Ritual, Romance, and Royalty:

Bollywood Remakes of Hindu Femininity

Anjali Ram

Roger Williams University

Abstract:

Bollywood has always played a central role in brokering the connections between the Indian nation state and the diaspora. However, the twin forces of neo-liberalization and Hindu nationalism amplified Bollywood's soft power and accelerated its function as a symbolic resource for diasporic identity. Using the term "mediatization" I track ways in which Bollywood facilitates the performance of a Hinduized femininity predicated on neoliberal ideologies. First, I analyze the mediatizations that have transformed the once limited, regional *Karva Chauth* ritual into a pan-Indian celebration that allows diasporic women to enact a desirable and consumable Hinduized femininity. Second, I examine how film watch parties and cosplay practices in the diaspora use the film *Padmaavat* (Bhansali, 2018) to stage Indianness as naturalized, lush, and empowering forms of Hindu femininity. By unpacking such diasporic mediated performances and practices, I demonstrate how Bollywood is strategically deployed in the construction of a globalized Hindu femininity that seamlessly incorporates religion and culture with lifestyle discourses. Furthermore, I argue that such constructions of Hindu femininity allow the muscular, aggressive ideology of Hindutva to be softened and circulate uncritically in the diaspora.

Keywords: Diaspora; Hindu Nationalism; Bollywood; Femininity; Gender; Mediatization; Cosplay; Soft Power.

The Indian novelist Amitav Ghosh once remarked that "the spaces of India travel with the migrant," and India too "has no vocabulary for separating the migrant from India" (1989: 77). Ghosh's comments point to the re-territorializing of cultural practices as migrants negotiate their place in the hierarchies of their host society. Simultaneously, he alerts us to the many ways in

which the Indian state has interpellated the Indian immigrant into its national narrative. Indeed, one could argue that new vocabularies have been created to connect the migrant with the nation. For instance, the "Pravasi Bharatiya Divas" (Indian migrant day) initiated in 2000 is an annual celebratory day sponsored by the national government to felicitate named and famed NRIs and PIOs (non-resident Indians and people of Indian origin). Tharoor (2013) has remarked that "India is the only country that has an official acronym for its expatriates" and "also the only country whose government organizes an annual celebration aimed at making its expatriates feel welcome to return home." Tharoor, an influential public figure himself, suggests an added vocabulary term, "NRI: National Reserve of India," to recognize the intimate and productive connection between India and the migrant. As coveted grooms, potential investors, and favored customers, Rai notes that NRIs are sometimes referred to as the "new Brahmins" (2008: 29). New acronyms have emerged from PIO (Persons of Indian Origin) to now OCI (Oversees Citizens of India) that continue the nation-state's recognition of the Indian diaspora while it concurrently devises policies such as the CAA and the NRC that risk disenfranchising members of India's minoritized Muslim community.

Central to this co-mingling of cultural identities and spaces is the Bollywood dream machine. Scholars have noted how consuming Bollywood in the diaspora extends far beyond watching films. Bollywood supplies textual material for the creation of a range of performative cultural practices in the diaspora. The Indian diaspora is ethno-linguistically, regionally, and religiously diverse.[1] Part of Bollywood's enduring power has been to interpellate the Indian diaspora as a homogenized audience by offering up generic and idealized constructions of Indianness. Kaur and Sinha (2005: 16) have coined the term "Bollyworld" to explain how Bollywood is a "a conveyor of 'Indianness' to diverse audiences." Rajadhyaksha (2003: 30) uses the term "techno-nostalgia" to define a longing for or an emotional response to an imagined past through mediated and technologized forms. He explains Bollywood's export of a "commodified and globalized" Indian nationalism "into a 'feel good' version of 'our culture' as an example of such "techno-nostalgia" (Rajadhyaksha, 2003:37). In a similar vein, Kavoori and Joseph use the term "Bollyculture" to explain the role of Bollywood in various cultural performances that mobilize, "deeply held feelings of membership and accountability to a point of (cultural/ethnic) origin" (2011: 20). In Dudrah's extensive study on the media consumption patterns of South Asian audiences, he observes how they amalgamate and recreate "Bollywood film cultures into their everyday lives" (2006: 38). In this article, I build on this scholarship to demonstrate ways in which Bollywood is mediatized in the diaspora to embody and enact Indian identity that simultaneously supports neo-hinduized ideologies and neoliberal marketplace discourses.

The scholarship surrounding mediatization allows us to get away from "the staid triangle of production–text–audience" and instead focus on "wider consequences of media's embedding in everyday life" (Couldry & Heep, 2013: 193, 195). Mediatization urges us to understand how media concentrates symbolic power that "affects not just what we do, but our ability to describe the social itself" (Couldry, 2003: 39). The term "mediatization" is a helpful tool to go beyond analyzing film texts and track the many ways in which media shape and transform everyday public and political discourses. Pivoting on the idea of mediatization, I explore how Bollywood is embedded in diasporic life and used as a symbolic resource to imagine identity and enact culture. My research over the past two decades has focused on how film texts, active readings by Bollywood audiences, and the diasporic context intersect to generate powerful affective sites of gendered and nationalist identity constructions (Ram, 2002; Ram, 2003; Ram, 2014). Observing and collating the myriad ways in which Bollywood is inserted, invoked, and implicated in the diaspora has led me to pay

close attention to the evolution of a neo-Hinduized femininity in communal, public, and social media spaces.

In this paper, I draw on two examples of such mediatizations by tracing its emergence across newspaper reports, social media sites, and film texts. Consistent with analyzing mediatization, I focus less on a particular media text and more on how specific films have been strategically deployed in the construction of a globalized neo-Hindu femininity that seamlessly incorporates religion and culture with lifestyle discourses. I first explore how older non-mediated forms such as the regional, vernacular ritual of *Karva Chauth* have been transformed through Bollywood films such as *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (Chopra, 2005) and star bodies to become resources for diasporic women to enact a desirable and consumable Hinduized femininity. Next, I examine how the film *Padmaavat* (Bhansali, 2018) inspired watch parties and cosplay practices in the diaspora to stage neo-Hindu femininity as naturalized, lush, and empowering. I draw on films from different eras to uncover the ongoing role that Bollywood plays in mediatizing selective presentations and performances of Indian identity and culture. In the mid 1990s, *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (*DDLJ*) ushered in an era of films that explicitly acknowledged and interpellated its diasporic audience. *DDLJ* was followed by a slew of films that have been termed as the NRI domestic drama that articulated an Indian identity that was simultaneously Hindu, transnational, and neoliberal. *Padmaavat*, on the other hand, uses historical fiction to create an extravagant pro-Hindu heroic narrative that vilifies Muslim masculinity as terrorizing and misogynistic. Regardless of its ahistoricity and anti-Muslim rhetoric, *Padmaavat*'s popularity lies in its ability to function as a couture catalog that purports to recuperate and restore lost clothing traditions and fashion styles for the contemporary viewer. Both these films have been mediatized, in the sense that they have been used to reinvent cultural rituals and reimagine cultural identities in and about the diaspora. Through my analysis, I argue that such mediatizations have enabled a neo-Hindu femininity to circulate in diasporic spaces which then obscures the muscular, aggressive ideology of Hindutva from view. By keeping the spotlight on extravagant, exceptional, ornamentalized, and commodified identity constructions that are Hindu-centric and consistent with the neoliberal marketplace ethos, Bollywood plays a significant role in covertly consolidating Hindutva ideologies in the diaspora.

Bollywood, Soft Power, and Neo-Hindutva

The enduring success of Bollywood cinema is predicated on its ability to amalgamate Indian regional, folk and classical traditions and aesthetics along with Western elements. By reconstituting local, national, and global themes and forms, Bollywood developed a performative grammar that resulted in what Sudhir Kakar calls a relaying back. Folk traditions adopted the codes and iconography of the very texts they influenced. For instance, the devotional bhajan "transmuted" via the addition of various other regional and western elements into a film dance or a film bhajan and "then relayed back in full technicolor and stereophonic sound to decisively alter the original" (Kakar, 1970: 26). Similarly, Satish Bahadur (1983: 111) noted that in the 1980s, the image of the popular goddess Durga paraded during the Bengali Puja festival was beginning to look more and more like the popular actress Suchitra Sen. These observations reveal that the popular appeal of Bollywood cinema lies in its ability to repeatedly create spaces for reimagining Indian culture. More recently, the mediating influence of Bollywood can be seen in the re-invention of traditional wedding ceremonies and rituals (Ramdya, 2010). As an op-ed in the *Deccan Herald* (2012) observed, "No longer are there South Indian kalyanams, Maharashtrian

lagnas, Punjabi shaadis, Bengali vivahas or Rajasthani lagans. There is only the Great Bollywood Wedding." Regional and local wedding rituals and traditions are being reimagined literally and figuratively through a Bollywood lens with elaborate ceremonies, choreographed dance performances, and extravagant staging. Focussing on Hindu ceremonies as default for Indian culture relegates Muslim and other minoritized cultures as even further marginalized in the popular imagination.

Bollywood's popularity extends beyond national audiences and encircles the diaspora with what Hirji (2005, para. 14) refers to as "transnational lure." The expansive global reach of Bollywood in this century has been dubbed by Thussu (2016) as an example of India's soft power. Soft power typically manifests through the seductive appeals of cultural products and messages as opposed to the "hard" commanding power of economic and militaristic sanctions and actions (Nye, 2009). Thussu adopts Nye's well-known formulation and argues that:

> The Bollywood brand, co-opted by India's corporate and governmental elite and celebrated by members of its diaspora, has come to define a creative and confident India. Gone are the days when diasporic communities felt embarrassed about the cinema of their country of origin, perceived by many in host nations as glitzy and kitschy.
>
> (2016: 421)

Bollywood's acquisition of cool capital occurred alongside the neo-liberalization of the Indian economy in the late 1990s as the more localized term "Hindi cinema" was replaced with the globally recognized "Bollywood." The re-branding of Bollywood manifested itself through a "cool, urban, global visual aesthetic" that retained selective cultural signifiers and themes to communicate a new, globalized India (Ram, 2014). Alongside this globalizing discourse, twenty-first century Bollywood amplified the centrality of Hindu identity and increasingly erased or marginalized religious and ethnic minorities. Banerjee (2016: 3) points to how Hindu nationalism and triumphalism is being increasingly constructed in Bollywood through the virile male body to portray a muscular, self-confident nationalism. Rajgopal refers to this as Bollywood's nativist turn which makes "any other religion or culture appear 'Un-Indian'" (2011: 242). Bollywood's soft power works in two ways that converse with each other. On one hand, as Thussu argues, it promotes India as a pro-market, investment-friendly, modern state. On the other hand, as Rajgopal and Banerjee argue, Bollywood imaginaries frequently construct Indian culture as primarily Hindu through tropes of authenticity and ascendency. Both these rhetorical frames endorse Hindu nationalist visions of India as a Hindu-centric state buoyed by neoliberal economic policies.

In the following sections, I track two specific examples of how Bollywood's soft power transforms rituals, constructs Hinduized discourses of romance, and invokes images of resplendent royalty to secure what has been termed "neo-Hindutva" (Anderson & Longkumer, 2018; Reddy, 2018). Neo-Hindutva, according to Anderson and Longkumer, differentiates between "'hard'–not reticent about being connected with Hindu nationalism . . . and 'soft'– often more concealed and prone to avoid explicit linkages with Hindu majoritarian politics." Neo-Hindutva is less of a definite schema and more of an ideology that "transcends institutions" to permeate "media and educational spaces in ways that are difficult to disaggregate." The emergence of neo-Hindutva can be seen in how "articulations of Hindutva-inspired Islamophobia" have become "commonplace in domestic and public spheres where previously it was aberrant" (Anderson & Longkumer, 2018: 373). As these neo-Hindutva discourses are embedded in Bollywood mediatizations, they

encourage what Couldry refers to as "misrecognitions" (2003: 39). Film narratives and visual logics that repeatedly mis-recognize Indian as Hindu allow Hindutva agendas to move freely and frequently in the diaspora while hidden in plain sight.

"My Wife is Indian. She is Hindu, and She is Incredible in Every Way":
How Bollywood Made *Karva Chauth* Cool

The once localized, North/northwestern Indian ritual of *Karva Chauth* where wives fast in honor of their husbands has progressively filtered through the Bollywood prism and been recast as a national festival unfettered by borders or regional affiliation. Moreover, *Karva Chauth* has become a ubiquitous marketing tool to sell clothes, jewelry, beauty products, and spa experiences to both domestic and diasporic markets. Bollywood stars routinely take to social media to display wedded bliss complete with carefully curated designer finery inspired by the traditional red and gold colors of *Karva Chauth*. For instance, the Bollywood superstar Priyanka Chopra splashed her social media on the occasion of her first *Karva Chauth* in October 2019. Married to American singer/songwriter Nick Jonas in 2018, the couple broadcast their first *Karva Chauth* celebration in Los Angeles during a Jonas Brothers concert. Jonas in his Instagram ode to Chopra proclaimed, "My wife is Indian. She is Hindu, and she is incredible in every way. She has taught me so much about her culture and religion. I love and admire her so much, and as you can see we have fun together. Happy *Karva Chauth* to everyone!" (Jonas, 2019). In turn, on her Instagram, Chopra (2019) declared, "*Karva Chauth* at a @jonasbrothers concert. Definitely a first I'll always remember!" Reporting for Vogue.in, Garima Gupta (2019) provided the sartorial detail:

> With her red sari, she opted for a matching blouse with intense gold embroidery, traditional red choodas, and gold kadas. The look was completed with her diamond engagement ring, custom-made mangalsutra by Sabyasachi, and bright red sindoor. Later that night, when Chopra joined the audience at the Jonas Brothers' concert, she changed into a comfy white shirt but kept her traditional accessories on. If you loved Priyanka Chopra's full red outfit for the festivities, here's where you can buy a similar look online now. Add a touch of modernity to the otherwise traditional ensemble by pairing it with minimal earrings, just like the star did.

Sen (2020) argues that Chopra's success relies on her "consumable Indianness," and her "strategic placement of physical markers that associate . . . herself as non-threatening cosmopolitan, albeit generic Indian" (314). Chopra's "transnational iconicity," as Sen terms it, holds enormous rhetorical power. Through the power of her star body, Chopra successfully articulates *Karva Chauth* that invokes a Hinduized femininity within the idiom of the neo-liberal marketplace. Chopra is not alone in using her star presence to promote *Karva Chauth* as a consumable and romantic tradition. Every year, Bollywood stars and media celebrities share their *Karva Chauth* activities through their social media. The popular press and fan sites re-circulate these images with comments about how the stars were dressed and who was hosting and attending *Karva Chauth* parties. Lifestyle articles provide lists of Bollywood songs and scenes related to *Karva Chauth* along with advice on what to do for the occasion. For example, an article in the *Mumbai Mirror* (2019) headlined, "*Karva Chauth* 2019: 5 Bollywood songs that beautifully capture the essence of the festival." Another one in *The Free Press Journal* (2019) advised, "If your wife is fasting for you, here are some romantic Bollywood dialogues you ought to send, to make her smile." Supported by Bollywood imagery, consumerism, and neoliberalized notions of

heteronormative romance, *Karva Chauth* has become resignified as an indigenized Valentine's Day (Ram, 2014).

To understand the mediatization of the *Karva Chauth* ritual, I turn briefly to the film texts themselves. A parade of romanticized *Karva Chauth* scenes emerged frequently in the "family film" genre of the late 1990s and early 2000s. Mehta argues that such "family films" represent a "happy marriage between Indian 'traditions' and the global market" (2005: 136). The film industry was granted official recognition by the state in 1998. Mehta further argues that "by designating film as an industry and thereby bringing an 'unorganized' and 'informal' sector of the economy under its purview, the state is actively attempting to (re)inscribe its authority in the context of globalization" (2005: 137). Big-budget family films in the 1990s were endorsed by a series of awards and accolades and played a significant role in "fostering new relations between the Bombay film industry, the Indian state, and the Indian diasporic communities." The family films educated "Indian nationals, both at home and abroad, in 'Indian traditions' and the pleasures of consumerism" (Mehta, 2005: 145). The commodification and transformation of *Karva Chauth* from being a local, regional festival to a highly glamorized, romanticized, pan-Indian celebration is a powerful example of this mediatized "education" by the big-budget family film genre.

The most frequently cited film for portraying an iconic *Karva Chauth* scene is *DDLJ*. The film has been well acknowledged as the gateway film in the post-1990s globalization of Indian cinema. The film marked a turn that Ganti refers to as the "gentrification of film" with the noticeable emphasis on "class, youthful romance, and the Indian diaspora" (2012: 97, 98). Social media—personal blogs, YouTube compilations, Facebook and Instagram posts—are replete with the image of the film's star crossed lovers, Raj and Simran, breaking their *Karva Chauth* fast together under the full moon. Raj, played by Shah Rukh Khan, is the diasporic male protagonist who finds himself in rural Punjab in pursuit of his beloved, Simran, played by Kajol. Betrothed to a man that her father has chosen for her in India, Simran has sacrificed her own wishes in order to acquiesce to parental will. Anupama Chopra, film critic and industry insider, observes that the Punjab of *DDLJ* is not a "killing field stained with blood by terrorists and security forces, but a rural utopia" (2002: 57). The film departs from the traditional prescriptions of *Karva Chauth* as a fast observed only by married women in two ways. First, Simran keeps a fast for *Karva Chauth* as an unmarried woman. Then Raj, in a bid of romantic solidarity, decides to fast as well. Their mutual fasts are used as expressions of romantic love for each other coded in tradition but employed secretively to affirm their individual choice-making abilities. As they break their fasts alone together on a moonlit terrace, *Karva Chauth* is reimagined as choice based, individualized, glamorous, and romantic within the boundaries of Hindu tradition. In *DDLJ*, the lovers' aspirations to romance and individual choices are expressions of modernity that are safely managed and regulated by Hindu tradition.

The peculiar ways in which *Karva Chauth* are recoded in *DDLJ* were symptomatic of broader political discourses being activated by the Hindu Right from the 1990s onward. Malhotra and Alag argue that the BJP (Bharartiya Janta Party) gained much of this power by "presenting itself as the truly 'Indian' party through a conflation of Indian and Hindu." Bollywood reflected this synonymity by manipulating "the national imaginary to move Indian identity away from being anchored in a physical location on Indian land to a Hindu-based cultural identity, not bound by location" (2004: 21). The branding opportunities offered by this reimagined *Karva Chauth* were immediately seized upon. Wild East, a marketing agency, declared its expertise in developing "sound cards, calendars, stationary, mugs, and other types of greeting cards with a focus on

occasions such as birthdays…young romance, friendship, and mainstream Indian holidays such as Diwali, *Karva Chauth*." Sid Shah, the president of Wild East at the time, said "this Bollywood brand licensing opportunity is particularly exciting on multiple levels," and that "first, Bollywood is woven into the fabric, culture, and tradition of the Indian Diaspora; Second, YRF's iconic films, characters, and music have been a household name, globally, for the last 40 years; and third, this is a completely untapped segment, category, and demographic in geographies such as the US, UK, and Canada" (The Wild East Group, 2011). Bollywood's remaking of Hindu traditions into a consumable, generically Indian culture that was romantic, luminous, and extravagant has been increasingly interpreted as a recovery of authenticity. Ritu Kumar, a well-known fashion designer, was quoted in the *Times of India* as saying:

> We have a strong sense of pomp, pageantry and grandeur in our DNA. We can't underplay our celebrations. These social events showcase how we celebrate and love living life to the full. We're known for our celebrations, parties and religious fervor, even *Karva Chauth* is a big affair with bling. Our expenditure patterns aren't conservative as they used to be in the 60s and 70s. We've moved away from the colonial habits of being simple and saving. There's a general feel-good exuberance.
>
> (Walia, 2011, para. 2).

By construing thrift as un-Indian and even foreign, Kumar rationalizes festivals such as *Karva Chauth* as opportunities to recuperate a distinct, authentic Hinduized sense of self. Additionally, the focus on excess to make thrift seem alien to Indian culture is a sly repudiation of Gandhian values. The Hindu right has long rejected the Gandhian ideology of non-violence, prudence, and simplicity as "effeminate" (Banerjee, 2017: 70). Kumar blends consumer choice making discourse with the core Hindutva goal of recuperating a "pre-invasion 'purity'" to Indian culture (Anderson, 2015: 46). Note how she links "religious fervor" with "celebrations," "parties," and "bling." The violence perpetuated by the religious fervor of the Hindu Right is willfully side-stepped. Religious fervor is associated with celebratory spectacles and rendered benign, desirable, and culturally authentic.

Among diasporic communities, examples of mediatized *Karva Chauth* abound. Reporting for Indo-American News, Vineet and Vipin (2014) covered a successful *Karva Chauth* party complete with a movie screening, a *Karva Chauth* Bingo theme, and a mehndi competition organized by India House in Houston, USA. One of the participants at the event, who had been married for 30 years, celebrated her first *Karva Chauth*. She was from South India and the *Karva Chauth* ritual was not part of her ethno-religious heritage. However, she stated, "I am inspired by my North Indian friends and movies, but never got the chance to celebrate this festival." The report continued with the comment that "her equally excited husband" did not "find it strange that his perfectly South Indian wife is preparing for rituals rather alien, [and] accompanied her." The article concluded with the statement, "*Karva Chauth* is perhaps the closest to Valentine's Day in spirit, as it kindles romance and love, with couples devoting special time for each other on this day." The idea of "rekindling the romance" was echoed in an *India Abroad* article where women who celebrated *Karva Chauth* at private gatherings in the New Jersey area were interviewed (Kulkarni, 2017).

For some women, the glamour associated with the festival led them to embrace it as a personal choice. Others explained it as a "win-win situation" for couples who do not really get to enjoy romance every day due to their busy lives . . . the fasting and the traditions and stories around

it have "a feel good factor." A participant was quoted as saying that she observes the fast, "for the sheer love for my husband." She then followed up commenting that she enjoys dressing up -- "We hardly do that so often anymore" (Kulkarni, 2017). Reinterpreting the ritual as an occasion to dress up and display idealized femininity is illustrated by a *Karva Chauth* beauty pageant held in Canada with the tagline "Girls want to have Fun" (Asia News International, 2015). This sampling of reports on *Karva Chauth* celebrations in the diaspora demonstrates how Bollywood signals Indian identity as essentially Hindu but updated to incorporate the neo-liberal discourses of personal choice, autonomy, and commodification.

Bollywood's romantic makeover of *Karva Chauth* exemplifies the notion of what Hjarvard terms as direct and indirect mediatization (2013: 20). *Karva Chauth* is directly mediatized by converting a regional cultural activity into a mediated form. In turn *Karva Chauth* is indirectly mediatized by continually renovating the originally more austere tradition through spectacular Bollywood imagery, romantic narratives, star bodies, and brand placements to imagine a desirable Hindu-based femininity. Such a transformation of a regional tradition to a national ritual with transnational reach and retail capacity is testimony to Bollywood's remarkable efficiency as a global marketing media machine. Further, such moves where the local melts into a homogenized identity function to erase diversity and consolidate a single dominant narrative of Hindu nationalism. *Karva Chauth* celebrations repurposed as generically Indian and Hindu become powerful affective spaces mediated by Bollywood where female bodies are adorned and ornamentalized to communicate a spectacular, consumable Hindu-ness in the diaspora.

"It's a Dream Come True to Dress Like a Queen":
Bollywood Redefines Hindu Femininity Through the Lens of "Royal Chic"

The Sanjay Bhansali blockbuster *Padmaavat* (2018) elicited a range of contradictory responses. *Padmaavat*'s narrative glorifies the valor and heroism of a fictionalized Rajput-Hindu king and queen while presenting the more historically based Muslim ruler, Alauddin Khilji, as a maniacal villain of exaggerated proportions. Despite the fact that the film is not based on historical fact and promoted a pro-Hindu message, it drew the ire of hardline traditionalists. The Shri Rajput Karni Sena, an ultra-right wing group that sees itself as the champion of Rajput rights, led violent protests against the release of the film. Their leader, Lokendra Singh Kalvi, threatened that Rajput women would perform jauhar (mass immolation) if the movie was released (DH News Service, 2018). On the other hand, Malaysia banned the film "citing the movie's negative portrayal of a Muslim ruler" (Reuters, 2018). Controversy notwithstanding, the film went on to make box office gold and was eagerly anticipated in the Indian diaspora. In the diaspora, historical accuracy, misogyny, and Islamophobia were less relevant than the fact that this was a visual and musical spectacular that provided a sumptuous menu of materials to fashion an idealized Hindu femininity.

To celebrate *Padmaavat*'s box office release, members of the Indian diaspora in the San Francisco Bay area organized a series of fan performances to accompany the screening of the movie. The Ghoomar dance, a chorus accompanied by a live dhol, and a best dressed "*Padmaavati*" competition formed a slate of activities alongside the movie screening. In a similar event organized in Sugarland, Texas, Texans Energy and Masala Radio partnered to host a film premiere of *Padmaavat*. Audience members and organizers adopted a dress code inspired by the film, with "turbans, bandini, cholis, and large kundan jewelry – bodla tikkos and nose rings" (*Indo American News*, 2018). Like the Bay area event, there was a prize for the best dressed couple. I

turn to the concept of cosplay to unpack how these events inspired by film are examples of Bollywood mediatizations of diasporic identity practices.

Cosplay refers to dressing up in character to watch a movie or attend a fan convention—a practice "where fans of popular culture (e.g., television series, games, movies) produce their own costumes inspired by fictional characters" (Lamerichs, 2011:2). Fans creating and wearing costumes date back to science fiction conventions in the 1960s and 1970s, most notably to embody their favorite Star Trek and Star Wars character. In the mid 1980s, Takahashi Nobuyuki, founder of an anime publishing house, is said to have coined the term "cosplay" to describe fan costuming practices at sci-fi and comic conventions (Winge 2006:66–67). Nobuyuki's neologism, while inspired by American fan experiences, was also tapping into a Japanese anime and manga audience phenomena. Today cosplay is a popular, transnational fan practice that expresses admiration and passion. Key to cosplay is that the characters are fictional and, in most cases, hyperreal as they draw on sci-fi, anime, and manga genres. Cosplay practices can range from the subversive to the neo-colonial expressions of empire. Cosplay can allow for countercultural queer performativity and also troubling forms of imperial glorifications as demonstrated by steampunk cosplay (Loza, 2017). What I term as Bollywood cosplay in relation to audience engagement with *Padmaavat* both follows some of the features of typically researched cosplay practices and departs from them in specific ways.

The practice of copying film fashion was evident as early as the 1930s (Barnouw & Krishnaswamy, 1980). As Dwyer (2014) states, "one of the most imitated features of films is the style of the stars" including hairstyles, clothing, and even signature gestures and body language (242). The "sadhana cut" of the 1960s, the "Rekha blouse" of the 1980s and Madhuri Dixit's purple saree and backless blouse in the song "Didi Tera Dewar Deewana" in the 1990s are some examples of fashion trends popularized by Bollywood. The Bollywoodization of the Indian wedding is the most opulent example of how film fashion has transformed style, aesthetic, and cultural expectations. Unlike sci-fi and anime cosplay, the adoption of Bollywood clothing trends was not typically an embodiment of a particular character or an attempt to consciously role play. Rather, it was consistent with more common audience practices that idealize and model the visual and embodied aesthetics of popular film. However, the fan fervor that has surrounded the look and style projected in *Padmaavat* points to more heightened and conscious acts of life imitating art among Bollywood diasporic viewers. Both the Bay area and Houston premieres were designed to create a space for audience members to imagine themselves as Rani Padmavati, the central character of the film. As one woman who attended the event exclaimed, "I have no connection to Rajasthan, I just looked up Deepika's looks in the film, and tried to emulate her" (Rathore, 2018). Another attendee commented:

> I'm really interested in watching this story, which is not just a story but is based on the life of Queen Padmini . . .The courage and valor of Rajputs especially when they were faced with treachery from an enemy who was extremely strong, but they stuck to their beliefs and their principles and men would die in the battlefield, and the women instead of being enslaved by the enemy, they would choose to jump into the fire with their children and that is something that really fascinates me. We decided to dress up as her to remember her legacy and have fun doing it.
>
> (Rathore, 2018)

These comments point to the desire to "dress up" that goes beyond following fashion trends. Rather, we see a direct and intentional engagement with the character of Padmavati and attempts to embody the romanticized heroic culture that she portrays in the film. Such Bollywood cosplay practices are similar to what Loza refers to as "sartorial masquerades" that selectively reimagine and romanticize heritage, tradition, and history (2017: 47). Further, cosplay, as Winge (2006) argues, is primarily a social activity where cosplayers gather to share their passion about a show and/or a specific character. Activities such as photographic sessions, competitions, and themed parties are typical at cosplay gatherings and all these were evident at these *Padmaavat* screening parties.

Embedded with such *Padmaavat* cosplay engagement are discourses of neo-Hinduized femininity that invoke cultural authenticity and pride. The female body once again becomes a site for the diaspora to imagine and invent ways of being Indian. However, this remaking is selectively focused on recovering a grand and glorious past suffused with motifs of royal luxury. As the winner of the best dressed "*Padmaavati*" at the California screening exclaimed:

> I was very curious and excited about this historical movie which was going to come in October. And I was hoping and praying that it come out sooner. . . . It's a dream come true to dress like a queen. I was very excited to match the way Deepika Padukone looked.
>
> (Rathore, 2018)

By misreading *Padmamvaat* as a "historical movie," such comments play into the broader neo-Hindutva ideology of selectively recuperating fictions of glorious pasts as history. The opulent optics of *Padmaavat* are part of recent Indian aesthetic trends of "royal chic" where Indianness is being reasserted to claim a "positional superiority" (Kuldova, 2016: 12). Indian designers are "staging Indianness," according to Kuldova, by referencing Indian pre-colonial elites through aesthetic extravagance that projects Indian culture's greatness. The "strength and potency of India is imagined to reside in India's heritage . . . this heritage needs to be flaunted, celebrated and personally cherished" (2016: 14). The designers for *Padmaavat*, Rimple and Harpreet Narula, have given several press interviews talking about the research that went into crafting the costumes of the lead characters. Prior to the film release, they used social media to talk about the costume design for the film. Fashion magazines and blogs gushed over the authenticity and splendor of *Padmaavat*'s costumes as in this example from PeepingMoon.com, an online Bollywood news portal: "Let this beautiful diva transport you back to the time where our Queens were seen wearing this antique piece of jewellery. The Raanihaar fitted for a true Queen, is crafted with precious stones and gems and pretty much covers the neckline of a woman. Makes us want to be part of a royal family, too!" The events surrounding the *Padmaavat* screenings provide the diaspora not just an opportunity to passively gaze at the "maximalist neo-royal fashion" (Kuldova, 2016: 185) but a space to embody and enact this lush reimagined Hindu femininity.

"The India of Your Dreams Where Everything is Fine":
How Bollywood Aids Hindu Nationalism

"You have given me a lot of love," declared newly elected prime minister Narendara Modi during his first post-election United States visit in 2014. The house-full diasporic audience at Madison Square Gardens "surged to its feet" as Modi continued that he is very grateful and will

form "the India of your dreams" (Yee, 2014). More recently, the 2019 "Howdy Modi" event in Houston Texas was a political extravaganza with 50,000 attendees and 400 performers. With oratorical flourish, Narendra Modi declared that when asked, "Howdy Modi," he replies, "Bharat main sab acha hain" (Everything is fine in India). Using anaphora as his rhetorical device, he repeated the phrase in several Indian languages to a cheering crowd. Modi's glib phrase was a master stroke as it expunged the violent repression of Kashmir by the state that had taken place just a month before. The outsize crowds at Modi events in the United States would suggest that the Indian diaspora overwhelmingly endorses the political right. Yet, data indicate that the Indian diaspora in the U.S. leans left (Badrinathan, Kapur, & Vaishnav, 2020). One answer to this contradiction is the emergence of "neo-Hindutva" discourses that circulate in the diaspora (Anderson & Longkumer, 2018; Reddy, 2018).

Neo-Hindutva, as Anderson and Longkumer argue, is a term that allows us to think about the evolving mainstreaming Hindu nationalism. By normalizing Hindu-ness as the default category for Indianness, the underlying political saffron agenda of Hindutva is obscured. Bollywood texts promote neo-Hindutva ideologies as they transform regional rituals such as *Karva Chauth* into a pan-Indian, transnational cultural practice. By transforming a regional practice into a nationalized one and then imbuing it with discourses of romantic love and self-care, Bollywood films such as *DDLJ* broker a neo-Hindutva femininity framed through neo-liberal ideologies. Films such as *Padmaavat* further the Hindu nationalist project by providing an inspirational catalogue to redesign a Hinduized femininity in terms of cultural supremacy and discourses of authenticity. Taken together, Bollywood provides resources to mediatize the rhetoric that maintains an "India of dreams" where everything is fine.

My analysis of Bollywood mediatizations is an effort to uncover some of the ways that soft neo-Hindutva circulates in the diaspora. Up until the mid-1990s, the diaspora was not directly addressed by Bollywood. Regardless, the movies always provided significant symbolic resources for diasporic communities to imagine and maintain their connections to the nation. However, from the late 1990s onward, Bollywood exploded with stories that sought to vigorously reconcile modernity and tradition. This post-1990s nationalist turn in the movies demonstrated, according to Williams, "the persisting superiority of Indian national culture even as it free-floats the globe" (2015: 49). In this paper, I examine how this textual validation of a Hindu-centric Indian identity continues to be symbolically concentrated as it spills out of film frames and flows through embodied performances in the diaspora. Foucault famously argued that "power would be a fragile thing if its only function were to repress". Rather, power endures due to its ability to "produce effects at the level of desire" (1980: 59). Bollywood's soft power is an important ally to Hindu nationalism as it produces new knowledges at the level of desire on how to be "Hindu." Through mediatized practices and forms of desirable, consumable Hindu femininity, Bollywood softens the muscular, aggressive ideology of Hindutva and abets in its circulation as normative in the diaspora.

References

Anderson, Edward. (2015). 'Neo-Hindutva': The Asia House M. F. Husain campaign and the mainstreaming of Hindu nationalist rhetoric in Britain. *Contemporary South Asia*, *23* (1), 45-66.

Anderson, Edward & Longkumer, Arkotong. (2018). 'Neo-Hindutva': evolving forms, spaces, and expressions of Hindu nationalism. *Contemporary South Asia, 26* (4), 371-377.

Asia News International (2015, October, 26). Canada to have its first Mrs. Karva Chauth. *Yahoo News.* Available online at: https://ph.news.yahoo.com/canada-first-mrs-karva-chauth-083247926.html (Retrieved July 16, 2020).

Badrinathan, Sumitra, Kapur, Devesh, & Vaishnav, Milan. (2020). How Will Indian Americans Vote? Results From the 2020 Indian American Attitudes Survey. *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.* Available online at: https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/10/14/how-will-indian-americans-vote-results-from-2020-indian-american-attitudes-survey-pub-82929 (Retrieved August 1, 2020).

Bahadur, Satish (1983). Aesthetics: From traditional iconography to contemporary kitsch. In A. Vasudev and P. Lenglet (Eds.) *Indian cinema superbazaar* (pp. 104–113). New Delhi, India: Vikas Publishing House.

Banerjee, Sikata. (2017). *Gender, nation, and popular film in India: Globalizing muscular nationalism*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Barnouw, Erik & Krishnaswamy, Subrahmanyam. (1980). *Indian film*. Oxford University Press.

Bhansali, Sanjay   Leela (Director). (2018). *Padmaavat* [Film].   India: Bhansali Productions & Viacom 18 Motion Pictures.

Chopra, Aditya (Director). (1995). *Dilwale dulhaniya le jayenge* [Film]. India: Yash Raj Films.

Chopra, Anupama. (2002). *Dilwale dulhania le jayenge*. London: British Film Institute.

Chopra, Priyanka: [@priyankachopra]. (2019, October 18). *Karva Chauth at a @jonasbrothers concert. Definitely a first I'll always remember!* [Photograph] Available online at: https://www.instagram.com/p/B3vpauYpr0j/?hl=en (Retrieved July 16, 2020).

Couldry, Nick. (2003). *Media rituals: A critical approach*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Couldry, Nick & Heep, Andreas. (2013). Conceptualizing mediatization: Contexts, traditions, arguments. *Communication Theory*, *23* (3), 191–202.

DH News Service. (2018, January 17). Karni Sena threatens mass Jauhar against Padmaavat release.   *Deccan   Herald*.   Available   online   at: https://www.deccanherald.com/content/654343/karni-sena-threatens-mass-jauhar.html (Retrieved July 16, 2020).

Dudrah, Rajendra. (2006). *Sociology goes to the movies*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Dwyer, Rachel. (2014). *Bollywood's India: Hindi cinema as a guide to contemporary India*. London, U.K.: Reaktion Books.

FBJ Web Desk. (2019, October 17). Top 10 romantic Bollywood dialogues to send your wife this Karva Chauth. *Free Press Journal.in*. Available online at: https://www.freepressjournal.in/entertainment/top-10-romantic-bollywood-dialogues-to-send-your-wife-this-Karva-chauth (Retrieved July 16, 2020).

Foucault, Michel. (1980). *Power/knowledge: selected interviews and other writings, 1972-1977*. New York: Pantheon Books.

Ganti, Tejaswini. (2012). *Producing Bollywood: Inside the contemporary Hindi Film industry*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Ghosh, Amitav. (1989). The diaspora in Indian culture. *Public Culture 2*(1),73-78.

Gupta, Garima. (2019, October 18). Priyanka Chopra celebrates her first Karva Chauth with Nick Jonas in a red sari. *Vogue.in* Available online at: https://www.vogue.in/vogue-closet/collection/priyanka-chopra-first-karva-chauth-red-sari-mangalsutra-mehandi-bangles-sindoor-earrings-nick-jonas/ (Retrieved July 16, 2020).

Hirji, Faiza. (2005). When local meets lucre: Commerce, culture and imperialism in Bollywood cinema. *Global media journal 4* (7). Available online at: http://www.globalmediajournal.com/open-access/when-local-meets-lucre-commerce-culture-and-imperialism-in-bollywood-cinema.php?aid=35173 (Retrieved July 14, 2020)

Hjarvard, Stig. (2013). *The mediatization of culture and society*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Jonas, Nick. [@nickjonas]. (2019, October 18). *My wife is Indian. She is Hindu, and she is incredible in every way. She has taught me so much* [Photograph] Available online at: https://www.instagram.com/p/B3vuHKQjWaL/?utm_source=ig_embed (Retrieved July 14, 2020).

Kakar, Sudhir. (1990). *Intimate relations: Exploring Indian sexuality*. New Delhi, India: Penguin India.

Karva Chauth 2019: 5 Bollywood songs that beautifully capture the essence of the festival. (2019, October 17). *Mumbai Mirror*. Available online at: https://mumbaimirror.indiatimes.com/entertainment/bollywood/Karva-chauth-2019-5-bollywood-songs-that-beautifully-capture-the-essence-of-the-festival/articleshow/71582252.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst (Retrieved July 14, 2020).

Kaur, Raminder & Sinha, Ajay J. (2005). Bollywood: An introduction to popular Indian cinema through a transnational lens. In Raminder Kaur and Ajay J. Sinha (Eds.), *Bollyworld: Popular Indian cinema: Through a transnational lens* (pp.11-32). New Delhi, India: Sage Publications.

Kavoori, Anandam & Joseph, Christina. A. (2011). Bollyculture: Ethnography of identity, media and performance. *Global Media and Communication, 7* (1), 17-32.

Kuldova, Tereza. (2016). *Luxury Indian fashion: A social critique*. New York, NY: Bloomsbury Press.

Kulkarni, Bhargavi. (2017, October 13). Eat pray love: Karva Chauth morphs from the religious to the romantic. *India Abroad.com.* Available online at: https://www.indiaabroad.com/indian-americans/eat-pray-love-karva-chauth-morphs-from-the-religious-to-the-romantic/article_c6d2dfce-b069-11e7-9e51-8b3af78b25b7.html (Retrieved July 14, 2020).

Lamerichs, Nicolle. (2011). Stranger than fiction: Fan identity in cosplay. *Transformative Works and Cultures, 7.* Available online at: https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2011.0246 (Retrieved July 14, 2020).

Loza, Susana. (2017). *Speculative imperialisms: Monstrosity and masquerade in postracial times*. Lexington, KY: Lexington Books.

Malhotra, Sheena & Alag, Tavishi. (2004). Dreaming the nation: Domestic dramas in Hindi films post-1990. *South Asian Popular Culture, 2* (1), 19–37.

Mehta, Monika. (2005). Globalizing Bombay cinema: Reproducing the Indian state and family. *Cultural Dynamics 17* (2), 135–154.

Nimbalkar, Pearl. (2018, January 26). Decoding Rani Padmini aka Deepika Padukone's Padmaavat style. *Peepingmoon.com*. Available online at: https://www.peepingmoon.com/fashion-special/news/12362/Decoding-Rani-Padmini-aka-Deepika-Padukones-Padmaavat-Style.html (Retrieved July 14, 2020).

Nye, Joseph. (2009). *Soft power: The means to success in world politics*. New York, NY: Public Affairs.

Padmaavat premiere brings Bollywood glamour back to Houston (2018, February 1). *Indo-American News.com.* Available online at: http://www.indoamerican-news.com/padmaavat-premiere-brings-bollywood-glamour-back-to-houston/   (Retrieved July 14, 2020).

Rai, Rajesh. (2008). "Positioning" the Indian diaspora: The South-east Asian experience. In Parvati Raghuram, Ajaya Kumar Sahoo, Brij Maharaj and Dave Sangha (Eds.), *Tracing an Indian diaspora: Contexts, memories, representations* (pp. 29-51). New Delhi, India: Sage Publications India.

Rajadhyaksha, Ashish. (2003). The 'Bollywoodization' of the Indian cinema: Cultural nationalism in a global arena. *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies 4*, (1), 25–39.

Rajgopal, Shoba Sharad. (2011). Bollywood and neonationalism: The emergence of nativism as the norm in Indian conventional cinema. *South Asian Popular Culture, 9* (3), 237-246.

Ram, Anjali. (2014). *Consuming Bollywood: Gender, globalization and media in the Indian diaspora.* New York, NY: Peter Lang International Academic Publishers.

Ram, Anjali. (2003). Memory and the reconstitution of cultural identities in the Asian Indian diaspora. In Mary Fong and Rueyling Chuang (Eds.), *Communicating ethnic and cultural identity* (pp.121-133). Lanham, MD: Rowan and Littlefield.

Ram, Anjali. (2002). Framing the feminine: Diasporic readings of gender in Indian cinema. *Women's Studies in Communications, 25*(1), 25-52.

Ramdya, Kavita. (2010). *Bollywood weddings: Dating, engagement, and marriage in Hindu America.* Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.

Rathore, Reena. (2018, January 20). Bay Area Indian American women embody the spirit of 'Padmaavat' on the first day of film's release. *India-West.com*. Available online at: https://www.indiawest.com/entertainment/global/bay-area-indian-american-women-embody-the-spirit-of-padmaavat/article_4647c06a-05f3-11e8-874c-9798fc752d96.html (Retrieved July 14, 2020).

Reddy Deepa. (2018). What is neo- about neo-Hindutva? *Contemporary South Asia, 26*(4), 483-490.

Reuters Staff (2018, February 22). Malaysia bans Bollywood film 'Padmaavat' over negative portrayal of Muslim ruler. *Reuters*. Available online at: https://www.reuters.com/article/us-india-movie-malaysia/malaysia-bans-bollywood-film-over-negative-portrayal-of-muslim-ruler-idUSKBN1FM1AY (Retrieved July 14, 2020).

Sen, Ruma. (2020). Priyanka Chopra's journey from Bollywood stardom to transnational iconicity. In Aysha Iqbal Viswamohan and Clare Wilkinson (Eds.), *Stardom in contemporary Hindi cinema: celebrity and fame in globalized times* (pp. 305-320). Singapore: Springer Nature Singapore.

Tharoor, Shashi. (2013, January 15). The global Indian. *Project Syndicate*. Available online at: https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/india-s-diaspora-at-home-by-shashi-tharoor?barrier=accesspaylog (Retrieved July 14, 2020).

The Wild East Group. (2011, February 28). Bollywood dances into social expressions. *Cison PR Newswire.* Available online at: https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/bollywood-dances-into-social-expressions-117053553.html (Retrieved July 14, 2020).

Thussu, Daya. (2016). The soft power of popular cinema – the case of India. *Journal of Political Power, 9*(3), 415–429.

Vineet, Payal & Vipin, Vanishka. (2014, October 16). First, Karva Chauth celebrations at India House. *IndoAmerican News.com*. Available online at: http://www.indoamerican-news.com/first-karva-chauth-celebrations-at-india-house/ (Retrieved July 14, 2020).

Walia, Nona. (2011, December 25). "The party never ends! *Times of India*. Available online at: http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/20111225/people/30556623_1_royal-wedding-birthday-bash-celebrity (Retrieved June 1, 2012).

Weddings: Inspired by Bollywood (2012, May 5). *Deccan Herald*. Available online at: https://www.deccanherald.com/content/246954/weddings-inspired-bollywood.html (Retrieved July 14, 2020).

Williams, Rina. (2015). At home in the world: Neoliberalizing Indian national identity in a global era. In Anne Murphy, Rina Williams and Sean O. Dubhghaill (Eds.), *Towards a diasporic imagination of the present* (pp. 31-67). Calcutta, India: Lies and Big Feet.

Winge, Theresa. (2006). Costuming the imagination: Origins of Anime and Manga Cosplay. *Macadamia 1*, 65-76.

Yee, Vivian. (2014, September 28). At Madison Square Garden, chants, cheers, and roars for Modi. *The New York Times*. Available online at: https://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/29/nyregion/at-madison-square-garden-chants-cheers-and-roars-for-modi.html (Retrieved July 14, 2020).

Endnotes:

[1] The Indian diaspora is composed of varying historical trajectories. One of the first groups of Indian migrants to settle in North America were Punjabi Sikhs who worked on railroad construction and lumber mills in the early 20th century. In other parts of the world, Indians of primarily Gujarati and Bhojpuri ethnicity were transported in the 19th and early 20th century Indians as indentured labor to the Caribbean and parts of Africa. The passage of the Immigration Act of 1965 in the United States opened up a large and fairly steady stream of migration from the Subcontinent. For the purposes of this paper, I draw upon various examples of mediatizations from the Indian diaspora. The intent of this paper is not comment on a particular, vernacular diaspora. Instead, this paper offers up a discussion of the ways in which the diasporic imaginary and cultural practices are mediatized by Bollywood.

About the Author

Anjali Ram (PhD, Ohio University) is a professor of Communication and Media Studies at Roger Williams University. Grounded in the critical-cultural studies tradition, her research explores formations of gendered, racialized, and transnational identities in the context of migration and global media. Her book *Consuming Bollywood: Gender, Globalization and Media in the Indian Diaspora* (2014) analyzes how diasporic audiences use the spectacle of Bollywood cinema to renegotiate cultural meanings of home, gender, belonging, and identity. Her work has also appeared in various edited volumes and journals such as *Women's Studies in Communication, International Journal of Intercultural Relations, Human Development,* and *Mind, Cultural and Activity.*

Citing this articcle:

Ram, Anjali. (2021). Ritual, Romance, and Royalty: Bollywood Remakes of Hindu Femininity. *Global Media Journal -- Canadian Edition*, *13* (1), pp. 28-44