



Portrayal of Punjabi Culture in Bollywood Movies on India's Independence and Partition (1947 to Present)

Ms. Saini Navneet Kaur

Ph.D Research Scholar, Department of History, Chikitsak Samuha's Patkar Varde College (Autonomous)
Affiliated to the University of Mumbai, Mumbai, Maharashtra



Open Access

Manuscript ID: BIJ-2025-OCT-041

Subject: History

Received : 14.09.2025

Accepted : 22.09.2025

Published : 31.10.2025

DOI:10.64938/bijri.v10n1.25.Oct041

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Abstract

The research paper examines the portrayal of Punjabi culture and its elements in Hindi cinema that are set on the themes of India's Independence and 1947 Partition. The division of Punjab during Partition had a profound impact on the region, dividing not only the land of the five rivers but also its people, heritage, legacy, and cultural traditions. Bollywood movies have beautifully revisited and recaptured the historic stories, portraying not only the anguish of separation and displacement but also the beauty of Punjabi culture and people's strength. This study focuses on five films—Shaheed (1965), Train to Pakistan (1998), 1947: Earth (1998), Gadar: Ek Prem Katha (2001), and Pinjar (2003)—as key cinematic displays. It analyzes how each of these films depicts Punjabi customs, everyday life, festivals, clothing, cuisine, music, language, and performance traditions. The paper highlights the incorporation of Punjabi folk elements—such as bhangra and giddha, seasonal celebrations like Lohri and Baisakhi, traditional garments including turbans and phulkari embroidery, and staple foods like makki di roti, sarson da saag, and lassi. It also highlights the Punjabi language, the use of original dialogues in Punjabi, songs, and visual representation. The study reveals how these films authentically portray Punjabi culture and traditions, with a little bit of entertainment for Bollywood stylisation. Accordingly, it highlights how the films have conserved and preserved the purest of emotions, such as sacrifice, courage, martyrdom, joy, sorrow, loss, migration, displacement, and resettlement on screen. The movies provide viewers with a deeper understanding of Punjab's history and culture by displaying both joy and grief. The paper concludes that Bollywood films set on the themes of India's Independence and Partition have played a significant role in safeguarding Punjabi culture and presenting it to the audiences.

Keywords: bollywood movies, Independence, partition, Punjabi culture, preservation

Introduction

A Brief Background to Punjabi Identity in Hindi Films

Although filmmakers are storytellers rather than historians, movies—regardless of their genre, setting, tone, or narrative structure—can vividly depict the pure emotions of the past and bring history to life. Movies are directed by filmmakers in such a way that the events that unfold can evoke intense emotions and simplify challenging situations, while facts are recorded by historians. Films can arouse varied emotions such as suffering, sorrow, fear, joy, enthusiasm, patriotism, love, and nostalgia for the viewers through imagination, cinematography, story,

characters, and setting. This is true for the films made on India's Independence and 1947 Partition, where movies became a medium to serve as a visual archive, conserving not just the recorded past but also depicting the unspoken feelings and oral histories of the era.

Partition literature has shaped Hindi cinema historically, with many films adapted from novels and short stories. Novels like Amrita Pritam's Pinjar in Punjabi and Khushwant Singh's Train to Pakistan were brought to life on screen, powerfully retelling the human narration of violence, agony, religious riots, displacement, and survival. A film



like *Gadar – Ek Prem Katha* (2001) represented the timeline of events that felt real by mixing emotional storytelling with historical events. It is interesting to see that most partition-based films focus especially on Punjab rather than on Bengal. This is due to the direct connection and experience of the filmmakers, such as Gulzar, B.R. Chopra, and Arvind Nihalani, who migrated to Bombay from Pakistan and Punjab, witnessing the turmoil. This was the reason for making films on independence and partition with common themes of violence, communal riots, mass displacement, loss, and especially the suffering of women, which show deep scars left behind by the partition.

The Partition of India in 1947, which split Punjab into East Punjab (India) and West Punjab (Pakistan), deeply affected the region. The cultural harmony that has co-existed for centuries was disrupted with the redrawing of the boundaries. Repeatedly, Hindi cinema has revisited this past moment in history, telling the stories of love, harmony, loss, suffering, migration, and survival against the backdrop of independence and partition.

Movies like *Shaheed* (1965), *Train to Pakistan* (1998), *1947: Earth* (1998), *Gadar: Ek Prem Katha* (2001), and *Pinjar* (2003) show different dimensions of Punjabi life. They highlight the Sikh way of life, religious faith, village lifestyle and traditions, martial spirit, interfaith connections, sacrifice, martyrdom, courage, and the agony of displacement during independence and partition. By analysing these films, we can see how Punjabi culture and ethos have been depicted in movies, sometimes with authenticity and sometimes with added stylisation for the viewer's entertainment.

Before India was partitioned, Lahore was an important filmmaking hub in North India, which produced both Punjabi and Hindi films, giving opportunities to many filmmakers, actors, singers, and writers. Many of these artists migrated from Lahore to Bombay due to Partition and mass displacement. They brought with them a pool of creativity, cultural ethos, traditions, and folklore. These elements had a great impact on Hindi cinema and shaped it for the better. The migrated talent included singers such as Mohammed Rafi and Shamshad Begum, and writers and lyricists like Sahir Ludhianvi, Rajinder

Singh Bedi, Anand Bakshi, and Gulzar, who added a Punjabi flavour to scripts and songs. Punjabi folk music, like the beats of the dhol and tumbi, and folk dances with the rhythmic energy of bhangra and giddha, became part of film songs. Filmmakers such as B.R. Chopra, Yash Chopra, and Mehboob Khan brought the aesthetic vibes of Punjabi family life, wedding ceremonies, sarson ke khet (mustard fields), vibrant festivals, traditional and simple attire, and, not to forget, the robust Punjabi language into their storylines. Actors from Punjabi backgrounds like the Kapoor clan, Dharmendra and his sons, Dev Anand, Dilip Kumar, Balraj Sahni, Om Puri, Prem Nath, and many more reflected the essence of the Punjabi spirit on screen. They embodied strong emotions of bravery, love, sacrifice, and resilience through their performances.

Talking about male artists alone isn't enough, as there were also female artists who became part of Hindi cinema, even if only for a short time, such as Suraiya, Noor Jehan, Khursheed Bano, Simi Garewal, Meena Kumari, and Madhubala. These female artists shaped the Hindi film industry by defining ideals of beauty, romance, and simplicity. They influenced cinema both culturally and emotionally, adding depth and diversity to the ways women were portrayed on screen, and showcasing the true meaning of feminine expression. In this way, Lahore's cultural legacy merged with that of Bombay through the migration of Punjabi artists after Partition, making Punjabi culture a central part of Bollywood.

Hindi cinema often portrayed Punjab through Punjabi characters, songs, and rural settings that stood for bravery, simplicity, and vibrant festivities. Post-Partition too, Punjabi culture—known for its courage, hospitality, lively traditions, and strong community bonds—has played a vital role in shaping India's socio-cultural life. Bollywood did not fail to represent, reflect, and highlight Punjabi heritage and legacy along with other cultural identities dwelling in harmony. This presence became even more meaningful when themes of bravery, love, sacrifice, and resilience were depicted in movies about Independence and Partition. Bollywood has long drawn on Punjabi history to narrate stories of liberation, loss, and hope.



Hypothesis Statement

How do Bollywood's Independence and Partition-themed films portray Punjabi recurring cultural elements – lifestyle, costumes, performing arts, customs, and traditions?

Methodology

This study uses a qualitative content analysis approach, focusing on Punjabi cultural elements and situations in selected films that deal with themes of Independence and Partition. The following are included in the methodology:

Selection of Films

The films chosen are set on the themes of Independence and Partition. Each film features Punjabi characters and shows aspects of Punjabi culture such as festivals, rural life, language, and martial identity.

Framework for Analysis

1. Dialogue Analysis: Identifying and translating key dialogues in the Punjabi language that reflect cultural values and Punjab life.
2. Costume & Setting: Looking at how accurately religious places, village settlements, and attire are shown.
3. Rituals & Traditions: Studying the portrayal of religious practices, marriage customs, performing arts, and festivals.

References

Primary Sources: The films Themselves.

Note: As the complete film 1947: Earth (1998) was not available online, I relied on short clips and selected portions of the movie.

Secondary sources: Academic publications, novels, articles, online sources, and historical narratives.

Literature Review

Films made on India's Independence and Partition not only portray historical events but also depict culture and memory. They capture the purest emotions and first-hand experiences through oral traditions and personal interviews, which are sometimes missed by written records.

Urvashi Butalia's book *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India* is based on oral narratives of women from the 1947 Partition. The book reveals how women endured trauma during Partition. Through interviews, she highlights the widespread sexual harassment, abductions, and the division of India. She has beautifully voiced the silence of these women. These themes are reflected in the films *Pinjar* and *Gadar*.

Bhaskar Sarkar's book *Mourning the Nation: Indian Cinema in the Wake of Partition* examines how Hindi cinema and Partition are interconnected, keeping the wounds of this trauma alive. He argues that the trauma of Partition will always haunt generations through collective memory, and that cinema serves as a vital medium for exploring this tragic event.

At the same time, films on India's Independence often highlight the spirit of sacrifice, patriotism, and collective struggle for freedom. Movies such as *Shaheed* (1965) embody this theme by portraying the courage of revolutionaries like Bhagat Singh, whose ideals reflect the resilience of Punjabi identity. The depiction of such heroes not only connects cinema to the history of Independence but also strengthens cultural memory through narratives of valor and devotion to the nation.

Hindi films frequently employ Punjabi folklore—songs and dances, traditional attire, rural lifestyles, yellow mustard fields, and fairs and festivals—to create an authentic, picturesque. This is visible in movies like *Train to Pakistan*, *Gadar*, and *Pinjar*.

Novels like *Train to Pakistan* by Khushwant Singh and *Pinjar* by Amrita Pritam were adapted into films showcasing violence, loss, displacement, communal riots, and a special focus on the suffering of women, along with some heartwarming moments of marriages and festive celebrations before the onset of Partition.

Films like *Gadar* and *Pinjar* adopt stylisation along with history for entertainment, creating a balance between authenticity and dramatization.

The references mentioned in the paper highlight these themes of Independence and Partition, capturing emotions and experiences while showcasing Punjabi cultural heritage. In doing so, they keep alive both the pain of separation and the resilience of Punjabi



identity, as well as the pride and sacrifice associated with the struggle for freedom.

Analysis and interpretation of the films

1. Shaheed (1965)

Shaheed, which was directed by S. Ram Sharma, is based on India's Independence and the life of Bhagat Singh, and his martyrdom. Despite being predominantly a Hindi film, it incorporates sacrifice as a deeply embedded cultural and religious value, courage, and valour. Sikh principles, rural visuals, and Punjabi culture are also portrayed profoundly. The movie captures the martyrdom spirit, glorifying the land of warriors and revolutionaries.

Dialogue Example

Gurmukhi: ਸਾਡੀ ਜੁਦਿਗੀ ਦਾ ਮਕਸਦ ਸਹਿਜ ਆਜਾਦੀ ਹੈ।
Devanagari: हमारी जदिगी का मकसद सहिफ आज़ादी है।

English: The sole purpose of our life is freedom.

Cultural significance: Demonstrates Punjabi tenacity by connecting one's own life to the country's freedom, which is a defining feature of Punjabi revolutionary philosophy.

Cultural Elements

1. Songs: Dhol and tumbi accompaniment are used to render patriotic Punjabi folk tunes, such as "Sarfaroshi Ki Tamanna," which combine Punjabi traditional rhythms with Hindi lyrics.
2. Festivals and celebrations: Lohri celebration with bonfire, bhangra, dhol, chimta, and Punjabi lyrical tunes are depicted at the start of the film. Shows revolutionaries congregating in the name of celebration at rural fairs and assemblies, evoking the Baisakhi melas.
3. Dress: Bhagat Singh's kurta pajamas and turban styles are typical of Punjab in the 1920s and 1930s. Men wearing a turban (pagdi), kurta pajamas are seen, while women are seen wearing simple Punjabi suits with dupattas covering their heads.
4. Food: Rural Punjabi hospitality is portrayed through scenes with paranthas, gur, and lassi during village gatherings and in houses.

5. Language: Hindi and Punjabi are mixed, and Punjabi honorifics like "veerji" and "bebe" are used.
6. Dance: Despite the film's sombre tone, there are subtly bhangra moves during background celebrations during village gatherings and during the Lohri celebration.
7. Setting: The film features scenes of rustic Punjab villages, fields, and simple mud houses.

2. 1947: Earth (1998)

Set in Lahore, Deepa Mehta's Partition drama is portrayed from the viewpoint of a Parsi girl.

Cultural elements:

1. Songs: Punjabi kalams with a Sufi influence are used to convey desire.
2. Celebrations: A Christian wedding is shown with some dancing and singing.
3. Dress: Traditional pre-partition Lahore attire, including embroidered dupattas, achkan, and kurta pajamas. Sikh family men are shown with a turban (pagdi), kurta pajamas, and women wearing Punjabi suits.
4. Language: A blend of Punjabi and Urdu that reflects the multiculturalism of Lahore.
5. Food: As part of the street food culture, kebabs, halwa-puri, and lassi are served.

3. Train to Pakistan (1998)

It is based on Khushwant Singh's novel Train to Pakistan and shows Mano Majra, a made-up village where Muslims, Sikhs, and Hindus coexisted peacefully before violence broke out during Partition.

Dialogue Example:

Gurmukhi: ਪੰਜਾਬ ਨੂੰ ਕਸੇ ਨੇ ਵੀ ਨਹੀ ਜਾਂਤਿਆ, ਨਾ ਹੀ ਕੋਈ ਜਾਂਤ ਸਕਦਾ ਹੈ।

Devanagari: पंजाब को कसी ने भी नहीं जीता, ना ही कोई जीत सकता है।

English: No one has ever conquered Punjab, nor can anyone ever conquer it.

Cultural significance: Reflects the perseverance and solidarity that are important to Punjabi self-belief.



Cultural Elements

1. Songs: "Sanu Aa Mil Yaar Pyareya", "Chal Bulleya Chal", and "Aaj Aakhan Waris Shah Nu" are sung in Punjabi with strong Sufi influence. Village life is evoked by Punjabi folk songs with sarangi, tabla, harmonium, and algoza.
2. Religious Rituals: Depictions of Ardas (Sikh Prayer), langar, and Gurudwara scenes are shown.
3. Dress: Muslim males wear pathani suits, Sikh men wear turbans (pagdi), kurta pajamas, and lungi, while women wear salwar kameez with dupatta, showcasing rural authenticity.
4. Language: Punjabi is used frequently in the movie, including some abusive words, religious shabad (words), and Ardas. Terms like "pind" (village), "changa" (nice), and "shukar" (thankful) are used throughout the entire village talks.
5. Food: Food is served in a langar-style at communal feasts.
6. Setting: Depicting rural lifestyle with mud houses, open courtyards, and only three constructed structures—a Gurudwara, a Mosque, and the home of the moneylender.

4. **Gadar: Ek Prem Katha (2001)**

The film, which is set against the backdrop of India's 1947 Partition, follows the tale of Tara Singh, a courageous Sikh truck driver from Punjab, and Sakina, a Muslim girl from a powerful family in Lahore. Sakina and Tara are married and have a son after Tara saves Sakina's life during the turmoil, bloodshed, and displacement during Partition. However, despite social opposition, political obstacles, and animosity, Tara crosses the border to bring Sakina back to India after her family forcibly takes her to Pakistan. Fundamentally, the movie is a love tale interwoven with a tumultuous period of history, emphasising themes of selflessness, societal separation, and unwavering commitment.

Dialogue Example

Gurmukhi: ਹੋਇਸਤਾਨ ਜ਼ਿਦਿਆਵਾਦ ਸੀ, ਹੈ ਤੇ ਰਹ੍ਯਾ!
Devanagari: होइसतान ज़िदिआवाद था, है और रहेगा!

English: Hindustan was, is, and will always remain alive!

Cultural significance: Tara Singh's remarks perfectly capture Punjabi pride and defiance, along with patriotism from the Partition era.

Gurmukhi: ਜੱਟ ਜਾਂਦੇ ਵਾਰ ਕਰਦਾ ਹੈ, ਤਾਂ ਬੰਦੂਕਾਂ ਨਹੀਂ, ਬਾਂਹਾਂ ਬੋਲਦੀਆਂ ਨੇ!

Devanagari: जाट जब वार करता है, तो बंदूकें नहीं, बाजुएँ बोलती हैं!

English: When a Jatt strikes, it's not the guns but his arms that speak!

Cultural significance: This intense exchange of dialogue demonstrates the bravery and physical prowess of a Punjabi farmer (Jatt). Tara Singh asserts with pride that his strength and willpower are sufficient to fight without the need for weapons. It stands for the bravery, independence, and unadulterated strength of the Punjabi people.

Gurmukhi: ਪਾਇਆਰ ਵੱਚਿ ਧਰਮ ਤੇ ਸਰਹੋਦਾਂ ਦੀਆਂ ਕੰਪਾਂ ਨਹੀਂ ਹੁੰਦੀਆਂ।

Devanagari: प्यार में धरम और सरहदों की दीवारें नहीं होतीं।

English: In love, there are no walls of religion or borders.

Cultural significance: The central message of Gadar is—love goes beyond religion and political borders.

Cultural Elements

1. Songs: "Main Nikla Gaddi Leke" is a traditional Punjabi bhangra song featuring dhol beats, banjo, flute, and playful Punjabi lyrics. The "Udja Kale Kawa" song has dhol beats, a string instrument called sarangi played by Bobby Deol (Tara Singh) during his wedding night. The same song is again played, symbolizing partition trauma, separation, and longing.
2. Festivals and celebrations: Wedding scenes with mehndi function, chooda ceremony, sangeet with bhangra. The atmosphere of the Lohri celebration with dhol features bonefire, communal singing, bhangra, giddha by women, with vibrant attire, sweets like rewri, gajak, are also served.
3. Dress: Women dress in vibrant salwar kameez withgota-patti work, while males wear turbans (pagdi) with shawls embroidered with phulkari.



4. Language: Full Punjabi lines during emotional high points, with a strong Punjabi accent in Hindi discourse.
5. Food: In sequences including family dinners, makki di roti, sarson da saag, and lassi are clearly displayed.
6. Dance: Vivacious bhangra at weddings; gidda at women's events.

5. Pinjar (2003)

A Hindu woman kidnapped by a Muslim guy is the subject of Chandra Prakash Dwivedi's adaptation of Amrita Pritam's novel Pinjar, which is set against the human cost of Partition.

The film Pinjar opens with serene visuals of the Golden Temple, accompanied by the devotional chanting of Satnam Waheguru during a Prabhat Pheri (morning religious procession). The sangat is shown performing kirtan with traditional instruments such as the harmonium and cymbals, highlighting the spiritual and cultural essence of Sikh devotional practice.

Dialogue Example

Gurmukhi: ਇਹ ਧਰਤੀ ਸਾਡੀ ਸੀ, ਤੇ ਹੁਣ ਅਜਨਬੀ ਲੱਗਦੀ ਹੈ।

Devanagari: ये धरती हमारी थी, और अब अजनबी लगती है।

English: This land was ours, and now it feels like a stranger.

Cultural significance: Draws attention to the Punjabi people's ingrained devotion to their land, which makes losing it equivalent to losing oneself.

Cultural Elements

1. Songs: "Maar Udaari" song is a young woman's longing for liberation and joy. Punjabi spinning-wheel imagery in the folk-inspired song "Charkha Chalati Maa" mirrors women's voices in Punjabi villages.
2. Festivals and celebrations: Elaborate henna (mehndi), ladies' sangeet, traditional songs, heavy jewelry, and customs depicting wedding preparations.
3. Dress: Women in brightly coloured salwar kameez with simple and phulkari dupattas,

men in turbans (pagdi) and simple cotton kurta pajamas.

4. Language: Soft Punjabi with poetic undertones, rural idioms, and Punjabi proverbs in the Punjabi language predominate in conversations.
5. Food: Making rotis on clay stoves (mud chulha), parathas, lassi, and mention of achar or pickles.
6. Dance: A slow-paced gidda by women during marriage celebrations.
7. Setting: Village-style mud houses (mitti de ghar), thatched roofs, open courtyards (aangan), woven cots (charpoys), mustard fields (sarso ke khet).

Conclusion

The study shows that Bollywood films made on the themes of India's Independence and the 1947 Partition have evolved into more than just narratives; they are now symbols of Punjabi culture and memory. The movies analysed in the paper highlight Punjab's sacrificial spirit, courage, valour, joy, sorrow, and the strength to overcome hardships. They also showcase the importance of family bonds, community values, and the deep connection Punjabis share with their land. Along with this, music, festivals, and traditions have been strongly woven into the stories, giving them authenticity and emotional depth. Punjabi culture has thus been intricately linked to the recurring elements depicted in these movies. There is no doubt that Hindi cinema has played a major role in preserving and conserving Punjab and its traditions for audiences across generations.

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