

Cinematic Historiography?

Bollywood, *Lagaan*, and Hindutva India

Nita Verma Prasad

Quinnipiac University

Abstract:

This paper explores the ways in which Bollywood films, as a form of historical fiction, can be utilized in the classroom, arguing that properly contextualized discussions of such films can be more impactful than historical monographs in highlighting the contested nature of the past. Focusing on the 2001 film *Lagaan: Once Upon a Time in India* (Khan & Gorawiker), the article shows how the filmmakers offer a compelling, albeit vastly oversimplified portrayal of political dynamics, caste prejudice, gender relations, and communalism in nineteenth-century colonial India. While containing various generalizations and inaccuracies, the basic historical literacy offered by the film can serve as an effective catalyst for conversation and learning in the upper-division classroom, particularly when combined with appropriate scholarly readings. More importantly, however, the paper contends that *Lagaan* must be analyzed within the contemporary political and cultural context of rising majoritarian nationalism on the subcontinent and the concomitant decline of liberal-secular policies and political orientations. *Lagaan* advances a Gandhian vision of India's past, with a specific emphasis on religious and caste/class unity, that has become increasingly marginalized in post-Hindutva India, thus demonstrating how India's past is continually constructed and reconstructed according to the dictates of the present.

Keywords: South Asian history; Bollywood, *Lagaan*; Hindu nationalism; Presentism; Cricket; Caste; Communalism.

Historical fiction is commonly judged by how accurately it portrays past events, and Bollywood films set in the past are no exception. Take, for instance, *Lagaan: Once Upon a Time in India*, a 2001 film that was wildly popular with the public but less so with historians and academics. Written and directed by Ashutosh Gorawiker, *Lagaan* was the first undertaking of Aamir Khan

Productions, and was critically acclaimed both at home and abroad. It boasts an Oscar nomination for Best Foreign Language Film at the 2002 Academy Awards—only the third Bollywood film to receive such recognition. Set in a small Indian village during the British colonial period, the film has all the elements of a Bollywood classic: a catchy score, a love triangle with a handsome hero, regular bouts of comic relief, and most importantly, a David vs. Goliath, good vs. evil confrontation on a cricket field. Given the Indian public's all-consuming passion for both cricket and Bollywood, it is no wonder *Lagaan* was a hit (Mehta, 2020: 185; Stadtler, 2005).

Yet the film's reception among historians has been somewhat checkered. It is more fiction than history, and thus draws low marks from those using the yardstick of accuracy. Indeed, as a historian of British India, I find myself criticizing numerous themes in *Lagaan* based on their profound misrepresentation of the past, even as I tap my toes in time to the music. But the film is nonetheless an effective teaching tool in my upper-division classes on modern India.¹ Historical fiction need not reflect reality to be useful in the classroom; it need only lay the groundwork for a critical discussion of the past and—more importantly—show how the lenses with which we view the past are tinted and warped. *Lagaan* does all of this, and in an incredibly engaging way. It addresses multiple topics in the political and social history of the Raj, while at the same time advancing a Gandhian, liberal-secular vision of India's past that has become increasingly marginalized in post-Hindutva India.

The film is set in 1893 in Champaner, a small village in the Central Provinces (an area covering parts of modern-day Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, and Chhattisgarh).² The plot revolves around the British demand for *lagaan*, or tax in kind, and a wager that is made between the peasant protagonist Bhuvan (Aamir Khan) and the commander of the local British cantonment, Captain Andrew Russell. If Bhuvan and his rag tag team of villagers can beat the British brigade at a game of cricket, then *lagaan* will be cancelled for the next three years, not only for Champaner, but for the entire province. If they lose, however, they will have to pay triple *lagaan*, in the middle of a two-year drought, no less. The intrigue and suspense draw students in, leaving them with a multitude of insights on the colonial and postcolonial history of India. Classroom discussion revolves around the film's overt representations of politics, caste, gender, and religion, which are often overly simplistic, as well as the more subtle Gandhian undertones, which are not.

Historical Literacy, Simplified: Politics, Caste, Gender, Religion

Lagaan introduces students to the overlapping spheres of sovereignty in colonial India. They see how Captain Russell and his cantonment wield power over the local Raja, Puran Singh, who in turn rules over the villagers. Amitabh Bachchan's dulcet tones thus narrate:

The British protected the Raja's domain from attacks by neighboring rulers. They also promised the other rajas protection from him. Thanks to this double-dealing, the British collected a tax from the rajas, which was paid by every farmer in the country.

(Khan & Gorawiker, 2001: 0:04:41)

True to this schematic, the Raja calls upon Russell early in the film, asking for help with a hostile neighbor. Russell is perfectly willing to help, but conditions it on the Raja (a vegetarian) eating meat with him. When he refuses, Russell cruelly doubles the *lagaan* payment for the year, and the Raja's men duly inform the villagers. An exceedingly simple political map is thus drawn: British

overlords play native rulers against one another with offers of "protection." Those rulers in turn extract revenue from the villages under their control and feed it back up the chain to the British. The villagers participate implicitly in this political hierarchy: throughout the film, they take their appeals for tax relief to the Raja, who then negotiates with Russell on their behalf. When word of double lagaan reaches Champaner, for example, the villagers react by declaring "we must go to our Rajaji" (Khan & Gorawiker, 2001: 0:31:32).

I use classroom discussions to nuance this basic historical literacy, emphasizing that the political layout of the Raj drawn by *Lagaan*, while correct in its broader outlines, is grossly oversimplified. The film, for instance, makes no mention of the *taluqdars* and *zamindars* who ruled over the peasants as landlords, extracting revenue at exorbitant rates. Nor does it illustrate how moneylenders, village headman, and coparcenary communities preyed on the Indian peasant. These groups are not implicated in the plight of Champaner's peasants. To drive this point home, students read Gyan Pandey's groundbreaking study of peasant movements in Awadh, where they learn that in reality, taluqdars "collected more than the recorded rents, instituted a system of unofficial taxation...and often ignored the law altogether...The taluqdars concentrated on screwing up their incomes from their estates without any concern for protecting old tenants" (Pandey, 1982: 146). Moreover, this taluqdari class, enjoying its newly-created rights in property, was well-known for collaborating with the British. In fact, nearby Awadh "was the home...of the idea of a close alliance between government and landlords" (Musgrave, 1972: 259; Agarwal, 2007: 628-629). Nowhere is this "government-landlord coalition" apparent in *Lagaan* (Musgrave, 1972: 260). Rather, the Raja is allied with the villagers. Despite the diverse layers of exploitation and authority aimed at the Indian peasant, the film paints a simple binary between Indians and their white colonizers (Mannathukkaren, 2001: 4582).

A better treatment of imperial politics can be found in *Lagaan's* portrayal of Russell as the infamous "man on the spot." Politics in the British Empire were decentralized, with significant power and policy-making ceded to authorities on the ground. This often led to maladministration in the localities, as well as friction between London (or central authorities) and men on the spot. The former is perfectly illustrated by Russell's doubling of lagaan on a whim, as an egotistical power play. The latter is depicted when Russell is summoned by the commanding officer of the Central Provinces, who chastises him for the wager: "This is the most preposterous idea I've heard of...The British Empire cannot function according to the whims and fancies of officers like you" (Khan & Gorawiker, 2001: 01:20:45). He reminds Russell that he "is working for Her Majesty the Queen" (Khan & Gorawiker, 2001: 01:19:45). Russell, however, remains defiant, like a true man on the spot, proclaiming, "These senile old hats will teach *me* to run the show?" (Khan & Gorawiker, 2001: 01:22:10). The history of the British Empire abounds with examples of such tensions between core and periphery. My students and I draw parallels to Lawrence of Arabia's semi-independent diplomacy in the Middle East, and to the dispute between the Raj and London on military strategy during World War I (Lawrence, 1935; Wilson, 1930). But perhaps the best example is provided by early Company rule in Bengal. Warren Hastings's military strategy created quite a row between London and Calcutta, ultimately resulting in an impeachment trial (Rolli, 2019). Thus, in an exaggerated and simplistic way, *Lagaan* illustrates the broader political dynamics within the Empire.

Lagaan's treatment of caste is also worthy of discussion, though it too lacks complexity and nuance. Several castes are featured as the film opens: a landowning peasant, a *vaid* (doctor), the *thakur* (village headman), and the village priest. The filmmakers visually mark the castes with

different styles of dress and adornment, but inter-caste interactions are free and congenial. Halfway through the film, caste relations are more forcefully drawn into the foreground. As team Champaner deliberates who should be its final member, the ball rolls towards Kachra, a meek, disabled Dalit. Bhuvan asks him to retrieve the ball, and discovers that his disabled left hand puts a noticeable spin on it, making him an ideal bowler. Delighted, Bhuvan declares "we have found our eleventh player!" (Khan & Gorawiker, 2001: 02:00:26). But a chorus of protests follow:

"He can't play with us! No way!"

"We will not mix with an Untouchable!"

"It's unthinkable!"

"It's totally wrong! You're polluting the whole system!"

(Khan & Gorawiker, 2001: 02:00:45-02:01:20)

Bhuvan responds with an eloquent speech, showing the others the error of their ways: "You brand people Untouchable and poison humanity itself...Why are you choking the very air of our village with this caste division?" (Khan & Gorawiker, 2001: 02:01:44). The team members quickly realize that Bhuvan is right and embrace Kachra as their teammate. The rest of the film features Kachra singing, dancing, eating, and praying with the team. Ultimately, this inclusivity is rewarded: during the game, the relentless onslaught of the British batsmen is slowed only by Kachra's hat trick.

These scenes serve as a useful conduit into a discussion of caste. My students will have read Nicholas Dirks's *Castes of Mind*, and so understand that under the British, caste was constructed as inflexible and determinative of access to power and resources (Dirks, 2001). Given this starting point, the most frequent comment I hear is that the team's quick and easy acceptance of Kachra makes no sense: deeply-rooted biases are not shed so easily. Students conclude that the team's swift about-face is meant to impart a very specific message, i.e. that caste discrimination is wrong and must be ended. When pressed further, however, they recognize that this message is marred by a lack of agency and skill in the character of Kachra. Indeed, Bhuvan's interest in Kachra is motivated not by skill or merit, but rather by his *disability*: when Kachra tries to bowl with his able right hand, Bhuvan instructs him not to. He is valued for his *lack* of ability, quite literally. Moreover, it is Bhuvan who recognizes this (dis)ability and decides to recruit Kachra. Kachra does not make the decision for himself; he obediently follows Bhuvan's orders. This deferential behavior continues after he joins the team: Kachra cowers before the others, crying and speechless, lower lip trembling as he gazes gratefully up at Bhuvan, his caste savior.

Interestingly, Kachra bears a striking resemblance to a historical figure, Palwankar Baloo. Baloo was a talented bowler and a member of the *chamaar* (leather-working) caste, near the bottom of the Hindu caste hierarchy. In 1896, high-caste Hindus reluctantly drafted Baloo onto their cricket team, Deccan Gymkhana, as they were desperate to beat their British rivals. Like team Champaner, their inclusivity paid off, as Baloo was instrumental in Deccan Gymkhana's victory over the British in a much publicized 1906 match. But unlike team Champaner, Baloo's caste was not so easily overlooked: he did not dine with the rest of the team, and during the game's ritual "tea intervals," he could be seen drinking tea from a disposable cup, alone and outside of the pavilion (Guha, 1998: 170).

Unlike the issue of caste, gender has been overlooked by many scholarly analyses of *Lagaan*, even though the plotline intersects with gender issues at multiple points. The film's female characters provide vivid illustrations of common gender archetypes. The most obvious is that of

the traditional, subservient Indian woman, exemplified by Gauri. Students immediately see that Gauri's main concern is chasing after Bhuvan: the film quite literally opens with her searching for him, and her on-screen time is dominated by efforts to secure his hand in marriage. She and the other young Indian women exhibit traditional gender roles, singing in support of the team, bringing food to the male cricket players, tending to their wounds, and cheering them on during the game. The second gender archetype I ask students to consider is that of "Mother India," represented by Bhuvan's widowed mother. Throughout the film, she remains unnamed, but is simply referred to as "Mai" (mother). A vision of purity, always clad in the widow's attire of a plain white sari, she is the "wise and highly spiritual matriarch" of the village (Lichtner & Banyopadhyay, 2008: 447). Bhuvan seeks her advice when he is filled with doubt about the wager, and she guides him, serving as his—and the entire village's—moral compass. The Indian women in the film, then, fit neatly into recognizable gender roles. These stereotypes are so generic that my students are able to identify them, even without focused readings on the gender history of colonial India.³

Students do, however, need help analyzing the character of Elizabeth, Captain Russell's sister. Elizabeth demonstrates how gender collided with race in colonial India. The simplest analysis of Elizabeth's character revolves around her resistance to authority; students easily see how she challenges traditional norms and structures of authority. At the outset, we see her displeasure with Russell's unfair treatment of Indians, first as he tries to force the Raja to eat meat, and then when he challenges them to a game of which they know little. In a quiet act of rebellion, Elizabeth begins coaching team Champaner, thereby transgressing multiple boundaries: she challenges the traditional masculine preserve of the game, the authority of her brother, and British rule itself. Upon learning of her betrayal, Captain Russell reprimands her for going "against [her] own brother" and demands that she remain confined to the Cantonment, safely within her own domestic and imperial boundaries (Khan & Gorawiker, 2001: 01:37:31). But Elizabeth again defies both familial and imperial authority, proclaiming "I'll go to the village as and when I so wish" (Khan & Gorawiker, 2001: 01:56:29).

What students generally miss is that despite her bucking of authority, Elizabeth's character also reaffirms certain racial and gendered stereotypes. Her empathy for the villagers, her desire to guide and nurture the team, and her unrequited love for Bhuvan all reaffirm "essentialist notions of womanhood by connecting womanness with vulnerability, sensitivity, and passion" (Chakraborty, 2003: 1883). But these traits, usually associated with gender, become racialized within the context of Empire. Elizabeth is not falling for anyone; she is falling for a brown-skinned native. Her love for Bhuvan and her interactions with the villagers (she, for example, attends a religious festival), represent a breach of imperial norms mandating separation of the races. Her blurring of racial and cultural boundaries is visually represented in the song "O Rey Chhori," when the editing suddenly replaces Gauri with Elizabeth, dressed in full Indian garb, lying in the arms of her brown lover (Bhuvan) in a village hut. Later in the same song, Bhuvan appears in imperial dress uniform, dancing with Elizabeth at an officer's ball. Moreover, western instrumentals and Elizabeth's English-language vocals regularly break into the Hindi song (Khan & Gorawiker, 2001: 01:50:20-01:56:05).

Furthermore, Elizabeth's desire to help the underdogs—brown-skinned underdogs—casts her in the role of "white savior." Her coaching saves the villagers from certain defeat. They "know nothing" about cricket, and understand it only as some version of "gilli-danda" (Khan & Gorawiker, 2001: 01:14:17). Elizabeth teaches them the game, and also advocates for them during the match, in a dispute over the rules. But most significantly, Elizabeth's white presence bestows

legitimacy on the team, in the eyes of the villagers themselves. Initially, few are willing to join the team. Most urge Bhuvan to "go to Rajaji...and beg him to save us" (Khan & Gorawiker, 2001: 0:55:39), because "even a whole year hitting with a stick won't teach us this whitey game" (Khan & Gorawiker, 2001: 0:44:03). But when word spreads that a "*gauri mem*" (white lady) is helping them, many become convinced that "that means they can really play." The team subsequently earns more recruits (Khan & Gorawiker, 2001: 01:03:40). Thus, Elizabeth's actions and behaviors intersect with both gender and race in diverse ways.

Finally, the love triangle Elizabeth is a part of—along with Gauri and Bhuvan—allows students to further unpack the intersection of gender, race and nation. We discuss how Elizabeth and Gauri represent illicit versus innocent desire, "western-ness" versus "Indianness" (Dark, 2008: 129-130). The film is full of sexually suggestive images of Elizabeth: when she first meets Bhuvan, the camera plays fully on her face, revealing a knowing physical desire. Similarly, "O Rey Chhori" stages various boudoir scenes—Elizabeth on the bed, Elizabeth stroking her body, Elizabeth clad in lingerie. Gauri's interactions with Bhuvan, on the other hand, are entirely non-sexual: she sings with him on a bullock cart and kneels before him in the fields, head covered—a vision of modesty. Elizabeth's western femininity contrasted with Gauri's Indian one becomes even more significant upon Bhuvan's rejection of it: at the end of the film, Elizabeth is left in a state of emotional exile, pining away for him. My students, informed by Partha Chatterjee's *The Nation and Its Fragments*, recognize the western woman and the Indian woman as oppositional structures in nationalist discourse, and we discuss how Bhuvan's actions in this love triangle underscore his allegiance to the nation and its cultural purity (Chatterjee, 1993: 131-132; Farred, 2004: 109). Elizabeth, the most complex character in the film, is at once rebel, nurturer, and white savior; she is both transgressor and upholder of cultural norms.⁴

After examining politics, caste, and gender in *Lagaan*, students gain significant insight into British colonial India. Yet no discussion of the film is complete without an investigation of religion. The filmmakers issue a clear statement on the importance of religious unity, but in a somewhat contradictory way. Initially, the film suggests a religious utopia of sorts, where religious difference means little. My students, in fact, generally miss the religious identities of the two Muslim characters, Lakha and Ismail—a significant statement in and of itself. Fleeting references to Allah and seldomly-worn prayer caps are the only markers of Islam assigned to them. We meet Lakha early in the film, as he pines for Gauri, a Hindu girl who only has eyes for Bhuvan. Lakha's love for a Hindu is not seen as taboo or illicit—religion is not even mentioned. Later in the film, Lakha acts as a spy for the British, playing for team Champaner but taking orders from Captain Russell. Here again, religion plays no overt role in the plotline: Lakha's actions are not born out of religious hostility but because he is secretly jealous of Bhuvan and Gauri's relationship, and so "wanted to disgrace [Bhuvan] in Gauri's eyes" (Khan & Gorawiker, 2001: 02:31:34). The absence of communally-charged thinking is underscored when Lakha's betrayal is discovered, and the angry mob that forms is genuinely bewildered as to his motivations; neither they nor Captain Russell assume he acted out of religious hatred. And the ironic ending to the subplot has Lakha taking refuge from the mob in the Hindu temple (which he frequently refers to as "our temple"). Sincerely repentant, he redeems himself with solid play on the cricket field. Throughout the film, in fact, Lakha and Ismail move freely among the villagers, their identities anchored by locality, not religion. Students are always surprised to see Ismail, in his prayer cap, singing along at a Hindu *puja*, and Lakha joining his hands in *pranam* before Hindu gods.

But alongside this backdrop of religious harmony is an undeniable subtext of tension between Hindus and Muslims—tensions which are overcome on the cricket field. Take, for example, the scene where Ismail joins the team. Ismail and Lakha are hiding behind a hill, watching the team practice, when Ismail proclaims, "We were wrong, Lakha...An English girl is helping us save our bodies and souls. And we sit sulking! Shame on us! By Allah's command, we must be with [the team]" (Khan & Gorawiker, 2001: 01:24:44). Lakha is skeptical, and warns him that Bhuvan "will never allow you to play for the team" (Khan & Gorawiker, 2001: 01:25:39). Ismail nonetheless approaches Bhuvan, stressing his trustworthiness and religiosity: "I swear by Allah, I am with you in this effort. It is the word of a man of prayer" (Khan & Gorawiker, 2001: 01:26:02). Both Lakha and Ismail's actions here suggest discord among the Hindus and Muslims of Champaner. Although many team members had been critical of the wager at the outset, no other recruits felt the need to declare their trustworthiness, nor were any unsure if they would be welcome. This communal tension, however, is quickly dispelled when Bhuvan accepts Ismail onto the team with open arms, and none of the teammates object. There is no eloquent speech on religious bigotry to rival the oration on caste prejudice; the team simply accepts, without question, that Muslims are welcome in the struggle against the British. Significantly, religious unity is catalyzed by a Brit: it is the presence of Elizabeth that compels Ismail to join the Hindus in common cause (Farred, 2004: 106). Ismail goes on to play a heroic role in the victory against the British: injured by a wayward pitch during Britain's innings, he limps back onto the field late in the game and scores a half-century for the team.

Similarly suggestive of underlying religious tension is Lakha's role as traitor-turned-supporter. During our class discussions, I always ask students to consider the filmmakers' decision to cast Lakha—a Muslim—as traitor in the fight against the British. Of all the characters that could have been chosen, why position Lakha as Bhuvan's archrival, not only vis-à-vis the wager and the cricket game, but also when it comes to their shared love for Gauri? Lakha is not cast as the driver of nationalism; rather, he is pitted against the Hindu protector of the nation (Murty, 2006). This subplot lends a certain complexity to *Lagaan's* representation of religion and the nation. On the one hand, Muslims and Hindus in Champaner worship alongside one another, and on the other, there are subliminal messages on the need to overcome religious difference and unite against a common enemy.

Despite these complexities, students agree that the filmmakers explicitly push a theme of religious unity. Having read Gyan Pandey's *The Construction of Communalism in North India* and Richard's Eaton's *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier*, my students understand that the emergence of communalism on the subcontinent was a historical process, and that communal violence is a relatively recent phenomenon (Pandey, 2006; Eaton, 1996). They also realize that religious boundaries were more fluid and permeable in the past than they are presently. Happily, Pandey's study draws heavily on Hindu-Muslim relations and the construction of a communal past in the state of Uttar Pradesh, very close to where our fictional villagers dwell. But students still question whether the communal harmony depicted in *Lagaan* could have really existed as late as 1893. On this issue, the class invariably splits into two camps, each vociferously defending its interpretation. We often reach no definitive verdict, but the fact that students are debating such issues, and using scholarly readings to gauge the veracity of religious unity in a fictional Indian village, is good enough for this instructor.

Cinematic Historiography? Bollywood, Gandhi, and the BJP

Classroom discussion of *Lagaan* thus begins with a strict focus on historical literacy. In other words, *what* do the filmmakers tell us about politics, caste, gender and religion in late colonial India, and is their story accurate? Discussion next pivots to the question of *why* the story is told the way that it is. This is the better part of history; it is also the part that undergraduate students struggle with the most. *Lagaan* tackles the issue head-on, showing students how India's past is contested, and how cultural productions of historical narratives express contemporary concerns.

Students generally agree that *Lagaan* oversimplifies history at every turn, ultimately reducing India's colonial past to a simple binary between colonized and colonizer. Perhaps such a simplification is the necessary byproduct of an engaging, easily digestible plotline. However, it is more likely the residue of the historical lens being used. *Lagaan* resurrects a Gandhian, liberal-secular vision of history at the precise moment this narrative is being swallowed whole by an ascendant Hindu nationalism. The film's vision of India's past subordinates various fault lines like religion and caste to the nation, projecting an emerging sense of "Indianness" much farther back in time than it belongs. The film thus counters Hindutva politics by infusing the colonial past with a narrative of essentialized unity.

Champaner is a virtual Gandhian utopia; its villagers seem to live in a state of idyllic harmony. Caste and class divisions, though present, are irrelevant to stature or importance. In Champaner we have a (Brahmin) priest who remains voiceless throughout the film and a common peasant who emerges as the village spokesman. Likewise, the thakur sits on the sidelines, even as his high status is visibly marked by the film's aesthetics—his colorful head scarf strikingly set against the plain clothing of the low-caste villagers. Conversely, Kachra is instrumental to the victory, while his untouchability is visually punctuated by his bare chest for the duration of the film. That caste difference is immaterial is further demonstrated by the role of Raja Puran Singh. Like the thakur's colorful scarves, the Raja's bright red clothing and richly decorated, jewelry-studded palace contrast starkly with the dry, brown, lifeless fields in which the villagers dwell. But the film forges unity, even here: the Raja treats the villagers as fellow Indians, whose interests align with his own. Students recall the Raja rooting for team Champaner, urging them to "Defeat the tyrants! Thrash the ferungees! Beat them!" (Khan & Gorawiker, 2001: 02:14:22). The peasants do not feel exploited by the Raja, even under the weight of double *lagaan*. Although initially angry, and ready to surmount a rebellion, they ultimately understand that "[the Raja] and his ancestors have protected us all these years," and that "double *lagaan* isn't the Raja's doing; it's the demand of the damn white Sahibs" (Khan & Gorawiker, 2001: 0:31:05-0:31:22). This is a clear attempt to imbue the past with a caste/class unity that did not exist in the 1890s. Current historiography tells us that peasants in late nineteenth-century India were acutely aware of raja/taluqdari exploitation, and a nationalist consciousness did not develop among them until well into the twentieth century (Guha, 1983: 2-3; Pandey, 1982).

The liberal-secular narrative on caste is further punctuated by Kachra's character, as the dilemma of having a Dalit join the team is solved in an unmistakably Gandhian manner—by the good conscience of high-caste Hindus. Students easily recognize this; they remember that Kachra joins the team not because of his own actions or efforts, but because of the crisis of conscience his high-caste team members had after being shamed by Bhuvan. This scene is a filmic reenactment of the long-standing debate between Gandhi and Ambedkar. Ambedkar was convinced that Dalits

must play a role in their own liberation, writing that "the problem of the depressed classes will never be solved unless they get political power in their own hands...Nobody can remove our grievances as well as we can" (Ambedkar, 1979: 205-206). Gandhi disagreed, arguing that untouchability was a problem with a social, not a political solution. High-caste Hindus, Gandhi believed, would realize the injustice of untouchability and change their ways:

What [Dalits] need more than election to legislature is protection from social and religious persecution. Custom, which is more powerful than law, has brought them to a degradation of which every thinking Hindu has need to feel ashamed of and do penance.

(Gandhi in Tiwari, 2009: 433)

Bhuvan and his fellow villagers are plainly reading from Gandhi's script. Religion in *Lagaan* also reflects a Gandhian narrative. To punctuate the spirit of religious unity and cooperation in *Lagaan*, I ask students to list the different religions represented in team Champaner. Hindu and Muslim are the first terms to appear on the white board, but eventually, someone recalls the Sikh bowler, Deva Singh Sodhi, who makes his way to Champaner to help defeat the British: "I hear you have vowed to fight the British...Let me lend you a helping hand in this fight, Bhuvan" (Khan & Gorawiker, 2001: 01:44:41). And so the third major South Asian religion gets listed on the white board. The final religion represented on the team, that of the Christian coach Elizabeth, makes its way up there as well. Thus, team Champaner sports a multiplicity of religions, all throwing in their lots to beat the British. And, like with caste, when religious hostility encroaches on this unity, it is quickly beaten back. Ismail's doubts are proven baseless, and Lakha, the Muslim traitor, realizes where his true allegiance lies and self-corrects. All underlying communal tensions melt away in the struggle against the British, just as Gandhi would have wished. This, of course, is not at all how the confrontation with the British unfolded; though Hindu-Muslim cooperation was heightened during the Khilafat movement, it fell apart during the interwar period and was never really achieved again (Hasan, 1991; Hasan & Pernau, 2005).

Not only is the Gandhian vision of religious and caste unity pushed by the filmmakers, but his strategy of nonviolence is as well. When I ask students to consider the subtext of nonviolence in *Lagaan*, they immediately recall the opening scene in which Bhuvan, the physical incarnation of ideal India, tries to save the antelope being hunted by Captain Russell and his men. Students again recognize the Hindu ideal of *ahimsa* when the vegetarian Raja is contrasted with the meat-eating Captain Russell. Russell's violence is further punctuated as he mercilessly beats Arjan the blacksmith for fitting a horseshoe incorrectly. In a veiled reference to nonviolence and *satyagraha*, Arjan warns him, "No matter how thick the sole, it wears out. The nails will begin to prick" (Khan & Gorawiker, 2001: 01:23:06). But the plainest evidence of Gandhian nonviolence is the cricket match itself. The decision to fight the British on the cricket field, "not with sticks and spears, but with bat and ball" was a conscious one made by Bhuvan (Khan & Gorawiker, 2001: 01:44:48). Team Champaner sticks to this approach during the game, even as they are physically battered and verbally abused. Aggressive British bowling leaves Lakha's head bashed and bloodied, Bhuvan's neck smeared with blood, while Ismail is carried off on a stretcher. The team is continually trash-talked by Captain Russell and the others. Yet they cannot be baited into violence. Bhuvan warns the team, "they are trying to provoke [us]. Stay calm" (Khan & Gorawiker, 2001: 02:47:47). Once again, Bhuvan is reading from Gandhi's script.

The overarching narrative of unity—of caste and religion being subverted by the interests of the nation—is inaccurate in many respects, not only within the larger context of resistance to imperial rule, but also when considering the game of cricket. Cricket was introduced to India as a competitive *communal* activity. It took off in the 1840s among the Parsis of Bombay, a well-to-do Westernized community. The sport soon spread to the Hindus, who began challenging the Parsis on the cricket field "in a spirit of competitive communalism" (Guha, 1998, 159). By 1883, a Muslim club had formed as well. Throughout the colonial period, cricket clubs formed and competed on the basis of regional, caste, racial, and religious affiliation (Majumdar, 2002: 1449). Team Champaner does not reflect this historical reality. While the formation of the team certainly required negotiating caste and religious divisions, in the end they were a vision of harmony, eating together, playing together, and praying together. In 1893, nowhere could you find a club that sported such inclusivity. Yet the filmmakers tell us this village is not unique: Champaner is "like thousands of other villages across India" (Khan & Gorawiker, 2001: 0:04:22). The film's extrapolation of the nation from this small Gandhian utopia is given aesthetic form when, upon team Champaner's victory, the camera pans out on a vast Indian countryside teeming with joyous peasants, all clad in clothing evocative of the white *khadi* homespun championed by Gandhi during the independence movement.

Why craft this kind of a fictional town, and this kind of a fictional team, supposedly representative of all India? What purpose does it serve? This is the final question I pose to students, and I believe it is critical to understanding how history is constantly reworked, emphasizing certain aspects and de-emphasizing others according to the dictates of the present. *Lagaan* was released in 2001, during the BJP's (Bharatiya Janata Party) first significant stint holding power. The film thus came at a critical historical juncture—a moment when Hindutva India was not yet a foregone conclusion; it was not the virtual uncontested hegemony it has since become. *Lagaan's* vision of Indian history is a clear effort to challenge the increasingly dominant narrative of the BJP and other Hindu nationalist organizations spawned by the RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh).

The BJP rose to prominence during the 1990s on the back of its Ram Jannabhoomi campaign, an issue that remains central to the party platform today. Peddling the unsubstantiated claim that a sixteenth-century mosque in Ayodhya, the Babri Masjid, was built over the birthplace of Lord Rama, the BJP's calls to demolish the mosque and replace it with a mandir thoroughly vilified the non-Hindu "other."⁵ The Party gained popularity throughout the decade and emerged as the biggest winner in the 1996 Parliamentary elections, far eclipsing the Congress Party, which had ruled almost continually since Independence. Thus, *Lagaan* was filmed when the ascendant political ideology was (re)defining the nation as essentially Hindu. The BJP is founded on the idea that "Hindu culture is the life-breath of Hindustan. It is therefore clear that if Hindustan is to be protected, we should first nourish the Hindu culture" (RSS, 2012). This style of majoritarian nationalism casts Muslims as outsiders—foreign invaders who ruled oppressively in the past and are responsible for India's woes in the present. Note that this narrative explicitly recruits history into its service, spinning a tale in which Hindus were subjected to a "mental, cultural and economic onslaught by alien rulers for long decades" (RSS, 2012). The BJP uses this narrative to foster resentment among the Hindu majority and direct it towards Congress and their "appeasement" of Muslims, which is exemplified, the argument goes, by Rajiv Gandhi's virtual reversal of the 1985 Supreme Court ruling on the Shah Bano case (Engineer, 1987).

Muslims, however, were not the only reason for the erosion of the Hindu nation: the BJP's brand of populist nationalism capitalizes on latent class and caste division as well. Lower and

middle castes—the so-called "other backwards classes"—had been mobilizing for economic and social betterment in the years preceding the BJP's rise to power. In this context, the adoption of the Mandal Commission recommendations for caste reservations in 1990 set off a flurry of caste-based protest: 159 upper and middle-class children across north India set themselves ablaze, protesting the reservation system they feared would rob them of opportunities. The timing coincided perfectly with the BJP's rise to power, and the party was able to cash in on these grievances, playing caste politics to their advantage, particularly at the state level.⁶

Given this context, students quickly see the relevance of *Lagaan's* fictitious Champaner. At the exact moment the religious and caste-based "other" was being demonized as the root of all ills, "deserving no privileges, far less preferential treatment," *Lagaan's* filmmakers resurrected a Gandhian, liberal-secular vision of history that emphasized unity and commonality (Golwalkar, 2006: 52). Indeed, the fate of everyone in the province—Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, high-caste, and Dalit alike—is a collective one; they will, all together, either be broken by triple *lagaan* or liberated by three years of economic freedom. This is a story of national unity: the imagery of separate fingers coming together in a fist is invoked throughout the film. The song "Chale Chalo," for instance, incorporates shots of the many fists of team Champaner, in their varied shades of brown, coming together against the backdrop of the Indian summer sky (Khan & Gorawiker, 2001: 02:05:14-02:11:45). It is no accident that this united fist strikes its most powerful blow when a Muslim and a Dalit take the field alongside a Hindu peasant. *Lagaan* projects this vision of harmony into the past, subverting the Hindu nationalist narrative of history that pits Hindu against Muslim, and showing how communalism is in no way intrinsic to India or its past. In seeking to emphasize unity over discord, *Lagaan* issues a call to return to a liberal-secular political and cultural order that is increasingly slipping away in Hindutva India (Deshpande, 2002/2003). Thus, *Lagaan* positions itself as a corrective to the rising tide of BJP-style nationalism and its impact on politics, history, and the social order.

Lagaan is not the only Bollywood film to construct a narrative of the past as a guide to what the present should look like; several more recent films do the same (Luszczkiewicz, 2019). None, however, provide a holistic view of the Gandhian paradigm the way *Lagaan* does. Both the 2008 film *Jodhaa Akbar* (Gorawiker) and the 2015 film *Bajirao Mastani* (Bhansali) underscore religious unity in the precolonial era as they retell the stories behind legendary Hindu-Muslim mixed marriages.⁷ But both limit their depiction of religious harmony to a Hindu-Muslim duality, and neither address Gandhian nonviolence or caste/class issues. The omission of caste is particularly egregious in *Bajirao Mastani*, set as it is in the Maratha Empire (1674-1818), where the politicization of caste was an undeniable feature of government and society (Deshpande, 2007). Bhansali's 2018 film *Padmaavat* is also worthy of mention: it advances a Hindutva narrative of history, pitting an honorable Hindu ruler against a villainous Muslim tyrant in fourteenth-century north India. *Padmaavat* additionally examines gender, as the female protagonist is willingly subservient and self-sacrificing. Interestingly, both of Bhansali's films served as lightning rods, inciting protest from Hindus and Muslims alike. The politically-charged response to these filmic versions of history is as useful a teaching tool as the films themselves, yet in both cases, the discussion must be largely confined to Hindu-Muslim relations.

Lagaan, on the other hand, allows for a holistic discussion of the Gandhian narrative of history, touching on religion, caste/class, violence/nonviolence, and gender, as well as the ways in which these various components intersect with one another in a liberal-secular framework. This gives students a broader understanding of the narrative, and forces them to consider not just

communalism in India's past, but also political interactions, the experience of women and lower castes, and the response to foreign rule. Furthermore, the fact that *Lagaan* is set in the Raj, when anti-colonial nationalism was emerging, provides students with a window into the Gandhian ideal at its genesis. Students can plainly see the utility of this ideal in the moment, as the nation struggled to unite against foreign rule. *Lagaan*, then, provides the most detailed, holistic examination of the liberal-secular narrative of history and the ways in which it challenges BJP-style politics.

Yet despite this broad engagement with historical issues, *Lagaan* is not "cinematic historiography," in the truest sense of the term; it does not do so many of the things historiography must do. It does not ground its findings in primary research, check and cross-check its sources, or depict actual historical figures and events. There is, in other words, no historian here engaging with her facts. But in a certain sense, *Lagaan* performs the fundamental duty with which all historiography is tasked: it allows the present to engage in a dialogue with the past, and pull from it what it needs (Carr, 1961: 35). Though the film's portrayal of the past is overly simplistic and subject to numerous inaccuracies, it nonetheless revives a bona fide vision of Indian history that was marginalized by contemporary political and cultural power trajectories. It demonstrates how and why history is not static, but rather a moving target, always being constructed and reconstructed according to the needs of the present. And arguably, it does so with far greater efficacy than most historiography, which remains confined to small academic circles and specialized scholarly journals. Bollywood has the power and the reach to take this message to the masses in a way that a historical monograph cannot. That is movie-making at its finest.

References

- Agarwal, Ruchi. (2007). British policy towards Awadh taluqdars in the post revolt period. *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, 68(1), 628-639.
- Ambedkar, Bhimrao Ramji. (1979). *Writings and speeches volume II*. Bombay: Education Department.
- Basu, Amritu. (1996). Caste and class: The rise of Hindu nationalism in India. *Harvard International Review*, 18(3), 28-31.
- Bhansali, Sanjay Leela (Producer/Director) & Lulla, Kishore (Producer). (2015). *Bajirao mastani* [Film]. India: Bhansali Productions & Eros International.
- Bhansali, Sanjay Leela (Producer/Director), Andhare, Ajit & Vats, Sudhanshu (Producers). (2018). *Padmaavat* [Film]. India: Bhansali Productions & Viacom 18 Motion Pictures.
- Carr, Edward H. (1961). *What is history?* New York: Random House.
- Chakraborty, Chandrima. (2003). Subaltern studies, Bollywood, and *Lagaan*. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 38(19), 1879-1884.
- Chatterjee, Partha. (1993). *The nation and its fragments: Colonial and postcolonial histories*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Dark, Jann. (2008). Representations of white western women in Indian film and media. *Transforming Cultures eJournal*, 3(1), 124-144.

- Deshpande, Prachi. (2007). *Creative pasts: Historical identity and memory in western India*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Deshpande, Sudhanva. (2002/2003). What's so great about *Lagaan*? *India International Centre Quarterly*, 29(3/4), 236-245.
- Dirks, Nicholas B. (2001). *Castes of mind: Colonialism and the making of modern India*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Eaton, Richard. (1996). *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier, 1204-1760*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Engineer, Ashgar Ali. (1987). *The Shah Bano controversy*. New Delhi: Advent Books.
- Farred, Grant. (2004). The double temporality of *Lagaan*: Cultural struggle and postcolonialism. *Journal of Sport & Social Issues*, 28(2), 93-114.
- Forbes, Geraldine. (1996). *Women in modern India*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Gandhi, Mohandas K. (1970). *India of my dreams*, quoted in Tiwari, Shailender Kumar (2009). Social Justice: Gandhi and Ambedkar. *Indian Journal of Political Science*, 70(2), 429-439.
- Gehlawat, Ajay. (2011). The *gori* in the story: The shifting dynamic of whiteness in Bollywood. *TOPIA: Canadian Journal of Cultural Studies*, 26, 105-126.
- Gehlawat, Ajay. (2015). *Twenty-first century Bollywood*. New York: Routledge.
- Golwalkar, Madhavrao S. (2006). *We or our nationhood defined: A critique with the full text of the book*. New Delhi: Pharos Media.
- Gowariker, Ashutosh (Producer/Director) & Ronnie Screwvala (Producer). (2008). *Jodhaa Akbar* [Film]. India: Ashutosh Gowariker Productions.
- Guha, Ramachandra. (1998). Cricket and politics in India. *Past and Present*, 161, 155-190.
- Guha, Ranajit. (1983). *Elementary aspects of peasant insurgency in colonial India*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Hasan, Mushirul & Pernau, Margrit (Eds.). (2005). *Regionalizing pan-Islamism: Documents on the Khilafat movement*. New Delhi: Manohar.
- Hasan, Mushirul. (1991). *Nationalism and communal politics in India, 1885-1930*. New Delhi: Manohar.
- Khan, Aamir (Producer) & Gowariker, Ashutosh (Director). (2001). *Lagaan* [Film]. India: Excel Home Productions.
- Khan, Shahnaz. (2011). *Jodhaa Akbar*: Masculinities, femininities and cultural politics in Bombay cinema. *Feminist Review*, 99, 131-146.
- Lawrence, Thomas E. (1935). *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*. London: J. Cape.
- Lichtner, Giacomo & Banyopadhyay, Sekhar. (2008). Indian cinema and the presentist use of history: Conceptions of "nationhood" in *Earth* and *Lagaan*. *Asian Survey*, 48(3), 431-452.
- Luszczkiewicz, Antonina. (2019). Dealing with the colonial past: The image of British rule in India in twenty-first century cinema. *Politeja*, 2(59), 123-138.
- Majumdar, Boria. (2002). Cricket in colonial India. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 37(15), 1449-1450.

- Mannathukkaren, Nissim. (2001). Subalterns, cricket and the 'nation': The silences of *Lagaan*. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 36(49), 4580-4588.
- Mehta, Rini Bhattacharya. (2020). *Unruly cinema: History, politics, and Bollywood*. Champaign: University of Illinois Press.
- Murty, Madhavi. (2006). Representing *Hindutva*: Nation, religion, and masculinity in Indian popular cinema, 1990-2003. *Popular Communications*, 7, 267-281.
- Musgrave, P.J. (1972). Landlords and lords of the land: Estate management and social control in Uttar Pradesh, 1860-1920. *Modern Asian Studies*, 6(3), 257-275.
- Myers, Nathaniel. (2001). Right tilt: India and the BJP. *Harvard International Review*, 23(1), 7-8.
- McClintock, Anne. (1995). *Imperial leather: Gender and sexuality in the colonial context*. New York: Routledge.
- Pandey, Gyan. (2006). *The construction of communalism in colonial north India*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Pandey, Gyan. (1982). Peasant revolt and Indian nationalism: The peasant movement in Awadh, 1919-1922. In Ranajit Guha (Ed.), *Subaltern Studies I* (pp. 143-197). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Prasad, Nita Verma. (2007). The litigious widow: Inheritance disputes in colonial north India, 1875-1911. In Anindita Ghosh (Ed.), *Behind the veil: Resistance, women and the everyday in colonial South Asia* (pp. 161-190). New Delhi: Permanent Black.
- Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh. (2012). Vision and mission. Available online at: <http://rss.org/Encyc/2012/10/22/rss-vision-and-mission.html> (Retrieved July 15, 2020).
- Rolli, Chiara. (2019). *The trial of Warren Hastings: Classic oratory and reception in eighteenth-century England*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Stadtler, Florian. (2005). *Lagaan* and its audience responses. *Third World Quarterly*, 26(3), 517-524.
- Wilson, Arnold T. (1930). *Loyalties: Mesopotamia, 1914-1917*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Endnotes:

¹ Bollywood is increasingly working its way into western academia and classrooms, particularly as the historical/mythological genre has been revived in Indian cinema. Accordingly, there has been more discussion about the ways Bollywood historical fiction can be used in the classroom, and how it resembles a kind of "presentist" history (Gehlawat, 2015).

² The map pictured at the outset places Champaner in the northern portion of the Central Provinces, just below Bundelkhand. Although not expressly stated that Champaner lies in a princely state, the portrayal of the local Raja seems to indicate this.

³ For secondary source literature that provides context, see Chatterjee (1993); Forbes (1996); Prasad (2007).

⁴ For further elaboration on the portrayal of white women in Bollywood, see Gehlawat (2011). For a broader discussion on white women in the Raj, see McClintock (1995).

⁵ For context, I assign Nathaniel Myers's short, easily digestible summary of the rise of the BJP, the Ayodhya dispute, and its impact on national politics (Myers, 2001).

⁶ A concise synopsis of the BJP's use of caste can be found in Basu (1996).

⁷ *Jodhaa Akbar's* specific vision of history is thoroughly examined in Khan (2011).

About the Author

Nita Verma Prasad is Associate Professor of History and Director of Asian Studies at Quinnipiac University in Hamden, Connecticut. She specializes in modern South Asian history, specifically British colonial India. Her current research interests and publications revolve around issues of gender and law in the colonial courts as well as gender and medicine in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century India.

Citing this article:

Prasad, Nita Verma. (2021). Cinematic Historiography? Bollywood, *Lagaan*, and Hindutva India, *Global Media Journal -- Canadian Edition*, 13 (1), pp. 12-27.
