

Bollywood and Hindu Nationalism

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Abstract:

Sanjay Leela Bhansali's *Goliyon Ki Raasleela Ram-Leela* (2013) offers an example of how Bollywood cinema continues to reap success at the box-office by tapping into the Hindu viewers' familiarity with Hindu gods, mythological tales, and religious performance traditions. The film employs the Hindu epic *Ramayana* in ways that celebrate and consolidate Hindu identity through the visual representation of Hindu religious rituals and performances. The hugely popular song-dance sequence "Tattad tattad" plays a significant role in this context by integrating popular aspects of the Hindu gods Ram and Krishna to represent the cinematic hero and male protagonist Ram, played by the actor Ranveer Singh. An examination of the song lyrics, dance moves, and the *mis-en-scène* of "Tattad tattad" demonstrates how *ramlila-raslila* performance traditions, which enact episodes from the mythological stories of the Hindu gods Ram and Krishna, respectively, get reworked in the context of contemporary visual media. The film's success reveals the intertwining of Bollywood and Hindu nationalism in India that produces both devoted Bollywood spectators and Hindu Right supporters.

Keywords: Bollywood; Hindu nationalism; song-dance sequence; item number; Bhansali; Ranveer Singh; *Ramayana*

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Sanjay Leela Bhansali's 2013 blockbuster film *Goliyon Ki Raasleela Ram-Leela*, popularly referred to as *Ram-Leela*, was the fifth highest-grossing Indian film of 2013, and one of the highest-grossing Indian films of all times in 2013.¹ The success of the film is attributed to the strong performances of the lead and supporting characters, a tragic plot of star-crossed lovers, Bhansali's signature extravagant set designs, long-shot/widescreen cinematography, and catchy musical scores. But, as this essay argues, the film's ability to cater to the mainstream Hindu viewers' familiarity with Hindu gods, mythological tales, and religious performance traditions is integral to the viewing experience. *Ram-Leela* offers us an example of how Bollywood cinema continues to produce blockbuster films that employ the Hindu epic *Ramayana* in ways that celebrate and consolidate Hindu identity through the visual representation of both shared and reconstructed Hindu religious rituals and performances.²

Specifically, this essay focuses on how the film's widely popular song-dance sequence "Tattad tattad" integrates popular aspects of the Hindu gods Ram and Krishna, and incorporates *ramlila-raslila* performance traditions to introduce the cinematic hero Ram, played by Ranveer Singh. *Ramlilas* and *raslilas* are folk dramatic art forms that use recital, dialogue, and songs to enact episodes from the mythological stories of the Hindu gods Ram and Krishna, respectively. Although *ramlilas* and *raslilas* are especially popular in northern India, Bollywood viewers across India are aware of these folk art forms, and there continue to be concerted political efforts by the Hindu Right (or Sangh Parivar)³ to establish Ram and Krishna as martial Hindu gods. I will examine the song lyrics, dance moves, and mise-en-scène of the "Tattad tattad" song-dance sequence to reveal how this media text reworks the *ramlila-raslila* performance traditions, with the aim of unraveling the intertwining of Bollywood and Hindu nationalism in India that facilitates the production of both devoted Bollywood spectators and Hindu Right supporters.

Ram: The Ideal Ruler

Goliyon Ki Raasleela Ram-Leela was originally titled *Ram-Leela*, a combination of the names given to the star-crossed lovers, Ram (played by Ranveer Singh) and Leela (played by Deepika Padukone), the eponymous heroes of the film. However, this title, *Ram-Leela*, prompted controversy because certain religious groups went to court arguing that the film's title, trailer, and photographs "were highly objectionable and offended the religious sentiments of the public believing in Hindu mythology" (Sura, 2013). The plaintiffs argued that "the term 'Ramlila' has been historically associated with the plays depicting the life of [the] Hindu god Ram," but the film "contains sex, violence and vulgarity" (Sharma, 2013). The film's release, scheduled on 15 November 2013, was stayed by the Delhi High Court.

To alleviate these concerns, director Sanjay Leela Bhansali explained in a public announcement (November 13, 2013) that the film's title refers to the main characters of the film, Ram and Leela. Bhansali wrote that "we would like to clarify and state that [the film] is inspired and based on William Shakespeare's work 'Romeo and Juliet.'" The film is "neither related to 'Ramleela' folklore/traditional performance associated with Lord Ram nor related to 'Rasleela' associated with Lord Krishna. Ram, the character in the said film does not depict or resemble Lord Rama in any manner" (Quigley, 2013). However, he still changed the title of the film to *Goliyon Ki Raasleela Ram-Leela*, and the film was released on the scheduled date.

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Although Bhansali insists that the film draws upon William Shakespeare's tragic romance *Romeo and Juliet*⁴ and not *ramlila* or *raslila* performances, attending to the film's plot suggests otherwise. Bhansali's adaptation of Shakespeare's play maintains the basic narrative of star-crossed lovers and their tragic end, but it is adapted to the socio-historical context of a fictional Gujarati village infamous for its unrestrained manufacture and sale of arms and ammunition, and an ancestral feud that persists between two clans, Rajadi and Sanera. The film tells the story of romantic love between Ram, the younger son of the chief of the Rajadi clan, and Leela, the daughter of the matriarch of the Sanera clan. The film interweaves the love story of Ram and Leela with tropes from the Indian performance traditions of *ramlila* and *raslila* to create a distinctive cultural text that prompts context-specific reading of the characters and events in the cinematic narrative.

Anuradha Kapur notes that folk theatrical enactments of stories from the *Ramayana* (i.e., *ramlila* performances) have made Ram and his venerated devotee Hanuman one of the most popular deities in northern India (1993: 74).⁵ In *ramlila* performances there are many episodes that display the monkey-god Hanuman and his troops' devotion to Lord Ram as well as their martial exploits. In northern India, *ramlila* performances conclude with the festival of Dussehra. Bhansali employs this temporal arc in his film: *ramlila* performative practices appear in the "Tattad tattad" song-dance sequence within a few minutes of the film's beginning and the film ends with the celebration of Dussehra. The annual festival of Dussehra (also known as Vijaya Dashami) is celebrated across India to commemorate Lord Ram's victory over the "demon-king" Ravan. Ram-Leela re-enacts the triumph of good over evil signified by Dussehra, when the lovers finally put an end to the murderous clan warfare that has prevailed in their village for centuries.

Alert to the spectacular performance of *ramlilas* and the spectacle of the star in Bollywood cinema, Bhansali begins *Ram-Leela* with a violent altercation between the Rajadis and Saneras, two clans in the village of Ranjaar whose political and business rivalry spans centuries, as the audience is quickly informed. While gun shots are exchanged between the two warring clans over petty squabbles, the Rajadis note the absence of the chief's younger son, Ram. This makes way for Ram's spectacular entrance onto the cinematic screen (11:49). The camera cuts across to Hanuman Lane and to a massive billboard cut-out of Hanuman exhibiting his chest engraved with the image of Lord Ram and his wife Sita, followed by Ram's/Ranveer Singh's entrance to the sound of trumpets and drum rolls.

Introducing the cinematic hero Ram by directing attention to this traditional iconography of Hanuman as the ideal devotee, and having the background dancers wear saffron shirts to signify the Hindu faith, or dressed like the monkey troops of *Ramayana* who aided the Hindu god Ram in his war with Ravan, immediately aligns the cinematic hero with the mythological figure of Lord Ram. Through the lyrics and dance moves in "Tattad tattad," Ram introduces himself to the film's viewers, referring to himself in the third person: "*Ramji ki chaal dekho*"/Notice Lord Ram's walk, "*Aankhon ki majaal dekho*"/Notice the confidence in his eyes. This also creates a slippage between the Hindu god Ram and the film's hero. By framing our reading of the cinematic hero through Lord Ram, who is celebrated by his worshippers as the ideal ruler, the song builds audience expectation that the cinematic protagonist Ram will emerge as the ideal ruler who will bring forth peace and justice in the violence-ridden village of Ranjaar. So even as the cinematic hero Ram performs erotic dance moves and excessively sexual gestures to the energetic beats of "Tattad tattad," the viewers are reminded of the promise of *ramrajya*: the peaceful and just reign of Lord Ram.

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The “Tattad tattad” song ends with Ranveer Singh/Ram (melodramatically) grabbing the end of a gun to prevent his elder brother from killing a member of the enemy (Sanera) clan (5:28). When summoned to explain his actions at a meeting of the clan, Ram emphasizes the need for peace and amity to end the ancestral feud between the Rajadis and the Saneras. To reprimand him for suggesting that the Rajadis befriend the enemy Saneras, his elder brother reminds him that as a child he had murdered a member of the Sanera clan. Ram retorts that it was an accident and that he had paid heavily for his mistake. He was banished from the village for twelve years and he had to live with an old, despicable aunt in Ahmedabad. He uses the term “*banavas*”—literally, residence in the forest—to describe his banishment from Ranjaar. For anyone with rudimentary familiarity with the *Ramayana* storyline, the term “*banavas*” will work as a semiotic device, a prompt to read *Ram-Leela*’s hero in light of the story of Lord Ram’s wrongful banishment from Ayodhya, triumphant return as its ruler after residing in the forest for fourteen years, and his establishing of a peaceful, equitable society.

Traditionally, *ramlila* performances end the festival of Dussehra with the actor playing Ram burning an effigy of Ravan. Bhansali’s *Ram-Leela* also ends with the celebration of Dussehra. In the film, we see a *ramlila* procession of actors dressed as mythological characters from the *Ramayana* and folk dancers passing through Ranjaar’s streets. The actor playing the deity Ram in the *ramlila* performance stands on a lavish wagon blessing his devotees, accompanied by the actor playing Hanuman. We also see the cinematic protagonist Ram/Ranveer Singh, who now heads the Rajadi clan, riding a wagon, holding a loudspeaker, and playfully shouting lines from his “Tattad tattad” song (“*Ramji ki chaal dekho*”/Notice Lord Ram’s walk) to introduce *ramlila*’s Ram to the crowd of worshippers.

In addition, similar to *ramlila* performances in northern India that commemorate the beginning of a new era of peace and justice, this *ramlila* performance within the film also ends with love prevailing over hate and the end of clan feuds in Ranjaar. Moved by a discourse of love spouted by an enemy child, the Sanera chief Dhankor, Leela’s mother, decides to put an end to the ongoing feud with the Rajadis by sending Leela to her in-laws’ house, thereby establishing familial ties with the enemy. This decision is preceded by her embrace of the enemy child, Ram’s nephew. This child character is significant because it was this same enemy child who initiated the petty squabble between the Rajadis and the Saneras with which the film opens. The cinematic narrative comes full circle with the same child, at the end of the film, rehearsing lessons of peace when he is offered the opportunity to take revenge for the merciless killing of his clansmen. Shaped by his uncle Ram’s insistence on love and amity, this child signifies the next generation that could possibly inhabit an alternative future, where Rajadis and Saneras could peacefully coexist as friends and neighbours. Ram and Leela, however, do not have knowledge of Dhankor’s change of heart, and they make a conscious decision to be united forever in death. In an emotional scene interspersed with the burning effigy of Ravan, Ram and Leela offer their goodbyes to each other and subsequently commit mutual homicide. Their deaths compel their families to end the vicious feudal animosities, and the Saneras and Rajadis celebrate Dussehra together for the first time in the history of Ranjaar.

The solemn funeral procession for the lovers and the promise of a peaceful reign at the end of Bhansali’s film will resonate with Bollywood aficionados who expect Bollywood films to end with a hopeful, uplifting message. For the majority of Hindu spectators of the film, their familiarity with *ramlila* performances as actors, participants or viewers and their intimate knowledge of the *Ramayana* story will further enhance their viewing experience. It is worth noting here that the

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Ramayana series was telecast on national television from January 1987 to July 1988 in the prime slot of Sunday morning. This facilitated not only the circulation of a uniform version of the epic but also roused a new consciousness of religious mythologies for its 100-million viewers.

Krishna: The Dancing Male Star

The reference to *raslila* in the film's title is borne out by the female star Deepika Padukone's entry into the cinematic narrative as Leela—a lively, joyful young woman playing Holi with her friends. Holi is the spring festival of colors and the playfulness associated with Holi is considered to be in imitation of the Hindu god Krishna's erotic play with his eternally devoted lover Radha and her friends, making it a popular celebration for Krishna devotees. *Raslila* is the traditional story of the childhood and amorous youth of Krishna, described in Hindu scriptures such as the *Bhagavata Purana*. The folk performance of *raslila* is popular in northern India, mainly Uttar Pradesh. It is performed during the festivals of Holi and Krishna Janmashtami (Krishna's birth anniversary). *Raslila* performances focus on Krishna dancing with Radha and her friends, and in *Ram-Leela* it is telling that Ram meets Leela at the Holi celebrations and then joins her in a sensual dance number, "Ang laga de," which quickly communicates to the film's spectators that they are about to witness a legendary story of romantic love, Ram and Leela's *raslila*. Since the story of Radha-Krishna has been incorporated to some extent within indigenous stories of star-crossed lovers, the film's spectators are primed to anticipate a remarkable tale of love and devotion unfold before their eyes.

Even before Leela enters the cinematic screen, through the placing of the "Tattad tattad" song-dance sequence at the very beginning of the film, Ram emerges as a Krishna-like figure. He appears in this song as the seducer, the playful lover, the modern-day Lord Krishna, who is both desiring and desired by the women in Ranjaar. Unlike other characters in the film who assert their masculinity by killing members of the enemy clan, Ram in this introductory song and dance performance publicly asserts his sexuality to display his masculine prowess.

Ranveer Singh's sexualized, pelvic-thrusting dance moves in "Tattad tattad" need some contextualization. Song-dance sequences emerged as a distinctive feature of Hindi cinema from the very first Hindi sound film *Alam Ara* (Irani, 1931), which had seven songs (Dudrah & Desai, 2008: 6). The "Tattad tattad" song, however, is not like any song-dance sequence; it qualifies as an "item number," a term that has been in existence since the late 1990s to describe sensuous, over-sexualized dances performed to the tunes of catchy Bollywood songs. While Hindi films historically have had a version of the item number that would either be set in a nightclub or feature a courtesan (Nijhawan, 2009), it is only since the late 1990s that they have become distinct media texts. The term was first associated with Malaika Arora for her song "Chaiya chaiya" in *Dil Se* (Ratnam) in 1998 and Shilpa Shetty for her song "UP Bihar lootne" in *Shool* (Nivas) in 1999 (Brara, 2010: 68).

From its first usage, Bollywood item numbers positioned women as the object of the male gaze. The mise-en-scène in an item number usually comprised a gathering of men gazing at the singing and dancing woman and the voyeuristic camera angles objectified the female dancer as an erotic object for the audience, within the screen and beyond the screen. Take, for example, Neena Gupta in "Choli ke peeche" (*Khal Nayak*, Ghai, 1993), Yana Gupta in "Babuji zara dheere chalo" (*Dum*, Nivas, 2003), Rakhi Sawant in "Mohabbat hai mirchi" (*Chura Liyaa Hai Tumne*, Sivan, 2003), and Lara Dutta in "Aisa jadu" (*Khakee*, Santoshi, 2004). Many of the dancing girls in

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Bollywood cinema were “admired as gorgeous dancers[s],” but they were cinematically and socially typecast in their roles. They were not offered leading roles in films (Nijhawan, 2009: 104). Established female stars, on the other hand, were not willing to perform item numbers. However, more recently, item numbers have been employed to include a guest appearance by a leading actor to increase the film’s popularity. Some examples are Sushmita Sen in “Mehboob mere” (*Fiza*, Mohamed, 2000), Rekha in “Kaisi paheli” (*Parineeta*, Sarkar, 2005), Aishwarya Rai in “Kajra re” (*Bunty aur Bubli*, Ali, 2005), and Katrina Kaif in “Chikni chameli” (*Agneepath*, Malhotra, 2012). Also, top Bollywood male stars such as Shahrukh Khan (“Dard-e-disco,” *Om Shanti Om*, Khan, 2007), Aamir Khan (“I hate you,” *Delhi Belly*, Deo, 2001), and Abhishek Bachchan (“One love,” *Rakht*, Manjrekar, 2004) have all appeared in item numbers. Energetic dancing by a star actor (male or female), catchy beats/lyrics set to music, and a staged setting with a supporting cast of dancers in the background have now emerged as the staples of a compelling item number in Bollywood cinema.

Meticulously choreographed, “Tattad tattad” comprises a dancing male star with numerous male dancers in the background, sexually suggestive dance moves, voyeuristic female viewers on screen, and absurd albeit catchy lyrics. But unlike older Bollywood item numbers that were performed by dancers who would not play the lead role in the film or the recent trend of item numbers being employed to facilitate a guest appearance by a leading male actor, “Tattad tattad” is performed by the hero of the film.⁶ Ranveer Singh enters the staged setting like a rock star, reclining on an intentionally designed Gujarati motorcycle that magically rides itself as the crowd parts. Motorcycles were used for action sequences in Hindi cinema beginning in the 1970s and motorbike-riding urban toughs are a staple feature of both Hindi and regional cinemas in India. The presence of the motorcycle therefore immediately conjures up for Bollywood fans common-sense associations of motorbikes with playful sexuality, masculine confidence, violence, and questionable morality. The actor wears a traditional Gujarati shirt paired with tight, ripped jeans and has longish hair—a sartorial style that also signifies to Bollywood viewers the spectacular eroticization of the male actor. Ranveer Singh’s dance moves explicitly foreground his sexuality as he blows a kiss to the camera, winks, vigorously sways his waist and hips, and thrusts his pelvis for both the fictional rural women and the viewers of the film. As he sheds his shirt, in the course of this “contemporary, Indian ensemble of onscreen song, dance and desire” (Brara, 2010: 68), to display his glistening muscled chest, he unapologetically exhibits his body for the viewing pleasure of the spectators.

In addition, Ranveer Singh’s entrance on a motorcycle while clicking his own selfie (0:32) suggests that he is alert to masculinity as a performance that necessitates both the presence of viewers and the admiring validation of peers. Throughout the performance of “Tattad tattad,” he poses for his fans, female friends and gawkers, who incessantly click photos and record videos on their mobile phones (4:18-4:42). The excessive visibility of mobile phones in this song points to an India that has now become the world’s second-largest user of mobile phones, and a globalized mediascape where stardom is both manufactured for and within a social media-driven ecology.

The liberalizing of the Indian economy in the 1990s opened the country to foreign investment and flooded it with consumer goods. The increasing consumerism that this produced also facilitated the emergence of the male star as, according to Anne Ciecko, “at once a consumer agent and commodity, a producer and a projection, a singing (lip-syncing) and dancing sex symbol with an excess of charisma and affect, a fashion victim and a huckster” (2002: 121). Although the bodies of male actors of an earlier Bollywood era, such as Amitabh Bachchan, Dev Anand, Rishi

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Kapoor, Dharmendra, and others, were a source of popular consumption for cinema spectators, the male body did not function as the site for advertising consumer products until the 2000s. For instance, Shahrukh Khan is the “brand ambassador” for Pepsi, Aamir Khan for Coke, and Ranveer Singh for Thumbs Up, Adidas, and Durex.

Film spectators and viewers of the “Tattad tattad” dance number encounter close-ups of Ranveer Singh’s lustrous, chiseled, dancing body and body-builder physique. The acquisition of this sculpted, gym-toned body is also described in detail in media interviews and newspaper coverage to promote fitness regimens and diets (Quigley, 2013; Saraswat, 2014; Suri, 2017). Such media focus on the star’s hard, muscled body as a model for viewers to cultivate, as well as an object of desire, reflects the explosion of consumer culture.

Consumer culture in Ranjaar is also on display in the settings of “Tattad tattad,” where the street emerges as a living site enmeshed in the social and economic life of the inhabitants. The dance number is performed on a narrow street that consists of a movie theatre, stores displaying their wares, and colorful billboards advertising consumer goods and films. In addition, Ram is presented as an active participant in this consumer culture. He runs a video parlor for adult films that seem to have shaped his casual approach to sex and he takes pride in his reputation as a philanderer.

Looking is central to the emergence of Ram as a Krishna-like figure, and looking is foregrounded in “Tattad tattad”—through the song’s lyrics, the camera angles, the accompaniment of male dancers, and the many, predominantly, female onlookers. The lyrics invite the film’s spectators to join the skillfully choreographed gawking women in the item number to gaze at the male star through the repeated use of the word “*dekho*”/look and through the refrain “*Oh dekho, oh dekho, oh dekho, dekho, dekho*”/Oh look, oh look, oh look, look, look. They draw attention to the actor’s eyes— “*Aankhon ki majaan dekho*”/Notice the confidence in his eyes; “*Nazar mein alaav dekho*”/Look at the fire in his eyes—to solicit viewers to lock their gaze with the actor. The camera angles comprise frontal shots in which Ranveer Singh (as Ram) looks directly at the camera to connect with the audience and draw them into the performance as voyeurs. In one scene, he takes off his unbuttoned shirt and wriggles his hips suggestively, making a woman watching the dance performance from a balcony faint (4:01-4:10). The desire that the actor creates in the spectators within and outside the film is explicit in the lyrics: “*Karein yeh dhamaal dekho*”/He spreads joy everywhere; “*Are dil ko tum sambhaal dekho?*”/Control your heart when you see him. As the actor assertively displays his carefully cultivated, chiseled body, the lyrics draw attention to the actor’s gait: “*Ramji ki chaal dekho*”/Notice Lord Ram’s walk; “*Chaal dekho, dhal dekho*”/Look at his walk, look at his style; “*Arre haav dekho, bhaav dekho*”/Hey, look at his mannerisms and mood; “*Tevar ki talwar dekho*”/Look at his sword of attitude. Similar to item numbers performed by female actors, as this song-dance performance progresses, many of the men and women onlookers within the film copy the star’s signature hair ruffle and join him to the beat of “Tattad tattad” (3:58; 4:43). This serves as a prompt to the offscreen viewers of the item number to follow the onscreen supporting cast and similarly participate in the song-dance sequence.

Hanuman: The Devotee

The ability of Ram in *Ram-Leela* to seamlessly gather an entourage of dancers and onlookers to participate in the dance number and the popularity of the dance number beyond the film’s spectators speak to the star power of Bollywood actors. Tejaswini Ganti notes that the

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“Bombay film industry is primarily defined by and identified with its stars...[it] is a star-oriented, star-driven” industry (2013: 61). In the 1990s and 2000s, Sikata Banerjee notes, “post-globalization consumerism has bred both a nationalist triumphalism and shored up Hindu nationalism in India that is embodied by the muscular self-confident bodies of actors” (2017: 16). Ram’s “muscular self-confident” dancing in “Tattad tattad” in the background of fictional clan warfare, and the marshalling of a militant iconography of Lord Ram along with a supporting cast of dancers that resemble contemporary Hindu Right supporters, raises this complex problematic. The film is set in Gujarat, an Indian state that has earned (along with Uttar Pradesh) infamous status as the site of anti-Muslim violence in present-day India. The song-dance sequence is set in a Gujarati locale and is performed in the midst of the reckless use of arms and erupting violence between warring clans.

As noted earlier, “Tattad tattad” starts off with a billboard cut-out of Lord Ram’s widely revered devotee, the monkey-god Hanuman, and the dance performance unfolds on a public street, fittingly called Hanuman Lane. Drawing upon *ramlila* performance practices, the male background dancers resemble Lord Ram’s devotees in their costume and makeup. When the song-dance performance begins, Ram is accompanied by dancers wearing saffron shirts (and some dancers wear saffron pants as well). The choice of saffron, which is a sacred color in Hinduism, is meant to evoke associations with Hindu monks and ascetics who wear saffron clothing to signify religious abstinence and the quest for salvation. These young, aggressive male dancers could easily pass as Hindu Right activists, who since the 1990s have become a familiar sight in Hindu Right public gatherings. Saffron-attired men (and some women) shouting political slogans, marching in rallies, making hate speeches, carrying swords and tridents, and engaging in violent street fights are now increasingly visible on India’s streets. As the song progresses, the saffron-attired male dancers are joined by performers dressed like monkey devotees of Lord Ram—reminiscent of the *Ramayana* story and the televised *Ramayana* series (2:06)—and performers who are painted blue like Lord Ram, in accordance with traditional iconography in which Lord Ram is depicted as blue-skinned (2:27). The performers dressed as Ram’s monkey devotees will also resonate with those familiar with the Bajrang Dal, a front organization of the Hindu Right that named itself “Hanuman’s Troops” (i.e., Rama’s monkey army), placing itself within the narrative of the *Ramayana*.

The Hindu Right eulogizes Hanuman as the ideal devotee of Ram and is intent on redirecting the devotion of Hindus from their many gods and goddesses to predominantly one god, Ram (and to a limited extent to Krishna).⁷ The Hindu Right posits Ram predominantly as a muscular, vengeance-seeking god, and seeks to institute its version of Ram as the god of the Hindus (Chakraborty, 2011: 198-99). It is therefore striking to see, in the course of the “Tattad tattad” performance, the emergence of larger-than-life wall paintings of a martial Lord Ram reflecting a post-1990s Hindu nationalist ethos (4:12). Anuradha Kapur describes how the characterization of Ram as compassionate, tender, composed, and non-muscular spans several different textual, pictorial, and performative cultural forms, following the first written appearance of the *Ramayana* story sometime between 500 B.C. and 300 A.D. She points to the shift in Ram iconography from a “tranquil, tender and serene god to an angry, punishing,” “exercised” deity (1993 :75) as a result of “the making of a virile Hinduism” with the Ramjanmabhoomi (Ram’s birthplace) controversy.⁸ Hindu Right interlocutors argue that Ram is justifiably angry, since the Babri Masjid continues to occupy his birthplace, and, further, that the divine hero, transformed into an angry crusader, will reclaim his birthplace through his aggression (Datta, 1991).

As Ranveer Singh and his troupe dance their way through Ranjaar’s Hanuman Lane, the setting of the song changes. On the walls behind Ranveer Singh and the saffron-clothed dancers,

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viewers see two gigantic images of an angry, martial Ram with disheveled hair, armed with bow and arrow, and looking away from the viewer (4:12). Milind Wakankar, in his analysis of a similar image, suggests that Ram is “inviting the viewer to gaze with him in the direction of the enemy” (1995: 59–60). It is a solicitation to the devotee to join him in the battle to regain his birthplace, and thus “attain a kind of proximity to the ‘ideal man’ that was not available in the stylized renditions” of the past (1995: 60).

The onscreen presence of armed Hindu devotees performing “garba” moves (Gujarati folk dance) to the beat of “Tattad tattad” on the streets of rural Gujarat unequivocally produces the street as a complex public site for affirming one’s claim to space and the Hindu nation through the avowal of Hindu religious identity. The dancers wearing monkey costumes, holding guns, and performing shooting gestures as part of the dance routine (2:05-2:26) also uncomfortably bring the reel too close to the real. It offers us uncanny visual images of the foot soldiers of the Hindu Right, pointing to the impossibility of extricating this media text from our historical knowledge of Godhra 2002, where a train coach was set ablaze and 59 passengers died. The passengers were mostly Hindu Right activists, who were returning from Ayodhya in Uttar Pradesh after participating in a Ram Temple building program. The train-burning incident triggered retaliatory violence across Gujarat that killed hundreds of Muslims and rendered thousands homeless. Press reports and eyewitness testimonies abound, with stories of the Gujarat government’s complicity in the attacks.⁹

Acknowledging this difficult history asks for a recognition of the complex and differentiated affect that “Tattad tattad’s” invocation of Hindu nationalist tropes might produce in viewers, specifically those who lost lives, livelihoods, and homes as a result of Hindu Right violence that was facilitated by both state support and state inaction. It also asks us to consider the dance number’s reception by the rural, poor, and lower-middle class Bollywood consumers, who feel left out of neoliberal India’s urbane cosmopolitanism and distanced from the representation of transnational, globalized Indian-ness in Bollywood films from the mid-1990s. Scholars have studied at length how liberalization of the Indian economy facilitated the internationalization of the production and distribution of Hindi films, resulting in a larger share of the film’s revenue to be generated from overseas markets (Ciecko, 2001: 124) and multiplexes in metropolitan cities (Banerjee, 2017: 14; Ganti, 2013: 102; Mehta, 2005: 136-37) compared to family-owned, small-town theatres (similar to the “Satrangi Palace” portrayed in the sets of “Tattad tattad,” 0:31). Consequently, film directors began to increasingly feature an upper-class lifestyle, rampant consumption, non-resident Indians, and foreign locations in their films (Dudrah & Desai 2008: 13; Mehta, 2005: 143).

“Tattad tattad’s” public assertion of Hindu masculine and sexual prowess on the streets of Ranjaar will resonate with lower-class male youth in rural India, who, as Shakuntala Rao argues from her detailed ethnographic work on non-elite audiences in India, are increasingly alienated by Bollywood’s emphatic courting of transnational viewers and valorization of global modernity. *Ram-Leela*’s appeal to this demographic of viewers is not lost on the film’s director. The only diasporic character in *Ram-Leela* is Leela’s suitor, Karsan, a Non-Resident Indian who is visiting from London. Karsan is represented as effeminate because of his higher education, fluency in English, accent-ridden Gujarati, and lack of aggression, earning the disdain of Ranjaar’s gun-toting, unschooled men and women.

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Moving to the Beat of the Hindu Right

The popularity of “Tattad tattad” is, perhaps, a reflection of the rise and normalization of Hindu Right violence on India’s streets, which has also increased the viewers’ acceptance of violence and Hindu Right tropes in Bollywood cinema. To promote film spectatorship, *Ram-Leela* intentionally draws upon the Indian mythological epic *Ramayana* and folk theatres (*ramlila-raslila*) and hybridizes them with a plot borrowed from an acclaimed British play and MTV-style music videos. The star appeal of Ranveer Singh and the eroticization of the male body in “Tattad tattad” also play a salient role in the song-dance sequence garnering a wider range of viewers beyond the “parent” film’s reach or appeal. This is because Bollywood song-dance sequences have a life of their own and often circulate independently of the film in which they appear, and this is much more so if they are promoted as item numbers.

Similar to other Bollywood dance numbers, the “Tattad tattad” item number has been constructed in such a way that it fits into the film’s narrative, but also stands as a media text on its own. Similar to *ramlilas* and *raslilas*, which function as singular, detachable performative texts enacting stories of Lord Ram and Lord Krishna, “Tattad tattad” was marketed as a music video separate from the cinematic text. It proved to be a very popular dance number for its energetic dance moves and musical scores, and was performed regularly at community dance events, wedding receptions, dance competitions on television, clubs, and parties, both within India and in the Indian diaspora.

Many Indians, for whom Bollywood is both a film and music industry, encountered this item number without having seen the film or having any prior knowledge of the cinematic narrative. This remarkable ability of Bollywood song-dance sequences to travel independently of the film for which they were originally created makes the incorporation of Hindu nationalist tropes in song-dance sequences particularly important to study. For example, V.Unbeatable, the Indian dance troupe who floored the viewers of the US reality show “America’s Got Talent: The Champions,” selected “Tattad tattad” for their final performance (“Indian Team,” 2020).

The ability of this song-dance sequence to reach spectators beyond the film’s viewers illustrates the power of dance numbers to outlive the parent film and successfully consolidate Hindu identity through the visual representation of Hindu religious rituals and performances of Hindu nationalism on screen. It is the viewers’ familiarity with Hindu epics, Hindu gods, and Hindu religious rituals, which has been bolstered by the growth of Hindu nationalism, that underpins the film’s popular appeal and commercial success. *Ram-Leela*’s heavy reliance on the Hindu gods Ram and Krishna to tell the tragic story of star-crossed lovers, and its success in rallying devoted Bollywood fans (Hanumans) must therefore be understood in the context of an ascendant Hindu nationalism in contemporary India.

Endnotes

1. <https://www.boxofficeindia.com/years.php?year=2013&pageId=4>
2. The *Ramayana* was composed in Sanskrit by the sage Valmiki. It is an ancient Indian epic about the birth, youth, exile, and then return of Ram to Ayodhya. The abduction of Ram’s wife Sita

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by the demon-king Ravan and subsequent rescue are the central incidents of this epic that celebrates the triumph of good over evil.

3. The Sangh Parivar signifies the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and its Parivar, or family of organizations, such as the Vishva Hindu Parishad, the Shiv Sena, the Bharatiya Janata Party, among others. The RSS was formed in 1925 by Keshavrao Baliram Hedgewar. From its inception, the RSS has been working steadfastly to disseminate the ideology of *Hindutva* (literally Hinduness, specifically “Hindu nation” or “Hindu rule”) to the Indian populace.
4. Bollywood’s continued attraction to Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* is evident from two other acknowledged adaptations of the play that appeared alongside Bhansali’s. These include Habib Faisal’s *Ishaqzaade* (2012) and Manish Tiwary’s *Issaq* (2013).
5. Hanuman is the commander of the monkey army that assists Lord Ram in his war against the demon-king Ravan. He is one of the central characters in *Ramayana*, who is celebrated for his muscular prowess and exceptional devotion to Lord Ram.
6. In *Ram-Leela* Priyanka Chopra, who otherwise plays no part in the film, makes an appearance in the item number “Ram chahe Leela.” The song features Chopra as a nautch girl who is performing the song for Ram.
7. Hindu Right ideologues encourage Hindus to “get themselves reanimated and re-born into a martial race” by “re-learn[ing] the manly lessons” taught by Ram and Krishna (Savarkar, 1949: 201).
8. The Sangh Parivar claims that the Babri Masjid (Babur’s Mosque) was built in 1528 by a general of Babur, the founder of the Mughal dynasty, replacing an eleventh-century Hindu temple to Ram that commemorated his birthplace in Ayodhya. The Vishva Hindu Parishad led the Ram Janmabhoomi campaign to liberate the alleged birthplace of Ram in 1984. For further details, see Datta, “VHP’s Ram at Ayodhya.”
9. See, for example, Human Rights Watch, “We have no orders to save you”; Asghar Ali Engineer, ed. *The Gujarat carnage*.

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