

Cinematic Historiography?

Bollywood, *Lagaan*, and Hindutva India

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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* (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.