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Bollywood Diplomacy: Unravelling Narendra Modi's Strategic Deployment of Hindi cinema

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Bollywood Diplomacy: Unravelling Narendra Modi's Strategic Deployment of Hindi cinema

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Abstract: This thesis explores Bollywood's homogenizing potential through the lens of "soft power," positing Bollywood as a national conduit that obscures the hegemonic tendencies of the BJP and Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The analysis is focused on the function of Bollywood as a platform for promoting and perpetuating dominant national narratives and cultural norms, thereby discrediting minority considerations. In addition, this research shall expand its scope to explore developments in celebrity discourses and the growing politicization of social media. Through these inquiries, the thesis aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted influence of Bollywood on Indian society and politics.

Keywords: Bollywood, Hindu nationalism, BJP, Narendra Modi, social media, Celebrity politics

Contents

Introduction	3
Literature review	4
Research Question	5
Structure	5
Methodology	6
Chapter 1: Classic Bollywood Themes Revisited	6
1.1: An History of Bollywood	6
1.2: Golden age of Bollywood (1950s and 60s)	7
1.3: Angry Young Man (1970s)	8
1.4: Masala flicks (1990s to 2010s)	8
1.5: "Brand Modi" Bollywood (2014- Present)	10
1.6: Chapter Conclusion	11
Chapter 2: "Brand Modi" Bollywood	11
2.1 "Padmaavat" and Neo-Hindutva	11
2.1.1 Film Analysis	12
2.1.2 Critique	12
2.1.3 Neo-Hindutva and Femininity	13
2.2 "The Kashmir Files" and Othering	13
2.2.1 Film Analysis	13
2.2.2 Critique	14
2.2.3 A New narrative	14
2.2.4 Othering	15
2.3 "PM Narendra Modi" and Patriotism	15
2.3.1 Film Analysis	15
2.3.2 Critique	15

2.3.3 Nationalism	16
2.4 PM Narendra Modi, the Person	16
2.4.1 Modi narratives	17
2.4.2 Bollywood Narratives	17
2.4.3 Social Media Narratives	18
2.5 Chapter Conclusion	18
Chapter 3: The Vigor of Starpower	19
3.1 Bollywood and Starpower	19
3.2 Pro-Modi Bollywood Stars	20
3.3 Attack on Bollywood: SSR Controversy	21
3.4 Attack on Bollywood: Boycotting Islam	23
3.4.1 Salman Khan	23
3.4.2 Aamir Khan	23
3.4.3 Sharukh Khan (SRK)	24
3.5 Chapter Conclusion	24
Chapter 4: Conclusion	25
Bibliography	27
Appendix	33

Introduction

Bollywood, or the Hindi film industry, has been widely speculated to exert significant influence in moulding the Indian nation, constructing its identity, and symbolising its global frontiers. Throughout history, numerous Bollywood films have resonated with the Indian audience by evoking sentiments of nationalism and devotion to the nation (Rajadhyaksha, 2003). The subjects included various issues, including the struggle for independence, invasions, conflicts, sports, history, and resistance. The prevailing motifs observed across these films reflect a sense of national pride and commitment to the homeland. The marketing strategy that positions Bollywood as a shared cultural asset and a symbol of national self-identification is actively ingested and reproduced by Indian individuals, regardless of their location (Mehta & Pandharipande, 2011).

Bollywood films predominantly reinforce the prevailing societal norms and portray an overarching national narrative. This narrative frequently neglects the inherent variety of India in favour of a homogenous nationalism. Multiple researchers have observed this as popular movies continuously serve as preservers of dominant Indian customs, family values, masculinity, heteronormativity, and Hindu religious aesthetics (Rajadhyaksha, 2003; Kaur & Sinha, 2005; Dwyer, 2006).

Since 2014, under the leadership of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and Prime Minister Narendra Modi, India has exhibited a growing inclination towards adopting the qualities of an ethno-nationalist state with *Hindutva* ("Hindu-ness") as the core ideology of the nation. *Hindutva* is characterised by its association with upper-caste and Brahminical perspectives, as well as its endorsement of Hindu

supremacy. Dedicated supporters, known as *bhakt*s or the 'Troll Army' (Chaturvedi, 2016) are notably active on social media, focusing on issues like combatting nepotism within the Nehru-Gandhi family, pushing for the removal of Muslim representations, and advocating for Hindi as the official language over English. To rally support, they use symbols like cow protection (*Gau Raksha*) and the ban on beef and cow slaughter, which discriminate against Muslims and members of lower castes (Jaffrelot, 2017).

A comparable scenario unfolds in the context of Bollywood, wherein the advent of the BJP has led to vehement criticism of the medium. This criticism primarily revolves around allegations of nepotism within the industry and the presence of movie stars belonging to the Muslim community. While it may not always be possible to attribute the charges to the BJP directly, numerous allegations have surfaced suggesting a deliberate assault on the Bollywood industry. On the contrary, despite facing criticism from right-wing proponents, it is noteworthy that Modi has consistently acknowledged the unifying capacity of the film industry as he has adeptly leveraged Bollywood films and actors to validate personal narratives and influence the collective consciousness of the Indian populace.

Literature review

The scholarly exploration of Bollywood's historical origins is a relatively recent endeavour; even the etymology of the name Bollywood is still up for debate. Some proponents argue it was phonetically transposed from 'Tollywood' in the late 1930s (Prasad, 2003). Alternative viewpoints posit that the emergence of the term might be attributed to the Bombay film industry itself (Bhaumik, 2007) or the English-language press in India (Ganti, 2004). However, within the film industry, several actors express their dismissal and resentment against the word "Bollywood," seeing it as a Western construct that classifies Indian films as mere imitations or alternatives to the dominant Hollywood model (Gopal & Moorti, 2008).

In the broader context of early Bollywood studies, it was deemed necessary to examine the historical origins of Indian film. This method allowed for a systematic examination of the chronological progression of Indian cinema and provided an in-depth understanding of its transformation into its contemporary form (Ganti, 2004; Bose, 2006). More recently, there has been a notable increase in critical and historical inquiry from various institutions of liberal arts and film studies worldwide. This surge has been particularly evident over the past two decades, specifically focusing on exploring the philosophical underpinnings of Bollywood movies. The primary objective of these discourses is to analyse the long-term trajectory of *how* and *why* Bollywood has emerged as an embodiment of inherent 'Indianness' that possesses worldwide appeal despite its limited ability to encapsulate the diverse range of Indian sensibilities and realities (Takhar et al., 2012). These studies suggest that the widespread appeal of Bollywood can be attributed to India's transition to a market-oriented, neoliberal internationalization in the 1990s. However, an alternative perspective disputes this notion, proposing that Bollywood's emergence is not solely a product of neoliberalism and consumerism but rather marks another phase in the century-long evolution of Hindi cinema (Mehta, 2020)

According to Joshi (2015), Bollywood films serve as a mechanism through which society addresses and deals with its issues, traumas, and aspirations. Similarly, several scholars have argued that popular Hindi cinema is a platform for forming and perpetuating state ideology. This perspective was extensively explored in Madhava Prasad's *Ideology of the Hindi Film: A Historical Construction* (1998), in which he views popular Hindi cinema as a space where the state's ideology is produced and reproduced. Numerous literary works assert such notions, positing that popular cinema aligns with the state's goals and acts as a conduit for its development. Similar to Prasad, these studies seem to consolidate all conceivable variations of "India" within the broader idea of the nation. In Sumita

Chakravarty's (1993) conceptualisation, Bollywood cinema should be interpreted as a means of "embodying" the nation. However, it is crucial to note that the nation-state relationship is only sometimes harmonious. There are instances where the nation aligns with the state, agreeing on some issues while diverging from others.

The nation, thus, encompasses a broad spectrum of aspirations, and Bollywood has always been actively engaged in bringing this spectrum closer together. However, what varies across Bollywood phases is the kind of nation envisioned and the types of public imaginings to enhance and include to establish such a vision. Hence, our current objective is to analyse the nation's presentation in contemporary Bollywood films, focusing on the time frame coinciding with the emergence of Hindu nationalism under Prime Minister Modi. Accordingly, this thesis aims to contribute to the existing literature by analysing the present stage of national envisioning to determine whether it adheres to a predetermined trend or if Prime Minister Modi has innovatively utilised Bollywood's soft power. Moreover, since a significant portion of the academic literature predates the emergence of celebrity culture, social media, and growing religious prejudice, including these variables will enrich scholarly discussions.

Research Question

Considering Bollywood's homogenising potential, this thesis aims to analyse Bollywood as a representation of "soft power," a concept derived from Joseph Nye's (1990) framework of American foreign policy. It argues that Bollywood serves as a platform for promoting and nurturing dominant national narratives and cultural forms, often overshadowing alternative expressions. The investigation of soft power entails exerting influence over individuals through appeal and attractiveness. In contrast to Nye's perspective, which overlooks the internal dynamics of soft power within a country, this thesis will demonstrate how the soft power label may be applied to Bollywood as a *national* conduit for masking the hegemonic tendencies of Hindu nationalism.

This thesis has chosen to underscore Modi's individual employment of the Bollywood industry. Henceforth, the ensuing research inquiry shall be as follows: *How has Prime Minister Modi utilized the soft power of Bollywood to strengthen the cultural predominance of Hindu nationalism within India? And why is Bollywood considered an efficacious medium for disseminating such perspectives?*

Each chapter within this study will endeavour to address distinct research inquiries, thereby laying the groundwork for a comprehensive response to the overarching research question:

- **Chapter 1:** *Should the manifestation of Hindu-nationalist motifs in Bollywood films be perceived as a contemporary phenomenon instigated by the Hindu-nationalist government, or is it a reoccurring motif that undergoes reinvention during each phase of Bollywood?*
- **Chapter 2:** *How is Hindu Nationalism conveyed in Modi-era Bollywood films? And in what manner has Modi utilized these films to bolster his public persona?*
- **Chapter 3:** *What responsibilities do Bollywood actors have in endorsing or challenging the ideologies propagated by the Modi administration?*

Structure

Chapter One will demonstrate how Bollywood's widespread appeal stems from its capacity to consistently offer spaces for rethinking Indian culture through an oversimplified yet comprehensive timeline of developments in the industry. Chapter two then offers a greater understanding of the nationalist themes that manifest in recent Bollywood productions, the relationship that currently exists

between national identity and the media, and the ideas of Orientalism and *Neo-Hindutva*. The first section of this chapter focuses on three movies that were made and released during Narendra Modi's tenure as India's prime minister, while the second section will explore how Modi exploits specific movie narratives to enhance his star persona. The last chapter will discuss the assault on the industry by right-wing Hindu politics, the use of actor Sushant Singh Rajput's suicide as a weapon, the mobilisation of Modi's troll army, and the numerous hardships experienced by Bollywood actors in the current political milieu. This chapter will concentrate on the division in Bollywood, with well-known BJP supporters on the one hand and Modi critics on the other. Consequently, it will also examine the vital influence that "star power" has in Indian politics.

Methodology

This study draws added implications through its results and past research. The former will mainly consist of data acquired from social media posts (Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, among others) since both celebrities and politicians have used these networks for political purposes, and it may even be argued that one cannot understand current Indian politics without them (Mitra, 2021). In addition, public interviews, speeches, and newspaper articles will be analysed in a similar manner. Government statistics, including government expenditure, public policies, and polling results relevant to the Bollywood industry, will be addressed where needed. Ultimately, a selection of Bollywood films has been reviewed to ascertain their alignment with Hindu nationalist values, narratives, and plots. While the research methodology applied to all films in this thesis is consistent, three specific Bollywood productions (*Padmaavat*, *Kashmir files*, and *PM Narendra Modi*) have undergone a more extensive rhetorical analysis.

Chapter 1: Classic Bollywood Themes Revisited

This chapter will thoroughly analyse the stages of Bollywood that scholars have previously examined in the respective academic domains. By utilising the available data, we may formulate a chronological sequence of prevalent issues in Bollywood cinema, facilitating our endeavour to address the ensuing question: *Should the manifestation of Hindu-nationalist motifs in Bollywood films be perceived as a contemporary phenomenon instigated by the Hindu-nationalist government, or is it a reoccurring motif that undergoes reinvention during each phase of Bollywood?*

1.1: An History of Bollywood

Despite the rich and intricate history of Indian filmmaking, scholars, critics, and educators in the early 2000s had already agreed on a concise rendition of Bollywood's trajectory (Bose, 2006). This condensed version highlights the most noteworthy aesthetic and thematic transformations within the Hindi film industry (Ganti, 2004). The characterisation of these stages can be summarised as follows:

- *British Raj (1910s to 9040s)*: This phase incorporated a diverse range of genres, including Mythologicals, which comprised films versions of revered epics such as the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, as well as stunt flicks.
- *Golden age of Bollywood (1950s and 60s)*: In this widely recognised era, performers and filmmakers such as Raj Kapoor, Guru Dutt, and Bimal Roy had significant influence and prominence in Indian cinema. Their films usually incorporated themes of national pride and anti-colonial spirit.
- *Angry Young Man (1970s)*: The 1970s were a significant time in Indian cinema, characterised by societal disintegration during the emergency period. This socio-political context led to the development of a genre of films known as "Angry Young Man" films, which may be categorised as action pictures seeking social revenge.

- *Masala flicks (1990s to 2010s)*: This phase mostly revolved around movies targeting the Indian Diaspora. These films prominently showcased patriotic, traditionalist, and family-oriented ideals and were responsible for popularising the genre of “Masala drama,” a style characterised by a blend of several genres including action, comedy, romance, drama and melodrama along with musical numbers.
- *Brand Modi Bollywood (present)*: The Bollywood film industry remains entrenched in the “Masala” phase; however, fantastical visuals, enticing music, and controversial themes (as will be explained later) have renewed interest this perchance soft power apparatus.

In his work, Rajadhyaksha (2003) elucidates how these conventional categorisations of Hindi cinema can be viewed as cinematic representations of the nation-state. The author asserts that the field of film theory has consistently showcased the significant influence exerted by nationalist-political constructs on storytelling and spectatorial behaviours (Rajadhyaksha, 2003, p. 33). The subsequent sections will expound upon this matter by analysing the political backdrop of each stage in the evolution of Bollywood and its consequential impact on the film industry. Furthermore, it will assess the relevance of these historical influences in light of the contemporary advancements observed in the repertory of Bollywood films.

1.2: Golden age of Bollywood (1950s and 60s)

In contrast to the nationalist sentiments observed in Europe, which often envisioned the community before its establishment as a country, India’s scenario was precisely the reverse. Following its independence in 1947, visualising the nation became crucial, demanding the creation of a collective sense of national identity inside the psyche of its people. The task at hand was to successfully tackle the broad and intangible aspirations of the nation, which encompassed and transcended its laws, traditions, heritage, and values. As Joshi (2015) puts it, “Nehru was asking for an act of public fantasy” (P. 4). Consequently, a wave of films centred around nationalism began to surface, depicting the difficult path of a country that had achieved independence after an exhausting battle for freedom. The emergence of films such as *Shaheed* (1962), *Samadhi* (1972), and *Pehla Aadmi* (1950), supposedly inspired by historical events related to the independence movement, marked their initial appearance in the cinematic universe. This “nationalist social genre” of film became the ‘dominant language of cinematic nationalism’ in the 1950s (Mehta, 2020, p. 63).

The era of independence was marked by the traumatic event of partition with Pakistan. In Bollywood cinema, the negative portrayal of Pakistan has traditionally served the purpose of satisfying the demands of cinemagoers (Roy, 2012). However, not until the mid-2000s did these portrayals of Pakistan emerge as a prevalent theme for expressing nationalism in Bollywood. A classic example that embodies this genre is the film *Rang De Basanti*, released in 2006. The film offers a historical account that highlights the significance of political violence within the Indian nationalist movement. It focuses explicitly on the revolutionaries associated with the Hindustan Socialist Republican Association, which has received limited attention from historians specialising in the nationalist era (Sirivastava, 2009). *Gadar: Ek Prem Katha* (2001) and *Fanaa* (2006) are other examples of films which expressed anti-Pakistan sentiments, as noted by Dudrah in 2012. The absence of anti-Pakistani sentiments in the early years of Bollywood cinema can be attributed to Jawaharlal Nehru, India’s first prime minister, as he largely disapproved of Hindi films’ tendency to cater to the masses (Kaul, 2002). Regardless, Nehru recognised the powerful status of Hindi film stars within society and even developed a strong personal connection with the renowned actor Prithviraj Kapoor, who frequently served as the face of the nation on cultural missions overseas. Kapoor, a staunch advocate of Nehru’s Indian National Congress party (INC), was even appointed to the upper house of the Indian parliament (*Rajya Sabha*) to engage prominent public figures in the administration process. Kapoor’s endorsement of the INC suggested the Hindi film industry’s inclination towards aligning with the incumbent political order.

1.3: Angry Young Man (1970s)

The Nehruvian approach to nation-building centred on establishing substantial infrastructure through implementing public sector enterprises (McMichael, 2008). Nehru was a Fabian socialist, and his administration emphasised preserving the interests of the nation's capitalists against global competition. However, implementing an elaborate framework for redistributing resources among the country's enormous population did not materialise as anticipated. Hence, despite India's commitment to secularism and recognition as a functional democracy, the nationalist aspiration for an affluent India had become jaded by the 1970s. The early enthusiasm for nation-building gradually waned after the first several decades of independence, giving rise to a growing sense of dissatisfaction.

Furthermore, the government's implementation of new labour constraints resulted in the emergence of criminal activities and unlawful behaviour, which can be observed in Hindi cinema throughout the 1970s and 80s. Labour unions and student demonstrations led to further oppression from the increasingly authoritarian state, culminating in a historic turning point in 1975. During this period, the INC, under the leadership of Indira Gandhi, declared a state of Emergency, thereby suspending democratic rights. In Bollywood, the post-independence era's optimism towards nation-building was drastically transformed in response to the prevailing challenges posed by the state. According to Madhava Prasad (1998), this phenomenon was called the "moment of disaggregation," characterised by the unravelling of the Hindi film format. One prominent manifestation of this trend was the rise of the macho, action-oriented films starring Amitabh Bachchan. During this time, Bachchan portrayed several iterations of the "angry young man," a protagonist representing the working class. The emergence of this "angry young man" persona may be attributed to the prevailing repression, protest, weakening political agency, and the direct assault on personal liberties (Mishra, 2002).

The state's economic policies, particularly the 1974 IMF loan, also spurred growing economic inequality and corruption. Prominent scriptwriter duo Javed Akhtar and Salim Khan translated these hardships of the Indian people onto the silver screen and managed to create a few of the most popular films in the "angry young man" repertoire (*Deewaar*, 1975; *Sholay*, 1975; *Trishul*, 1978; *Don*, 1978).

1.4: Masala flicks (1990s to 2010s)

The systematic exploitation of the labouring class by the government and private enterprise finally reached its apex with the liberalisation of the Indian economy to foreign capital throughout the 1980s, followed by the formal adoption of neoliberal policies in 1991 (Gosh & Chandrashekar, 2002). With the formal implementation of economic "liberalisation", a notable shift emerged in popular Hindi film as it started reevaluating the ongoing effects of Bachchan's portrayal as the "angry young man." The advent of neoliberalism enabled the onset of financialization, consumption, and risk-taking. In the context of neoliberal India, the concept of "risk-taking" progressively included potential risks associated with investment for those aspiring to climb the social ladder or engaged in economic endeavors. Consequently, the transformation during the 1990s, transitioning from Amitabh Bachchan to Shahrukh Khan, primarily centered around changes in the socio-economic background of the central character. While the male protagonist continued to dominate Hindi cinema, there was a shift from the working-class hero to the middle-class individual. Films like *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* (1998) and *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham* (2001), directed by Karan Johar, exemplify this genre shift.

Furthermore, the Indian government announced in May 1998 that it would authorise the Bombay film industry to secure financial resources from foreign funding, bank loans, and commercial investment. In considering the new situation of the industry, Indian filmmakers would no longer be reliant on government funding or engage in illicit financial activities through criminal networks. Instead, they could secure financial support from international sponsors and multinational corporations, such as Coca-Cola (Fig. 1) (Mehta, 2005; Dudrah, Mader, & Fuchs, 2015). This development resulted in the disappearance of Bombay from its cinematic universe, as the city's urban surroundings did not match the idealised depiction of consumerism that the film industry sought to promote (Kapur & Pendakur,

2007). Concerning this matter, we must acknowledge that various organisations under the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, including the Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC or ‘Censor Board’), the Directorate of Film Festivals (DFF), and the National Film Development Corporation (NFDC), have exerted considerable influence on the Indian film industry. However, while Bollywood remains privately owned, these organisations do not possess the authority to dictate the content that Bollywood may or may not produce (Dwyer, 2021). However, they can impose tax regulations or incentives that could impact film production, distribution, and exhibition.

Moreover, Bollywood's renewed image furthered ties with Indian diasporic community, notably in the United Kingdom and the United States. The 1990s witnessed the rise of a novel cohort of youthful filmmakers in the Bollywood industry, sometimes called the “brat-pack.” This group comprised notable individuals such as Aditya Chopra, Karan Johar, and Farhan Akhtar. Karan Johar is well recognised as a prominent figure within the Non-Resident Indian (NRI) film industry, primarily due to his involvement in producing highly renowned films like *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (1992), commonly called DDLJ, starring Shahrukh Kahn. The film earned notable recognition for its accomplishment in setting records as the longest-continuously-running Hindi movie (Fig. 2). Moreover, DDLJ is an important marker indicating Bollywood’s intended audience shift, transitioning from local Indian viewers to the international NRI community (Mehta & Pandharipande, 2011). Incorporating NRI narratives in films such as DDLJ brought about significant changes in the style and structure of Hindi cinema. Such changes included greater opportunities for filming in foreign locations, increased incorporation of the English language, increased pursuit of modernity, the portrayal of excessive wealth, and the exploration of themes related to familial separation and detachment (Dudrah, 2012). Accordingly, the films belonging to this particular genre are commonly perceived as depicting NRIs as individuals who are either influenced negatively by their ‘Western’ way of life or as experiencing a moment of self-awareness, longing to reconnect with their heritage.

Bollywood has maintained its significance by consistently addressing the Indian diaspora as a unified audience in its homogenised and idealised portrayals of “Indianness” (Thakar et al., 2012). The term “Bollyworld” was introduced by Kaur and Sinha (2005: 16) to elucidate the role of Bollywood as a medium for disseminating the concept of “Indianness” to a wide range of people. Rajadhyaksha (2003: 30) uses the concept of “techno-nostalgia” to refer to this sentiment of yearning for an idealised past experienced through technological mediums. Furthermore, he explains how Bollywood disseminates a commodified and globalised form of Indian nationalism, presenting it as a consumable depiction of Indian cultural heritage. In a similar vein, Kavoori and Joseph (2011) use the term “Bollyculture” to describe the significance of Bollywood across numerous cultural expressions that evoke profound sentiments of attachment and obligation towards their cultural heritage (p. 20). In Dudrah’s (2006) in-depth study of the media consumption behaviours of South Asian audiences, he notes their tendency to assimilate and reenact elements of Bollywood film cultures in their daily routines (p. 38). The fulfilment experienced by NRI audiences when watching films is often associated with the film’s display of patriotism and its ability to reinforce Indian cultural identity. However, empirical research on audience preferences indicates that this correlation needs to be revised. Instead, the pleasure derived from such films appears to be primarily rooted in aesthetic factors, such as the script’s originality, the actors’ performances and popularity, and the film’s visual appeal, including its musical numbers and elegant costumes (Kaur & Sinha, 2005).

As mentioned earlier, there was an increase in the number of film releases with violent nationalist themes during this phase of Hindi cinema. Films of this nature mostly depict the state’s objective in defending the integrity of the nation’s geographical and cultural boundaries. Paradoxically, as the nation-state increasingly conceded to the influence of transnational capital, it became more crucial to draw out and solidify these boundaries. This manifested in Bollywood through a pronounced leaning towards jingoism, characterised by a strong inclination to despise Pakistan. However, as the ideology of transnational capital became ingrained and more acceptable, a subsequent wave of Bombay films

arose, focusing on the youth and their profound commitment to the nation (Chandra, 2010). This fascination with national politics was realised in films such as *Rang De Basanti* (2006) and *Lage Raho Munna Bhai* (2006). Both films employ the help of mass media as a means to mobilise individuals towards active participation in the nation-building process. Essentially, the events in such movies mirror real-life occurrences; conversely, what plays out in real life is an imitation of what is shown in the movies.

The transnational Hindi cinema of the 90s- 00s has received significant attention as a subject of academic research, primarily due to its self-orientalization through the lens of “autoethnographic gaze” (Chaudhuri, 2020; 97)- deliberately engaging in the exploitation, exoticification, mockery, and critique of both domestic and foreign cultural norms. It allowed for a discussion of Indian identity within the context of multiple identities while simultaneously critiquing and reshaping the idea of Indianness. However, it is critical to note that these discussions occurred within the context of continuity and, therefore, without necessarily losing the essential characteristics of Indian film entirely.

1.5: “Brand Modi” Bollywood (2014- Present)

The trajectory of Bollywood’s development leading up to its current state was a subject of speculation among scholars in the mid-2000s. Studies now tend to be conducted according to the cultural approach which has commonly associated Bollywood films with matters of national identity. In contrast to the discussions that emphasise transnational perspectives, cultural studies of Bollywood films deviate by giving greater weight to religious themes rather than state politics by drawing attention to mythology, ritual customs, and culturally specific belief systems (Dissanayake, 1988). The cultural studies approach plays a significant role in elucidating how individuals of Indian descent develop, uphold, and react to certain systems of meaning conveyed via film. Scholars in this discipline would argue that Bollywood, realising its capacity to embody cultural hybridity, has purposefully leveraged this characteristic to its advantage (Gokulsing & Dissanayake, 1998; Dyer, 2006).

While it is true that cross-cultural influences have contributed to the expansion and validation of the industry, it is important to note that Bollywood, in tandem with the process of globalisation, has also reinforced the prominence of Hindu identity, leading to the marginalisation of cultural, religious, and ethnic minorities. Banerjee (2017: 3) notes a growing trend in Bollywood to depict Hindu nationalism by accentuating the physically strong male body as a symbol of vigorous and confident nationalistic ideals. According to Rajgopal (2011: 242), the phenomenon he refers to as ‘Bollywood’s nativist turn’ can be understood as a manifestation of Hindu nationalism, wherein any religion or culture other than Hinduism is portrayed as contradictory to Indian identity. As such, there has been a significant increase in the production of hyper-nationalist war films, biopics, and historical dramas that predominantly depict the dominant culture in the last ten years. These hyper-nationalist films aim to rationalise warfare, espionage, and state-sanctioned violence while advancing politically biased narratives of actors in today’s politics. Movies such as *Raazi* (2018), a spy drama that draws inspiration from the real-life experiences of an Indian Muslim RAW agent and *Uri: The Surgical Strike* (2019), which portrays characters bearing striking resemblances to Prime Minister Modi and other administrators, are notable examples of this cinematic trend.

In 2004, Ganti had already observed that Hindi cinema promotes nationalist initiatives by stressing the ideal image of the upper-middle-class Hindu male while simultaneously portraying the Muslim man as a sexualised and aggressive figure. This occurrence of ‘othering’ is thus not uncommon and does not stem from recent political motivations. It is, therefore, imperative to avoid perceiving contemporary Bollywood films only through a political lens. Nevertheless, it is crucial to acknowledge and analyse the ideological implications embedded within these films (Tyrrell, 2004). Anderson and Longkumer (2018) refer to this subtle, frequently covert link to Hindu majoritarian

ideologies as “Neo-Hindutva.” Neo-Hindutva may be characterised as an ideology that extends beyond established frameworks and has a widespread effect across multiple domains, such as media and education, making it hard to separate its effects. The emergence of neo-Hindutva is evident in the increased prevalence of expressions of Islamophobia, which have grown more dominant in both private and public arenas after the electoral victory of the BJP (Anderson & Longkumer, 2018: 373). Within the media landscape, neo-Hindutva discourses have propagated what Couldry (2003: 664) labels as “misrecognitions.” Hindutva agendas, facilitated by film scripts and aesthetics, circulate freely, often leading to a misrecognition of Indians as exclusively Hindu.

1.6: Chapter Conclusion

This chapter has shown that Bollywood has undergone distinct phases influenced by shifting economic conditions, nation-building exercises, and global marketing objectives. As of today, Bollywood is in yet another phase of reconstitution; while some have observed expanding integration of other cultures as a result of globalisation, others have observed a turn to religious fundamentalism in which Bollywood aids in the practice of ‘othering’ those who are deemed ‘un-Indian.’ Thus, popular Hindi film has played a significant part in Indian popular culture by reflecting and challenging the nation’s many ambitions. In other words, Bollywood has operated as an interface between the state and the nation: In building an ever-shifting narrative of “India,” cinema has confirmed and disputed the establishment of both nation and state. It should, therefore, be argued that the presence of Hindu-nationalist themes in Bollywood is identifiable as a recurring pattern, albeit one that transforms in response to the prevailing political circumstances.

In addressing our primary research question, it appears that the Bollywood industry functions with a certain degree of creative autonomy as it operates as a commercial entity. However, it is important to note that it is not entirely exempt from intervention as the government retains the capacity to endorse particular films that align with a desired political message. The subsequent chapter will provide a more detailed exploration of this dynamic.

Chapter 2: “Brand Modi” Bollywood

This chapter analyses three Bollywood films, namely *Padmaavat* (historical drama), *The Kashmir Files* (hyper-nationalist war film), and *PM Narendra Modi* (hagiography) that were released during the tenure of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The chapter mostly centres on the portrayal of othering, nationalism, religious fundamentalism, and Neo-Hindutva within the realm of Bollywood. The subsequent inquiries will be examined: *How is Hindu Nationalism conveyed in Modi-era Bollywood films?* Additionally, *in what manner has Modi utilized these films to bolster his public persona?* In the first section, a content analysis is conducted with the aim of identifying its underlying ideology. The second section will not centre on the substance of Bollywood films but rather on the strategic utilization of Bollywood narratives to construct the so-called “brand Modi.”

2.1 “Padmaavat” and Neo-Hindutva

Directed by Sanjay Leela Bhansali, the 2018 Hindi film *Padmaavat* is an adaptation of Malik Muhammad Jayasi's renowned epic poem of the same name. Starring notable actors such as Deepika Padukone, Shahid Kapoor, and Ranveer Singh, the film remains free of explicit political affiliations among its production team. However, Bhansali's earlier work, *Goliyon Ki Raasleela Ram-Leela* (2013), featuring Padukone and Singh, sparked controversy for its depiction of religious symbolism and sensuality, drawing criticism from conservative religious factions (Sura, 2013). In 2023, Padukone faced additional backlash from religious fanatics for wearing a saffron-coloured bikini in the highly successful film *Pathaan* (Khurana, 2022).

2.1.1 Film Analysis

The narrative on which *Padmaavat* is based was composed in 1520 by Malik Muhammad Jayasi, who wrote a folktale about the Mughal king Aurangzeb and a Rajput queen Padmavati, whose veracity has been disputed by historians (Shandilya, 2019). The film was highly contested, and numerous modifications were made before it was released to the public, including changing the title from *Padmavati* to *Padmaavat* to suggest that it was based on Jayasi's epic poem, as well as a disclaimer that the film was not claiming to be historically accurate and did not endorse the usage of *Jauhar* (self-immolation) (Chaturvedi, 2017).

The film portrays the Muslim ruler Alauddin Khilji as the antagonist and the Rajputs as the protagonists; this dichotomy is subtly shown through the use of visual symbolism as it employs a contrast of hues to represent opposing qualities: the Hindu Rajput stronghold of Chittor is depicted in a radiant amber hue, symbolizing their honour, uprightness, and bravery. In contrast, the Muslim ruler's domain is portrayed dimly lit and shadowy, symbolizing dishonesty and chaos. Furthermore, the world of Khilji, the poetry, music, revelry, and joy, appears incredibly lively in contrast to the wordy conversations about responsibility and righteousness that characterize the Hindu Rajputs. Khilji is portrayed as an irrational, savage and immoral man who embodies all the worst stereotypes of a seductive Muslim. He is never depicted as a devout Muslim; instead, he is presented as a sensual character who is not afraid to flaunt his muscular body. Conversely, the ideal Hindu man should be disciplined and controlled in displaying physical and mental strength. This is not at all like the stereotype of the lusty, aggressive, overly macho Muslim with his multiple wives and offspring. Per this vantage point, a correlation can be established between the demonstrations led by the Hindu right-wing against 'Love Jihad.' It can be argued that the controversy surrounding the film is fuelled by the same rhetoric employed to depict the Hindu right-wing's perception of the Muslim male as a seducer and violator of Hindu women. Despite the absence of explicit scenes of desire, the film is permeated by an underlying apprehension of the Muslim male as desiring Hindu women (Shandilya, 2019).

2.1.2 Critique

Although critically acclaimed, the release of *Padmaavat* sparked significant controversy. On the one hand, the portrayal of certain cultural traditions was met with disapproval from the Rajput community, whilst secular organizations expressed concern over the perceived promotion of Hindu-nationalist values and the vilification of Muslims. Various conservative Hindu organizations expressed their demand for a ban on the film, and instances of threats against the lives of the director and lead actor were reported (HT Correspondent, 2017). These queries, when investigated from a cinematic perspective, indicate how nationalism and anti-Muslim sentiments are now deeply rooted within Indian society, with the government exerting a growing influence on the media, pressuring it to endorse these political ideologies or, at least, to refrain from expressing dissent (Banerjee et al., 2021). Despite departing from historical accuracy and supporting a pro-Hindu narrative, the film elicited substantial criticism from hardline traditionalists. The Shri Rajput Karni Sena, a right-wing organization that considers itself an advocate for Rajput rights, orchestrated violent protests in opposition to the film's premiere. According to a news report by India Today (Gonsalves, 2018), Lokendra Singh Kalvi, the group leader, issued a warning stating that Rajput women would participate in the practice of *Jauhar* if the film were released.

In contrast, the film was prohibited in Malaysia due to its unfavourable portrayal of a Muslim leader (IANS, 2018). Despite the controversy, the film had significant commercial success at the box office and generated tremendous anticipation throughout the Indian diaspora. Within the context of the diaspora, the significance of historical accuracy, sexism, and Xenophobia was overshadowed by the primary focus on the artistic and musical aspects of the performance that contributed to the construction of an idealized Hindu womanhood (Ram, 2021).

2.1.3 Neo-Hindutva and Femininity

According to Ram (2021), *Padmaavat* has been exploited as an instrument to revitalize traditional customs and redefine cultural loyalties within the diaspora. In Particular, the research posits that *Padmaavat* has facilitated the dissemination of neo-Hindu femininity, thereby disguising the imposing and aggressive ideology of Hindutva. Namely, the lavish visual elements of *Padmaavat* align with aesthetic trends known as “royal chic,” which seek to reaffirm the individual’s Indianness (Kuldova, 2016). According to Kuldova, Indian designers have adopted a strategy of “staging Indianness” by incorporating elements of Indian pre-colonial aristocracy into their designs, showcasing the wealth of Indian culture via aesthetic extravagance. The festivity accompanying *Padmaavat* provides the diaspora with a platform to live out and express a luscious ideal of Hindu womanhood (Ram, 2021) rather than merely passively staring at the film costumes (Kuldova, 2016). Thus, *Padmaavat* presented rich portrayals of femininity, enabling diasporic women to engage in cosplay to express and reinforce their connection to the idealized Hindu concept of virtuous womanhood. The disputes around prejudices and authenticity were found to be less critical in the diaspora than the value attributed to consumption and participation in cosplay. This phenomenon, as observed by Ram, highlights a notable inconsistency within the Indian diaspora: Modi's warm reception outside India may imply a widespread acceptance of Hindu nationalism within the diaspora. However, it's conceivable that Modi's symbolic expressions of Indian identity could prompt Indians abroad to engage in performative affirmation without fully endorsing Hindu-nationalist ideals (Varadarajan, 2021).

Films such as *Padmaavat* advance the Hindu nationalist cause by offering an inspirational repertoire for reimagining an Hinduized feminine. Taken as a whole, Bollywood provides the resources to mediate the language that promotes an Indian fantasy in which everything appears to be good. Bollywood, as a soft power apparatus, is a crucial ally of Hindu nationalism because it generates a new understanding of how to be Hindu. Bollywood softens the robust and aggressive ideology of Hindutva and aids in its diffusion in the diaspora through mediatized behaviours and manifestations of desired, consumable Hindu womanhood (Ram, 2021).

2.2 “The Kashmir Files” and Othering

The Kashmir Files is a 2022 Hindi-language drama film produced and directed by Vivek Agnihotri. The film depicts a fictional narrative that revolves around the mass exodus of Kashmiri Hindus from the region of Indian-administered Kashmir in 1990. It features Mithun Chakraborty, Anupam Kher, and Pallavi Joshi, who are known for their public affiliation with the BJP.

2.2.1 Film Analysis

The Kashmir Files, while promising to depict the untold story of the 1990 Pandits' exit from Kashmir, strongly reinforces right-wing and Hindu nationalist themes. Firstly, it portrays Kashmir as the lost homeland of the (Hindu) Kashmiri Pandits, emphasizing their deep-rooted communal identity within the region's history and socio-cultural uniqueness. Second, it challenges the expression “exodus,” which is often employed to refer to the Pandits’ escape from the Valley, as an argumentative approach that obscures the reality of what the movie terms genocide. Third, the film portrays Kashmiri Muslims as terrorists and unpatriotic and liberal academics as anti-national (exemplified by a professor who manipulates her student, into questioning the Government of India’s operations in Kashmir). In doing so, the film relies on recurring themes in the Indian government’s narrative concerning Kashmir. In a lengthy monologue near the film’s closing, Krishna, the protagonist, suggests that all of India’s beauty is linked to Kashmir. He attributes the demise of the Hindu community in general to an ongoing series of Muslim atrocities, the most heinous of which he claims was the massacre of Pandits. Aside from depicting Kashmiri Muslims as violent and treacherous, the film has a questionable plot, which is presented as a work of fiction but maintains the right-wing Hindu nationalist historical narrative entirely. In this case, the effort to shape the collective recollection concerning the displaced Pandit population encourages a particular vision of the Indian community.

2.2.2 Critique

According to filmmaker Sanjay Kak, a Kashmiri Pandit himself, the film proposes a “Hindu nationalist vision for Kashmir, constructed around the idea of the recovered homeland, not just for Kashmiri Pandits but for all Hindus”. Initial reactions from the Indian media echoed Kak’s opinion, with certain commentators characterising it as Islamophobic, deceitful, and violent. Furthermore, Israeli film critic Nadav Lapid, criticised the admission of *The Kashmir Files* to the International Film Festival of India (IFFI). He expressed disbelief at the film’s inclusion in the competition, labelling it as “propaganda” (BBC News, 2022). In contrast, others commended the film’s efforts in shedding light on the events surrounding the Pandit exodus, as evidenced by the hashtag #righttojustice on the film’s poster (The Quint, 2022). These contrasting views fuelled communal overtones, with anti-Muslim chanting and banners accompanying the film’s showing across India and abroad (Kak, 2022).

In the midst of these events, the Modi administration launched public sponsorship of the film, associating it with a broader discourse about the necessity to establish the historical veracity concerning Kashmir. Several BJP-governed states announced tax exemptions for the film screenings and granted official permission for government employees to attend these showings (Express News Service, 2022). This act was regarded as an explicit endorsement of filmmaker Agnihotri’s historical narrative by Modi. During a BJP parliamentary conference held on March 15, 2022, Prime Minister Modi was reportedly heard saying that the film has shown previously concealed truths that have been suppressed for years: “The truth prevailed in Kashmir Files” (Times of India, 2022). It thus became evident that the government had dedicated significant political resources to promoting a central theme of the film.

Similar instances of Modi's endorsement are apparent, as seen in his praise for the film *The Vaccine War* (2023). Directed and written by Agnihotri, featuring Anupam Kher and Pallavi Joshi, Modi commended the film for showcasing the efforts of Indian scientists in addressing the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. Speaking at a public rally in Jodhpur, Modi expressed his satisfaction: "Every Indian is feeling proud after watching that film." However, despite being based on "true events," the film faced criticism for downplaying Modi's draconian measures during the pandemic, including the controversial lockdown that resulted in multiple fatalities. Additionally, Modi referenced the film *The Kerala Story*, depicting women from Kerala coerced into converting to Islam and joining the Islamic State, as if the portrayed events were factual. Subsequently, it was revealed that the film contained numerous inaccuracies, leading to significant controversy (India Today News desk, 2023).

2.2.3 A New narrative

Kashmir has occupied an integral position in India’s nationalist narrative, serving as the centrepiece of the current government’s right-wing ethno-nationalist agenda (Mangiarotti, 2023). On October 27, 1947, Kashmir was annexed by India based on an agreement known as the Instrument of Accession between the newly formed government and the ruler of the Princely State of Jammu and Kashmir. The Instrument of Accession served as a base for authorising Article 370 of the Indian Constitution, which gave the state of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) a unique status. Since the rise of Hindu nationalist politics, the autonomous status is constantly questioned for impeding the Kashmiri people’s ability to fully acknowledge themselves as citizens of India. Therefore, the revocation of Kashmir’s special status in 2019 must be seen within a persistent fixation on assimilating Kashmir as an essential element for reconstructing the (Hindu) nation (Ibid.). In addition to fulfilling the BJP’s long-standing pledge to reunite Kashmir with the larger Indian national community, the government has taken a proactive role in fostering specific collective memories about Kashmir (Kanth, 2011). The central state has been actively withholding or severely limiting access to archival documents in an attempt to dictate past narratives while encouraging the development of a new memory. Thus, contested tales have become an integral part of Kashmiri political culture, creating a space in which the state continues to make efforts to legitimise and determine how the past is recollected. Unquestionably, the

movie *The Kashmir Files* exploited the ignorance of its audience to create a narrative that was negatively biased toward Pakistan, Muslims and left-wing academics.

2.2.4 Othering

The Kashmir files and *Padmaavat* are examples of how Bollywood frequently revisits the theme of religious othering. According to Chaturvedi (2002) and Van der Veer (2002), the fundamental distinctions between the two religious communities—Hindus being unmotivated, submissive, and effeminate, and Muslims being violent, autocratic, and masculine—were used to characterise, separate, and demonise them during the British administration. As a result, religious identification came to be understood as more than a mere question of personal beliefs; it also indicated one's overall engagement with a broader demographic and justified certain behaviours among Indians. According to Stets and Burke (2000), this classification has developed the concepts of *ingroup* and *outgroup* within the Indian population. In a similar vein, Bollywood movies hint at the existence of ingroups and outgroups, mainly when applied to Pakistan, Muslims and other ethnic and religious minorities. This portrayal of non-Hindus as “them” or “others” is consistent with the notion of Orientalism put forth by Edward Said in 1978. Said introduced the expression “Orientalism” to describe the hegemonic patterns of the depiction of “Oriental” cultures and societies as “backwards” and “traditional.” Indeed, the concepts of racism, Islamophobia, intentional bias, and other notions of ‘othering’, which are commonly associated with Orientalism, prevail in an array of Bollywood movies.

2.3 “PM Narendra Modi” and Patriotism

PM Narendra Modi is a Hindi biographical drama released in 2019, directed by Omung Kumar, and written by Anirudh Chawla and Vivek Oberoi. It's noteworthy that all actors and producers linked to the film openly express support for Narendra Modi. The movie is produced under the authorization of "Legend Global Studio," a production company exclusively dedicated to creating films with nationalist themes, with *PM Narendra Modi* being one of only four productions.

2.3.1 Film Analysis

PM Narendra Modi is a biographical play on India's 14th Prime Minister. The story follows Modi as he began his career selling tea as a *chaiwallah* before moving to the Himalayas to follow the Hindu religion as a *Sanyasi*. After returning from the Himalayas, he led a volunteer right-wing Hindu nationalist movement and joined his current party, the BJP. Modi is portrayed as a committed individual from a humble background who became Gujarat's chief minister and India's prime minister through hard work and perseverance. As Gujarat's Chief Minister, he built highways, brought foreign investment and jobs, eliminated corruption, and graciously managed the 2002 Gujarat riots. The film depicts Modi as a saviour and brands him as an “ideology” rather than a person. It is revealed that Modi's journey has been heavily influenced by nationalism and religion. There are several references to his ideological views, ranging from his formal education in Hinduism to his affiliation with Hindu Religious groups, from his physical combat with “terrorists” in Kashmir to his position as a “servant for his people and country.” Several songs in the movie also reference religion, India, and the protagonist's tenacity. The film closes with Modi becoming India's 14th PM.

2.3.2 Critique

Despite doing well at the box office, the film's content, release date, and protagonist's portrayal drew much criticism. With movies like *Uri: The Surgical Strike* (2019) and *the Accidental Prime Minister* (2019) being released prior to the elections; it was apparent that the Hindi film industry was publicly backing Modi. The movie was initially scheduled for release on April 11, 2019, a month before India's general election. However, the Election Commission of India delayed its distribution one day before the poll, stating alleged infractions to the model code of conduct for elections (Supreme Court Observer, 2022). The Election Commission of India declared that no biographical material that serves the interests of a political party or any associated individual and could sabotage fair and impartial

voting during an election should be shown on electronic media, including cinematographs (Ibid.). After election day, on May 24, the movie was ultimately distributed globally. One day prior to the movie's official release, a brand-new poster with the slogan *Aa rahe hain dobaram ab koi nahin rok sakta*—which translates to “I am coming back again, nobody can stop me now”—was unveiled (Times of India, 2019) (Fig. 3). Overall, most film critics agreed to the decision of the Election Commission of India as they referred to the movie as a “hagiography” and claimed it was openly prejudiced in backing the lead character (Regen, 2019).

2.3.3 Nationalism

Throughout the movie, Modi says, “*Jai Hind*,” meaning “long live India,” which suggests that his love for India is an integral component of who he is as a person. Modi is depicted as someone who always puts India, his nation, first. He salutes each time he passes the Indian flag, even as a youngster selling tea. Whenever Modi visits a Hindu temple for prayer, he presses both hands together and bends his head as a sign of utmost respect for the Hindu deities. In a particular scene where Modi interacts with a journalist, his persona initially commends Hinduism for being an inclusive faith. Subsequently, he commends India's religious policies, drawing comparisons with those of other countries. The film emphasises the virtues of the Hindu religion through this debate, but it also heavily underscores the value of national identity. The final word of Modi's speech states that “country is bigger than religion.” Modi's devotion to his motherland is more significant than anything else, regardless of how religion plays a significant role in his persona. More songs continue to echo the film's central message that religious faith is significant but ultimately secondary to patriotism. Modi's intense affection for his nation and his profound devotion to the Hindu faith are often juxtaposed in the movie, yet the nation ultimately emerges as a winner. This is also indicated in the patriotic songs featured throughout the film; the musical number “*Saugandh Mujhe Iss Mitti Ki*” (I vow to this soil of my nation), refers to self-sacrificing for one's nation as “righteous behaviour.” The song's lyrics are an encouraging reminder that the people of India share a responsibility to their nation. As part of this obligation, the Indian people must ensure that their nation is prosperous, that it is not subjected to the authority of any other nation, and that it will not disappear from the limelight. The movie thus presents nationalism as a privilege and suggests that the right person for leadership is the one who puts the well-being of the nation before their objectives.

2.4 PM Narendra Modi, the Person

We continue this chapter by discussing Modi, the person, not the film character. Modi rose through the ranks of the RSS, a “cultural” organisation that also happens to be one of the world's longest-surviving fascist organisations. The Rastriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), whose acronym means “National Volunteer Organization,” was founded in 1925 by an association of upper-caste Hindu men. The RSS has, over time, adopted Mussolini's concepts of fascist youth camps and referred to Hitler's “solution” to the Jewish dilemma as a template for the organisation's goal of transforming India into a Hindu-only nation (*Hindu Rashtra*). According to RSS, the Hindu concept of culture is all-encompassing, touching on politics, economics, and religion, among others. With the rise to power of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the RSS's political front, the RSS brand of Hindu nationalism has become even more influential and meddlesome in all facets of administration.

As Chief Minister of Gujarat, Modi enjoyed immense popularity and widespread support; however, Large-scale instances of communal violence in 2002 (Human Rights Watch, 2012) cast a shadow on his tenure. Nevertheless, he managed to stay in the public's eye and finally inspire his party to victory in 2014. Presumably, an increase in identity-based polarisation, aggression toward minorities, repression of free speech, and communal strife escalated after the BJP's election (Chowdhury, 2021). Despite this, Modi's popularity has not waned in the face of widespread inequality and undesirable policies like demonetisation (2016); it has increased. How could this be? How did an individual of average status obtain such a degree of sanctity? Some aspects of this inquiry might be solved by examining how Modi's 'star image' came to reinforce his public persona.

2.4.1 Modi narratives

Modi's triumphant image was initially developed during his tenure as the chief minister of Gujarat. Even though the policies he implemented during his term favoured the urban middle class, resulting in a disparity in the distribution of wealth and socio-economic polarisation, the development process was heralded as one of Modi's most significant achievements (Jaffrelot, 2013; Ghatak & Roy, 2014). Moreover, Modi's reputation as a decisive leader who could cut through bureaucratic red tape with his "56-inch chest" (strong body), connected the development narrative to both his image and physical appearance (Srivastava & Bano, 2014). Hence, by carefully managing his public image, Modi used expressions to portray himself as the one driving development (*Vikas Purush*). Along the same line, the BJP election campaign in 2014 prominently stressed the narrative of Modi's humble origins and his early occupation as a *Chaiwallah*. Despite widespread scepticism around the credibility of Modi's chronicle, this success story, bolstering the potential for upward social mobility, has become inextricably linked with Modi's persona (Jaffrelot, 2015). Similar to how movie stars construct their public image by portraying various characters - such as Amitabh Bachchan's characterisation of the "angry young man" - Modi's persona has been cultivated as someone who emerged from modest beginnings but now carries the responsibility of developing the nation.

Moreover, the star image of Modi serves as an anchor for intricate caste classifications as he presents himself as a member of an Other Backward Caste (OBC), potentially intending to broaden Hindu nationalism's support among lower caste communities. Modi has additionally cultivated his public persona as an efficacious individual who achieves his desired results: The notion that Narendra Modi assumed the role of a Chief Executive Officer (CEO) rather than that of a Chief Minister in Gujarat gained significant traction in the public discourse, as highlighted by Sardesai (2022). In line with this, Modi was seen as having a pro-business orientation, which was influenced by his Gujarati origin. Conversely, Modi's rival, the Congress party, was shown as a long-standing governmental organisation characterised by bureaucratic inefficiencies, corruption, and nepotism.

Ultimately, the narratives that were employed in sustaining Modi's star image resulted in the portrayal of any resistance, disagreement, or criticism as being anti-national and thus anti-Modi (Jaffrelot, 2015). The immense popularity of Modi has been reflected in significant changes to the BJP's approach to electoral politics: India's parliamentary elections were transformed into presidential popularity contests with Modi as the foundation of the BJP's campaign. This phenomenon entails that rather than casting their vote for the most appropriate candidate, individuals opt to vote for the candidate affiliated with Modi. The media have widely called the spectacle the "Modi wave" (Chibber & Verma, 2014).

2.4.2 Bollywood Narratives

In January 2019 alone, Modi's views, policies, and rhetoric were directly portrayed in three mainstream Hindi films (Jamkhandikar, 2019), one of which was covered in the preceding section (*PM Narendra Modi*). In addition, the film *The Accidental Prime Minister* portrays Modi's predecessor, Manmohan Singh, as little more than a puppet of the powerful nepotistic Nehru-Gandhi dynasty. Even more so, films like *The Kashmir files*, *The Kerala story*, and *The Vaccine War*, were openly endorsed by the Hindu nationalist government by posting links to their trailers on the BJP's official Twitter account (BJP, 2018).

Furthermore, Modi frequently incorporates phrases from such films into his narrative: When Modi formally opened the National Museum of Indian Cinema in Mumbai on January 19, 2019, he asked the crowd, "How's the josh (energy)?" (ANI, 2019) as quoted from the movie *Uri: The Surgical Strike*. *Manikarnika* is another example; the film is an epic historical drama centred around the tale of a queen of a princely state in the nineteenth century who led an insurrection against the British, later known as the Revolt of 1857. In a scene featuring a British commander, the protagonist says, "The difference between you and me is that you want to rule, and I want to serve my people." Modi

frequently makes a similar comparison between monarch and public servant when contrasting himself with the Nehru-Gandhis, emphasising his modest beginnings as a *chaiwallah*. In another scene, Manikarnika prevents a calf from "becoming steak." This particular scene has been made famous under Modi's wings as during his time in office, the phenomenon of "cow lynching," has become all the more common (Jaffrelot, 2017).

During Modi's tenure, topics related to his policies, particularly those concerning welfare campaigns, have also gained significant traction. As a result, discussions around these themes indirectly attribute the moniker "Vikas Purush": In the film *Mere Pyare, Prime Minister*, a little boy from a slum dreams of constructing a lavatory for his widowed mother. The plot of this movie connects to Modi's 'Swachh Bharat Abhiyan' (Clean India Campaign), in which toilets play a central role as a national concern. Similarly, *Toilet: Ek Prem Katha*, released in 2017, is yet another film that touches on the topic; it follows a young wife who demands a toilet be installed in her home, which leads to a sanitation and social revolution. While not explicitly referencing Modi's 'toilet campaign,' it directly praises Modi's contentious demonetisation policies.

2.4.3 Social Media Narratives

Like his masterful use of Bollywood allusions and hegemonic public discourse, Modi's carefully nurtured image as a grassroots leader was mostly reinforced by social media narratives. Modi's near-total absence in traditional news media during his tenure as prime minister has made his social media reimagining all the more significant, as Pal, Chandra, and Vydiswaran have argued (2016). With a few notable exceptions (Times Now, Republic TV, ABP, Zee News, and ANI), Modi has avoided interacting with the mainstream media during his first five years as the country's president, even declining press conferences. This minimising of face-to-face media engagement frames social media as an autonomous version of media outreach and highlights the fact that traditional press outlets no longer have a responsibility in the narrative politics of "Brand Modi" (Pal et al. 2016; p.59). According to Daniyal (2020), not only has the BJP weaponised these social media networks for political purposes, but it has essentially begun to shift to a situation where its supporters cannot engage in politics without it.

2.5 Chapter Conclusion

The first section of Chapter Two has demonstrated that Bollywood frequently captures the political and social milieu of its time. In line with this, several Bollywood films produced under Modi's tenure have had plot points or characters that are consistent with Hindu nationalist ideology; this research examined three movies that exemplify such major themes:

Patriotic Sentiment (PM Narendra Modi): Movies may highlight pride in one's country and patriotism, supporting the larger narrative of building a robust and cohesive India.

Religious Othering (Kashmir files): Movies may display religious othering while disguising themselves as documentaries about fighting terrorism and preserving national security.

Cultural Dissemination (Padmaavat): Movies may showcase Hindu rites, celebrations, and traditional costumes. Doing so might strengthen the people's feeling of cultural pride and identity.

Because these films deftly weave in the desired scenario, their plots have insisted on creating a new narrative of history or the current state of affairs. Consequently, these narratives have functioned as notable platforms for the public to escalate their hostility towards Muslims and other groups deemed to be "un-Indian." A film's success is then heavily dependent on the audience's opinion, especially as the audience appears to align more with Hindu nationalist sentiment. Consequently, when determining specific casting, visual, and semantic alternatives, individuals employed in the sector should be aware of their position. In other words, In Modi's India, decisions that are at odds with the Hindu nationalist

ethos of Bollywood customers do not age well, as demonstrated by the boycott of *Padmaavat* and the attacks on its director.

As the second half of Chapter 2 indicated, Modi has leveraged some of the aforementioned themes to his advantage in several ways to bolster his public persona. For instance, certain films' plots or characters have been shaped by or allied with the political beliefs of the ruling party. Although direct interference with such images is deemed illegitimate due to constitutional apparatus, as evidenced in the case of the Election Commission of India's postponement of the release of *PM Narendra Modi*. Still, given that Modi has included some of these movie storylines in his speeches and social media rhetoric, his overt endorsement of the Bollywood industry—whether through films or celebrities—is undeniable. Furthermore, in order to advance government initiatives and social campaigns, such as those pertaining to radicalization, the problem of Kashmir, COVID strategies, and public sanitation programs, the government achieves the dual objectives of bringing attention to these perceived challenges and tying them to celebrities who could subsequently shape public sentiment. The next chapter will cover the effectiveness of these so-called celebrity politics in more detail.

Chapter 3: The Vigor of Starpower

As seen in the previous chapters, Indian films go beyond mere entertainment; Bombay cinema serves as a medium for shaping the nation's collective imagination. Additionally, actors play a crucial role in asserting national identity to the extent that they actively participate in electoral competition and establish their political organizations. Bollywood celebrities not only leverage their fame and influence in election campaigns but also venture into active political careers, holding positions such as Members of Parliament (Sunny Deol, Jaya Bachchan, Dharmendra, and Kirron Kher) and even Cabinet Ministers (Sunil Dutt, Shatrughan Sinha, and Vinod Khanna).

However, existing scholarly research on celebrities' involvement in Indian politics has primarily focused on South Indian film stars like M. G. Ramachandran, Jayalalitha, and N. T. Rama Rao. These studies primarily explore how these celebrities mobilize their fan base for political purposes (Pandian, 1992; Prasad, 2014; Srinivas, 2022). Apart from Kidwai's 2018 non-academic book *"Neta Abhineta: Bollywood Star Power in Indian Politics,"* few others have examined the involvement of Hindi film stars in the country's politics (Mitra, 2021). Therefore, this chapter aims to contribute to the existing scholarly discourse on the impact of Bollywood celebrities on the contemporary political landscape by exploring the following question: *What responsibilities do Bollywood actors have in endorsing or challenging the ideologies propagated by the Modi administration?*

3.1 Bollywood and Starpower

Film stars in India frequently exploit their widespread popularity and acclaimed public image to participate in political elections (Mukherjee, 2004). Whether or not they run for office, they provide glamour and star power to political campaigns. According to Chidananda Das Gupta, a widely recognised film critic, the achievements of actors in electoral politics can be attributed to the 'blind faith' of the masses and their resultant inability to differentiate between the realm of cinema and reality (1991). In his analysis of celebrity culture in India, Pramod Nayar addresses that star politicians, by embodying the dreams and desires of the people, may be viewed as spokespersons for the general population (Nayar, 2009). Furthermore, celebrities often resemble politicians in terms of their interactions with the media, which can be equated to creating recognition for their service (Harvey, 2018). The utilisation of stars and celebrities in politics indicates their psychological impact and, as a result, their capability to draw in large audiences (and prospective electors) (Ibid.).

According to Barry King's writings on the progression of stardom to fame (1987), the transition from being a movie star to a celebrity allows the star image to be separated from its initial source of

meaning (film), which is an act of commodification in wherein the celebrity, as a commodity, comes to be employed as “presences,” that can be put to use in a myriad of situations. This brings us to the issue of employing celebrities to reframe the narrative around particular urgent concerns, such as the 2020–2021 Indian farmers’ protest. In this case, celebrities offered their “presences”: Following the lead of international celebrities in raising international awareness of the protest, the Indian government (allegedly) enlisted several prominent Indian figures to tweet their opposition to “foreign interference” in India’s domestic affairs. For instance, famous athlete, Sachin Tendulkar, stated, “India’s sovereignty cannot be compromised. External forces can be spectators but not participants. Indians know India and should decide for India. Let’s remain united as a nation” (Fig.4). Although there is no evidence to support that the government had orchestrated a counterattack, the general tone of social media posts suggests that the government was deliberately trying to undermine the awareness raised by outsiders (DH Web Desk, 2021).

Withal, when the Times of India group launched *India Poised*, a government-backed effort that blended politics with entertainment to revitalise the nation’s future leadership, it proved Bollywood artists’ influence and effect over the general public. The campaign hosted a television program called *Lead India*, modelled after Western panel shows like *Idols*, and invited Indian citizens to apply and run for votes in the country’s assembly elections. Despite the intense political undertones of this campaign, Bollywood industry heavyweights, including film star Akshay Kumar and lyricist Javed Akhtar, made up the judge’s panel. Advertisements featuring Bollywood superstars like Amitabh Bachchan and Shahrukh Khan were also a part of the *India Poised* PR campaign (Fig.5).

3.2 Pro-Modi Bollywood Stars

Several scholars have observed that *Hindutva*, which was previously considered an implicit motif in Bollywood cinema, has now become overtly presented and openly endorsed by prominent figures in the industry who have primarily maintained an accepting stance towards the political impact of Hindu nationalism (Nandy, 2020; Rajabali, 2017). The most remarkable example of the mutually beneficial relationship between electoral politics and the Hindi film industry is Bollywood icon Amitabh Bachchan, who entered congress politics during the 1980s at the invitation of Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi. Despite the brief duration of Bachchan’s time in parliament, the actor persisted in providing tacit endorsements to political parties. Bachchan, who no longer supports the Congress, has recently supported the Samajwadi Party, the BJP, and Narendra Modi himself (Mitra, 2021), who extended the opportunity to Amitabh Bachchan to serve as Gujarat’s brand ambassador in 2010. Bachchan’s subsequent support for the government and, consequently, for Modi is among the early examples of Bollywood star power being employed to reinforce “Brand Modi.”

Similarly, during the 2014 election campaign, Bollywood superstar Salman Khan visited the International Kite Festival (*Uttarayan*) in Ahmedabad, the state capital of Gujarat. The implicit endorsement of Modi by the Hindi film industry was more than evident as he tweeted about the traditional Gujarati meal he enjoyed with Khan, followed by photographs of the Bollywood star flying kites. Though Khan tactfully replied, “God will decide who is the best man for the country. May the best man win,” when questioned if he backed Modi as a contender for prime minister (The Economic Times, 2014), his presence alone was enough to imply his approval. Salman Khan had not been outspoken about his political beliefs. However, this highly publicised event was seen as him warming up to Modi and the BJP as it became clear that the “Modi wave” was strong enough to triumph in the elections.

The “celebritization of Indian politics” (Rai 2019, p. 324) and the subsequent makeover and revival of Narendra Modi’s public persona are also significantly attributed to actor Akshay Kumar. The Bollywood superstar conducted a “non-political” interview with Modi for the Delhi-based news agency ANI on April 24, 2019. The informal chat stood in stark contrast to the press room discussions and television interviews that Modi’s political opponents participated in during the 2019 Indian

general elections. It was shot on location at the Prime Minister's official residence in true theatrical fashion with lengthy overhead shots and idyllic soft-focus images of the location's surroundings. A "candid and completely non-political freewheeling conversation" (Kumar's words) took place as the leader of the world's largest democracy and Bollywood's favourite star consumed tea and wandered peacefully across the green lawn, providing a "breather" from the ongoing Parliamentary elections (Jain, 2019).

Many more actors, including Dharmendra, Hema Malini, Kirron Kher, Paresh Rawal, and Sunny Deol, have successfully campaigned for office within the BJP. Even celebrities who are not party members, such as Anupam Kher, Raveena Tandon, and Juhi Chawla, have openly endorsed Modi and the right-wing policies of the BJP. Moreover, Modi employs even those Bollywood celebrities not particularly associated with the "Modi brand." A small group of Bollywood superstars travelled to New Delhi on January 10 to meet with Modi. The meeting aimed to explore how the Hindi film industry could promote government development programs and aid in the process of "nation-building." The group was primarily made up of up-and-coming Bollywood actors, or the "Young Turks." However, it also featured influential individuals like producer-director Karan Johar and producer Ekta Kapoor. Along with the female presence of actresses Alia Bhatt and Bhumi Pednekar, the attendance of today's stars like Ranbir Kapoor, Ranveer Singh, Varun Dhawan, Sidharth Malhotra, Ayushmann Khurrana, Rajkumar Rao, and Vicky Kaushal was an unambiguous indication of the BJP and Modi's effort to court younger voters. The picture of a beaming, happy Modi with his Bollywood entourage went viral rapidly. It was dubbed "the selfie of the year." Johar shared the image on Twitter, thanking the Prime Minister for the "amazing opportunity" and reiterating the film industry's commitment to "inspire & ignite positive changes towards a transformative India" (Fig.6).

The immense appeal of the "selfie of the year" highlights how the entertainment and media sectors shape public consciousness in the political arena. This increasing convergence of the political and popular is vital, as evidenced by the abundance of selfies with Bollywood stars alongside Prime Minister Narendra Modi on social media platforms, along with hashtags like #CelebritieswithNamo (PTI, May 2019). The unification of the popular and the political does not only occur within the realm of social media but also extends to more formal contexts, evidenced by the invitation of celebrities, including Aamir Khan, Shahrukh Khan, and Sonam Kapoor, to speak at major summits, such as the commemoration of Mahatma Gandhi's 150th anniversary (PTI, October 2019) (Fig.7).

3.3 Attack on Bollywood: SSR Controversy

The Bollywood industry has significantly contributed to advancing India's national narrative. Nevertheless, the most notable advantage is in its capacity to incorporate urgent societal concerns, such as social justice, gender equality, and religious prejudice, into the realm of entertainment. Therefore, Bollywood films and the actors involved in their production are regarded as commercial and political commodities. In the contemporary political landscape, this positions them as a means of exerting influence and exposes them to potential dangers. Similar to the historical Hollywood blacklist, Modi and his BJP have implemented successful tactics to curtail the artistic liberty of Bollywood, explicitly targeting the perceived influence of Muslims, who are believed to exert a disproportionate weight over the film sector. In consideration of this, henceforth, this chapter will not exclusively allude to the efficacy of Bollywood stars as custodians of soft power; it will also elucidate the attacks directed at Bollywood stars, specifically those who are considered "un-Indian."

We commence our inquiry with the weaponisation by Hindu right-wing politics of the suicide of an upcoming Hindi film actor, Sushant Singh Rajput, in September 2020. It seems that the specific manner in which his death was evoked to intensify the onslaught on the Bollywood industry was part of a more complex, coordinated campaign by the RSS to regulate and eliminate spaces perceived as being antagonistic to Hindu-Muslim polarisation or dominated by "left-liberals." When Rajput was

discovered hanging in his bedroom in a Mumbai apartment in June 2020, the Mumbai police initially ruled it a suicide. Nevertheless, within a few days, the hashtag Justice for SSR became trendy, and all of a sudden, countless loyal and heartbroken admirers appeared on social media, criticising Bollywood for its nepotism, which had denied a gifted actor a job and ultimately led him to commit suicide (Fig.8). One of the primary threads of this frantic display of apparent anguish were the “boycott Bollywood” and stop “Bullywood” threads (Fig.7 & Fig.8). Subsequently, the allegations intensified, stating that Rajput was assassinated and a narcotics gang associated with Bollywood celebrities was responsible for the killing.

Outsider actress Kangana Ranaut had been a driving force behind these slander campaigns with her nonstop stream of tweets regarding Rajput’s death. It was Ranaut who, in 2017, to Karan Johar’s apparent disbelief, directly confronted him about “nepotism” in the industry, during a talk show hosted by the quintessential “insider” Karan Johar himself (Express web desk, 2017). Also playing a significant role was the Karni Sena, which claimed to speak for the “upper”-caste Rajputs, to which Sushant Singh Rajput belonged. In 2017, the Karni Sena spearheaded a violent campaign against the movie *Padmaavat*, arguing that it was anti-Rajput. Sanjay Leela Bhansali, the filmmaker of *Padmaavat*, was among the filmmakers singled out by #JusticeforSSR as members of the corrupt and nepotist film business. Following Rajput’s passing, Mumbai Police also requested that Bhansali be questioned (DH Webdesk, 2020)

This attack on the film industry and its representatives must be seen in the context of the RSS’s more extensive, coordinated campaign to cleanse areas perceived as being “un-Indian”. The government, police, social media, compliant television networks, and newspapers, among others, all reinforced the RSS narrative, which, including other issues, attacked universities for encouraging critical thinking and condemned the “love Jihad” as they criticised Hindu-Muslim marriages. The most recent National Education Policy 2020 (NEP, 2020) demonstrates this strong influence of RSS cultural norms. It also provides a roadmap for the deconstruction of publicly financed education, the promotion of private investment in this field, and the establishment of strict ideological regulation of research and instruction.

Another indication of RSS’s influence on the Indian psyche is the gradual but steady appearance of peculiar conspiracies outlined in WhatsApp conversations in police investigations, official declarations, and the mainstream press. According to a widely shared WhatsApp message, “ideologically cunning thugs & frauds in the mask of the Leftists” are responsible for a “film jihad,” (Menon, 2020). Such concentrated and planned ‘trolling’ by paid staff members and malware is notorious from the BJP’s IT Cell (Chaturvedi, 2016). The fact that the Mumbai Police cyber unit has found over 80,000 fictitious social media accounts from different countries in Asia and Europe that were all generated on the exact day of Rajput’s death and that aim to undermine the police’s official investigation is another indication of the BJP IT-Cell’s contribution to the slander campaign (Ojha, 2020). As revelations about the assault on Bollywood’s perceived wrongdoings continue to surface, the BJP’s role becomes more apparent. An investigation led by Joyojeet Pal analyzing social media content from June to September 2020 identified a pattern where the BJP promoted the narrative of Rajput’s murder to tarnish the reputation of Mumbai actors, Mumbai Police, the Maharashtra government, and Shiv Sena (Daniyal, 2020). While Modi refrained from directly addressing the “murder” allegations, he joined the nation in expressing condolences upon the actor’s demise (Fig. 12).

Filmmaker Mahesh Bhatt and his actress daughter Alia have become victims of orchestrated internet trolling. Bhatt, who has a Muslim spouse, stands out as one of the few openly critical of Narendra Modi’s Hindutva policies (India Today, 2014). Renowned movie stars like Johar, Alia Bhatt, Sonam Kapoor, and Kareena Kapoor experienced such intense trolling on social media that they had to impose restrictions on their comment sections (Menon, 2020).

3.4 Attack on Bollywood: Boycotting Islam

The attack on the film industry and its “un-Indianness” could be seen as synonymous with the attack on Muslims within the industry. The uneasy relationship between Hindi cinema and Muslims is not a recent one. To make themselves more appealing to Hindu audiences, some Muslim actors were compelled to assume normative Hindu identities and alter their names to conceal their identities. Among them are well-known actors like Meena Kumari (Mahjabeen Bano), Madhubala (Mumtaz Jehan Begum Dehlavi), and Dilip Kumar (Yousuf Khan). The three Khans, on the other hand—Sharukh Khan (SRK), Amir Khan, and Salman Khan- the three greatest Muslim celebrities in the entertainment industry, did not have to obscure their identities behind names that sounded Hindu. However, the Khans are not entirely untouchable.

3.4.1 Salman Khan

Bollywood “bad boy” Salman Khan managed his Muslim identity well throughout the 90s; however, in the Hinduized nation-state, his identity is catching up with him. Despite the Hindu origins of his mother, his prominence was increasingly influenced by his Muslim identity. Even when Khan was seen publicly endorsing Modi’s image, crazed Hindu internet mobs were assaulting Khan in a case of severe Islamophobia. Khan mostly faced backlash for a tweet after he publicly denounced the hanging of Yakub Memon (the brother of the mastermind of the Mumbai terrorist attack in 2008) in an uncharacteristic display of candour: “Don’t hang brother, hang the *lomdi* (Fox) who ran away,” (Fig.10). In Salman Khan’s case, we must see his closeness to Modi either as a ploy to increase his star power or to protect himself from being marginalised in the industry because of his Muslim background.

3.4.2 Aamir Khan

Aamir Khan has also taken a great deal of abuse on social media for publicly voicing his fear as Muslim in post-2014 India. According to The Economic Times (Chaturvedi, 2015), Khan’s company lost a sponsorship due to this social media backlash. In 2015, Kiran Rao, the filmmaker and producer ex-spouse of Aamir Khan, revealed that she and Aamir thought about departing India in the future due to the rise in hostility in the last few years. Although Khan expressed shock and sadness upon learning of his wife’s thoughts, he also admitted that intolerance was spreading throughout the nation (BBC, 2015). With these remarks, Khan has been the centre of a media and social media frenzy. Hindu fundamentalist group Hindu Mahasabha released a statement stating that Khan ought to relocate to Pakistan and face terrorism charges alongside superstars like SRK (The Hindu, 2015). A few celebrities from the industry additionally contributed their thoughts to the cacophony of criticism. For instance, on November 24, 2015, Raveena Tandon, a well-known movie star from the 1990s, tweeted: “Let’s cut the BS-why can’t these people openly say that they weren’t happy since d day Modi became PM. instead of shaming the whole country” (Fig.11). Aamir Khan’s remarks were indeed misinterpreted as an insult to India, which was then misunderstood as a challenge to the BJP and Narendra Modi. In response to Khan’s comments, there was a fierce internet backlash known as right-wing “activism” or mass trolling. Later, in July 2016, Khan was removed from his role as the spokesperson of the Ministry of Tourism’s international travel promotion, “Incredible India” (The Economic Times, 2016). Khan had previously witnessed the masses’ fury following Gujarat’s ban on his 2006 film *Fanaa*. There, he criticised how Gujarat’s then-chief minister, Narendra Modi, had overseen the building of the enormous Narmada Dam, which would force numerous residents to relocate due to floods. In Gujarat, angry crowds ensured that his movie was never shown, and the one cinema that did screen it had to remove it when a man sacrificed himself in the theatre as an act of protest (The Hindu, 2006). Similarly, the film *PK*, despite receiving critical acclaim, faced criticism from Bajrang Dal, the militant youth wing of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, due to perceived disrespect towards religious sentiments. Vandalism occurred at theaters screening the film, prompting calls to cease any future showings (Pandey, 2014).

3.4.3 Sharukh Khan (SRK)

Being an outsider in the film industry, SRK—possibly the most successful actor in Bollywood of this generation—has never been the subject of discussions about nepotism; however, like the other Khans, his Muslim identity has made him a target. Through his appearances in film SRK has established a lucrative career playing predominantly upper-caste, wealthy Hindu characters in conventional Hindi households. Nevertheless, his religion is “catching up” with him. In response to inquiries concerning his Muslim identification, SRK remained composed and said in a 2013 article (Dawn, 2013) that, similar to his role in *Chak De! India* (2007), he is frequently “accused of bearing allegiance to our neighbouring nation rather than my own country”, and his patriotism is frequently called into question. Because of his Islamic identification, SRK articulated in a cutting phrase how his impression of freedom diminishes in the current political environment: “We create little image boxes of our own. One such box has begun to draw its lid tighter and tighter at present. It is the box that contains an image of my religion in millions of minds” (Ibid.).

On his 50th birthday, SRK had an interview with journalist Rajdeep Sardesai (Sardesai, 2015). During the conversation, Sardesai inquired about the growing religious intolerance in India. SRK tactfully sidestepped the question, acknowledging the global spread of fanaticism and the diminishing tolerance of people in general. However, he also pointed out that anti-secular elements were hindering India's progress on the world stage. This assertion that bigotry was increasing in India sparked significant social media outcry. SRK was further questioned about his views on performers refusing National Awards to protest government interference in the Film and Television Institute of India, Pune (FTII). In his careful response, SRK supported the artists' right to protest and advocate for greater creative autonomy. He shifted the discussion on intolerance by defining tolerance as the ability for people to engage in discourse and deliberation over diverse viewpoints.

This mildly critical viewpoint faced furious reactions from right-wing Hindu politicians, including prominent BJP ministers. BJP General Secretary Kailash Vijayvargiya suggested that SRK, despite living in India, had thoughts aligned with Pakistan and should relocate there. Yogi Adityanath, a BJP member of parliament at the time, compared SRK to a terrorist. Some demanded that SRK refund all earnings made in India and labelled him a Congress party operative. While some statements favoured SRK, such as BJP spokesperson Nalin Kohli stating that he was a well-liked and esteemed citizen, the uproar over SRK's subtle remarks on societal issues indicated the limits of his fame, signalling a changing landscape. Even though SRK retracted his remarks due to the intense backlash (Ibid.) they nevertheless affected the release of his film *Dilwale* (2015), with Hindu fundamentalist groups staging rallies nationwide. SRK's apology helped mitigate the issue, although some theatres still had to cancel screenings (HT Correspondent, 2015).

Despite the imminent threat of cancellation, SRK's latest theatrical release, the commercially successful *Jawan*, has adeptly taken a critical stance towards the current government without resistance from fundamentalist factions. *Jawan* is notably rich in political discourse, addressing topics such as Electronic Voting Machines, corruption, and farmer suicides amidst vibrant musical and dance sequences. Towards the film's conclusion, SRK's character delivers a monologue emphasizing the importance of voting and the critical role of electing candidates without caste, religious, or racial biases. Despite the fictional setting of *Jawan* in an imaginary Indian context, it undeniably serves as a commentary on contemporary political dynamics. A noteworthy aspect that may then contribute to the film avoiding cancellation is its manifestation of patriotic sentiment, evident in expressions such as “*Vande Mataram*” (I Bow to thee, mother (India)) and “*Jai Hind*” (Long live India). These phrases underscore the protagonists, and by extension, Khan's, profound love for the nation.

3.5 Chapter Conclusion

While the government does not openly back the production of Bollywood movies, Modi, in particular, does openly endorse the star power of Bollywood celebrities whom he skilfully directs as if he were

directing his own movie. We thus see the benign manipulation of movie stars as commodities to legitimise political claims while also witnessing the slick manipulation of social media narratives by the BJP and its followers to exacerbate polarisation on societal issues such as religious intolerance and nepotism.

As the battle for popular appeal is largely played out on social media grounds, one should not deny that the emergence of this new media since the 2010s has had tremendous implications for the dissemination of culturally dominant ideals. Furthermore, the deft leveraging of Bollywood stars, who possess the power to influence narratives and, by extension, the lived experiences of millions of people, has amplified the prevailing star-centric structure of society, wherein the power and constraints of fame are paradoxically intensified. The domestication of the stars and the utilisation of their star power in support of the established ideology reflects a governing framework that is moulded by the prominence of public figures and grand displays. Conversely, the expanding presence of Bollywood actors in the political domain is severely constrained by the prospective of being 'cancelled.'

Chapter 4: Conclusion

This thesis elucidated that Bollywood, with its claims to be the vessel of all-encompassing "Indianness," has, ever since it came into existence, contributed to the spread of the prevailing socio-cultural elements both domestically and abroad. That is not to say, however, that the government was ever directly involved in the propagation of a specific set of ideals: During the 1950s, India's ruling party neither publicly supported nor financially supported the creation of anti-colonial film narratives; nonetheless, the nation's happiness over its independence from the British Empire and its sorrow over its partition with Pakistan were reflected in Hindi cinema, as this was the narrative that the public found most compelling. Nehru also supported using national icons to spread his message via the movies, despite his disapproval of Indian cinema's endorsement of nation-building exercises. In the 1970s, the economic and societal trauma of the emergency period became personified through the 'angry young man.' Once more, the state did not subsidise such types of films; in fact, one could argue that these films strongly contradicted the prevailing national narrative at the time. The 90s marked a shift as Bollywood gained formal recognition as a separate industry with necessary government backing, though direct intervention was not deemed necessary. Films during this period reflected the consumerism accompanying globalization and commercialization. This facilitated Bollywood's global reach, appealing to non-resident Indian audiences seeking a connection to their heritage through film. Despite its success, this approach lacked essential dialogue about the diverse cultures within the Indian community. Consequently, the 1990s and 2000s saw the creation of anti-Muslim, anti-Pakistani, and anti-minority films, reflecting the othering of 'un-Indianness.'

Our current phase amalgamates previous stages, encompassing the homogenization of Indian culture, the marginalization of religious communities, cinematic reflections of societal dynamics, and a noticeable absence of governmental intervention. It is logical that films from our era would mirror the dominant Hindu nationalist perspective to some extent. According to Anderson and Longkumer, this trend, termed neo-Hindutva, subtly instils an aggressive ideology in unsuspecting spectators. This "subtle" influence is discernible in movies like *The Kashmir Files*, where ostensibly historical depictions deliberately expose viewers to a new interpretation of the 1990s events in Kashmir. Similarly, while *PM Narendra Modi* was a more overt example of propaganda, a Hindu-nationalist worldview was considered a credible narrative for the expansion of the 'brand Modi,' even without government endorsement. *Padmaavat*, while not directly representing the modern Hindu-nationalist

outlook, was still a significant example of a film embodying the splendour of Indian culture, chosen by the Indian diaspora as a model of Hindu femininity.

Although a direct correlation between these films and government endorsement cannot be established, they serve as illustrative instances of neo-Hindutva. Specifically, works such as *PM Narendra Modi* and *The Kashmir Files*, alongside productions like *The Kerala Story*, *The Vaccine War*, *Marnikarika*, and others, received support from the Hindu-nationalist government and were overtly promoted through various channels, including social media and campaign speeches. This endorsement was rooted in the films' alignment with the government's desired narrative for public consumption. Conversely, movies such as *Padmaavat*, *Ram Leela*, *Pathaan*, and *PK* faced censure from the Hindu right-wing for their portrayal of upper caste culture in a negative light which went against what is considered to be Indian. Stars of these films were also often criticised for propagating anti-national ideas. Interestingly, however, they were also exploited by Modi to boost his popularity and celebrity status. Aside from celebrities who are actively involved in right-wing politics, even celebrities who are frequently criticised by *Bhakts*, still figure prominently in Modi's public events which indicates Modi's tactful exploitation of public sentiment.

In conclusion, this thesis delved into the strategic utilization of Bollywood's soft power by Prime Minister Modi to reinforce the cultural dominance of Hindu nationalism in the Indian sociopolitical landscape. It also explored the reasons why Bollywood is perceived as an effective medium for disseminating such perspectives. The inquiries arising from these objectives have been addressed in the following manner:

While the government, including Modi, cannot directly interfere in the production of Bollywood films, the current administration has successfully tapped into Bollywood's soft power potential by publicly endorsing productions aligned with the Hindu nationalist rhetoric of Modi's India. Furthermore, Prime Minister Modi bolsters his actions for public legitimacy by judiciously utilizing Bollywood celebrities, simultaneously disseminating his ideological tenets among their adoring fans. Consequently, the new Hindu nationalist ethos of India is portrayed on the silver screen voluntarily, without coercion. On the contrary, cinematic productions or performers characterized as 'un-Indian' face potential repercussions from the audience if they deviate from the commonly sanctioned narrative. However, in such cases, it is not the government enforcing hard power tactics; rather, it is the devout followers of the Hindu nationalist regime who carry out the often unsanctioned "dirty work."

Regarding the latter component of our research inquiry, the efficacy of Bollywood as a subtle conduit for ingraining Hindu nationalist values is multifaceted. Through cinematic productions, the demarcation between reality and fiction becomes indistinct, indoctrinating unsuspecting spectators who may struggle to differentiate between authentic representations and the propagation of flawed premises. Moreover, given the film's historical role in shaping the notion of "Indianness," Bollywood has historically captivated the national psyche, presenting a commodified and globalized version of Indian nationalism as a consumable representation of cultural heritage.

Lastly, the prevalence of celebrity politics and social media introduces vulnerability within Bollywood, making it easily targeted. This manipulation could result in the dissemination of Hindu nationalist sentiments, driven either by genuine approval or fear of potential repercussions, such as facing public censure. Functioning as a soft power apparatus, Bollywood assumes a pivotal role in advancing Hindu nationalism, contributing to a redefined understanding of "Indianness." By softening the assertive and aggressive tenets of Hindutva, Bollywood aids in the diffusion of this ideology throughout the nation. One could assert that Modi has assumed the role of orchestrator of this process, shaping public sentiment through a collage of cinematic narratives and substantiating his political stance by garnering support from influential figures within the Bollywood industry. This discernible dynamic suggests that India's most efficacious soft power instrument resides in the "brand Modi," a

construct fortified through the collaborative influence of the film industry, celebrity politics, and social media.

Bollywood's impact on the "brand Modi" may grow more apparent in the future. Since 2015, Bollywood's status as India's primary film industry has declined, with audiences seeking more engaging narratives. The success of regional language films, particularly after *Bahubali's* release in 2015, has led to increased competition with Bollywood. While Bollywood may be losing its grip on Indian audiences, Modi's reputation might persist. Future research could explore whether alternative film industries negatively affect public perception of Modi or if his "brand" remains resilient despite any setbacks.

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Appendix

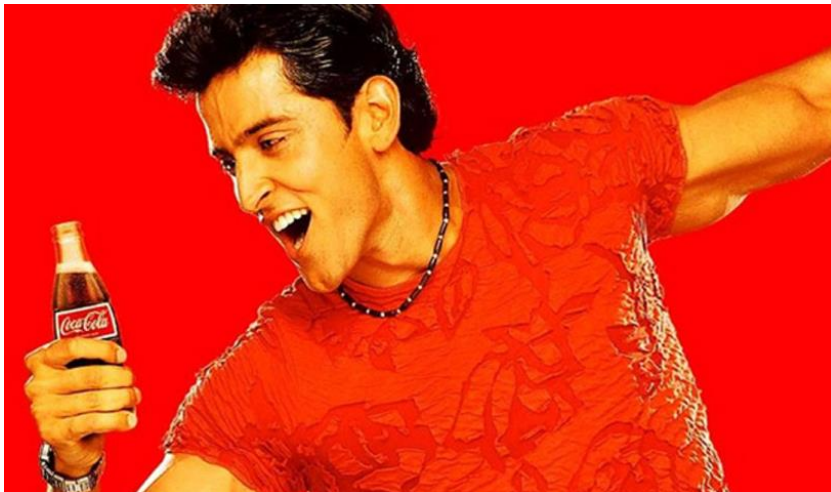


Figure 1: Actor Hrithik Roshan is among the many Indian film stars who have starred in Coca-Cola ad campaigns. Other notable stars include Deepika Padukone, Aishwarya Rai, Alia Bhatt and Ranbir Kapoor. Source: Agarwal, A. (2021, June 21). 10 Indian Stars In Coke Ads We Pretty Much Forgot About Just Like Ronaldo. *Mensxp*. <https://www.mensxp.com/entertainment/bollywood/89379-10-indian-celebs-who-starred-in-famous-coca-cola-ads.html>

Figure 3: PM Narendra Modi poster with the slogan Aa rahe hain dobaram ab koi nahin rok sakta—which translates to “I am coming back again, nobody can stop me now.” Source: Pinterest.



Figure 4: Former cricket player Sachin Tendulkar condemning "fake news" regarding the Indian farmer protest in 2021. Source: *Twitter*.



Figure 5: Screenshot from an ad of the “Lead India” campaign starring Shahrukh Khan. The “Lead India” campaign is part of the India Poised initiative. Source: *YouTube*. [\(714\) Lead India. Do! ft. Shahrukh Khan - YouTube](#)

← Plaatsen

ET NOW 🇮🇳
@ETNOWlive

Young Bollywood reaches National Capital to pose for a selfie with the Prime Minister @NarendraModi. Film-maker @KaranJohar posted the picture on his social media account thanking the PM for reducing GST on movie tickets.

Isn't it the selfie of the year? Post your comments below.

[Post vertalen](#)



👤 Ayushmann Khurrana en 7 anderen

3:56 p.m. · 10 jan. 2019

16 Reposts 4 Geciteerd 94 Vind-ik-leuks

Figure 6: Modi and Bollywood entourage in what is dubbed selfie of the year 2019. Source: *Twitter*.



Narendra Modi
@narendramodi · Follow



Spreading the thoughts of Mahatma Gandhi through cinema, ensuring more youngsters are well-acquainted with the ideals of Gandhi Ji.

Today's interaction with leading film personalities and cultural icons was fruitful.

We exchanged thoughts on a wide range of subjects.



6:07 PM · Oct 19, 2019



18.9K Reply Share

Figure 7: Prime Minister Narendra Modi had a meeting with prominent Bollywood actors and directors, including Shahrukh Khan, Aamir Khan, Kangana Ranaut, and Sonam Kapoor, to deliberate on strategies and initiatives aimed at commemorating the 150th birthday of Mahatma Gandhi. Source: *Twitter*.



Justice For Sushant Singh Rajput @TheTrueWay0 · Sep 23, 2020 ...
Queen nailed It



Kangana Ranaut @KanganaTeam · Sep 23, 2020


Finally for the first time Bullywood mafia wishing that Sushant wasn't killed and Kangana wasn't pushed against the wall, for the first time they are regretting their cruelty, sadism and silence. For the first time they are wishing they could turn back time and bring us back 😊




2



Figure 8: Fan account retweeting post by Kangana Ranaut condemning 'Bullywood' for playing a role in Sushant Rajput Singh's death and Kangana's demise. Source: *Twitter*.

 **boycot_bollywood_nepotism**
 @BoycotN Follow

 **stop Jihad boycott Bollywood**
 @JihadStop Follow



 **Boycot Bollywood**
 @BollywoodBoycot Follow

Figure 9: Example of Twitter (fan) accounts supporting #BoycottBollywood. Source: *Twitter*.

 **Salman Khan** @BeingSalmanKhan · 8h
 been wanting to tweet Tis fr 3 days n was afraid to do so but it involves a man's n family. Don't hang brother hang tha lomdi who ran away
 1.6K 2.7K

Figure 10: Salman Khan's tweet condemning the hanging of Yakub Memon. This Tweet has since been deleted from Khan's account. Source: *Twitter*.


 **Raveena Tandon** ✓
 @TandonRaveena ...

Let's cut the BS-why can't these people openly say that they weren't happy since d day Modi became PM..instead of shaming the whole country

8:19 AM · Nov 24, 2015

803 5.3K 4.4K 1

Figure 11: Tweet from Raveena Tandon defending those who spoke out against PM Narendra Modi. Source: *Twitter*.

 **Narendra Modi** ✪
 @narendramodi · Follow X

Sushant Singh Rajput...a bright young actor gone too soon. He excelled on TV and in films. His rise in the world of entertainment inspired many and he leaves behind several memorable performances. Shocked by his passing away. My thoughts are with his family and fans. Om Shanti.

12:32 PM · Jun 14, 2020 i

382.3K Reply Share

Figure 12: Tweet from Narendra Modi expressing his condolences in honour of Sushant Sing Rajput. Source: *Twitter*.