

MULLA NASRUDDIN IN CINEMA

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Abstract: Mulla Nasruddin is a folk hero. His tales are popular the world over. It is believed that he originally belonged to Turkey. His tales are short and humorous. But through humor these tales teach important life-lessons which people otherwise fail to learn. This paper portrays Mulla Nasruddin in a new role – that of a film hero. During the Soviet period many of his tales were made into films in the Central Asian Republics of the erstwhile Soviet Union, mainly Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. Some of his films are described in this paper. The material for this paper has been collected from the Internet sources especially Youtube.com which has these Mulla Nasruddin full-length feature films. The links to these films have been provided as footnotes in the paper.

Keywords: Mulla Nasruddin, Films, Soviet Union, Central Asian Republics.

Otto von Bismarck once quoted that –

“Only a fool learns from his own mistakes.

The wise man learns from the mistakes of others.”¹

Mulla Nasruddin’s version, who is considered to be a ‘wise fool’², goes one step further than this, saying –

“However, a wise fool is generous enough to let others learn from his failures.”

The moment one hears the name Mulla Nasruddin, an image of an old man with a long beard riding backwards on his donkey appears before one’s eyes. But, in reality he was much more than just a funny man. He was a folk hero, a jester, a fool, a wise man, a Sufi, a teacher, a judge, a husband, a father...talk about multi-tasking!!! There are numerous tales of Mulla Nasruddin that portray each one of his personalities. This paper discusses Mulla Nasruddin’s lesser known side, which is him as a film hero.

No one actually knows whether Mulla Nasruddin was an actual person or a figment of someone’s very vivid imagination, but many countries claim Nasruddin to be their own like Turkey which has a grave site marked as Nasruddin’s to prove it.

If Turkey’s claim is accepted to be true then it goes without saying that Mulla Nasruddin and his tales travelled far and wide over the years and now Mulla Nasruddin is known in many countries of the world, although by different titles and names. For example in Turkey, he is called Nasreddin Hoca, in its neighbouring country Azerbaijan he is known as Molla Nasreddin, in China – as Afandi or Afangti, and of course, in India as Mulla Nasruddin.

The interesting thing to note is that Mulla Nasruddin is extremely popular in countries which were connected with each-other since ancient times via the legendary Silk Road; Turkey and China being very

¹ Otto von Bismarck. Quotes. Quotable quotes. n.d. Goodreads. 2 January 2017.

<http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/294225-only-a-fool-learns-from-his-own-mistakes-the-wise>

² Idries Shah called Mulla Nasruddin a ‘wise fool’.

important part of this Silk Road. India was also connected to the Silk Road via a subsidiary route which was termed as the Spice Route. All the Central Asian Countries - Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan – were a very important part of the Silk Road too. Hence, it may not be too far-fetched to assume that the spread and popularity of these tales in Russia was due to the fact that all the above-mentioned Central Asian countries were not long ago a part of the erstwhile Soviet Union, and these tales became popular in the erstwhile Soviet Union because of the association of the Soviet Union with these Central Asian countries.

These five Central Asian countries mentioned above, especially Tajikistan and Uzbekistan were so influenced by Mulla Nasruddin's tales that numerous movies were made in these two countries portraying Nasruddin as a protagonist and as a savior of the poor and the downtrodden and as a fighter for the rights of the common man. From a folk hero, Mulla Nasruddin became a film hero in these Central Asian countries and in the erstwhile Soviet Union by virtue of its association with these Central Asian countries.

During the mid-twentieth century, many films based on Mulla Nasruddin were made under such then famous Soviet banners like – Kinostudiya Tajikfilm, Uzbek Kino and Tashkentskaya Kinostudiya. One such film which was made in 1966 by Tajikfilm is titled in Russian “**Dvenaatsatch Mogiil Khodji Nasreddina**”³, which translated into English means “*Twelve Graves of Khoja Nasruddin*”. In the very first scene of this film, Mulla Nasruddin is seen sitting on his donkey backwards going through the streets of a town in a death procession because he was sentenced to death. This film in short is about Mulla Nasruddin travelling through centuries...it ends in the then present century, which was the XXth century. Mulla Nasruddin time travels in this film and the last scene of this film ends in the mid-20th century.

Another film made in 1959 by the same production banner – Kinostudiya Tajikfilm titled in Russian “**Nasreddin v Khodjente ili Ochaarovannii Prince**”⁴ which translated in English means “*Nasruddin in Khujand or the Enchanted Prince*” is based on a novel written by Russian writer Leonid Solovyov. Khujand which until 1991 was known as Leninabad is the second largest town of Tajikistan.

Another Soviet Production Banner by the name of Uzbek Kino made films about Mulla Nasruddin one of which was titled in Russian ‘**Khodja Nasreddin ii Azroil**’⁵ (*Khodja Nasreddin and Azroil – The Angel of Death*).

Yet another Production Banner - Tashkentskaya Kinostudiya made a couple of films about Mulla Nasruddin as well one of which was titled in Russian – “**Nasreddin v Bukhare**”⁶ (in English – “*Nasreddin in Bukhara*”). It was made in 1943. This film portrays the level of corruption in Bukhara which is now an important city of Uzbekistan.

All the films which are mentioned above are full length feature films; they are approximately one and a half hours films, some in black and white, and some in colour.

The production known as Tajikfilms is still there now. It is located in the capital city of Tajikistan – Dushanbe. The productions Tashkentskaya Kinostudiya and Uzbekkino are most probably not functional

³ YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LchSJR_-1RI 2 January 2017.

⁴ YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mSqyJP-B75k> 2 January 2017.

⁵ YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AC9l_nzoD_A 3 January 2017.

⁶ YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2e_zClhRsJw 3 January 2017.

anymore or may be functioning by some other name. These two productions if functioning today would be located in Uzbekistan.

The above-mentioned films are just the tip of the iceberg. There are scores of such films made during the Soviet era on the life of Mulla Nasruddin. A few other names of films on Mulla Nasruddin are - “**Pokhozheniya Khodji Nasreddina**”⁷ (in English – “*The Adventures of Nasreddin Hodja*”), “**Vkus Halwi**”⁸ (*The Taste of Halwa*), “**Vozvrashheniye Khodji Nasreddina**”⁹ (*The Return of Khoja Nasreddin*), “**Pervaya Lyubov Nasreddina**”¹⁰ (*Nasreddin’s First Love*). All these movies are available on YouTube.

Though there were and are many cartoon series of Mulla Nasruddin tales in many countries including India and even China, there are no full length feature films on him in these countries. In Bulgaria though there is a movie titled ‘**Khitriy Pyotr**’ who in English is known as Sly Peter (*Hitar-Pitar* in Bulgarian)¹¹, and this Sly Peter was actually an ‘equivalent figure’ to Mulla Nasruddin. Many such ‘equivalent figures’ of Mulla Nasruddin are there the world over – Sly Peter in Macedonia and Bulgaria, Till Eulenspiegel in Germany, Bertoldo in Italy, Juha in Arab countries – are to name a few.

In fact in India there are more such equivalent figures of Mulla Nasruddin than in any other country. India has Birbal and Sheikh Chilli from North India, Gopal Bhar from East (in Bengal, to be precise) and Tenali Raman from the South. Many of their stories match with or are similar to the tales of Mulla Nasruddin; one very good example would be that of an Akbar and Birbal story that I think almost every Indian has heard or read during his or her childhood – which is ‘**Birbal Ki Khichdi**’ (in English it would be translated most probably as *Birbal’s Porridge*). Mulla Nasruddin has such a similar tale where he is cheated by his friends and takes his revenge on them by making them wait a long time for a meal which Nasruddin was supposed to prepare for them because according to them he lost his bet of standing in a cold field at night due to a candle’s light which was burning at Nasruddin’s windowsill far away.

In conclusion, I would like to reiterate the fact that though India did broadcast a TV serial on Mulla Nasruddin tales during the 80’s of the last century where Raghuvir Singh Yadav played the role of Mulla Nasruddin, India is yet to make a full length feature film on him. According to me, Mulla Nasruddin deserves to have at least one full-length feature film to his credit in India for the simple reason that Mulla Nasruddin tales are very much alive in the world today taking modern shapes and getting molded by modern concepts as well, and his tales through humor are always teaching us something about the human nature that we otherwise fail to notice, and therefore, according to me, he is in true sense a hero – be it a folk hero or a film hero.

⁷ YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o1gjh4g0Fs> 2 January 2017.

⁸ YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MsKEwJOWPME> 3 January 2017.

⁹ YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9Q6ylpsHONS> 3 January 2017.

¹⁰ YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=13zjb6KXw3w> 3 January 2017.

¹¹ YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gtQsW9Vpcp8> 3 January 2017.