At the very outset, I would like to take a closer look at the intricate yet complementary relationship between two major disciplines of knowledge and study, namely, History and Cinema. The latter as a document reveals something about the time in which it was made and released – it is also important to recognize that films often attempt to take on the role of the historian. As per Hayden White’s suggestion that the work of the historian is not far removed from that of the story teller, then films – particularly those that adhere to principles of realism and verisimilitude – would appear to have the potential to be exemplary histories, promising and unrivalled ability to bring the past to life in a way that written histories cannot. However, there are problems with this simplistic view of the movies. Certainly there is a strong case to be made for acknowledging the important role movies have played in creating and informing common understandings of history. Paul B. Weinstein summarizes the issue succinctly: ‘think about which has made a greater impression on the mass consciousness, myriad scholarly studies of the Normandy invasion or Steven Spielberg’s Saving Private Ryan?’ (2001) But does the fact that movies represent a more popularly accessible route to narratives about the past mean that we should grant the same status – as a form of valid knowledge about the past – to feature cinema as to scholarly written histories? One response to this question is to point out that, despite the widespread assumption that these supposedly rigorous, written histories possess greater objectivity than feature films, these histories are also the product of human agency and so are equally susceptible to distortion. However, the political perspective of the historian may be only one of several factors that can lead to a less-than-rigorous treatment of ‘factual’ data in all histories. The often tenuous relation between ‘hard facts’ and the historical narratives that are developed around them may be an effect of what Fredric Jameson has observed about history; that although history itself is not a text or a narrative it is something that is never encountered in unmediated form, and certainly not in a form that is immune to the influence of political ideologies. (Chopra-Gant, Cinema and History, 7-8)
Hayden White adopts a similar stance in his consideration of the relationship between ‘facts’ and the narratives woven around them. He makes a compelling argument that the historian’s role is about more than simply recording chronological sequences of events:

The events must be not only registered within the chronological framework of their original occurrence but narrated as well, that is to say, revealed as possessing a structure, an order of meaning, that they do not possess as a mere sequence. (Chopra-Gant, Cinema and History, 8)

And the process of providing this ‘order of meaning’ to the raw facts of history is one that inevitably possesses a political or ideological dimension.

Whether historical discourse is given material form in film or writing it is essential to acknowledge the role played by the historian in the construction of historical knowledge as he/she transforms the fragmented and de-contextualized events that we regard as the ‘facts’ of history into a meaningful narrative form. While both written and filmed histories are, therefore, inevitably susceptible to inaccuracies and outright distortion, it must also be remembered that feature films are created within a matrix of competing pressures – including the desire to be faithful to historical fact, as well as narrative considerations, economic pressures, genre conventions, political and regulatory pressures and so on – that may increase their vulnerability to historical inaccuracies when compared to scholarly written histories. (Chopra-Gant, Cinema and History, 8)

Notwithstanding the fact that these debates about the validity of feature films as a medium for rendering histories still continues, there remains considerable interest among the cinema-going public in films based on historical subjects as the recent success of films such as Jodha Akbar demonstrates. The disparity in popular influence between the two forms signals a continuing need to engage seriously with the historical film and to advance our understanding through constructive debate about the problems associated with this mode of history-writing with film. The field of film and cinema history is complicated, and includes the technical, economic, aesthetic, and social dimensions of films, the biographies of filmmakers and also the ‘history writing’ role of certain films. (Chopra-Gant, Cinema and History, 9)

Cinema has always played a momentous role in giving voice to the existential concerns and dilemmas of common people, tried and perplexed in our tragi-comic postmodern world. Films are cultural artifacts created by specific cultures, which reflect those cultures, and, in turn, affect them. Film is considered to be an important art form, a source of
popular entertainment and a powerful medium for educating — or indoctrinating — citizens. The visual elements of cinema give motion pictures a universal power of communication. Classic cinema has invariably proved its worth by exercising a formative influence on the psyche of cine-goers. It has effectively tried to mobilize the sensitivity and sensibility of cine-goers. Classic cinema, like classic literature, incorporates a polyphonic narrative, that is to say, it projects reality from a multi-dimensional perspective. It does not merely invite us to enter a realm of enchantment and entertainment but also bring us face-to-face with the gruesome realities of ever-changing life. However, the commitment of cinema becomes doubly strengthened when it comes to projecting some of the most disturbing and controversial historical events. Such potentially dangerous historical events have unleashed a destructive tsunami of communalism, hooliganism, jingoism, violence, war, inhuman atrocities etc. Cinema, thus, plays a pivotal role in representing such unprecedented historical events authentically and objectively. One such committed cinema that intends to re-create and represent India’s Partition and its horrendous consequences is undoubtedly ‘Partition Cinema’.

One may come across certain perennial issues central to the making of Partition Cinema like –

1. How far cinema succeeds in transcribing or transcreating such untranslatable traumatic event like Partition?
2. To what extent cinema can give voice to erstwhile marginalized and oppressed subalterm of Partition?
3. How far cinema succeeds in maintaining a concord between the empirical documentation of Partition and its aesthetic representation?

Partition Cinema, as a whole, shifts the spotlight from the domain of High Politics – both of British Empire and Nationalist Leadership and focuses its attention on the ‘history of people’ – a history through which people remember and make sense of the experience from “below”. This approach derives its force from the premise that nationalist and state-building projects involve substantial fabrications and contestations and cannot be thought of as grand “political” mechanisms isolated from a more diffused cultural realm. Partition Cinema is an attempt to give voice to the post-Partition silence and locating this very silence as both a portent and a precondition for the subsequent discursive eruption. On one hand, it laments over the loss of \textit{Akhand Bharat} and on the other it upholds the dignified human values and the supreme acts of sacrifice done out of love and compassion for the whole humanity.
References