

Editorial:

Bollywood, Politics and Power: An Introduction

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As we write this introduction, India is in the midst of a crisis so horrific it has sent shock waves around the world. Confronted with a second wave of COVID-19, Prime Minister Narendra Modi counselled Indians to stay home and show discipline, despite the fact that he had recently held an enormous political rally in West Bengal and refused to place restrictions on the Kumbh Mela pilgrimage, perhaps because such a move would not align with the government's openly Hindu nationalist leanings. Indeed, as the death toll mounted in India and Indians died in the street without access to oxygen or hospital beds, the Indian government has remained true to its nationalist and authoritarian instincts.

Rather than accept responsibility or advice, Modi's government has sought to censor, suppress and punish criticism, seeking to ban Facebook and Twitter posts that it deems overly disparaging and suggesting that India's missteps have been the same as those of any other nation (Frayner, 2021). Such an approach is consistent with Modi's history of turning the spotlight on imagined enemies—from Muslims to ordinary citizens protesting injustice—and away from the government's apparent insistence on promoting a Hindu nationalist agenda rather than one that improves health, education, and living standards for all. In prioritizing Hindu festivals and voters over Indians of other faiths, Modi formalized and institutionalized beliefs and positions that have a long history in Indian society and popular culture. Against this economic context, this issue's analysis of popular film underlines a cultural milieu that has facilitated the valorization of Hindu nationalism, propping up Narendra Modi's and the Bharatiya Janata Party's hold on political power at the centre.

Popular Hindi films (often referred to as "Bollywood," though the term is contested) remain one of the most prominent and important forms of popular culture in India and in diaspora. The genre has shifted seamlessly into a global move to streaming platforms that has been accelerated significantly by the pandemic. This special issue speaks to how Bollywood aligns with the stories and themes unfolding around us: for all of its occasional absurdities, fantasy and melodrama, Bollywood has historically offered a window into India's psyche.

Bollywood films have frequently served as a lightning rod for political and cultural issues, such as poverty, corruption, caste discrimination, gender inequality, anti-Muslim discrimination and the direct, human impact of Partition on Hindu-Muslim families (see Banerjee, 2016; Dudrah & Desai, 2008, Dwyer, 2014; Hirji, 2010; Mishra, 2002; Viridi, 2003). Examples abound, from

Shri 420 (Kapoor, 1955) to *Rang De Basanti* (Mehra, 2006) and beyond. In 2018, the release of the popular film *Padmaavat* (Bhansali, 2018) in India unleashed considerable controversy. The Rajput community was offended by the depiction of particular cultural dance rituals, while secular activists were troubled by what came across as aggressive Hindu nationalism and demonization of Muslims. Right-wing Hindu groups called for the film to be banned and threats were made against the director's and star's lives. These issues, refracted through the cinematic lenses of Bollywood, point to the ways in which nationalism and anti-Muslim sentiment have become entrenched throughout India, with the state placing increasing pressure on media to support these politics or at the very least, remain silent and thus complicit.

The seeds of this special issue were planted when two of the co-editors collaborated on an article that argued that India's dream of regional dominance vis-à-vis Pakistan manifested in the film *Bhaag Milkha Bhaag* (Mehra, 2013) as nationalist triumphalism associated with the neoliberal politics linked to globalization and ascendant, muscular Hindu nationalism (Banerjee & Williams, 2019). We eventually convened an interdisciplinary symposium of scholars from the USA and Canada to analyze popular Hindi film in an era of neoliberal globalization (Williams, 2015) and ascendant Hindu nationalism. Symposium papers presented multidisciplinary perspectives on how religion, sexualities, caste, nation, and gender intersect in films to support and disseminate particular trajectories of cultural and political power that maintain the status quo in Indian society in the wake of post-1991 economic liberalization policies and the ever-increasing dominance of BJP-style Hindu nationalism. In selecting papers for this special issue, we looked especially for those that theorized embedded presentations and effects of Hindu nationalism in film. Two of the papers in this special issue were originally presented at the symposium (Hirji, Ram), while others were submitted subsequently. We were impressed by the depth and richness of the filmic analyses in which the authors grappled with identity and pedagogy in the construction of the "other" in the nation and how the nation comes to be defined against various "others."

The special issue builds and expands on important previous work in this realm (Gehlawat, 2019). In their own way, each article problematizes the intersection of Hindu nationalism and Bollywood. Indeed, as multiple observers have noted, Hindutva is no longer an underlying theme of Bollywood cinema, but presented outright, supported openly by some of the industry's biggest stars, who have largely remained subservient to the political power of Hindu nationalism (Ali, 2021; Nandy, 2020; Rajabali, 2017). Taken as a whole, the papers shed critical light on the othering of groups on the basis of caste, gender, or religion; and each piece analyzes this othering from a different angle of approach. Together they constitute a comprehensive look at multiple ways in which a Hindutva-inflected Hinduism has become the unmarked subject of Bollywood.

Several critical terms are used consistently across this special issue. We use Hindutva and Hindu nationalism interchangeably to connote the ideology of the movement to establish Hindu supremacy in India as led by the anchor social movement organization of Hindu nationalism, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), and the political wing/party of the movement, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) (Basu, 2015). Hindutva ideology elides any difference between nation and religion, essentially equating being Indian with being Hindu. The papers are all set in the context of the current era of neoliberal globalization and the post-1991 liberalization of the Indian economy—itsself an ongoing project. We also use Bollywood and Hindi cinema, and Bombay/Mumbai cinema to connote the popular Hindi-language film industry based in Bombay. The papers use both the older and the newer terms for the city, Bombay and Mumbai, depending

on context. Finally, as the focus of this special issue is the Indian film industry, we use India rather than South Asia to connote the geographical range of the analyses.

Globalization, consumer capitalism, and neoliberalism form the context of all these films made in the wake of the 1991 loosening of the Indian economy and its turn to foreign investment and privatization. These changes sparked the growth of a consumer goods economy dominated by multinational companies and a growing globalized urban middle class. In India today, a taste for conspicuous cosmopolitan consumption among the newly globalizing middle classes marks a significant shift from the years of early independence. Then, the tenets of Gandhi and Nehru emphasized social responsibility and the notion of refinement associated with a muted material desire and restraint on consumption. These were seen as more appropriate for a postcolonial country struggling with poverty and illiteracy in the wake of independence from imperialism (Fernandes, 2000). In contrast, the new middle classes perceive conspicuous consumption as the signifier of a new India that is no longer a marginal player in the global political economy. Earning annual salaries that are unprecedented because of the entry of international capital, urbanites usually work for Indian subsidiaries of multi-national corporations, educate their children in Western universities, and vacation abroad (Farrell & Beinhocker, 2007). When the government conducted nuclear tests in 1998, this middle class perceived itself and its ambitions to be on par with the developed countries, thus giving rise to an aggressive nationalist triumphalism (Oza, 2006).

Movie-going and watching have also changed in the post-liberalization era. In the wake of the struggle for independence, films were constructed as populist nation-building tools geared to be accessible to and for a very large, poor and illiterate population (Roy, 2007: Ch. 1). In 2000, the Industrial Development Bank of India Act recognized filmmaking as an official industrial activity. Prior to this Act, the economic aspects of filmmaking were unregulated and domestic box office sales were a major part of the profit made by a film. Post-1991, Hindi films are now geared to appeal to the new globalized middle class (Faroqui, 2006). Viewers pay an average of US\$10 per ticket (approximately Rs. 655) to see a film in multi-screen theatres usually housed in glittering new, multi-story, air-conditioned malls. Fifteen to twenty large Indian cities where the globalized middle classes reside, along with overseas markets, constitute much of the profit margin for Hindi films. Box office returns from the diasporic Indian audience have also become critical. Today, through the sale of music rights, overseas distribution rights, and telecast rights, films can generate massive revenues before they are even released (Athique & Hill, 2010; Ganti, 2013; Gupta, 2013). As noted above, a third significant shift in movie-watching is now underway with the shift to streaming platforms owned by giant U.S. tech firms—most prominently, Netflix and Amazon Prime. These services have already moved to lock in prominent Bollywood writers, producers, directors, and actors to produce content solely for their platforms, with political and cultural consequences still very much to be determined (Madhok, 2021). Scholarship to understand and analyze the ramifications of this shift, which are beyond the scope of this special issue, lag far behind the pace of the phenomenon and will need to race to “catch up.” Will this shift alter or exacerbate trends we have already seen and identified?

For example: None of the films analyzed in this collection of essays speak for the subaltern of Indian society, nor do they focus on the importance of working collectively to create a more equitable India. *Lagaan* provides a partial, unique exception which adds to its pedagogic value; but even in *Lagaan*, subalternity is packaged and presented in a way that resonates with the sensibilities of India’s middle and upper classes. As a whole, the films focus on individual travails,

make reference to India's new prosperity, and wrestle mostly with the location of the "other" in a Hindu India. Ultimately, these analyses raise the question of what it means if audiences, in India and globally, adopt and adapt the othering and exclusionary frameworks embedded in these movies. Do movies shape what people see and believe, or do they reflect what people believe and want to see—and to what extent do they do both? The articles in this special issue consider these questions from the angles of diaspora, minority and majority religion, and gender.

The articles taken together elucidate multiple themes. Anjali Ram and Chandrima Chakraborty explicitly discuss the links between Hindu nationalism and globalization. Julia Szivak, Karim Karim and Ryan Arron D'Souza trace the production of "otherness" in this context. Multiple authors, directly and indirectly, emphasize the importance of diaspora as conceptualized in multiple ways. Several of the movies analyzed in different pieces focus specifically on religion—including majority Hinduism in addition to Islam as well as Christianity in the status of minority religions in India—tracing the representations of religion in/and its confluence with nationalism in Hindi cinema. Another recurring concern is the persisting legacies of colonialism in Bollywood movies, manifested in how community identities are conceived, presented and received, and how colonialism affects contemporary Indian and Hindu nationalist politics. Across the articles, identity and exclusion—defined in terms of caste, geography, religion, gender, and class—are consistent themes.

In different ways, each of these articles problematizes the ongoing affiliation of Hindu nationalism and Bollywood. How does the continued popularity of Bollywood movies and their costumes, songs, and other cultural presentations in the diaspora signal an embrace of Hindutva, manifested in a refusal to engage with both the historical and contemporary promotion of Hindu/north Indian/upper caste identity presented as the true Indian identity in Bollywood? How does a desire for community and affirmation run up against the divergence (and the relation) between filmic constructions and Indian politics on the ground? Bollywood films present a form of escape that affirms and represents a homeland that never actually was the way Bollywood presents it. Simultaneously, Bollywood presents a vision of diasporic Indian life that those of us who actually constitute the Indian diaspora scarcely recognize (Banerjee, 2016; Desai, 2004). Even as some audiences are positioned to reject or resist Bollywood's exclusionary presentations, as Karim argues, Bollywood films package the diaspora for domestic consumption, and package India for diasporic consumption.

Nita Prasad, Ram, and Karim approach the issue of Hindu nationalism from perspectives rooted in and of various diasporas. In a unique contribution that simultaneously tackles pedagogy and theoretical analysis, Prasad uses *Lagaan* (Gowariker, 2001) as a platform in the United States classroom for discussions of the immutability of caste-based hierarchies, divide-and-conquer strategies by British colonizers, and the ways that gender, religion, race and ability shape the (sometimes contradictory) construction of various characters. In particular, Prasad looks at the layered forms of oppression that exist in the film, posed as stark dichotomies: Hindu vs. Muslim; the innocent, supportive Indian girl vs. the White British female saviour. And she unpacks the work such dichotomies do in constructing a vision of Indian national identity. As Prasad argues, paired with specific readings, this film provides students unfamiliar with Indian history a provocative look into how gender, nation, and religion have unfolded intersectionally with each other in a postcolonial context. Uniquely, prior to an era of ascendant Hindu nationalism, "*Lagaan* advances a Gandhian vision of India's past, with a specific emphasis on religious and caste/class unity... thus demonstrating how India's past is continually constructed and reconstructed according

to the dictates of the present.” *Lagaan*’s vision can be seen as somewhat anomalous in today’s Bollywood. In contemporary India’s unquestioning celebration of Hindu identity, this film sought to construct an alternate view of nation—though not itself unproblematic—rooted in Nehruvian secularism and Gandhian celebration of diversity. It is an open question how well such a film might do in today’s India, since Gandhian non-violence remains a particular target of Hindu nationalist vitriol.

Ram’s analysis focuses on films that became particularly well known in the diaspora and how they flattened India’s historical, religious and cultural diversity. She discusses how films such as *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (Chopra, 1995)—one of the first crop of films made in the wake of globalization that centres consumer capitalism—transformed regional rituals into pan-Indian celebrations in the diaspora’s search for an easily enactable Hindu femininity. In this instance, *Karva chauth* transforms from a culturally and regionally specific ritual to a proof of love to be performed throughout the vast and diverse Indian diaspora, as a kind of dating rite of passage, even for those who may not have any historical familiarity with this practice. Ram further argues that the lush representations of womanhood in *Padmaavat* (Bhansali, 2018) allowed diasporic women to indulge in cosplay as a means of both performing and strengthening their ties to a particular upper caste, chaste notion of “proper” Hindu womanhood. While extremists battled over stereotypes and accuracy in *Padmaavat*, these debates proved to be less significant in the diaspora than the ability to consume and engage in cosplay. This is one of many contradictions within the Indian diaspora, as Ram notes: an enthusiastic reception for Modi in the United States would seem to signal that Hindu nationalism has the diaspora’s unqualified support, but of course, there is no political unity within the diaspora. Perhaps Modi’s performative displays of Indian pride when travelling abroad are enough to compel diasporic Indians to engage in a similarly performative affirmation, just as they perform their engagement with *Padmaavat* and others.

Karim focuses on the Khoja Muslim diaspora in Canada. His article assesses the tightening grip of Hindu nationalism by focusing on the shifting nature of Muslim representation in film over time in India. Chadha and Kavoori (2008) argue that by the 1970s mainstream films featuring significant Muslim characters became something of a rarity within popular Hindi film. Further, in the wake of the destruction of the Babri Masjid in December 1992 and the communal riots that followed, there has been a wave of what Amit Rai (2003) dubs “cine-patriotism”, and the Muslim “other” has become a shadowy terrorist menacing the Indian body politic. The article by Karim pushes back against this inflexible filmic vision of the Muslim other. He focuses on the Khoja Muslim diaspora in Canada and their possible interpretation and use of Bollywood in the construction of communal identity. His article examines the way that Bollywood serves to strengthen this group’s sense of its South Asian origins in the face of its complex migratory history and the globally diverse nature of Islamic traditions. This influence from Bollywood holds despite the shifting nature of Muslim representation in film as Hindu nationalism becomes ascendant in the country and the industry. Although this recent dark turn in Muslim representation marginalizes the Khoja community, members seem to draw comfort and belonging from scenes of India depicted on the screen, and their own personal history allows them to relate to the more inclusive visions of India that seem to be increasingly scarce in Bollywood. As he depicts the historical and necessary pluralism of Bollywood that is frequently glossed over or simplified in the present day, Karim demonstrates how this is mirrored in the syncretic and flexible traditions of the Khoja Muslims who fuse Vedic traditions into their practice of Islam.

Szivak's article extends this focus on the Muslim "other" from a different angle, dissecting the representation of Pakistan. She unpacks *Bajrangi Bhaijaan* (Khan, 2015) and *Happy Bhag Jayegi* (Aziz, 2016) to argue that although these films gesture at the possibility of cross border friendships and understanding, a close analysis reveals the unstable foundations of such a possibility. Szivak achieves this by analyzing the films along three thematic lines: the portrayal of female protagonists, national identity based on religion and cricket, and the way in which comic scenes are formulated on the basis of stereotypes. Although stereotypes of Pakistani Muslims are not particularly menacing in these films, the rigid line dividing us (Hindu India) and them (Muslim Pakistan) abides.

D'Souza focuses on "another" (oft neglected) "other" of Hindu nationalism by analyzing how Christianity is represented in Bollywood, unpacking the idea of Hindu modernity and its relationship to Christianity. Through an analysis of three films: *Rock On!!* (Kapoor, 2008), *Page 3* (Bhandakar, 2005), and *Dum Maaro Dum* (Sippy, 2011), he reveals that when Hindu nationalism and modernity fuse in India, only the Hindu body can reap the benefits of modern capitalism. Others (in this case Christians) are assimilated into the national context so that they can enjoy stability and prosperity only if they rely on the support of a Hindu man and do not destabilize the dominance of Hinduism in overt ways. Echoing Karim's observations about the dichotomy between good and bad Muslims, D' Souza notes that while such "good" Christians can belong to India, other "bad" Christians, will always be outsiders. Moreover, in the context of Hindu nationalism, even good Christians and/or Muslims can never represent proper patriotic masculinity in the nation.

The flip side of othering non-Hindus is the centring of Hindus and Hinduism (in a particular Hindutva-inflected form) as the unmarked subject of Bollywood films. Illustrating this process, Chakraborty offers a nuanced analysis of the song sequence "Tattad tattad" in Sanjay Leela Bhansali's *Goliyon Ki Raasleela Ram-Leela* (2013). The film generated box office profit by drawing on Indian audiences' familiarity with the epic *Ramayana*. In her analysis, a playful use of the myths and divinities becomes a compelling way to valorize and consolidate Hindu identity. As she argues, "The extremely popular song-dance sequence 'Tattad tattad' plays a significant role in this context by integrating popular aspects of the Hindu gods Ram and Krishna to represent the cinematic hero and male protagonist Ram, played by the actor Ranveer Singh." She discusses how the presentation of the male body, the covert gestures to sexual desire, and the links to Hindu myths that form the background of the song, all congeal to reveal a joyous celebration of Ram, *Ramayana*, and thus Hindu identity as linked to these icons by various Hindu nationalist organizations.

Finally, Faiza Hirji brings an explicitly gendered and intersectional lens to analyze a particular interpretation of female empowerment in Bollywood as articulated by the careers of Priyanka Chopra, Anushka Sharma, and Vidya Balan. These women—upper caste, middle class, and Hindu—have in certain cases made bold choices in terms of feminine representation. Hirji focuses on Chopra in *Aitraaz* (Abbas-Mustan, 2004), Sharma in *NH10* (Singh, 2015), and Balan in *Kahaani* (Ghosh, 2012). The characters they played challenged, to an extent, the passive, innocent, virginal protagonists of Bollywood film. In their professional lives, all three women have commented on some of the challenges of being an actress in Bollywood, such as the gender wage gap. Sharma has recently produced the female revenge fantasy *Bulbbul* (Dutt, 2020) through her own production company. However, the stringent critique of domestic violence was located in the 19th century, somewhat blunting its efficacy for contemporary India. All three women have been reluctant to be viewed as "strident" feminists, which would certainly harm their chances of getting

roles in major productions. As Hirji points out, challenges to norms of proper womanhood have to be limited: these actresses cannot appear to be too transgressive or unruly, and in the final analysis they have to express their patriotism for a Hindu India. It is not clear if a Christian or Muslim actress could take on even the limited challenges to male dominance in the film industry these women have expressed.

We see the themes raised in this special issue as the initiation, or continuation, of an ongoing conversation, rather than a final word on anything. We would be delighted to see further analysis, for example, engaging non-Hindi language Indian film, or broader regional cinematic fields such as “Lollywood” (the Pakistani film industry based in Lahore). We hope the insightful analyses raised by the authors of these articles might spark future research along such lines.

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Citing this Editorial:

Banerjee, Sikata, Williams, Rina Verma, and Hirji, Faiza (2021). Editorial: Bollywood, Politics and Power: An Introduction. *Global Media Journal -- Canadian Edition*, 13 (1), pp. 1-11