



# Iran on Screen; Reception and Perception of Iranian Films in India\*

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## Abstract

During the Covid-19 pandemic, Over the Platforms (OTT) such as Netflix and Amazon multiplied their streaming and eased access to foreign content in India. The hybridity and transnational nature of the digital spaces allowed the audience to consume foreign content beyond the geographies of language and culture. This article aims to analyze the reception and perception of Iranian films in India during the Covid-19 pandemic. The study posits that the shift in the reception of Iranian film in India during the Covid-19 pandemic constructed a positive perception of Iran among the Indian audience. By applying the reception analysis and qualitative content analysis theories, the paper interrogates the way in which film acts as an agency to produce the perception of Iran as a nation among the Indian Audience. For the collection of data, the existing literature has been used. Furthermore, a purposive sample survey among Iranian film lovers had been conducted. The paper also carries a content analysis of the posts, comments, and reviews about Iranian films on social media pages. Iranian films have influenced the Indian audience to such a level that 80% of the respondents want to visit Iran once in a lifetime.

**Keywords:** Content Analysis, Covid-19 Pandemic, Indian Audience, Iranian Films, Reception Theory

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## 1. Introduction

In the age of information superhighway, different countries' cultural productions are no longer limited to their geographical borders; they circulate beyond national boundaries. Film, as a reflection of the broad social world, informs and expresses nationality, modernity, and contemporary political temporalities, and plays a significant role in constructing perceptions and imageries in the popular imagination through its content, style, and esthetics. The inevitable role of visual representations in projecting imaginative geographies and modernity about various nations can be seen while analyzing the West's interpretation of the Islamic world through the derogatory and racist caricatures that represent a negative image of Islam around the world. The Orient versus Occident dichotomy, historical generalization of the Orient as a 'deviant Other' dismissing the geographical, cultural, ethnocentric entities, and the West's imposition of superiority through various kinds of racism, imperialism, and institutional power have been subject to cross-examination and criticism in the intellectual and political sphere of the third world. In his landmark work 'Covering Islam' Edward. W Said offers a brilliant series of insights into the West's portrayal of Islam through news media, and reveals the hidden assumption and distortion of the picturized imaginary geography of the Islamic world as heinous, uncivilized, and prone to irrational violence in the popular imagination of the rest of the world. Said's extensive re-visit of How Iran appeared to Americans during the American embassy occupation of Iran in 1979 and its aftermath provides a premise for the historical accounts of the projection of Islam and Muslims in the Western media. The violent image of Islam in the news media has gradually reverberated in the film-like visual cultural medium, which subsequently urged the

Islamic world to counter-act with visual formation, depicting lived experiences and social realities of Muslims every day. The Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan in 1997, Iran's occupation of the American embassy in the same year, the Gulf war in 1991, the U.S invasion of Iraq in 2003, and the subsequent emergence of embedded (Wartime) journalism, as well as the U.S favored reportage of the journalists from war zones, the terrorist attacks on World Trade Centre in 2001, Charlie Hebdo and the French satirical magazine's controversial cartoon of Prophet Muhammed followed by protests in the Islamic world mark only a few of the historical incidents that have added more fuel and intensified the negative Schematization of the Muslim image in mainstream media (Afsaruddin, 2021; Ahmed, 2021; Said, 1981; Shahwar, 2014). In the present socio-political circumstances, when xenophobia and islamophobia are at an all-time high, and Muslim identity and survival are in jeopardy, it is important to investigate the way in which the media has been utilizing to counter-act and deconstruct the perceptions towards a nation and citizens. The unprecedented global lockdown caused by the devastating Covid-19 pandemic created a shift in the film viewing habit of many nations. The adaption of OTT and the widespread accessibility and use of streaming platforms have induced spectators to turn into watching foreign content. This paper posits that there has been a positive shift in the reception of Iranian films in India in the last two years, and that the subsequent changes have shaped the Indian perception of Iran. Situating the unprecedented global pandemic at the center, this paper analyses the Indian audience's reception and perception of Iranian film during the pandemic by attempting to answer the following questions: Do Iranian films in India serve as a mediated instrument in shaping Indians' perception of Iran? Do Iranian films inform Indian audiences about the socio-political and cultural

temporality of contemporary Iran? What do Indians think about Iran after watching Iranian films? This paper is divided into four sections. In section one, the perception and imagination of the old Persia in contemporary modern Iran is explained through the researcher's experience; the second section explores the background or historical link between Indian and Iranian films along with a glimpse of the reception of Iranian films in India. The third section provides an analysis of the audience's reception and perception of Iranian films during the Covid- 19 pandemic.

### 1. 1. An Imaginary Flaneur from Persia to Modern Iran

A never-gotten land of so much mystic illuminations, with thousands of beautiful wide-eyed Hooris<sup>1</sup>, the land Persia was often understood as Janna-tul-Firdous<sup>2</sup> as many of the fantasy tales heard about Persia during Madrasa<sup>3</sup> years have had a striking resemblance with Jannat of wide imagination. As little kids, Ustad<sup>4</sup>'s fantasy tales from the exotic /oriental world, which he narrated at the end of each Hifz<sup>5</sup> (Kids colloquially call Hizb oath<sup>6</sup>) Hizb<sup>7</sup> had been the only source of inspiration for students to wake up in the early hazy-misty mornings of Ramadan and run to the madrasa. The tricky and clever method of storytelling motivated

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1. **Hoori** houri, also spelt Huri, Arabic Ḥawrā', plural Ḥūr, in Islam, a beautiful maiden who awaits the devout Muslim in paradise.
  2. **Jannat-ul-Firdouse**- The literal meaning of Jannat is garden. Firdouse is heaven. For Muslims Jannat-ul- Firdouse is the highest level of heaven
  3. **Madrasa**- Madrasah is an Arabic word, is a parallel schooling system where Muslims obtain religious learning
  4. **Ustad**- is the teacher who teaches in Madrasa
  - 5 **Hifz**-is the recital and memorization of the Quran
  6. **Oath** -is the colloquial pronunciation for the recital in our mother tongue Malayalam
  7. **Hizb** – is the corrupted use of Hifz

the students to sit in the classroom and it allowed him to continue Hifz with maximum attendance. Throughout the storytelling days of Hifz, the intimacy towards the Persian queen “Shahrazad” of the one thousand and one nights (Arabian Nights) was inscrutable; as the story progressed... the compassion and longing for the queen grew day by day. The eloquent, exquisite narration of Shahrazad to her husband could form an unbreakable Idol of her in any child’s imagination. Many of the fascinating tales of him during the children’s Hifz days have vanished into irrecoverable trash of long-forgotten memories. Aladdin and the magic lamp and Ali Baba and the forty thieves are exceptions as the psychic affinity of any child with Aladdin and poor mother and with the honest woodcutter, Ali Baba could have been evolved in such a way that, all become associated with the sorry plight of *les Misérables* and not-havingness. Recreating that beautiful part of childhood, that long-nostoppable morning- run to Madrassa resembles that of a film screen where the little princess of captivating fantasy tales fades and dissolves like a memory scene.

My imaginary flaneur from much heard Persia of childhood to modern Iran has had an interesting trajectory that travels from childhood fantasy world through the teenage read of the translation of Alif -Laila (to vernacular language Malayalam as Aayirathonnu Ravukal) to the peak of unending persuasion of Iranian cinema of today. My first exposure to Iranian films occurred during my master’s degree at Maulana Azad University in Hyderabad in 2012. It was Asghar Farhadi’s Oscar-winning film *Jodāyi-e Nāder az Simin* ‘*A Separation* (2011)’, which had been discussed, throughout the previous half-decade of my academic career.

Like any international film, understanding the language was a major threat while watching ‘A Separation. Two words in Farsi that

seemed familiar to me were Salām (Hello) and Mutma Innu (confident), both of which are from the Arabic language that binds us together based on religion. The tension and struggle that the film addresses are a topic that affects the majority of people around the world and the struggle inside Nader and Simin's family is not unique to them, but is shared by all those caught in the patriarchal marital structure. The unresolved predicament of Termeh (daughter of Nader and Simin) in the end hits the never-ending consequence of an unwelcome separation that is common in every society. The width and tenderness of the human bond that Farhadi depicted on the screen left me in terrible anguish. The film leaves a spark in every spectator's conscience as everyone would love to meet and beg forgiveness to little Somayeh (daughter of Razieh) for the ongoing awful drama she and her unfortunate mother had to endure.

When Nader asks Razieh to swear on Quraan about the cause of her miscarriage, she refuses because she is dubious and it is a gunaa (sin). The film emphasizes the rightfulness and virtues that are the fundamentals of Islamic values, which can be seen in all most Iranian films. Films that have often been debated about the plight of Iranian women and children, and reconstructed popular cinematic interpretations through the lens of generational politics in contemporary Iran, entangling the complexities of domestic/family relationships and religious conservatism, are largely given academic interest and have raised the ineliminable possibilities of third cinema. Abbas Kiarostami, Majid Majidi, and, Jaffar Panahi are among the directors whose films drag every spectator to the vulnerable world of child complexities. Films that are centered entirely on women's affairs challenge the western way of sexual objectification by portraying realistic-female subjectivities, and

they navigate identity and emotional profundity. The films of Jafar Panahi, Asghar Farhadi' and Marziah Makhmalbaf offer an alternative perspective on women's representation in respect of social mobility and thematic complexity. From the film, *A Separation* (2011) to *A Hero* (2021), both directed by Farhadi, the pursuit of Iranian cinema is similar to that of every Indian, whose enthusiasm and engagement with Iranian cinema spreads from early film festivals to today's well-received over-the-top (OTT) platforms. In general, films, as an agency and intersubjective communication, play a unique and significant role in transnational relationships, which are the result of social and cultural linkages between two countries.

## **1. 2. History of Indian -Iranian Films and Reception of Iranian Films in India**

It is evident from history that 'Indian Cinema' in the early years of its origin (Silent Era) was not purely 'Indian' but partially transnational in all its forms and themes. In the preface of the book *Indian Cinema: A very short Introduction*, Ashish Rajadhyaksha (2016), postulates that one of the city's (Bombay) leading studios, the Imperial Film Company, made the world's first Iranian Film alongside producing movies in Burmese and Malay. The history of Iranian films has therefore been uprooted in Bombay, which has a distinctive transnational history in respect of cinema before being termed 'Bollywood' (Thomas, 2013). Academicians and scholars have recently questioned the historiography and the narrative history of the Indian Cinema and attempted to scrutinize and challenge the dominant social and mythological readings which have been the basis for Indian cinema scholarship over the years.

Indian cinema's interconnectedness with the oriental genre and popular Parsee theatres, as well as the way in which the tales of Arabian Night were adapted and circulated in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century have been exposed in the work of Mukul Kesavan (1994), Rosie Thomas (2013), and Ira Bhaskar (2009), which has become a foundational premise to read Indian cinema through an alternative historical perspective. In her book *Bombay before Bollywood; Film City Fantasies*' Rosie Thomas claims that even a decade before the release of Dhundiraj Govind Phalke's first Indian feature film (*Raja Harishchandra*, 1913) Hiralal Sen, an unsung pioneer of Indian cinema has made *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves* (1903), a two-hour version of the evergreen hit of a Calcutta stage. Films of the old era that are said to have derived from the Parsee stage; folk and Arabian night fantasy adventure are G.F. Madan's *Gul-e-Bakavali* (1924), Fatima Begum's *Bulbul-e-Paristan* (Nightingale in Fairyland, 1926), B.P. Mishra's *Aladdin Ane Jadui Fanas* (Aladdin and the wonderful lamp, 1927), an adaptation of Imtiaz Ali Taj's famous play *Anarkali* (1927), Himansu Rai's *Light of Asia* (1925), *Shiraz* (1928), etc. These films have expressed an amalgamation of Indo-orientalist tales upholding Islamic uprightness and virtues. The way in which Islamicate (the term is borrowed from Hodgen), and Persianate (Partovi) idioms of the Bombay cinema and its popular rendition of oriental and fantasy constructed a distinctive identity of Muslims, and the way in which it indelibly mapped the imaginary geography of the large Islamic world in the cultural memory of the audience are yet to be examined from a cultural and geographical standpoint. The revivalism of Hindutva created more political tensions in the nation, and the consequent framing of an exclusive political idea on the Indian film screen, which was done by constructing the Hindu-India binary and abandoning the Nehruvian idea of secularism and

patriotism urged Muslims to re-claim their inhabitation and forgotten history. Similar to the way in which the glorious, rich, Islamicate grandeur of the past has vanished from the History of the nation, the Islamicate, Orientalist, Persianate fantasy-oriented tales have been removed from the history of carefully constructed film screen (Mukul Kesavan (1994) claims that India's first real movies stars of the silent era Zubeida and Khalil were Muslims). Hence the present political circumstances demand an interrogation and the resurrection of the oriental saga which exists in the popular cultural memory of Indians, but not in the pervasive history of the Indian cinema.

While having a glimpse at the history of Iranian films through an academic approach, a striking similarity is seen with the history of the Indian cinema in terms of the paradigmatic shift in its filmmaking style, compared to the nation's political temporalities. For example, if the history of the Indian cinema has read through the pre-independence and post-independence era in the dominant academic scholarship, the Iranian cinema is picturized by the two revolutions of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Iran: one is the constitutional revolution of 1905 and the other is the Islamic revolution in 1979. The Iranian new wave of 1960-70 that acclaimed wide international attention shows salient similitude with the Muslim Socials of Indian cinema. The genre is defined and extended by Ira Bhaskar and Richard Allen (2009).

The popular Cinemas of India, Iran, and Turkey have enjoyed a dialogical relationship that draws on as well as mirrors interlinked literary and performative traditions of the medieval and early modern Persianate world. (Partovi, 2017, p. 4)

Researchers have paid less attention to studying the reception of Iranian films in India and vice versa. In his article, 'Determinants of

the spatial dispersion of Bollywood cinema' (2019), Malgorzata Parda (2019), argues that from 1970 to 2010, there was only one Bollywood film released in Iran. The film *Subah-O-Sham*, directed by Chanakya, released in 1972 was the first Indo-Iranian project that was shot in Iran with a group of brilliant technicians. Although the film featured versatile actors like Waheeda Rahman Sanjeev Kumar and Mohammad Ali Fardeen, it did not receive much acclamation.

Iranian films grew more popular among Indian audiences in the early 2000s. *Šahr-e-Ziba, The Beautiful City* (2004), directed by Asghar Farhadi, was the first Iranian film to win the Golden Peacock Award for Best Film at the 2004 International Film Festival of India. Cinematic genius Abbas Kiarostami was honored as one of the world's great masters at the Kolkata International Film Festival, held in 2007. The acceptance and acclaim for Iranian films have grown to the point where at least one Iranian picture must be screened at every Indian film festival. The International Film Festival of Kerala (IFFK), one of South India's largest international cultural events held annually in Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala's capital city, featured several Iranian films such as Navid Mahmoudi's *Parting*, Reza Mirkarimi's *Daughter*, Navid Danesh's *Duet*, etc. The Indian film *Beyond the Cloud* (2017) by the much-celebrated Iranian director Majid Majidi, was screened as the opening feature at India's 48th International Film Festival in Goa in 2017. It became another historical milestone in the Indo-Iranian cultural relationship since the public exhibition and popular reception of Iranian cinema induced the Indian audience to place Iranian cinema at the heart of world cinema. The release of Iranian films continued in the festivals and cultural events until the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020. The pandemic has

swapped the film viewing and exhibition pattern all over the world. When the Covid has become a mainstream fear and the whole world is reduced to restricted, confined spaces, public exhibitions, and movie theatres are replaced by digital platforms, as people find alternative ways to watch both national and international films to engage with the outside world.

## **2. Methodology**

To understand the audience's reception and perception of Iranian films in India, this paper employs reception analysis and qualitative content analysis methods. To study the receivers of Iranian films and their accession to Iranian films in India, the researcher conducted a purposive (random) sample survey among spectators on social networking groups. A questionnaire containing 20 questions has been sent to film lover groups and collected responses from 75 participants irrespective of their age and gender. Questions including the medium/platforms, time of reception, the genre of the films, choice of the film, recommendation of the film, and their thought on Iran after watching the films have been asked. For analyzing the audience's perceptions of Iranian films, the researcher further adapted the qualitative content analysis method and analyzed the textual content of posts, comments and reviews, which appeared in the movie analysis groups and pages during the lockdown period.

### **2. 1. Reception Analysis/ Reception Theory**

The Reception Theory, popularly known as the Audience Theory or Reader's Reception Theory places the receiver of the message at

the center of the communication process. It enquires how the receiver perceives the meaning of a message transmitted by the media. In the essay 'Encoding and Decoding Television Discourses', Stuart Hall emphasizes the encoding and decoding processes in communication. The meaning of the media text is interlinked to the receiver's social context as the receiver perceives it according to his/her understanding, observations and social experiences. Recent studies concerning new media largely rely on the reception analysis method, as it can be used as an alternative method to conventional discourse analysis. According to Denis Mc Quail (1997), Reception analysis emphasizes the use of media as a reflection of the socio-cultural context and as a process of giving meaning to an experience-based and cultural production; culture and media experience in the public environment influence the process of public acceptance of media messages. Reception analysis is a methodology of research that has been developed to understand the symbolic implications of the circulation of meaning through mass, broadcast media, in particular television. It is considered a practical method for understanding the study of a text-context relationship, contextual factors, or the way the audience views or reads the media, such as film, television, etc. Although reception studies are currently widely used, researchers criticize the authenticity of the methods in reception theories. Douglas Kellner refers to the focus on audience's construction of meaning as the fetishism of resistance. "There is a tendency in cultural studies to celebrate resistance per se without distinguishing between types and forms of resistance (a similar problem resides with indiscriminate celebration of audience pleasure in certain reception studies) (Kellner, 1995). The power of viewers to reinterpret meanings is hardly equivalent to the discursive power of centralized media institutions to construct the texts that the viewer

then interprets; to imagine otherwise is simply foolish (Morley, 1992). According to Fiske (1989, p. 28), “the economic needs of the cultural industries are thus perfectly in line with the disciplinary and ideological requirements of the existing social order, and all cultural commodities must therefore, to a greater or lesser extent, bear the forces that we can call centralizing, disciplinary, hegemony, massifying, commodifying”. For Garnham (1997, p. 60), the focus on reception and interpretation of the reception theory largely exaggerates the freedom of daily life:

Does anyone who has produced a text or a symbolic form believe that interpretation is entirely random or that pleasure cannot be used to manipulative ends? If the process of interpretation was entirely random, and, therefore, we had to give up entirely the notion of intentionality in communication, the human species would have dropped the activity long ago.

Grossberg, Nelson and Treichler’s (1992) approach to reception analysis is different from Fiske and Morley. Their emphasis is on the structure of social power and institutions rather than media contents or messages:

Cultural studies need a theory of how cultural empowerment and disempowerment are articulated to larger structures of social power, and of how, sometimes, people can be defeated and oppressed by articulations of the very practices that empower them. It needs to understand the struggles being waged by competing political agencies and institutions at different sites, and the stakes of these struggles in relation to popular culture and daily life.

The numerous critical approaches to media influence are sharply criticized by Thompson (1990), who constantly highlights the error of internalization that underlies them. By internalize, he refers to the idea that audience effects may be inferred from the texts that

the media commentator examines. Thompson reminds that when we are involved in social inquiry, it is not possible to simply engage in interpretation, as the natural scientist interprets his or her data. The object of our interpretations is already pre-interpreted by subjects. Thompson considers it important not to lose sight of the relations of domination involved in the deployment of symbolic forms. Nevertheless, the criticism and close reading on the reception theory inform that the content and the context of the text /message is not just only the researchable aspect in the reception studies but researcher has to focus on other different aspects of media such as power, society, institution and ideologies. Though the receiver and contents of the message are the significant components in the process of media dissemination, the meaning inherent in the text is crucial in the schematization and framing of media contents. Here lays the theoretical significant of reception analysis.

## **2. 2. Content Analysis**

According to Cole (1988), it is a “method of analyzing written, verbal or visual communication messages”. Through a systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns, content analysis is a “research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data,” (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). It is a systematic research method for analyzing and making inferences from text or other forms of qualitative information such as interviews, focus groups, open ended survey questions, documents and videos. Usually content analysis uses different forms of analytical strategies to categorize and compare both data and texts.

### **3. Reception and Perception of Iranian Films in India during the Covid-19 Pandemic**

The number of social media users in India has been steadily increasing as the country's internet use has increased in the last decade. According to the digital 2020 reports on India, there are 658.0 Million internet users in India; internet penetration has therefore stood at 47% of the total population at the start of 2022. The Digital India program, supported by the government of India, has also played a significant role in this expansion. In the year 2020, when the Covid-19 pandemic hit, people turned to social media for information or for expressing themselves, and conversations on various topics began trending on social media in India. The studies on the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on media usage across India indicate a sudden spike in the use of social networking applications during the first phase of the nationwide lockdown (Basuroy, 2022; Pandya & Lodha, 2021). People began to create numerous database groups, pages, and forums on Facebook-like social networking sites and increased their virtual social connectivity for entertainment purposes. Posts and reviews about regional, national and international films have skyrocketed during the lockdown, as film viewing has become the Indians' only form of engagement and escapism when the whole world was constrained from physical immobility. It is also reported that the adaption of OTT platforms, such as Netflix and Amazon during the lockdown has not only eased the accessibility to foreign content, but has even multiplied it significantly. The hybridity and transnational nature of these digital spaces allow the audience to consume foreign content beyond the geographies of language and culture. Streaming platforms such as Amazon Prime, Netflix, Disney+ Hotstar, and MUBI listed a significant number of Iranian

films based on popularity and the rating of the IMDb (Internet Movie Data Base). Film lovers who could not afford to subscribe to the streaming platforms relied on Telegram-like freeware, and cross-platform services to download and watch Iranian films. Every week, two to three posts regarding Iranian films appeared on the Facebook pages titled "The Best International Films" and "Iranian Film Lovers":

I have never been into IFFK events before. When I started watching movies during the lockdown, I have come across the name 'Asgar Farhadi'. I am not a fan of action movies., I was enthralled by Iranian films and the name Asgar Farhadi haunted me like anything. After watching the first one or two movies, I began searching for the rest of his movies. It is mostly a film that makes the audience think. He is a director who is 100% loyal to Iran and its people. That is why most of his films revolve around the harsh realities of the Iranian people. All eight of these films have already been discussed, but I'm just posting my watchlist here...

Posted Sajna Ali on June 29, 2020 on Facebook page 'Best International Movies'.

The song of *The Sparrow* (2008), *Baran* (2001), *The Fourth Child* (2013) *Ranna Silence* (2016), *About Elly* (2009), and *Close Up* (1990) are some of the frequently recommended movies on Facebook by Iranian film lovers. Prasadhi Prasad, for instance, wrote on October 31, 2020:

Rice Cake (1996) is a beautiful Iranian movie that I watched recently. It is the story of an elderly couple Morteza and Forough. Morteza runs a tailoring shop and Forough is a housewife. The movie begins with how Forough does everything she can to make her husband's life run smoothly. However, Morteza is hardly paying any attention and takes her for granted. The movie brilliantly

captures those small moments between a couple who have been together for ages. As the movie progresses, an incident occurs that changes the dynamics of their relationship forcing Morteza to look at their relationship from a different perspective. How he does this and what happens later form the crux of the story. For those who have not watched this movie, please do find time to watch this gem of a movie. I can assure you it will stay with you for a while. The movie is available on YouTube with subtitles.

Among the 75 participants in this study, 75% were male and 25% were female. 78% of the respondents watch Iranian films on OTT/ Online platforms. The rest of them watched on TV, CDs DVDs, or other mediums. 42.2% of respondents used Amazon prime video to watch Iranian films. The rest of them watched them on Netflix, Mx Player, Disney Hotstar, Apple TV, and other platforms. Among the participants, 56.75% belong to the 20-30 age group, and 43.25% constitute above the age of 30. 61% of respondents watched more Iranian films during the lockdown. 67.3% of respondents would like to watch drama, while the rest prefer adventure, thriller, mystery, fantasy, etc. 32% of the participants chose Iranian films based on of recommendation from friends and popular websites; 26% chose them because of the story and plot, 32% chose them because of the directors, and the rest of the choices were made based on movies' actors. 5% of the participants have visited Iran, while 80% of them would like to visit Iran. The data indicates that it is the young generation who mostly watches Iranian films and express a desire to visit and explore Iran.

#### **4. Iran in the Indian Imagination**

When enquired about how the participants felt about Iran after

watching Iranian films, most of them responded with enthusiasm. The majority of them see Iran as a culturally rich country with a colorful past. Below are Some of the interesting perceptions of Iran, mentioned by the participants:

- A must-visit country, culturally rich, a place of raw and hidden talent
- If I suggest a cultural capital for the world, I will choose Iran
- Many misconceptions are hazing the reality of the country and its women.
- Iran is a wonderful country; despite the fact that they are undergoing the strongest sanctions in the world, they are making good movies and their streets are clean and the cities look much more developed.
- It's more than to put into words; I keep hoping all good for Iran and its people.
- I love Iran and Iranians
- They show their culture and always raise their voice against the injustice around them. We are largely misled by the West about Iran. Iran cannot always fit into the dress of a strictly religious country. It cherishes its values, which are rather Persian than religious. People believe in cooperation and respects other cultures. Civil laws are not so strictly religious, as we can see in movies like Close Up, where laws could assume widespread interpretations
- Iran has gone through a lot of social reforms and Iranian films have played a vital role
- Iran is not just as we see in the news or something like that. Iran

has many skilled film workers who have proved their talent in the world cinema. The popular winning awards like Oscar are the proof of the best plot, story, and memorable characters, which are contributed to the world cinema by Iranian films.

- There is a lot to explore in Iran. Being a Kashmiri, I feel there is a lot of cultural pertinence and I love how directors like Majid Majidi have represented it. I would love to visit it someday.
- A beautiful place with geography similar to some northern parts of India. Lots of development is happening and good culture
- Iran is a place that is culturally rich and has a glorious past.
- The movies depict the people's civilized way of living, which always attracts me.

## 5. Conclusion

The ability of film to invoke sense and produce aesthetic and visual understanding creates geographical or spatial imagination in the spectators, and inherently produces perceptions and conceptions about a particular geography and society. In the age of cultural imperialism and exclusive politics, the role of cinema as a decisive and defensive instrument to deconstruct the contrived ideologies and dismantle the stereotypes and stigmatization is indisputable. Indian audience's perception of Iran proves that technologies of time and space in this era not only induced people to use film as a medium for entertainment, but they even adopted it as an effective tool to educate themselves about nationalities, cosmopolitanism, and modernity. Centuries marked meaningful interactions between India and Iran, which are reflected in the field of language, religion, art, culture, and other traditions (Cheema, 2010; Mumtaz, 2006;

Esfahani, 2013). Iranian films have a reflective tone, simple narration, less violence compared to other films, and a lovely composition, which provide a wealth of information about Iran's social, cultural, and geopolitical circumstances. The articulation of the daily- mundane/ discourse of the Iranian middle class, the idiosyncratic, resonant, and mysterious fashion of storytelling (for example in Abbas Kiarostami, Muhsin Makhmalbaf, Majid Majidi, and Jafar Panahi's films) is dismantled the much-dominated conventional genre in filmmaking. Iranian films are well-known for their thematic diversity and filmmaking techniques, which have a significant audience in India because they reflect the Iranian reality and modernity to the rest of the world. From this perspective, very little has been expressed in terms of cinema culture, and cinematic events engraved in the Indian imaginaries about Iran. Out of 75 respondents, only 2 people have visited Iran to this day. It is evident from the data that the opinion of the rest of the respondents on Iran is influenced by watching Iranian movies.

If the long bilateral relationships between India and Iran have become estranged since the age of Nehruvian Secularism, it is now time for reconnection through the cultural-political engagements that would open new opportunities for proximity, interaction, and co-existence between the two nations. What induces the Indian audience to pursue Iranian films is the subversive, domestic nature of the films, which examine the inescapable hurdles generated by class, politics, gender, and religious division of contemporary Iran. Hence, the possibilities of cinema as an artistic instrument to dismantle the world view on a nation's identity should not be undervalued in the present socio-political scenario.

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