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## Understanding Golden Period of Hindi Cinema in Light of earlier Classic Movie

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### Abstract

This paper explores the evolution of Hindi cinema with a focus on its golden age, spanning the 1940s to the 1960s, when the industry achieved remarkable artistic and cultural depth. It traces the early foundations of Indian cinema, beginning with mythological and historical themes, and examines the transition to sound films that reshaped audience experiences. The golden age is highlighted as a period when filmmakers combined realism, music, star power, and narratives rooted in social realities.

Within this context, the paper places particular emphasis on *Mughal-e-Azam* (1960), a landmark historical epic that showcased the grandeur, craftsmanship, and emotional intensity of the era. Beyond its aesthetics, the film demonstrated Hindi cinema's ability to merge history with contemporary culture, leaving a lasting imprint on audiences. By situating *Mughal-e-Azam* within the larger developments of the golden period, this study understands how cinema functioned not only as entertainment but also as a vital medium for cultural expression and nation-building.

**Keywords:** Hindi cinema, Golden Age, *Mughal-e-Azam*, Early films, cultural history

### Introduction

#### Section One: General Framework

The history of Hindi cinema, often referred to as Bollywood, is deeply intertwined with the cultural, political, and social transformations of twentieth-century India. From its modest beginnings in 1912 with Raja Harishchandra, Hindi cinema gradually evolved into one of the largest and most influential film industries in the world. Its trajectory was shaped by historical circumstances, technological advancements, and the creative impulses of pioneering filmmakers. Hindi cinema not only reflected the realities of its time but also provided a cultural space where ideas of modernity, tradition, and nationhood were constantly negotiated <sup>[i]</sup>.

The early decades of Indian cinema were experimental, dominated by silent films that drew inspiration from mythological and historical themes. Filmmakers deliberately chose such narratives because audiences were already familiar with the epics of the Mahabharata and Ramayana, and these stories provided cultural legitimacy for the new medium. <sup>[ii]</sup> Even in its silent form, cinema mirrored the aspirations of a society undergoing transformation under colonial rule. The arrival of sound in the 1930s brought about a radical change. With *Alam Ara* (1931), the first Indian talkie, music, dialogue, and performance became central to cinematic expression. <sup>[iii]</sup> The talkie format deepened cinema's resonance with audiences by integrating song and speech in vernacular languages, thereby reinforcing cinema's role as a cultural vehicle. Music in particular gave Hindi films a unique identity distinct from Western traditions.

By the 1940s, Hindi cinema entered a phase later celebrated as its golden age. This period coincided with World War II, the Quit India Movement, the trauma of Partition, and the challenges of independence. <sup>[iv]</sup> In this atmosphere of upheaval, cinema became a medium through which anxieties and aspirations of the people were voiced. Narratives increasingly explored poverty, social justice, and the dilemmas of modern life, turning cinema into a cultural mirror of collective concerns. The golden age, spanning the 1940s to the 1960s, is

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remembered for artistic richness and social engagement. Filmmakers such as Bimal Roy, Mehboob Khan, and Raj Kapoor combined entertainment with realism, while actors like Dilip Kumar, Dev Anand, and Nargis came to embody larger social ideals.<sup>[v]</sup> Music directors and lyricists also gained prominence, ensuring that cinema became woven into the everyday cultural life of the people.

The emergence of historical drama-settings in Indian cinema can be traced back to 1915 with the release of *The Murder of Narayan Rao Peshwa*, directed by S.N. Patankar. The film featured G. Ranade, Damuanna Joshi, and K.G. Gokhle in the cast. Prior to this, Indian cinema had largely been dominated by mythological themes, which enjoyed widespread popularity. Interestingly, no other historical film appeared for almost seven years after Patankar's attempt. It was only with the production of *Ashoka* by Madan Productions that the genre was revived, although the film failed to gain much traction with audiences. Gradually, directors began experimenting more boldly with historical narratives, and by 1924, three silent films—*Shah Jahan*, *Razia Begum*, and *Veer Durgadas*—marked significant progress in the genre. Among them, *Shah Jahan* was co-directed by Ardeshir Irani, who later made history by introducing India's first sound film, *Alam Ara*, in 1931. *Mughal-e-Azam* (1960) stands as one of the most iconic films in the history of Hindi cinema. Directed by K. Asif, it is remembered not only as a landmark in cinematic scale and production but also as a cultural text that reflects the grandeur of Indian historical imagination. The film narrates the legendary love story of Prince Salim and Anarkali, set against the backdrop of Emperor Akbar's reign, blending historical references with artistic interpretation.

The significance of this period lies not only in its creative output but also in its enduring influence on Hindi cinema's identity. The conventions of storytelling, song integration, and melodrama established during this time continue to shape popular cinema. *Mughal-e-Azam* embodied the aspirations of post-independence Indian cinema to create works that were epic in vision and universal in appeal. With its elaborate sets, intricate costumes, celebrated dialogues, and memorable music, the film became a benchmark for historical dramas in India. It also touched the themes of nation-building, gender roles, and social justice explored in the golden age, which still resonate in Indian society today.<sup>[vi]</sup>

This paper traces Hindi cinema's journey from its origins in the silent era to its consolidation during the golden years. While the main focus is on the golden period, the earlier decades are also discussed to provide historical continuity. The paper also revisits the film, *Mughal-e-Azam*, through its production history, artistic features, and enduring legacy, with an emphasis on its unique place in the canon of Indian cinema. Even decades after its release, *Mughal-e-Azam* continues to be revered as a "cult film," not only for its artistic brilliance but also for its role in shaping the visual and cultural memory of the Mughal era in popular imagination. The paper also demonstrates how cinema functioned not only as entertainment but also as a cultural site where tradition and modernity, individual aspirations and collective concerns, were mediated.

### Early Development of Hindi Cinema and the Transition to Sound

The early development of Hindi cinema coincided with

significant cultural and political shifts in colonial India. Films produced in the 1910s and 1920s frequently depicted mythological and epic narratives, drawing from familiar cultural traditions. These choices also served as subtle assertions of identity under colonial rule.<sup>[vii]</sup> At the same time, filmmakers experimented with social themes around caste, gender, and modernity, creating a dual character of Hindi cinema that persisted through later decades.

The rise of the studio system in the late 1920s further institutionalized Hindi cinema. Studios such as Bombay Talkies and Prabhat standardized production, distribution, and exhibition, while professional divisions of labor shaped cinema into a more organized industry.<sup>[viii]</sup> Storytelling practices during this period were influenced by oral traditions as well as emerging modern script structures, laying the groundwork for later developments. Audiences too were expanding. Urban working classes, students, and middle-class families increasingly visited cinemas, making them spaces of cultural gathering. By the end of the 1920s, Hindi cinema had developed into a recognizable industry with conventions, stars, and loyal audiences.

The transition to sound in the early 1930s marked a decisive turning point. The release of *Alam Ara* (1931) revolutionized film practice by integrating dialogue, songs, and music.<sup>[ix]</sup> Unlike Hollywood, where sound emphasized dialogue, Indian cinema placed equal importance on music, aligning with long-standing traditions of performance. This immediately resonated with audiences and gave Hindi films their distinctive identity. Songs soon became more than entertainment; they carried emotion, cultural resonance, and even social commentary. Drawing upon classical ragas, folk traditions, and popular music, film songs unified diverse audiences and expanded cinema's cultural reach. The sound era also reshaped the industry's organization. New technical skills were required, directors and writers adapted to changing demands, and actors were redefined by their vocal as well as visual presence. Performers with musical ability rose as stars, while studios began employing music directors and lyricists as central collaborators.<sup>[x]</sup> Most importantly, sound amplified Hindi cinema's cultural influence. By incorporating music and dialogue in the Hindi language, films connected with vast audiences across northern and central India, consolidating Bombay's dominance as the hub of film production. This foundation set the stage for the golden years of the 1940s to the 1960s.

### The Golden Age of Hindi Cinema (1940s–1960s)

The period between the 1940s and 1960s is remembered as the golden age of Hindi cinema. These decades were marked by a balance between artistic creativity and popular appeal. Filmmakers told stories that reflected the hopes, struggles, and values of a newly independent nation while at the same time entertaining audiences across the country. The backdrop of independence and Partition gave cinema a deeper meaning, as films began to address social issues such as poverty, injustice, and changing family roles.<sup>[xi]</sup>

One of the landmark films of this time was Mehboob Khan's *Mother India* (1957). The story of Radha, a mother who endures suffering yet holds on to moral strength, was seen as a symbol of the nation itself. The film not only presented an emotional family story but also expressed the larger struggle of India to rebuild itself after independence.<sup>[xii]</sup> Guru Dutt, another key figure of this era, made films that explored the disillusionment of individuals

in a corrupt society. His *Pyaasa* (1957) told the story of a poet who feels rejected by the world, capturing the sense of disappointment many people felt when freedom did not immediately bring social justice. <sup>[xiii]</sup>

Historical epics also reached their peak during this period, and none was more significant than K. Asif's *Mughal-e-Azam* (1960). With its grand sets, elaborate costumes, and strong performances, the film set new standards for scale in Indian cinema. Beyond its romance between Prince Salim and Anarkali, the film raised questions about authority, loyalty, and sacrifice. Its use of color in certain scenes and the unforgettable music, including the song *Pyar Kiya Toh Darna Kya*, showed how technology and art could combine to create unforgettable cinema. The performance of Madhubala as Anarkali remains one of the most iconic in Hindi film history. <sup>[xiv]</sup>

While films like *Mughal-e-Azam* impressed audiences with their grandeur, others focused on realism. Bimal Roy's *Do Bigha Zamin* (1953) showed the struggles of a poor farmer and reflected the economic challenges of rural India. His later film *Bandini* (1963) presented the life of a woman caught between love and duty, giving voice to female experiences in a society undergoing change. <sup>[xv]</sup> These quieter films balanced the spectacular productions of the period and gave cinema a wider range of expression.

The era also saw growth in technical skills. Cinematographers such as V.K. Murthy and Radhu Karmakar experimented with light, shadow, and camera movement to create new visual styles. These techniques added depth to films like Guru Dutt's *Kaagaz Ke Phool* (1959) and Raj Kapoor's *Sangam* (1964).<sup>3</sup> At the same time, music became an essential part of cinema. Singers like Lata Mangeshkar and Mohammed Rafi brought emotions alive through songs that audiences carried beyond the cinema halls. From the soulful tracks of *Pyaasa* to the grand melodies of *Mughal-e-Azam*, music shaped how people remembered these films. <sup>[xvi]</sup>

Stars of this period also became cultural icons. Dilip Kumar's powerful performances gave him the title of "tragedy king," while Raj Kapoor's role as the "common man" captured the struggles of ordinary people. Dev Anand became the face of youthful charm, while actresses like Nargis and Madhubala redefined the role of women in cinema. Their characters reflected both tradition and modern aspirations, giving audiences new models of identity and emotion.

By the end of the 1960s, Hindi cinema had developed its own distinctive style. It combined songs, melodrama, social commentary, and technical innovation in a way that appealed to both the heart and the mind. Films like *Mother India*, *Pyaasa*, and *Mughal-e-Azam* not only entertained but also defined the values, dreams, and anxieties of their time. The golden age left behind a legacy that still influences filmmakers today, reminding us that cinema is not only about spectacle but also about capturing the spirit of its people.

### **Mughal-e-Azam: A Cult Classic**

To discuss historical cinema in India without mentioning *Mughal-e-Azam* (1960) would be incomplete. The film is not merely a cinematic production; it is a cultural phenomenon that continues to occupy a place of reverence in Indian film history. Directed and produced by K. Asif, the film epitomized grandeur in every respect, from its cast and

dialogues to its music, sets, and costumes.

**A Constellation of Talent:** The creative force behind *Mughal-e-Azam* was monumental. The film's music was composed by Naushad, whose melodic genius blended seamlessly with Shakeel Badayuni's evocative lyrics. Cinematography by R. D. Mathur and art direction by M. K. Sayyad lent the film a rare visual elegance, while the costumes, crafted by Makhan Lal & Co. of Delhi, meticulously recreated the splendor of Mughal attire. Perhaps most striking were the dialogues, the outcome of a collective endeavor by four eminent writers: Kamal Amrohi, Wajahat Mirza, Ehsan Rizvi, and Aman (father of Zeenat Aman). Their prose elevated the film to poetic heights, giving it a literary permanence that continues to resonate.

The casting itself brought together the most celebrated actors of the era. Prithviraj Kapoor's towering portrayal of Akbar, Dilip Kumar's restrained yet powerful Salim, and Madhubala's luminous Anarkali remain etched in collective memory. Supporting performances by Durga Khote (Jodha Bai), Ajit (Durjan Singh), and Nigar (Bahar) added layers of depth and intrigue.

**Historical Backdrop and Vision:** The film was adapted from Syed Imtiaz Ali Taj's 1922 Urdu play *Anarkali*. However, Asif and his team of writers reimagined the narrative, weaving together history, romance, and spectacle into a cinematic tapestry. When *Mughal-e-Azam* was conceived, the genre of historical films in India had already seen earlier attempts, such as *The Murder of Narayan Rao Peshwa* (1915) and *Shah Jahan* (1924). Yet, *Mughal-e-Azam* stood apart for its sheer ambition.

K. Asif's background played a role in shaping his vision. Coming from a modest family, he arrived in Bombay with little but an unrelenting dream. Beginning his career as a ladies' tailor, he later moved into filmmaking with *Phool* (1945). His ambition to make *Mughal-e-Azam* became a lifelong pursuit, realized only after overcoming financial struggles, the departure of early financiers during Partition, and years of painstaking labor. With the support of industrialist Shapoorji Pallonji, Asif's dream finally took shape.

**The Making of a Spectacle:** Sixteen years in the making, the film's production was a saga in itself. The scale of its sets, constructed at Mohan Studios in Bombay, was unprecedented. Hundreds of artisans worked tirelessly to recreate palatial Mughal architecture and war sequences of epic proportion. K. Asif's insistence on authenticity became legendary, whether it was persuading Prithviraj Kapoor to walk barefoot on burning desert sands for a scene, or crafting elaborate court settings that mirrored historical research.

Frames such as Anarkali's first appearance as a statue, Salim's majestic entry with his cavalry, and Akbar's desert pilgrimage remain iconic. The battle sequences with thundering horses, armored elephants, and synchronized armies were choreographed with precision, leaving audiences awe-struck. Even minute transitions, such as Salim's passage from the male quarters to the zenana to meet his mother, were designed with architectural accuracy and narrative sensitivity.

**Music, Dance, and Cultural Depth:** The music of Mughal-e-Azam elevated it to the realm of the sublime. Legendary classical vocalist Ustad Bade Ghulam Ali Khan, who rarely lent his voice to cinema, was persuaded by Asif to sing for Anarkali's soulful renditions, immortalizing songs such as "Prem Jogan Ban Ke." Alongside, choreographer Lachhu Maharaj integrated Kathak-inspired movements into the film, shaping its visual poetry. The famous "Teri mehfil mein kismat" qawwali and the spectacular "Jab pyar kiya to darna kya" song-dance sequence remain cinematic landmarks in Indian popular culture.

**The Legend of an Era:** Ultimately, the true protagonist of Mughal-e-Azam was not its characters but its vision. K. Asif's relentless pursuit of perfection turned the film into a once-in-a-century creation. By blending meticulous historical detail with timeless human emotions such as love, loyalty, rebellion, and sacrifice, the film transcended its genre to become an enduring symbol of cinematic art. Even today, more than six decades after its release, no other historical epic has matched its combination of scale, artistry, and cultural impact.

Mughal-e-Azam thus stands not only as a cult classic but as an emblem of how Indian cinema could dream on a global scale while staying rooted in its own history and aesthetics.

## Conclusion

The evolution of Hindi cinema shows a remarkable journey from mythological tales and early silent films to the rich, cultural productions of the golden age. This period, stretching from the 1940s to the 1960s, remains significant for the way it balanced entertainment with artistry, giving rise to films that were both socially relevant and aesthetically appealing. Music, dialogue, and visual storytelling came together to create works that left a lasting impression on Indian society.

Among these, Mughal-e-Azam stands as the finest example of the grandeur and vision of the golden age. Its historical theme, emotional depth, and technical brilliance made it more than a film; it became a cultural event that defined Hindi cinema's ability to merge history with human drama. Even decades later, it continues to shape the way audiences and scholars understand the achievements of this era.

Thus, the golden period of Hindi cinema not only reflects the creative strength of filmmakers of the time but also highlights how cinema became a medium to represent cultural identity, collective memory, and artistic excellence.

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