

Liberation of Goa & Cinematic Nationalism: Unity, Secularism and Historical Memory in Khwaja Ahmad Abbas's *Saat Hindustani* (1969)

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Abstract: The present work examines Khwaja Ahmad Abbas's *Saat Hindustani* (1969) as a significant cinematic text that intervenes in the cultural memory of India's freedom struggle. Situated within the early decades of independence, the film articulates a vision of nationalism that foregrounds plurality, secularism, and collective sacrifice. By bringing together seven representative figures from diverse linguistic, regional, and religious backgrounds to fight for the liberation of Goa, Abbas crafts an allegory of the Nehruvian ideal of "unity in diversity." The essay analyzes the film's aesthetics, particularly its realist style, ensemble casting, and use of music, which align it with traditions of cinematic resistance and pedagogical nationalism. It further explores how the film challenges communal suspicion in post-Partition India through the central figure of a Muslim intellectual-patriot, while simultaneously reimagining decolonization as a prolonged historical process beyond 1947. At the same time, the analysis highlights the film's silences, particularly its marginalization of women and erasure of caste, which reveal the exclusions embedded in nationalist cultural production. The essay argues that *Saat Hindustani* remains a critical cinematic archive of representative histories, offering insights into both the promise and the limits of postcolonial nationhood.

Keywords: Liberation of Goa, cinematic nationalism, unity in diversity, freedom struggle in film, secular historiography, postcolonial cultural memory.

I. INTRODUCTION

Cinema in postcolonial India has been inseparable from the project of narrating national history. As a mass cultural medium, it functions not merely as entertainment but as a pedagogical and archival space where collective memory is rehearsed and reconfigured. In the decades following independence, filmmakers sought to inscribe the values of the freedom movement into cultural memory, thereby consolidating national identity. Khwaja Ahmad Abbas's *Saat Hindustani* (1969) stands as a crucial intervention within this trajectory. Released barely twenty-two years after 1947, the film fictionalises the story of seven men from disparate regions, religions, and linguistic backgrounds who unite in the liberation of Goa from Portuguese rule. By deploying allegorical characters, realist aesthetics, and a rhetoric of collective sacrifice, Abbas presents a cinematic text that embodies the ethos of unity in diversity. The present study critically examines "Saath Hindustani" as an ideological and aesthetic intervention in the representation of India's freedom struggle. It argues that the film negotiates questions of nationalism, secularism, and representative histories while simultaneously exposing the exclusions and silences—particularly regarding gender and caste—that undergird nationalist cinema. Drawing on theoretical debates in film studies, postcolonial historiography, and cultural memory, the essay situates *Saat Hindustani* within broader discussions of cinematic nationhood.

a. Cinema As Archive: Constructing National Histories On Screen

Film has often functioned as a “people’s archive” in South Asia, shaping historical consciousness outside the framework of official historiography. As Ravi Vasudevan notes, cinema participates in the making of “vernacular modernities,” offering affective forms of collective identification (Vasudevan 22). Ashis Nandy similarly contends that popular cinema embodies the “secret politics of desire” by staging fantasies of nationhood (Nandy 7). In this sense, “Saat Hindustani” is less a record of fact than a symbolic re-enactment of the unfinished struggle against colonialism. The choice of Goa, liberated from Portuguese rule in 1961—as the narrative backdrop is significant. Unlike the canonical stories of 1857 or Gandhi’s satyagraha, Goa’s liberation is relatively underrepresented in mainstream Indian cinema. Abbas’s decision to focus on this episode broadens the archive of struggle and reminds audiences that independence was not a singular temporal event in 1947 but an ongoing historical process. As Sudhir Mahadevan argues, films often “extend the time of decolonisation” by drawing attention to episodes marginalised in nationalist historiography (Mahadevan 61). The film’s seven protagonists: a Punjabi soldier, a Bengali poet, a Bihari labourer, a Maharashtrian youth, a Tamilian, a Muslim intellectual, and a Goan, function as archetypes of pan-Indian unity. This representational strategy mirrors Jawaharlal Nehru’s pluralist imagination of the nation as a mosaic of linguistic, cultural, and religious identities (Nehru 57). Abbas’s “representative characters” thus serve as cinematic shorthand for the idea that nationalism is a collective endeavour.

b. Nationalism and the Cinematic Imagination

In “Saat Hindustani”, nationalism is articulated as both a moral and political force. The characters’ willingness to embrace sacrifice and martyrdom resonates with Gandhian ideals of selflessness and Nehruvian visions of secular democracy. Abbas, a committed socialist and progressive writer, situates nationalism within the dual framework of anti-imperialism and secular humanism (Rajadhyaksha and Willemsen 245). The film is also notable for marking the debut of Amitabh Bachchan as Anwar Ali, a Muslim poet. The symbolic weight of this casting cannot be overstated. In post-Partition India, when Muslim identities were often stigmatised or viewed with suspicion, Abbas foregrounded a Muslim patriot whose intellectualism and courage embody the secular ethos of the nation. In doing so, Abbas challenges communal binaries and reasserts the inclusive claims of Indian nationalism. This cinematic gesture echoes Partha Chatterjee’s observation that nationalist discourse simultaneously creates and contests internal boundaries of community (Chatterjee 45). By focusing on Goa’s liberation, Abbas also problematises linear nationalist temporality. Rather than treating 1947 as the conclusive moment of independence, the film implies that colonialism persisted in enclaves like Goa and that the struggle for sovereignty extended beyond the symbolic midnight of freedom. Such a narrative complicates triumphalist accounts of independence, instead presenting decolonisation as fragmented and protracted (Chibber 103).

c. Aesthetics of Resistance: Realism and Cinematic Form

The aesthetic strategies of Saat Hindustani reinforce its ideological commitments. Shot in black and white with on-location sequences, the film employs a semi-documentary realism reminiscent of Italian Neorealism. As André Bazin argued, realism is not simply a style but a moral choice that allows cinema to testify to the lived experience (Bazin 35). Abbas’s embrace of unglamorous mise-en-scène and ensemble casting thus underscores his commitment to authenticity. The use of collective protagonists departs from the “hero-centric” conventions of mainstream Hindi cinema. Instead of elevating individual charisma, Abbas emphasises the solidarity of the group. This collectivist ethos aligns with the socialist ideal that nationalism is sustained by ordinary citizens rather than heroic elites (Barnouw and Krishnaswamy 176). Music also plays a crucial role. The patriotic song “Aye Watan, Aye Watan” functions as both an emotive device and a pedagogical tool. As Rachel Dwyer has argued, songs in Hindi cinema often articulate ideological positions with greater resonance than dialogue (Dwyer 88). In Saat Hindustani, music mobilises affect to reinforce the ethic of sacrifice.

d. Histories in Representation: Inclusivity and Exclusion

Despite its pluralist ethos, the film reveals the limitations of cinematic nationalism. Most striking is the marginalisation of women. Female characters appear only fleetingly and are denied agency as political actors. This silence reflects what Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid describe as the “fractured modernity” of nationalism, where women are symbolically invoked as bearers of tradition but excluded from active participation (Sangari and Vaid 13). Caste, too, is conspicuously absent. Although the Bihari character may allegorise the working classes, his social identity is framed primarily through regional rather than caste markers. The erasure of caste points to the homogenising logic of nationalist discourse, which, as Gopal Guru notes, often subsumes social hierarchies under abstract notions of unity (Guru 79). By omitting these axes of inequality, Saat Hindustani reinforces the normative masculinist and upper-caste vision of nationalism prevalent in mid-twentieth-century cultural production.

II. CONCLUSION

“Saat Hindustani” endures as a landmark in the cinematic representation of India’s freedom struggle. Through its ensemble cast, realist form, and ideological commitment to secular nationalism, Abbas crafts a narrative of unity in diversity that resonates with Nehruvian ideals. By situating Goa’s liberation within the longer arc of decolonisation, the film unsettles linear nationalist histories and insists on the unfinished nature of freedom. Yet the film’s silences are as instructive as its affirmations. Its marginalisation of women and erasure of caste reveal the exclusions embedded in nationalist cinema. These omissions underscore the need to approach cinematic nationhood critically, recognising not only its power to shape memory but also its complicity in sustaining dominant social hierarchies. As contemporary India continues to contest its past and imagine its future, Abbas’s film remains both a historical artefact and a provocation—a reminder that the struggle for freedom, equality, and representation is never complete.

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