

# Item Numbers: The Power of Seeing and Being Seen

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## Abstract

This paper considers the essential characteristics of item numbers produced from 1940-1947 under the concept of *darshan*. This concept, described as the worshippers' relationship of 'seeing and being seen,' is a way of engaging the whole body through the eye (Pinney 8), creating a sense of intimacy between the image and its beholder. By analyzing songs from films released during 1940-1947 in Lahore and Bombay<sup>56</sup>, this study looks at the features of an item number and draws a comparison with other film songs and song sequences released during that period. This paper also considers the role of sound and Parsi theatre. Item numbers have played a role in connecting films and viewers since the origin of sound film in the cinemas of South Asia. Furthermore, films in this region were also under the influence of the cultural practices of Parsi theatre, which provided a model for the popular theatre movement in Bombay.

Keywords: Item Numbers; Darshan; Parsi Theatre; Early Pakistani Cinema; Indian Cinema; Scopophilia; Male Gaze

## Introduction

Item numbers play a key role in connecting the film and its viewers. Film songs have been an essential part of the cinemas of South Asia since the region's first locally produced sound film *Alam Ara* or *The Light of the World* (dir. Ardeshir Irani, 1931). The year 1931 holds immense importance in the history of South Asian cinemas<sup>57</sup> by bringing songs and dance as a means of expression through song visualization (Shresthova 93). However, the origins of dance can be traced back to as early as 1896 with the introduction of film technology in the country (93). Silent films produced between 1912-1934 included rhythmically choreographed sequences, which indicates that dance existed even before the development of sound film in the region (93). Hence, what was different in *Alam Ara* was how sound in the form of songs provided dance with a means of visual expression leading to song-dance sequences becoming an integral part of film narratives in the region. When sound came to the subcontinent, new film genres were created that spread throughout the region (Gazdar 19). The crystallization of these genres became an integral part in the development of sound films.

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<sup>56</sup> Although Bombay is now called Mumbai, however for historical reasons I have kept the colonial name and spelling of the city.

<sup>57</sup> The use of the term South Asian Cinemas in this paper refers to the cinemas of the subcontinent.

This paper explores the essential characteristics of item numbers from 1940-1947 in the cinemas of South Asia. Film songs have been analyzed to understand the qualities of an item number and theorize what distinguishes it from other film songs and song sequences. The item number is popularly defined as being a cinesexual concept, comprised of a “sensuous dance performance,” where the attention is on the item girl who is usually accompanied by a male audience, dramatic light effects and a supporting cast (Brara 2010). However, the significance of the term ‘cinesexual’ is important to understand in this case. The term was coined by feminist film theorist Patricia MacCormack, who argued that cinema spectatorship represents a unique encounter of desire and that cinema, rather than being viewed as an object, should be seen as a ‘territory of desire’ (MacCormack 4). Cinesexuality in the case of item numbers asks its viewers to look beyond the offerings of the cinema, and how ‘to be seen’ and ‘seeing’ in a certain way informs cinematic pleasure (ibid). This paper, by examining film songs from the 1940s and mobilizing the concept of *darshan*, argues that there is more to item numbers than simply being a tempestuous performance by an item girl dancing to a racy song. *Darshan* refers to the worshippers’ relationship of ‘seeing and being seen’ as a way of building a connection between the image and the beholder (Pinney 8). In light of this concept, I aim to explore the performances in an item number that form a relationship between the viewer and the viewed. Moreover, I argue that the provocative dresses and attractiveness of the object in this case are not the qualities that distinguish an item number from other song sequences in films.

The paper focuses on specific characteristics of an item number to draw this distinction. Firstly, I look at how the camera angles connect the dancer with the audience. One of the main characteristics of an item number is how the dancer is always looking at the camera directly and engaging with her audience. This narcissistic aspect is how pleasurable looking develops into a fascination with likeness and recognition (Mulvey 15). The fascination develops through the camera’s fetishization of the beauty and mystery of the item girl and looks beyond the effects of the shots. This is central in understanding the development of item numbers in the 1940s. In terms of the visuals, the main focus is on the kind of women cast in these songs which led to them being defined as item numbers. The voyeuristic camera angles and the connection that the *mise-en-scène* constructs is the second most important characteristic in determining the definition in terms of *darshan*. *Mise-en-scène* refers to the primarily visible design aspects of films features, for instance the setting, costumes, lighting and the set or location where the scene is filmed.

Through the analysis of *Babu daroga ji kon kasoore* (Sir Police Inspector who is at fault) from the movie *Taqdeer* (dir. Mehboob Khan, 1943) and *Samne gali mein mera ghar hai, pata mera bhool na jana* (My home is in the opposite street, do not forget my address) from the movie *Mirza Sahiban* (dir. K. Amarnath, 1947) and other songs from the 1940s, I explore how the audience connects with the onscreen presence in the songs. This argument aids in understanding the connection between the image and its viewer in terms of the production of an item number. Christopher Pinney’s work about the conventional approach of aesthetics is of immense importance here (8). Therefore, through Pinney’s framework of ‘corporetics,’ which is described as sensory corporal aesthetics, I wish to explore not how songs on screen look but what they can do (Pinney 8). Pinney asserts the notion that the relationship that devotees cultivate lies at the heart of Hindu worship. The relevant question then becomes one of establishing the visual relationship between the image and its beholder and creating a zone of mutuality that encompasses the devotee and the image. The relationship is clearly expressive of *darshan*, in the case of item numbers as the ‘eye’ through which the actor/actress communicates to its audience creates a ‘locking in’ of

the vision that the beholder keeps returning to. The similarity between this idea and how a vast majority of devotees engage with the deity helps to establish a relationship between religious devotion and cinematic pleasure.

To illustrate my argument, I also aim to understand why songs were an essential part of films from the beginning of the sound film era. Moreover, I focus on the development of film songs that are historically related to other South Asian performances in the 1940s. The production system established by Parsi theatre companies in the 1850s and 1860s provided a model for the popular theatre movement in Bombay (Cohen 316). The music, dance, dramatic performances once restricted were now being commodified with the rise of the bourgeoisie class (Hansen 129). The development of sound film, therefore, starting from Bombay, also spread to Lahore and other parts of the region, including Calcutta and Madras. In comparison to Bombay, Lahore was initially an unprofitable enterprise, but the advent of sound redefined the notions of film production in the region. However, according to Ahmed Sa'id, Lahore became an attraction for filmmakers and artists with the launch of A.R. Kardar's Player-Phototone film studio (787). Kardar belonged to a landed family of Punjab and started his career as a still photographer for films under-production (Gazdar 6). Later, with sound films like *Khazanachi* (dir. Moti B. Gidwani, 1941) and *Yamla Jutt* (dir. Moti B. Gidwani, 1940), Lahore became an active centre for filmmaking in South Asia.

As a result of disruptions that occurred in the 1947 partition as well as lack of state interest in cinema history or preservation, very little work exists on the pre-partition cinema of Lahore. Along with other scholars, Dickey and Dudrah argue that Bombay cinema is not a representation of the South Asian cinema (208). They also draw attention to other cinemas in the region, such as Tamil and Bhojpuri and how the emergence of Tamil talkies for example decentered all South Asian film industries. Therefore, by looking at item numbers from films made in Lahore and Bombay, this paper also contributes to our understanding of how elements of film genre and style, such as item songs, spread across South Asia.

### **Parsi Theatre: Bombay and Lahore**

Cinema in the subcontinent developed into a unique entity when studios by A.R. Kardar and Pancholi were set up in Lahore, making it one of the major producers of sound film. However, even before the production of sound films, silent films were also extensively produced in Lahore. A.R. Kardar opened the first studio and production company in Lahore, under the name Premium Film Company in 1925 (Sa'id 786). In this studio, the first silent film of Lahore was produced, *Daughters of Today* (dir. Shankradev Arya, 1928), and studios such as 'United Players' were also set up in 1928 (ibid). The increasing number of studios and silent film productions in Lahore laid the groundwork for the wave of sound film technology that was to take over the filmmaking process in the cinemas of the subcontinent in 1931. Thus, when *Alam Ara* was produced in Bombay, two more studios, Punjab Film Company and Player-Phototone, were set up in Lahore in 1939 (Sa'id 787). Hence, when sound came to the region, Lahore played its role in advancing and promoting the new genre. Initially, sound films had a few songs, which were recorded at the time of shooting and mostly sung by the actors themselves. With sound film production in full swing in the 1940s a new genre was crystallizing in the form of the creation of item numbers. Item numbers in the context of this paper are understood as a form a cinematic pleasure that offer its

viewers the chance to look beyond the scope of the cinema and understand what the object has to offer.

This research engages with multiple studies and frameworks to understand the influence of Parsi theatre on item numbers in the 1940s. Their contribution to theatre combined with music and mise-en-scène presented both traditional and modern narratives in the performances. Modernity in this case is an escape from the traditional ways of representing religious and nationalist ideas in the society and creates the possibility of examining genre in a new way. This ties in with the proposition that Kapur makes regarding the way nationalist tendencies in a society encourages tradition to surface in various forms of arts (80). In the case of cinemas of the region, the mythological genre located in both visual and performative media was best suited to spread Hinduism. The mythological treats mythic and religious material, which is drawn from Hindu tradition (Hansen 4986). The genre crystalized in the region as mythological films were prominent in the early years of cinema in South Asia, including during the British colonial period. Furthermore, the link between the Hindu concept of *darshan* in mythological films and item numbers in South Asian movies can also be seen.

The importance of these films in relation to technological innovations are credited to Raja Ravi Varma, a famous painter from the nineteenth century, and Dadasaheb Phalke, often credited as the founding father of Indian cinema (Mishra 11). Varma's paintings established the mythological genre through his use of naturalistic painting techniques, bringing out the subjects' larger context through his work. Phalke's mediation of the mythic and filmic with India's first feature film *Raja Harishchandra* (dir. Dadasaheb Phalke, 1913) is a representation of static Indian images of Varma's art into moving images (Mishra 12). The incorporation of this form of visual genres brought a new approach towards aesthetics to the region.

Pinney has also argued for disregarding the conventional approach of aesthetics and proposes to explore the usefulness of images in their effects on the viewer (22). This was reflected in the performances of the Parsi theatre comprising of both English classics (Shakespeare and Sheridan), and traditional cultural narratives such as the Radheshyam's *Vir Abhimanyu* (Mishra 8). Almost everywhere Parsi troupes went, it seems, the theatre exerted a powerful attraction. The theatrical movement even today is greatly influenced by the Parsi theatre companies of the 1850s and 1860s (Cohen 316). The influence was not limited to India but also spread across South Asia. Moreover, as Mishra argues that there were also other developments, apart from Parsi theatre, where *Nautanki*, *Ramlila*, *Raslila*<sup>58</sup> and other forms of musical and speech styles came together (9). The effect that theatre had in the 1850s-60s, was reciprocated in the production of item numbers in the 1940s. The forms of expressive culture, including dance, drama, music, magic, and storytelling, commercialized through the theatre, resulted in emergent hybrid forms during later productions in the region.

In the years that followed, theatre spread to other parts of the subcontinent, with songs and dance becoming an integral part of the film industry. The development of the genre suggests what role

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<sup>58</sup> *Nautanki* is one of the most popular folk operatic theater performance forms of South Asia, particularly in northern India. *Ramlila* (literally 'Rama's lila or play') is any dramatic folk re-enactment of the life of Rama according to the ancient Hindu epic Ramayana. The *Raslila* is part of the traditional story of Krishna described in Hindu scriptures such as the Bhagavata Purana

the British proscenium arch theaters played in forming the basis of the Parsi theatre (Mishra 9). The proscenium arch, which basically frames the action of the performance, comprises of stage division, and the creation of a fourth (invisible) wall between the audience and onstage presence, the stage and the seating (ibid). The performances of the theatre reflect the “look back” notion (called “the fourth look”) which is an integral function of all cinema (Dixon 3). However, as Willeman suggests, the combined gaze of the screen, which includes the setting, and everything that is part of the background, transforms the reception of the viewer in a way the gaze of the actors does not (Dixon 4). Therefore, the stage relations that form with the creation of proscenium arch are different to those that developed through open staging in pre-colonial India. Within that confined space of the arch, an unspoken compact relationship between the spectator and the performer develops. In this case the angle of the vision allows the viewer to develop a similar voyeuristic relation with the actor on the stage. These dramatic performances of the Parsi theatre, paved the way for cinemas and item numbers in the region.

### The power of seeing and being seen

In the process of understanding the influence of the look back notion on item numbers in the 1940s, I analyze the song “*Inhi logon ne le leena dupatta mera*” (These people have taken away my veil) from three different movies produced in 1941, 1943, 1956 and 1972 respectively. The performance of the song “*Inhi logon ne*” in the three movies, signify two important characteristics. Firstly, in the form of representing the essential qualities of an item number in each case and secondly, in foregrounding the prominence of films made in Lahore. The most famous version of the song stars Meena Kumari as a courtesan<sup>59</sup>, performing for a largely male audience in the movie *Pakeezah* (dir. Kamal Amrohi, 1972). Another version of the song is available in black and white from 1956, that was shot before the movie shut down due to a conflict between the actress and the director Kamal Amrohi. The film can be termed as a ‘courtesan film’ because it stars Meena Kumari in a leading role where the heroine is a courtesan and male actors have minor roles (Dwyer 117). The characteristics of this song define it as a *mujra*, where the courtesan performs a dance (ibid). This is different from other song sequences in films because *mujra* is a form of dance where a woman dances in front of a male audience seated in a circular motion. Primarily a court dance, a *mujra* in relation to an item number can be understood as a subgenre of item songs. For example, the courtesan breaking through the frame to directly address and gaze upon the spectator makes the *mujra* a song that is also an item number.

Comedians such as Laurel and Hardy used the look back to express frustration or disobedience, by incorporating the audience into the work (Dixon 6). In the case of Meena Kumari, as she directly looks into the camera numerous times suggests the erotic narration of having her modesty compromised in front of an audience. She wants her audience to know that they took her modesty, and her innocence which is symbolized by the loss of her *dupatta* (veil). Her look back into the camera expressed in the lyrics of the song such as “*Hamri na mano, bajajwa se pucho*” (If you do

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<sup>59</sup> A *Tawa'if* (Courtesan) catered to the nobility of the Indian subcontinent and excelled in contribution to dance (*mujra*) and music.

not accept my word, ask the cloth merchant) evokes a playful spirit. To add to the playfulness, the courtesan is also smiling for her patrons at the brothel and the audience while she makes attempts to justify her innocence. The shots from the scene can be analyzed under Pinney's idea of corporeal aesthetics and depict their usefulness by creating that zone of mutuality between the viewer and the viewed. The subjects looking into the camera with a close up also have an underlying meaning to them, they do not only represent the identity of the actors but are reflective towards their spectator as seeing and being seen.

I want to highlight the version of this song first sung by Shamshad Begum in the movie *Himmat* (dir. Roshal Lal Shorey, 1941). Although no print of the song is available,<sup>60</sup> the parody version of the song in *Aabroo* (dir. Nazir, 1943) says much about the original video. Some sources refer to the original version being shot in a similar setting, where a courtesan is surrounded by a group of men and performs a *mujra*. Notable in *Aabroo*, is a similar storyline to that of the other two movies in which the song is set (*Pakeezah* and *Himmat*). The movie is a story about a courtesan named Shobha, who is a religious woman and wants to break away from the shackles of her *kotha* (brothel). After she refuses to cater to Hari and Kunwar, the leading male characters in the film, Kunwar is impressed by her dignity and pursues her for marriage. However, later due to the problems Shobha faces at home with Kunwar, she runs away seeking refuge in a theatre company where she sings and dances for a living. The storyline progresses with Shobha battling the society for the position of women in the society.

The movie includes a song sequence starring Yakub Mehboob Khan as Hari, who performs a parody of the song "*Inhi logon ne.*" During the song he can be seen looking into the camera and connecting with the audience in a way similar to Meena Kumari in *Pakeezah*. Additionally, he is impersonating a courtesan in front of an audience comprising of men and one woman. Hari is also seen using the *dupatta* during his performance and making connections with the spectator during lyrics such as "these people... if you do not accept my word, ask the cloth merchant." Being performed as a parody, suggests that the original was also performed by a courtesan, with similar expressions and *mise-en-scène*. The original version was shot in Lahore and resulted in the production of two other item numbers of the same song, signifying the importance of Lahore as a key site for the development of item numbers.

While the idea of female performances was being constructed, the role of Parsi theatre in setting a paradigm for female performances even before the women themselves became a part of this theatrical culture or songs in later years is important (Hansen 127). The presence of women in the theatre was opposed by all communities in the region. For this reason, female impersonators played a critical role in establishing a norm of Indian womanhood (Hansen 127). The standards and ideals that were set for how a woman was supposed to behave were brought forward through the female impersonators. There was an intense focus on the *sadhana* (technique of disciplining) that was required of young female impersonators to become the "perfect woman" on the stage, whose *chal dhal* (gait and graces) was supposed to be a representation of how a women of a respectable household would act (Pande 1647). This is something we also see in the performance of item

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<sup>60</sup> While there are audio versions of the song available, but no print of the film or song was available in stores or online. This narrowed the research in terms of looking at more item songs produced in Lahore.

numbers discussed in the paper. Notable in this case is the performance of Hari in *Aabroo*, while he performs a parody of the song *Inhi logon ne*.

Taking the discussion back to the essential characteristics in an item number, I now look at the *mise-en-scène* in these songs. The *mise-en-scène* in an item number comprises of the gathering of men gazing at the woman, consumption of alcohol or smoking by the audience in the shot, and the voyeuristic camera angles that objectify the subject. The *mise-en-scène* in both versions of the song *Inhi logon ne* is similar in a lot of ways. Willeman suggests that the ‘gaze of the screen’ is a more powerful phenomenon than the subject itself (Dixon 4). The production, setting and the frame has the ability to transform the reception of the viewer. This is not to negate the symbolic significance of the subject in building a connection with the audience, but rather to understand the importance of the background alongside its subject. The low angle camera shots in both videos suggest two things; firstly, the superiority of men and secondly, to give the audience a sense that they share the subject’s perspective by looking up at them. Even though the subject in each case is different, a woman in *Pakeezah* and a man in *Aabroo*; they represent the same idea and notion of the gaze of the screen, identifying it as an essential characteristic of an item number. The gaze produces effects of luscious eroticism, which in the case of images can be created through colors and texture. Hence, in the case of *darshan*, the worshipper sees the divinity and the divinity likewise sees the devotee through an image. In the case of item numbers, the gaze of the screen produces a sense of intimacy with its viewer who reciprocates locking in that vision to which he keeps returning.

The analysis of how the cinema structures the ways of “seeing” and “being seen” under the lens of *darshan* can also be analyzed in *Babu daroga ji kon kasoore* from the movie *Taqdeer*. The film’s star, Nargis, is featured in this item number. Observing Nargis, when she is on screen, it is rather impossible to ignore how her eye never stays with the camera, in moments, oblivious to the *mise-en-scène*. This suggests multiple narratives in terms of how the viewer and view-ee relationship is being developed. The close-up shots focusing on the item girl depict a subjective relationship with the audience. The camera moves along with her throughout the song, while she never looks directly into the camera but looks beyond it. The camera in this case is voyeuristic and depicts what the man behind the camera is looking at. Nargis is reaching out to the audience for help and building a connection with them under the notion of looked-at-ness. This voyeuristic nature of the camera is also prominent in another item song from the 1940’s *Samne gali mein mera ghar hai* from the movie *Mirza Sahiban*.

The song begins with the actress dancing and moving towards the camera, communicating to its audience that *Samne gali mein mera ghar hai, pata mera bhool na jana* (My home is in the opposite street, do not forget my address). The dancer not only looks into the camera while expressing grief over her lost identity but is also smiling as she develops a connection with her spectators. However, what is more important in this case is to notice how there are moments when she is not looking into the camera but beyond it, just like Nargis during her item song. The item girl in this case is also avoiding the voyeuristic camera while she sings *Zakhmi jigar hai, zamane ka dar hai* (my liver is injured, and I am scared of the people around me). The similarity in both cases is the notion of looked-at-ness being represented from a different angle. The actresses are not looking into the camera, but they are looking beyond it, towards their spectators behind the camera to get their message across.

This integration of eroticism as the audience watches the final product of *Babu daroga ji*, is reflective of the dominant ideological concept of the cinema. The men in the audience are laughing, playing with their mustaches and are seated with their legs spread while the woman dances in front of them for help. In this case Mulvey's theory of the way the unconscious of patriarchal society has structured film form to develop the connection between the dancer and its audience is also relevant. She argues how the alternative cinema is not only politically but also aesthetically developing, conceiving a new language of desire. This desire functions as a display of women on two levels, as an erotic object for subjects within the screen and the spectators behind the camera. The determination of the male gaze through the concept of looked-at-ness, in the case of *Taqdeer* and *Mirza Sahiban*, therefore combines the gaze of the spectator, camera and male characters in the song making it impossible for her to look directly into the camera.

The reception of a film through the combined gaze of the cinematic apparatus and its viewers is what *darshan* entails in an item number. The frame of the video represents a force deep within the field, a gaze that is returned by the frame towards the audience. The angle at which the shot is framed represents the action and builds a connection between the camera and its audience. The high angle shot in the song illustrates the superiority of the man over the vulnerability of the dancer isolating her from the frame. The camera aligns with the *darogha* (policeman) who is sitting at an elevated spot, suggesting the power structure in society and depicting the viewpoint of a man towards the powerless role of Nargis. The shot also emphasizes the identity of the item girl through the messiness of her hair and her appearance. Another feature noticeable in the song is how all the men circling Nargis while she dances for them are playing with their mustaches which are symbolic of their assertive masculinity. According to the twentieth-century gender code, a mustached man was a patriarch, authority figure or free agent who was able to play by his own rules (Oldstone-Moore 48). Hence with the high and wide angle shot, the mustached men put on a show of the masculinity that resides in the narrative of the song while the item girl puts on a show for the policeman for the release of her lover. Here the lighting is dark and there are shadows in the background, which creates a feeling of oppression and gloom.

Lastly, the lyrics of the song also emphasize the identity of Nargis. The use of words like *mora* instead of *mera* (mine) and *umariya bitat jae* instead of *umar beeti jae* (age/life is moving fast), is also a part of the *mise-en-scène*. These words are in *purbi*, which is a literary register of Hindi-Urdu characterized by the use of certain words and grammar borrowed from language in the eastern part of the so-called "Hindi belt," notably Braj and Awadhi. Use of such words are attributed to the Hindu classical music *purbi*, sung in the eastern style of the classical thumri, in Lucknow and Varanasi (Henry 1). The use of musical style thumri is also connected to the musical traditions used by Parsi and Marathi theatre, which required the body to enact the words sung (Mishra 10). The most accomplished courtesans were also said to be from Lucknow (Dwyer 117). Therefore, the use of such language by the courtesans themselves in these songs' aid in their characteristic of an item number. The use of *purbi* was also prominent in the 1941 version of *Inhi logon ne le lina dupatta mora*, from *Himmat*.



## Conclusion

This paper, by focusing on item songs produced from 1940-1947 in Lahore and Bombay, analyzes the item number within the concept of *darshan*. It emphasizes the point that an item number is not just a skimpy girl dancing to a racy song and flashy lights. The essential qualities that distinguish an item number from the other songs and song sequences comprise of ‘the look back’ notion, voyeuristic camera angles and physical features of the dancers. These characteristics, as seen in songs like *Inhi logon ne* and *Babu daroga jee*, develop a connection between the dancer and its spectators and create a zone of mutuality under the concept of *darshan*. Considering these characteristics, a *mujra* is also seen as a subgenre of an item number where the audience reciprocates by making a connection with the on-screen presence. Therefore, similar to how *darshan* induces a sense of being watched and cared for by the God/Goddess, during an item number the dancer connects with the audience and the notion of seeing and being seen develops. The relationship is not only confined to the subject itself, but also the mise-en-scene. Consequently, these essential qualities allow us to deconstruct item numbers in order to understand how they exert a powerful notion of seeing and being seen between the dancer and her spectators.

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## Filmography

*Aabroo* (dir. Nazir, 1943)

- Alam Ara* (dir. Ardeshir Irani, 1931)
- Daughters of Today* (dir. Shankradev Arya, 1928)
- Himmat* (dir. Roshal Lal Shori, 1941)
- Khazanchi* (dir. Moti B. Gidwani, 1941)
- Mirza Sahiban* (dir. K. Amarnath, 1947)
- Pakeezah* (dir. Kamal Amrohi, 1972)
- Raja Harishchandra* (dir. Dahasaheb Phalke, 1913)
- Taqdeer* (dir. Mehboob Khan, 1943)
- Yamla Jutt* (dir. Moti B. Gidwani, 1940)