Jehan, and was the first Pakistani film to be directed by a woman. Cinema in Pakistan in the 1950s enjoyed tremendous popularity, with classic movies like *Anarkali*, *Isq-e-Ishk* and *Shahood*."

Then politics reared its head. "After the liberal Bhutto years, President Zia ul-Haq started his 'Islamisation' of the state from 1977 onwards, and censorship kicked in, stifling creativity," says Mirza. "It's only in the last three years or so that film became recognised by the government as an industry at all. Before that, they'd offered no investment or support." She likens the situation to the way the British film industry has suffered in relation to Hollywood. Sharing the same language (Brits with Americans, Pakistanis with Indians) can make it hard to carve out a niche. "Pakistani directors have struggled to define their product as different to the global phenomenon that is Bollywood," she says.

Under current leader General Pervez Musharraf, all media in Pakistan has been liberalised. However, while Bollywood produces more films than even Hollywood does, Pakistan manages only 40 or so a year. These are of such poor quality that many Pakistanis prefer to consume Bollywood's output, even though







**MOVIE MAGIC:** While billboards in downtown Lahore advertise Pakistani films (left), police stand guard outside a cinema in Karachi during the premiere of the second Indian film to be screened in Pakistan in 41 years (opposite page)

screenings of Indian films are officially banned since the government injunction of 1965. Despite the ban, these movies are widely available for viewing at home, on pirated DVDs.

"Pakistani cinema has sadly been a poor, distant cousin of Indian film", says Bhagwant Sagoo, "and with the ban on Indian movies, creativity got stymied, it needs competition to

### "Artists in Pakistan constantly face a political and religious backlash"

thrive." However, with the recent release of the critically acclaimed film *Khuda Kay Liye* (In God's Name), he concedes that "with one leap and bound, Pakistani cinema might at last be catapulted onto the international stage."

The film examines how Muslims are being polarised in Pakistan between moderates and traditionalists. The educated and modern citizen is under siege from fundamentalists, because of his/her western outlook and way of dress. On the other hand, the west sees all Muslims as potential terrorist suspects. The

story unfolds via two brothers, one who goes from modern musician to a jihadi, having been told that playing and listening to music is a sin in Islam, and another who heads to America to study music, only to find himself arrested by the FBI, following the events of 9/11.

However, following the repercussions of the issues addressed in his film, director Shoaib Mansoor has been forced into hiding following death threats and the issuing of at least two fatwas by religionists infuriated by the taboo subjects he uncovered, including mental rape, forced marriage and jihad.

Fa'neeha Idrees, a commentator on the Pakistani arts scene, says: "It is about confused values and misinterpreted religious beliefs. Shoaib Mansoor has beautifully touched upon the very valid problem of Islam in the south Asian region. He examines how, over the years, a number of cultural practices, uneducated ideas and the blind following of heritage have resulted in a completely jumbled-up picture of Islam. For middle-class Pakistanis like me, he's had the courage to question where Islam is going, and has got us back into the cinema, as a result."

"The film has the potential to appeal to a western audience as well as southern Asian one, because it is a reflection of just how polarised Pakistani society has become," agrees Alina Mirza. "For example, fundamentalists used

religion to justify the murder earlier this year of the minister for social welfare, because she was a woman. Her killer was reported to have confessed: 'I have no regrets. I just obeyed Allah's commandment,' adding that Islam did not allow women to hold positions of leadership. These people are twisting Islam to suit their own aims. In *Khuda Kay Liye*, the director is trying to change the direction Pakistan is taking, by getting people to talk openly about these sorts of events."

Tickets for the film are reported to be changing hands at twice their face value, such is its popularity, while debate rages about its influence across blogs and websites. Some commentators even suggest its success could revitalise the entire Pakistani film industry. Bhagwant Sagoo says: "The movie is a sign of the times in Pakistan right now, which is a country undergoing delayed birth pangs. For half of its existence, it's been under military rule and every time democracy shows itself, it's curtailed. Consequently, artists in Pakistan constantly face a political and religious backlash. But you can't keep the arts back. People want to assert their own views, and this film could be a catalyst for change."

**Eve Ahmed is a UK-based freelance journalist and broadcaster. She is half-Pakistani and her father lives in Karachi.**