

Screens of Power: Cinema as a Hegemonic Apparatus in the Construction of Political Culture in India

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Abstract

Cinema in India is unique in terms of its relationship with mass culture, politics, and social practices. This paper aims to explore how Hindi mainstream cinema, commonly referred to as Bollywood, acts as an apparatus of cultural hegemony where dominant political cultures are reproduced and challenged. With reference to theory of cultural hegemony (Antonio Gramsci), idea of Ideological State Apparatuses – ISAs (Louis Althusser), and encoding/decoding model (Stuart Hall), this research will employ qualitative textual analysis of twelve purposively sampled Hindi movies from 2000 to 2024 that explicitly focus on issues related to nationalism, caste, religion, gender, and state power. The findings suggest that the main function of Bollywood is to encode ideological values that promote elite-nationalism while also creating fragmented space for counter-hegemonic discourses within them. This research proposes that cinema plays an active role in shaping Indian political culture and, thus, should be considered in any analysis of Indian politics.

Keywords: *Bollywood, cultural hegemony, political culture, ideology, nationalism, caste, religion, Indian cinema*

1. INTRODUCTION

The Indian film industry is globally one of the most prolific film industries, making over 1500 films each year from diverse regional languages (Central Board of Film Certification – CBFC, 2023). Of these films, mainstream Hindi-language cinema, popularly known as Bollywood, enjoys the largest audience base, nationally and internationally. Ever since India gained its independence, cinema in India has been more than just an entertainment industry; it has been a vital tool for the creation of meanings about the nation, power relations, and the

construction of individual and collective identities (Chakravarty, 1993). Nonetheless, despite its immense cultural power and influence, there is limited scholarly theorisation on the interconnections between cinema and political culture in India.

Political culture can be defined broadly as a complex set of beliefs, symbols, and orientations that any given society holds with regard to political authority and civic affairs (Almond & Verba, 1963). Political culture is not created within formal political institutions alone; rather, it is an outcome of cultural practices such as film. Whereas a large part of the population in India does not belong to the formalized systems of education and print media, the visual medium is the main channel of communication between the Indian citizens and politics (Vasudevan, 2000). As a result, the cinematic medium becomes especially significant in constructing political subjects.

The most fruitful theoretical approach to understanding how cultural practices like cinema establish power relations without using violence is the theory of hegemony advanced by Gramsci (1971). Hegemony refers to the mechanism whereby ruling classes obtain the consent of subordinate classes through their cultural and ideological leadership, subordinating the specific class interests to apparently universal ones. Hegemony theory allows one to comprehend how the entertaining films actually serve to perpetuate the nationalist, patriarchal, majoritarian, and statist politics of upper castes in India.

This paper examines the proposition that the Hindi film industry works as a hegemonic apparatus as per the Gramscian-Althusserian framework wherein dominant political-cultural messages are constructed, normalized, and challenged selectively. In order to analyze this hypothesis, this paper explores the period of time between 2000 and 2024, which has been a period defined by the dominance of multiplexes, market liberalization, Hindu nationalism, and the increasing blurring of boundaries between politics and film celebrities. Through qualitative analysis of twelve carefully chosen films and secondary analysis of audience reaction research papers and policy reports, this paper will explore the way cinema creates political culture in contemporary India.

2. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

2.1 Cinema and Hegemony: Theoretical Foundations

The use of hegemony theory in studying films derives its origins from the combination of cultural Marxism rooted in Gramsci and the theory of apparatus. ISAs (institutions like schools, churches, media, culture industries), according to Althusser (1971), are ideological state apparatuses that reproduce ideologies without force. This conceptualization allowed for the structural grounding of cinema as a political institution. For Althusser, ideology hails subjects to occupy preformed subjectivities that favor the ruling class. Thus, in relation to films, narratives, genres, and identification processes construct a viewing community that accepts existing social orders because they see themselves in the tales told.

This deterministic approach was problematized by Hall's (1980) coding and decoding theory. Although dominant codings replicate hegemonic messages, audiences do not passively receive them; rather, they actively decode films based on their class status, regional affiliation, caste

membership, and cultural capital. This perspective is especially valid for Indian society because audiences are heterogeneous across several axes of differentiation, and the same film could be decoded through various frames of meaning (Prasad, 1998; Vasudevan, 2000).

The psychoanalytic perspective on the male gaze put forward by Mulvey (1975) applied apparatus theory to gendered practices of looking, asserting that dominant cinema is configured to generate masculine pleasure through the sexualization of the feminine form. More recently, postcolonial and feminist critiques of Indian films have explored the intersections between the male gaze and caste, religious, and nationalist discourses, which result in a hegemonic masculine subject whose desire constructs politics as well as romance (Virdi, 2003).

2.2 Indian Cinema and Political Ideology

The history of academic discourse on the ideological aspects of Indian cinema is extensive. The seminal contribution to this scholarship by Chakravarty (1993) on Indian nationalism and Hindi cinema illustrated how the post-independence Bollywood industry produced the nation of Indians as an imagined community based on the imagery of the common man as a sufferer but survivor, the virtuous woman as the symbol of national honor, and the role of the state as the redeemer. This construction of cinematic nationalism had a political implication in that it upheld the ideology of the Nehruvian consensus of upper-caste, northerner, Hindi-speaking, secular-nationalism as the normative Indian identity.

In contrast, Prasad's (1998) analysis of Indian films presented a more explicit and Marxist theory. According to him, the characteristics of the mainstream Hindi cinema, including its tendency toward melodrama, lack of classical narrative closure, and fragmentation of address, are an expression of the tensions within India's semi-feudal capitalist economy.

Further, study has focused on the relationship between cinema and the politics of Hindu nationalism. In his work, Dwyer (2006) focuses on the rise of Hindu religiosity within mainstream Hindi cinema after the emergence of the 'Bharatiya Janata Party' (BJP) in the 1990s. Gopal (2011) investigates the role played by the Bollywood film industry in the reimagining of Indian nationalism after economic liberalization, through the figure of the aspirational middle-class consumer-citizen who possesses a naturalized and idealized Hindu cultural identity. In her study, Dwyer (2020) extends this analysis further to examine how films like 'Uri: The Surgical Strike' (2019), and 'Tanhaji: The Unsung Warrior' (2020) serve as affective infrastructures for majoritarian nationalism.

However, researchers have also noted counter-hegemonic practices in Indian cinema. Traditions of regional cinema, especially from Kerala, West Bengal, and Tamil Nadu, have continued to produce politically oriented films that critique upper-caste and Hindi-nationalist hegemony (Rajadhyaksha, 2009). Parallel cinema directors from the 1970s-1980s (Shyam Benegal, Mrinal Sen, Govind Nihalani) were also known for their works that critiqued caste exploitation, rural poverty, and state brutality from subaltern perspectives. With the rise of OTT platforms in the last decade, the scope of cinematic representation has been broadened, providing a space for movies that explore LGBTQ+ life, Dalit subjectivity, and political opposition (Tiwary, 2024).

2.3 Research Gap

Despite the existing body of research offering important perspectives on some particular ideological elements in Indian cinema such as nationalism, gender, religion, and caste, there is a need for an approach that: (a) combines the ideas of Gramscian hegemony theory with the notions of Althusserian and encoding-decoding theories to offer a complete framework of the contribution of cinema to political culture formation; (b) focuses on the present era from 2000 to 2024, where considerable changes have been observed in both the film industry and the political sphere; and (c) recognizes the dialectic tension between hegemonic and counter-hegemonic tendencies within the same filmic discourse.

3. RESEARCH DESIGN

3.1 Research Approach and Paradigm

In line with critical cultural studies, the research philosophy employed in this project follows an interpretive qualitative research approach (Grossberg et al., 1992). Specifically, the epistemological foundation for the study is the belief that movies are not clear windows into social life but are ideologically constructed texts that must be analyzed using rigorous methods that take the socio-political context into account. The aim is not to make any causal claims on the effects of cinema on audiences, but to explore the ideological structures of select films.

3.2 Film Selection

Twelve Hindi films have been chosen purposefully during the years 2000–2024 on the basis of three primary considerations: (i) strong box office performance (denoting a large number of viewers); (ii) addressing political culture aspects such as nationalism, caste, religion, gender, and the state; and (iii) ideological significance as recognized by journalism and academia. The selected corpus is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Selected Film Corpus (2000–2024)

Film	Year	Primary Political Theme	Director
Lagaan	2001	Nationalism / Colonial resistance	Ashutosh Gowariker
Rang De Basanti	2006	Youth activism / Statism	Rakeysh Omprakash Mehra
Firaaq	2008	Communal violence / Citizenship	Nandita Das
Peepli [Live]	2010	Agrarian crisis / Media politics	Anusha Rizvi
Gangs of Wasseypur	2012	Caste / Political economy	Anurag Kashyap
Queen	2014	Gender / Patriarchy	Vikas Bahl
Masaan	2015	Caste / Sexuality / Law	Neeraj Ghaywan
Toilet: Ek Prem Katha	2017	State welfare / Gender	Shree Narayan Singh

Article 15	2019	Caste discrimination / Policing	Anubhav Sinha
Uri: The Surgical Strike	2019	Militarist nationalism	Aditya Dhar
Thappad	2020	Domestic violence / Patriarchy	Anubhav Sinha
12 th Fail	2023	Meritocracy / State institutions	Vidhu Vinod Chopra

3.3 Methods of Analysis

Textual analysis was conducted on each film using three interrelated methods of analysis: (a) Narrative Analysis, where the plot construction, role of characters, conflict resolution, and ideological conclusion were studied; (b) Mise-en-scène Analysis, where attention was paid to the iconography, space, costumes, and visual symbols used to convey ideology; and (c) Discourse Analysis, which examined the language, address, and intertextuality used in reference to political events and institutions. The method of analysis was recursive, switching from text-to-text and text-to-corpus to discover patterns, contradictions, and conflicts. The secondary data, consisting of audience reception studies, film reviews, CBFC certificates, and box office data, provided context for the textual analysis.

3.4 Analytical Framework

The analysis is organized into four thematic axes that are considered significant within the Indian political culture as per the literature available on the subject matter. These are (i) nationalism and the nation state; (ii) caste and social stratification; (iii) religion and secularism; and (iv) gender and patriarchy. The analysis focuses on how the chosen movies express hegemonic discourses, reveal any contradictions therein, and offer potential for countering them.

4. DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

4.1 Nationalism and the Nation-State

The first ideological role performed by these films is the creation of a certain brand of Indian nationalism. In films like ‘Lagaan’ (2001) and ‘Uri: The Surgical Strike’ (2019), one finds two extreme forms of this process in operation: the former being a Gandhian or pluralist nationalism based on the unity of peasants as a class against their colonizers, while the latter constitutes a militarist nationalism that glorifies the Hindu nationalist regime in India as the true protector of Indian independence since 2014.

In ‘Lagaan’, the cricket game can be seen as a metaphorical site of the temporary resolution of caste, religion, and geographical divisions in order to fight together against imperialism. It is notable how pluralist in its nationalist encoding ‘Lagaan’ is, as the Muslim fast bowler Ismail is critical to the team's success, as is the untouchable Kachra. However, what is hegemonic about Lagaan is the figure of the paternalistic, dominant-caste Bhuvan, who leads these subaltern elements together as one unit.

Uri does not follow the same nationalist register at all. One of the most famous phrases used throughout the movie “How's the josh?” can be considered an affective hailing process, which

creates a subject position of militaristic nationalism for the viewer. In *Uri*, the surgical strike is seen as a clean operation that represents advanced technology and clear moral victory over Pakistan aggression and national will. The film dismisses any question on democratic accountability for the military action or civilian deaths, and even diplomacy. As Dwyer (2020), and Gopal (2011) suggest, the movie turns state violence into the true representation of sovereign power. Comparison of the two films shows the validity of Hall's (1980) statement on the absence of unified hegemonic encoding.

4.2 Caste and Social Hierarchy

Caste could be described as the most enduring axis of social stratification in Indian society, and yet, traditional Hindi cinema has tended to obscure it, opting instead for a non-political binary of rich and poor in place of a portrayal of caste-based oppression (Prasad, 1998; Viridi, 2003). The present analysis demonstrates a certain departure from this trend. While *Article 15* (2019) can be considered the most politically explicit work in the selected corpus in terms of tackling issues related to caste discrimination, it does so by portraying the investigation into the rape and murder of Dalit women in rural Uttar Pradesh by an upper-caste police inspector forced to examine the benefits of his caste affiliation. Ideologically, the movie's discourse is clearly intended for the upper castes, with the Dalits portrayed primarily as the victims whose plight is meant to inspire change in the upper-caste character rather than as a politically autonomous entity. Such a dynamic is consistent with Žižek's (1994) concept of ideological tolerance.

The issue of caste is raised by *'Masaan'* (2015) via an equally astute approach but through subtler means. While the romance between Deepak, who belongs to the 'Dom' caste (the burners of dead bodies at Varanasi ghats) and Shaalu, whose higher status in the caste hierarchy bars their union, does not involve an evil antagonist, it highlights the violence intrinsic to the caste system itself. The tragic denouement in the film precludes any happy conclusion that would have served to reconcile caste divides through the magic of Bollywood romance – the film implicitly asserts that the logic of caste relations can never be transcended by personal love. On the other hand, *'Gangs of Wasseypur'* (2012) examines the interconnection of caste, crime, and politics in the coal belt of Dhanbad.

4.3 Religious Identity and Secularism

The issue of religion versus secularism is a core fracture line in Indian political culture, and the movies in the corpus approach the topic in an illuminating manner. The movie *'Firaaq'* (2008), set in the backdrop of the communal riots in Gujarat in 2002, provides a multi-perspective story of the interactions between Hindus and Muslims where all four groups – perpetrators, witnesses, victims, and saviors – are granted ethical depth. Clearly, the encoding of the film with secular humanist ideals is evident; it rejects the simple dichotomy of guiltless Muslim victims and guilty Hindu perpetrators to present a community torn apart by politics and fear of being held responsible for their actions. However, the counter-hegemonic secular discourse of *'Firaaq'* also has its boundaries; while highly praised by critics, it achieved little success in theaters.

The majoritarian shift in mainstream Bollywood cinema is evident from the emergence of an additional genre of films glorifying Hindu culture and military pasts in ways that are to varying extents explicitly aligned with the cultural politics of Hindutva. ‘Tanhaji: The Unsung Warrior’ (2020 – not within our corpus but very much talked about) is one such example. In the corpus, ‘Uri’ embodies Hindutva sentiment by way of its affective mode: the holy geography of India, the masculine Hindu soldier, and the cathartic power of the state are brought together in such a way as to make Hinduism and Indian nationalism inseparable (Gopal, 2011).

4.4 Gender and the Patriarchal Family

Gender becomes the analytical dimension that best reveals the internal contradictions of hegemonic encoding vs. counter-hegemonic articulation in the films analyzed here. The two most sustained feminist interventions are ‘Queen’ (2014) and ‘Thappad’ (2020). ‘Queen’ follows the evolution of a jilted young woman from a small town who embarks on an odyssey of autonomy and self-discovery through solitary travel in Europe. The plot of ‘Thappad’ revolves around how the action of slapping someone during an argument is sufficient to constitute grounds for divorce and thereby questions the deeply entrenched conjugal culture of violence.

The political importance of ‘Thappad’ is that it rejects excessive melodrama. Slapping here takes place as part of a rather banal scene within a party, but the film insists that this casualness should not detract from taking the violence seriously. In rejecting the exceptionalist framework that makes it impossible to take anything except spectacular violence as serious ground for moral judgment, ‘Thappad’ inscribes a politics of the ordinary into feminist resistance against the patriarchal common sense that permeates legal, familial, and cinematic conventions. Its huge box office performance despite the pandemic—Rs. 29 crores net domestic collections—attests to the extent of its penetration into public sensibilities (Gopal, 2011).

‘Toilet: Ek Prem Katha’ (2017) provides an example of how state-sanctioned feminist representation is limited. Although the movie advocates sanitation as a basic right of women and also creates a strong female lead character who rejects marriage if toilets are not provided in her house, it ultimately privileges the idea of welfare policy by the state over the feminist struggle, with the state’s ‘Swachh Bharat campaign’ emerging as the solution rather than any feminist empowerment of women. In doing so, it demonstrates what Fraser (1995) describes as affirmative rather than transformative solutions to injustice, dealing only with the surface issue while ignoring underlying issues of gender oppression.

5. FINDINGS

The analysis of the film corpus provides five main insights which together prove the thesis of the paper. Firstly, mainstream Hindi cinema is indeed a hegemonic apparatus, in a Gramscian-Althusserian sense, in which ideology is encoded in such a way that legitimates the dominant hierarchies – of upper-caste nationalism, patriarchy, family values, Hindu cultural majoritarianism, and statist power – as being naturally and universally preferable. This occurs through the

mechanisms of narrative form, iconographic images, emotional appeal, and identification with the character of the dominant group.

Secondly, this hegemony is not total and coherent. In line with the work of Hall (1980), the corpus has internal contradictions, ambivalence, and cracks in its hegemony. Some films, including *Masaan*, *Article 15*, *Firaaq*, and *Thappad*, encode meanings that undermine, albeit partially, the naturalising role of hegemonic cinema. These counter-hegemonic films seem to exist in a critical-mainstream grey area, meaning that while they use mainstream funding, they address marginalised subject positions.

Thirdly, the political conjuncture following 2014, defined by the victory of the Hindu nationalist BJP in the general elections, has resulted in a clear tendency towards change in the ideological encoding of mainstream Bollywood films. More films with militaristic, majoritarian, and statist themes are being made than ever before, are increasingly more popular commercially, and more closely aligned with the political messaging of the ruling establishment. This is in line with Gramsci's (1971) idea that hegemony is a historical phenomenon and needs to be continuously renewed.

Fourthly, the process of cinematic encoding and political culture are not one-way interactions. Rather than merely reflecting the existing political culture, Bollywood is an active part in creating it. Feelings evoked through films—the nationalist pride, communal feeling, caste shame, and gendered anger—are incorporated back into politics, becoming a way for certain claims to gain legitimacy in political discussion. They determine which emotions are legitimate within politics and which sources of authority are respected. In this context, cinema becomes an integral part of civil society in the Gramscian tradition.

Fifthly, the institutional context of film production plays a major role in influencing its ideological output. The economic context of the multiplex industry involves films produced in order to cater to the demands of middle-class urban audiences, who happen to be more affluent. On the other hand, the development of an OTT platform for film consumption has facilitated the creation of a parallel film circuit that allows for production of cinema that is not commercially or politically viable within the mainstream industry circuit, including Dalit, queer and oppositional films.

6. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

6.1 Conclusion

In conclusion, it has been established that mainstream Hindi cinema functions as an apparatus of hegemony within the production of political culture in India. On the basis of qualitative textual analysis of twelve films from the years 2000-2024, and with reference to hegemony theory and concepts from Gramsci, Althusserian ISA analysis, and Hall's theories about encoding and decoding processes, it has been shown that cinema plays an important role in forming nationalist subjectivities, normalising caste/gender hierarchy, negotiating religion, and producing political consent. While mainstream Bollywood cinema appears to be largely hegemonic in nature, the apparatus itself is internally heterogeneous and variable.

From a political standpoint, it becomes clear that the theoretical contribution discussed above has implications well beyond academic discourse about film theory and criticism. Within a society in which visual media represents the principal cultural milieu for a large proportion of citizens, the role played by cinema within the production of ideology is crucial for the functioning of democratic public reason. Indeed, when cinematic discourse naturalises notions such as authoritarian statism, majoritarian exclusion, or patriarchal violence, even as forms of entertainment, it creates a political culture that makes room neither for plurality nor democracy.

6.2 Suggestions

Based on the above conclusions, the following recommendations are made to concerned parties. To policymakers, the Ministry of Information & Broadcasting and the CBFC should ensure certification guidelines that would include an objective evaluation of movies that have elements of inciting violence and/or caste discrimination against any particular community, without compromising on censorship of dissenting voices. The National Film Development Corporation (NFDC) should increase funding for independent and regional movies that deal with the plight of the subalterns.

For teachers, the process of teaching film literacy within citizenship education can help students understand the ideology inherent in films and, by extension, make sense of other media forms. For scholars, future research efforts should adopt mixed methods, combining the textual approach with systematic audience reception studies to make stronger claims about the dynamics of cinematic encoding and its connection to audiences' political beliefs. Comparative analysis of regional cinemas, including but not limited to Tamil, Malayalam, and Marathi cinema, would certainly add to the understanding of hegemony and counter-hegemony in Indian films.

For film makers and producers, it is essential to become more reflexive regarding the ideological undertones of the representational techniques employed. Industry discussions on responsible representation of social categories, such as caste, gender, and religion—based on established frameworks from organisations like the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media—can provide more avenues for counter-hegemonic practice without stifling creativity in the industry.

Indian cinema is just too potent and too prevalent to be viewed as entertainment alone. As this paper has argued throughout, it is a screen of power—an arena where political life in the world's most populous democracy is played out and constructed.

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