BOLLYWOOD'S "OTHERS": HINDI CINEMA, HINDUTVA, AND THE OTHERING OF THE MUSLIM SUBJECT

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines four Hindi-language films – *Naseem* (Saeed Akhtar Mirza, 1995); *Zakhm* (Mahesh Bhatt, 1998); *Sarfarosh* (*Fervent,* John Matthew Mathan, 1999); and *Kurbaan* (*Sacrificed,* Rensil D'Silva, 2009) – to discern the extent to which the representation of the Muslim figure in Bollywood can be understood in relation to the rise of *Hindutva* ideology (far-right, extreme Hindu nationalism). My exploration of *Naseem* and *Zakhm* details how these two films, which narrativize the disintegration of Hindu-Muslim relations amidst the backdrop of the Babri Masjid's demolition, depict the potential consequences of an emergent Hindu nationalism. My examination of *Sarfarosh* and *Kurbaan* discusses Bollywood's construction of the Muslim terroristic "Other". Overall, this thesis explores the nexus between *Hindutva* politics and Bollywood, focusing on how this influences the representation of the Muslim figure in popular Hindi cinema.

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INTRODUCTION

As one of the foremost scholars of Indian cinema, Ashish Rajadhyaksha asks us to reflect deeply on the enduring connection between cinema and the Indian nation-state:

> …the two terms ["cinema" and "India"] continue to come together easily enough in the mundane but still worthwhile question: why did India take to the cinema in the way it did? The enquiry comes to life, however, only when it forces a deeper quest. The Indian state … has something foundational to say to the question, with its own take on why the cinema took root in India the way it did and, even more, on why the state finds itself, even today, so dramatically implicated in the question of cinema.
>
> (Rajadhyaksha, 2009: 6)

Rajadhyaksha situates cinema as a cultural artefact that participates in the ongoing construction of the Indian nation, foregrounding questions of belonging, identity, politics and power, mediated through popular Hindi cinema, also known as Bollywood. Rajadhyaksha's question of why India "took to the cinema" becomes a question of how the nation continues to define itself, reflecting and constructing the social imagination of a modern India, themes which scholars like Rachel Dwyer (2014) have also explored. But, as Rajadhyaksha eloquently poses, it "forces a deeper quest", a quest this thesis will embark on.

Film production in India is estimated to be around 800 films a *year,* sometimes reaching over 1000.[1] The most well-known of all Indian cinemas,[2] Bollywood films are primarily shot in Hindi, a language mutually intelligible with Urdu, allowing the cinema to be understood by some five-hundred-million people across the Subcontinent (Kabir, 2001: 1-2). "Bollywood" conjures up specific images relating to its diverse history and modes of production: their film's "excessive length, their complicated plots within plots, their song and dance sequences, their colourful costumes, and their incongruous locations" (Dwyer & Patel, 2002: 7) distinguish them from other regional- and language-based Indian cinemas.

Bollywood has invited much scholarly discourse, as I will evidence in this thesis' literature review later. While Dwyer (2014) and Goutam Karmakar and Pippa Catterall (2025) note Bollywood's influence on shaping the imagination(s) of modern India, Ravi Vasudevan highlights how, particularly since the 1970s, film has become "a vivid, highly public and politically immediate document" (2000: 1), citing Tejaswini Niranjana's article (1994) as

[1] Please see: Kabir, 2001; Kasbekar, 2006.

[2] Whilst the Hindi-language cinema of Bollywood dominates global and national cinematic spaces, other well-known Indian cinema traditions include: Tamil-language cinema (Kollywood); Telegu-language cinema (Tollywood); Malayalam-language cinema (Mollywood); Kannada-language cinema (Sandalwood); and Bengali-language cinema (also known as Tollywood), amongst other smaller, regional cinemas.

an important example of scholarly discourse that has since shaped contemporary academic scrutiny of Hindi cinema. After all:

> The politics of popular cinema is not a hermeneutic puzzle nor is it enticingly tacit. It does not require sophisticated analytic schemes of the kind that an Indian postmodernist might cherish. It is often vulgarly blatant.
>
> (Nandy, 1998: 7-8)

This tethering between Hindi cinema and politics has largely informed the foundational focus for this thesis.

The advent and social popularity of right-wing Hindu nationalism, or *Hindutva,* since at least the early-1990s, adds a degree of urgency to this thesis. This political juggernaut makes it crucial to understand the intersection between popular Hindi cinema and politics, especially political *Hindutva*. Like others who have sought to spotlight the insidiousness of pro-Hindu ideology and its presence within Bollywood, I aim to re-explore the nexus between Hindi cinema and political *Hindutva,* particularly around the depictions of the Muslim figure, given *Hindutva*'s anti-Muslim rhetoric, which has historically demarcated the Muslim figure as the "Other".[3]

Hindutva stations Muslims "as a threat to the Hindu majority, eliciting a narrative of cultural protectionism against the threatening Other" (Leidig, 2020: 236). Under the contemporary political premiership of Narendra Modi, the Bharatiya Janata Party's (hereafter the BJP, 'Indian People's Party') staunchly *Hindutva* leader, *Hindutva* has rocketed to political heights since the mid-1980s, culminating in three electoral victories for Modi, who has consecutively served as India's Prime Minister since 2014. Prior to his appointments, Hindi cinema has undergone several reformations following India's economic liberalization, with the globalization of the Hindi film industry throughout the 1990s – paralleling the rise of political *Hindutva* – allowing for pro-Hindu, anti-Muslim images to not only surface, but to take centre stage.

Building upon a plethora of contexts surrounding Hindi cinema, politics and nationalism, this thesis draws upon two specific flashpoints of violence that have aided in consolidating and strengthening *Hindutva* in India and beyond: the demolition of the Babri Masjid ("Babur's Mosque") in Ayodhya, Uttar Pradesh, on the 6th of December 1992; and the September 11th, 2001 attacks in New York City. Their historical and socio-political contexts offer rich, yet deeply disturbing nuances surrounding *Hindutva* and its hatred towards the Muslim figure. I will examine four films for this study: *Naseem* (Saeed Akhtar Mirza, 1995) and *Zakhm* (Mahesh Bhatt, 1998), both of which narrativize the destruction of the Babri Masjid; and *Sarfarosh* (John Matthew Matthan, 1999) and *Kurbaan* (Rensil

[3] For example, please see: Murty, 2009; Kumar, 2013; Gehlawat, 2024.

D'Silva, 2009), narratives centred within the broader climate of Islamic terrorism in the Subcontinent and abroad, respectively. I will interrogate these films as cinematic responses to volatile events that have enabled political *Hindutva* to further alienate Muslims in contemporary Indian society, discussing how popular Hindi cinema has utilized these events narratively and, in turn, how they influence our interpretation of the portrayals of the Muslim figure in these specific films.

Against this backdrop, this research asks:

Following the demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992 and the September 11th, 2001, attacks, to what extent does Hindutva, and its socio-historical and political contexts, influence the cinematic representations and interpretations of the Muslim figure in popular Hindi cinema?

In this introductory chapter, I will situate Islam in India, highlighting its rich, cultural symbiosis within the Subcontinent, as well as Islam's historical, social and cultural position in India. I will then discuss the origins of extreme Hindu nationalism by introducing Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, the "founding father of *Hindutva*".[4] Following on, I will explore Hindi cinema's Muslim "Other" figure, spotlighting the broad historical portrayals and cinematic reformations the character has undergone. I will outline my methodological approach and clarify this thesis' scope and limitations, before foregrounding its original contribution and, lastly, a roadmap for the thesis, documenting what to expect in the subsequent chapters. By the end of this introduction, I hope that the historical, social, political and cinematic contexts which have underpinned my research will become clear, as much-needed discussions surrounding the cinematic Muslim figure within India's *Hindutva*-inflected climate.

[4] Please see: Kumar, 2013; Shani, 2021; Damle & Damle, 2023.

I: ISLAM IN INDIA

Islam has a long history inside the Subcontinent. While an Arab invasion of Sind took place in the eighth century (Bhaskar & Allen, 2024: 2), the Ghazni invasions, which saw Mahmud of Ghazni conduct raids into India, "incorporated western Punjab into the [Ghaznavid] empire, with Lahore as a provincial capital" (Embree, 1991: 385). However, the Ghurid Turkish conquest in the late-twelfth century permitted the Ghurid peoples and their successors to introduce "a new interpretation of the meaning and end of life – Islam" (1991: 381) in India. It is here, following the foundation laid by Muhammad of Ghor, that the first Muslim kingdom in India at the beginning of the thirteenth century decisively opened the way for Islamic and Turkic dynasties to rule and conquer swathes of Northern India. Ira Bhaskar and Richard Allen point out that the Mamluk, Tughlaks, Khaljis, Sayyids and Lodi dynasties – at various points – ruled the Delhi Sultanates "for over three hundred years until the defeat and death of Ibrahim Lodi by Babur at the Battle of Panipat in 1526" (2024: 2), leading to the establishment of the Mughal Empire.[5] Following its emergence, the Mughal Empire ushered in nearly three centuries of imperial rule, bringing political stability, cultural synthesis, and artistic innovation.

Following Aurangzeb's death in 1707, the Mughal Empire steadily declined. A series of short-lived reigns, including Bahadur Shah I (Shah Alam I, 1707-1712), Ahmad Shah Bahadur (1748–1754), Alamgir II (1754–1759), and Akbar Shah II (1806–1837) followed. However, it was Bahadur Shah II (Bahadur Shah Zafar) who "made the fatal mistake of giving his blessing to the sepoys who participated in the Mutiny of 1857AD" (Ramesh, 2024: 202). Following a trial by the British which concluded that Bahadur Shah II was guilty in partaking in the Mutiny,[6] he was exiled to modern-day Myanmar, whilst his sons were killed by the British, marking the beginning of the British Raj in India.

Despite the Partition of India in 1947, Islam has continued to play a significant role across the Subcontinent. Not only has Islam contributed to the region's economic, political, and cultural continuity in all aspects of Subcontinental life, its symbiosis with Indian and/or Hindu culture is evidenced in, for example, architecture[7] and language[8] following early Sufi mystics' engagement with the locals, which promoted a broader

[5] For more on the Mughals in India, and Islam's position within it, please see: Mukhia, 2004; Fisher, 2015.
[6] The "Mutiny" was the Indian Rebellion of 1857, a major uprising which involved Indian soldiers and civilians, who rose against the British East India Company. This mutiny marked the end of the Mughal Empire following Bahadur Shah II's conviction and exile, and the beginning of British Rule in India.
[7] Please see: Asher, 1992; Flood, 2009; Shokoohy & Shokoohy, 2021.
[8] Please see: Khalidi, 1986; Shaban, 2018; Bar Sadeh, 2023.

acceptance towards Islam (Bhaskar & Allen, 2024: 2).[9] However, in the early-1900s, a far-right figure with a disdain for Islam, Muslims and the Islamic culture in India emerged, bringing along the early ideological foundations of a nationalistic outlook we still see today in modern-day India.

[9] Please also see: Embree, 1991.

II: HINDUTVA

Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, a politician who later became a leading member of the Hindu Mahasabha (a Hindu nationalist political party) during World War Two, wrote *Essentials of Hindutva* (1923), detailing his arguments about the necessary tenets of Hindu identity. Since a historical exegesis of Savarkar's book exceeds the scope of this chapter, I will foreground three key ideas that exemplify Savarkar's pro-Hindu, anti-Muslim attitude that *Hindutva* – or "Hinduness" – became synonymous with.

Firstly, Savarkar chronicles the origination of the term "Hindu" (the adherents to Hinduism) by claiming that it was "chosen by the patriarchs of our race to designate our nation and people" (2021 [1923]: 4) based upon several contexts, including the *Rigveda* (ancient Indian Sanskrit hymns). Savarkar highlights how the term "dates its antiquity from a period so remoter [sic]… that even mythology fails … to trace it to its source" (2021 [1923]: 6), "validated" by his assertion that the term existed before the times of the Babylonians and Egyptians (2021 [1923]: 4). Savarkar's etymological assessment of the term "Hindu" exposes his taxonomical anxiety, at that time, about the capacity of the term to define India's "Indigenous" Hindu population, articulating what *he* believed was an integral part of the Hindu identity and, therefore, Indian history.

Secondly, Savarkar argues that the "Mohammedans" – a term used to designate Muslims – were Hindus, with "an almost pure Hindu blood and parentage" but now cannot consider India their homeland "since their adoption of the new cult [Islam]" (2021 [1923]: 37). Savarkar's acknowledgement that the "Mohammedan … communities possess all the essential qualifications of Hindutva but one and that is that they do not look upon India as their Holyland" (2021 [1923]: 42) demonstrates his suspicion of Muslims not seeing India as their ancestral land (since Islam originated in the Middle East), presenting a problem not only for himself, but also for India and to Hindus. This religious bias towards the ousting of Muslims (notwithstanding a section in his book called "Foreign Invaders"!) is further evident through Savarkar's comparisons between Islam and two other Indian religions – Buddhism and Sikhism. Savarkar describes Islam as inferior to Buddhism in religion and language but claims that Buddhism's universally pacifistic nature was no match for Islamic strength, thereby stilting Buddhism's growth in India because of Islam's "fire and sword" mentality (2021 [1923]: 10). Savarkar notes that Sikhs, the adherents to Sikhism, *can* claim a right to India (2021 [1923]: 48) as they were close to his perceived convictions on Hindu/Indian identities. These comparisons allow Savarkar to champion a distance between the Indian religions and Islam, fashioning India's Muslim population as the "foreign invader".

Thirdly, Savarkar's epithets for Muslims are derogatory and inflammatory. Savarkar proclaims that Islam holds violent and war-like mentalities, which, in his mind, render the faith incompatible with India, especially since he believes the country had succumbed to Islam in the past (2021 [1923]: 19). Savarkar continues undermining the Muslim image by suggesting that calling somebody a "Muslim" was "worse than calling him a brute" (2021 [1923]: 26). He opines that Muslims have always been inclined towards "barbarous violence" by insinuating that non-violence (*ahimsa*) and spiritual brotherhood (the all-encompassing nature of spiritually including all faiths in India into one nationhood) could only weaken, and not quench, their violent propensity (2021 [1923]: 10). By positioning the Muslim subject as inherently vicious, Savarkar creates fear and anxiety towards India's Muslims, advancing his agenda of mass Hindu unity during times of communal and religious tensions.

Essentials of Hindutva offers numerous prejudicious ideals that expose Savarkar's disdain and revulsion towards Islam and Muslims, with his abhorrence becoming a shared trait alongside others who followed him and his racist thought, such as Keshav Baliram Hedgewar and Madhav Sadhashiv Golwalkar. Although Bill Drexel maintains that Golwalkar's influence over contemporaneous *Hindutva* rhetoric far obscures that of Savarkar's (2022: 62), and that there are similarities between *Essentials of Hindutva* and Golwalkar's *We, or Our Nationhood Defined* (1939), Savarkar remains pivotal in originating *Hindutva*'s initial bigotry, evidenced in the extensive academic literature on staunch Hindu nationalism.[10]

Savarkar's ideas, bleeding into later reformations by Hedgewar and Golwalkar, enabled *Hindutva*'s resurgence concurrent with my thesis' timeline of analysis. This overview of *Hindutva*'s genesis was deliberately brief, as each of this thesis' chapters will offer a contextualized understanding of *Hindutva* in relation to that chapter's main themes. In this way, my critique of *Hindutva* ideals can be thoroughly excavated during each chapter's respective investigations into Hindi cinema's representations of the Muslim figure.

[10] Please see: Bakhle, 2010; Krishan, 2013; Chaturvedi, 2010, 2013, 2020, 2022; Nandy, 2014; Khan et. al, 2017; Chakrabarty & Jha, 2019; Menon, 2021; Mishra, 2022; Visana, 2021, 2023.

III: THE MUSLIM 'OTHER' IN HINDI CINEMA

Within Hindi cinema literature, scholars have sought to understand Bollywood's cinematizing of the "Other," categorized by symbolically depicting certain individuals and communities as "outside" the dominant social fabric in India. This othering has been realized thanks to social and political avenues, buttressed by various Hindi film narratives that deal with national belonging and exclusion, and often parallelling nationalist and majoritarian ideologies. As Kalyani Chadha and Anandam P. Kavoori argue, Hindi cinema has "traditionally Othered minorities by representing them almost exclusively through stereotypes, reducing members of minority groups to a set of cultural, linguistic, or behavioural archetypes" (2008: 143).[11]

The othering of the Muslim subject has prevailed within popular Hindi cinema's contemporary history. Chadha and Kavoori posit that since, at least, the 1990s and the early-2000s, depictions of Muslims shifted from the previous iterations of sidekicks and marginal characters, achieving "a more substantive presence within the master narrative of Hindi cinema … [even although] … they were frequently cast in negative roles" (2008: 140).[12] Crucially for this thesis, Chadha and Kavoori highlight the shifting depictions of Muslims: from "exotic" portrayals (such as Hindi cinema's earlier depictions of Mughal histories), to "marginal" depictions (which saw Muslim characters pushed to the periphery in some Hindi films throughout the 1970s), to "demonized" characters, especially during the late-1990s/early-2000s, promoting the Muslim figure as "violent, evil, [and] driven by a visceral hatred of India and a single-minded desire to destroy it" (2008: 141).[13] This parallels the BJP's political and social rise since the early 1990s, which has since allowed *Hindutva* to promulgate the image of Indian Muslims as "the Other: [a] fanatical, backward, violent, and dirty … people whose existence would unite all Hindus through fear and hatred of the common enemy" (Murphy, 2015: 359). It is my assertion that the 1990s is immensely important in shifting the portrayals of the Muslim figure to depict certain *Hindutva* anxieties. As I contextualize the nefarious nexus between popular Hindi cinema and *Hindutva*, I will explore how the demolition of the Babri Masjid and the broad spectrum of Islamic terrorism, particularly in the wake of 9/11, have enabled *Hindutva* to further demonize the cinematic Muslim figure.

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[11] For othering based on caste, please see: Yengde, 2018; Chauhan, 2019; Edachira, 2020; Wankhede, 2023; Bunkar, 2024. For othering based on ethnicity, please see: Saxena, 2022. For othering based on gender, please see: Gairola, 2018; Zinck, 2019; Pal, et. al, 2021; Ray, 2023.

[12] For example, *Angaar* (*Fire,* Shahilal K. Nair, 1992) depicted the Khan family as ruthless criminals capable of murder, whilst *Shool* (Eshwar Nivas, 1999) portrayed several Muslim characters as corrupt police officers.

[13] Please also see: Ali, 2025.

IV: METHODOLOGY, SCOPE & LIMITATIONS

This research employs a textual and contextual analysis of four Hindi films to interrogate the intersections between *Hindutva* and the representation of the Muslim figure. The films – *Naseem, Zakhm*, *Sarfarosh*, and *Kurbaan* – were chosen deliberately: they span two distinct, yet interrelated historical moments that aided, to some extent, *Hindutva*'s political and social presence.

Naseem and *Zakhm* were produced and released following the 1992 demolition of the Babri Masjid, providing complementary perspectives on the demolition. Simultaneous with the films' exploration of right-wing nationalism and the climate surrounding the demolition, I argue that these two narratives typify how Hindi cinema offered narrative responses to an event that altered the political and religious fabric of India.

Sarfarosh and *Kurbaan* navigate the terrain of Islamic terrorism: while *Sarfarosh* contemplates lingering Partition trauma, aligning it with contemporary issues surrounding cross-border terrorism, *Kurbaan* focuses on a post-9/11 climate and the globality of Islamic terrorism. In both films, I assert that discourses surrounding Islamic terrorism collide with *Hindutva* anxieties, providing additional interpretations of the Muslim terroristic "Other".

Broadly, this thesis' methodological framework spotlights the nexus of popular Hindi cinema and *Hindutva* discourse. Throughout my analysis of the four films, I draw from a range of readings by scholars on Bollywood cinema, paying attention to how nationalism/national identity is framed, as well as the depictions of the Muslim subject. I employ a close textual analysis, examining not only the cinematic form (narrative, language, characterisation, aesthetics) but also the broader socio-historical context in which these films are produced. To do this, my contextualization largely focuses on the political and social discourses relating to life in India, particularly within the *Hindutva* climate from the 1990s. Collectively, I believe this methodology allows for an acute examination of these films as cinematic responses to *Hindutva* and its anti-Muslim rhetoric.

The scope of this study is necessarily circumscribed. In focusing only on four films, this research privileges depth over breadth. I avoid touching upon other cinematic traditions in India (regional cinemas, parallel cinema), nor will I focus on how these four films were received by audiences. The focus, rather, is the textual representation of the Muslim figure amid the climate of *Hindutva* and how Hindi cinema has enabled – or promoted – their representation.

V: ORIGINAL CONTRIBUTION TO KNOWLEDGE

Academic scholarship has examined the Muslim "Other" in Hindi cinema, the rise of *Hindutva* (politically and socially), and Hindi cinema's intersections with nationalism. This research contributes to existing studies by foregrounding two contexts: how *Hindutva*'s emergence in the 1990s shaped the cinematic depictions of Muslims; and how, following the special industry status granted by the Indian government to cinema in 1998,[14] depictions of the Muslim subject are intensified as a threat, particularly as *Hindutva*'s perceived utopian Hindu *Rashtra* ("nation") came to the fore. In analysing *Naseem*, *Zakhm*, *Sarfarosh*, and *Kurbaan* through a lens of a contemporary understanding of *Hindutva*, this research highlights new interpretations of Muslim representation in popular Hindi cinema. The thesis' contribution lies in foregrounding the shifting intersections between Bollywood's Muslim figure and right-wing Hindu nationalism, positioning these films as cultural texts that either critique or reflect and reinforce *Hindutva*-inflected anxieties. This contribution will be further articulated in this thesis' literature review.

[14] Please see: Mehta, 2005; Bose, 2009.

VI: CHAPTER BREAKDOWN

The next chapter, “The Literature Review”, documents the academic scrutiny surrounding the Muslim subject in Bollywood. The literature review will highlight the broad scholarship dedicated to Indian and Hindi cinema, before focusing on the scholarly attention to India’s economic liberalization and globalization, and their impact on Hindi cinema. I continue by noting studies that contextualize the themes of nationalism/national identity and political *Hindutva,* spotlighting their influence in and on Hindi cinema. Lastly, I will examine the research into the portrayals of Muslims in Bollywood, documenting the trends and developments and highlighting potential gaps in research, situating this thesis’ study within the current research’s topography.

Chapter two, “The Demolition of the Babri Masjid: An Escalation”, explores the cinematic narrativization of the Babri Masjid’s demolition. With the demolition signalling the cumulative hatred towards Islamic culture, this chapter will scrutinize how *Naseem* and *Zakhm* portray the disintegration of Hindu-Muslim communal relations. As *Naseem* and *Zakhm* depict a different perspective on the demolition (*Naseem* immediately before and *Zakhm* directly after), I will analyse these films to interrogate the socio-political tensions surrounding the demolition and, since both films appear to critique emerging Hindu nationalism, I explore how they portray the Muslim figure amid rising *Hindutva* anxieties. Moreover, I will discuss how certain themes employed in *Naseem* are escalated in *Zakhm*, parallelling the intensification of tensions towards and immediately after the Babri Masjid’s demolition, culminating in widespread Hindu-Muslim violence.

The third chapter, “Bollywood, *Hindutva* and Islamic Terrorism”, investigates Bollywood’s response to cross-border terrorism *and* global Islamic terrorism. Split into two sections, this chapter first examines Hindi cinema’s response to cross-border terrorism: the relationship between India and its Muslim neighbour, Pakistan, and how *Hindutva* prejudices stem from cross-border and internal threats, culminating in an examination of *Sarfarosh*. The second half deals with global Islamic terrorism, focusing on Hindi cinema’s interest in global Islamic terrorism following the September 11th, 2001 terrorist attacks, building up to an assessment of *Kurbaan*. Ultimately, this chapter discusses Bollywood’s cinematization of Islamic extremism through terrorism-themed narratives, and how they support *Hindutva* anxieties surrounding Islam and Muslims.

VII: SIGNIFICANCE AND RATIONALE

This research's significance lies in re-examining these four Hindi film texts through a contemporary understanding of *Hindutva.* While scholars have studied the Muslim "Other" in Hindi cinema, political *Hindutva* and the relationship between *Hindutva* and Bollywood, this thesis' objective is to chart *how* the Muslim figure is fashioned and how these four Hindi film texts illuminate *Hindutva* anxieties within the narratives and the depictions of the Muslim figure across different political and social moments.

LITERATURE REVIEW

South Asian cinema has been well examined within Film Studies scholarship,[15] with Indian cinema – comprising of popular Hindi cinema, known as Bollywood, and India's other regional- and language-based cinemas – dominating examinations into South Asian media industries.[16]

This review first surveys the origins of popular Hindi cinema scholarship, before focusing on the literature surrounding Hindi cinema's framing of Hindu identity and Hindu nationalism. I will pay particular attention to India's economic liberalization and globalization – two economic transformations that, in my estimation, highlight the existential themes of national identity and nationalism in Bollywood. Following an understanding of national identity and nationalism in Bollywood, I analyse the politicization of *Hindutva*, discussing how the literature spotlights political *Hindutva*'s influence on India's media assemblages. Lastly, and importantly, I survey literature on popular Hindi cinema's depictions of the Muslim figure. It is here that I will position this research within the current literature's topography.

[15] Please see: Gillespie, 1995; Prasad, 1998; Dwyer and Pinney, 2001; Virdi, 2003.
[16] Please see: Chaudhuri, 2005; Kurian, 2012.

I: INDIAN & HINDI CINEMA SCHOLARSHIP

Despite earlier scholarship from Panna Shah (1950) and Subrahmanyam Krishnaswamy and Erik Barnouw (1963), contentions persist as to the origins of Indian cinema as a topic of study within Film Studies academia. M. Madhava Prasad states that it was the 1980s when Film Studies began to pay attention to Indian cinema's cultural significance (1998: vii). Prasad criticises how earlier literature focused on the works of Indian film directors, like Satyajit Ray or Ritwik Ghatak (1998: 14-15), which attracted academics from disciplines such as anthropology and Indology, detracting from a focus on Hindi film texts. Although this speaks to the influence of India's cinematic traditions through different disciplinary frameworks,[17] it alludes to the relative prematurity and recency of Indian cinema in film scholarship. Furthermore, Tejaswini Ganti notes that the term "Bollywood" was first used to denote popular Hindi cinema as early as the late-1970s (2013: 2), substantiating Bollywood's emergence as a distinct and recent phenomenon in Indian cinema history.

Following Hindi cinema's new protologism, Prasad cites Ashish Rajadhyaksha (1986, 1987, 1993) and Ravi Vasudevan (1989, 1991) as having built momentum towards the academic examinations of Indian cinema (1998: i). Additionally, Ashis Nandy (1981) and Rosie Thomas (1985) also present acute interrogations of *Hindi* cinema, rather than *Indian* cinema in the 1980s.[18] Collectively, I argue that these scholars, and their individual focus on various components of Hindi cinema, mark some of the earliest serious examinations of *Hindi* cinema rather than *Indian* cinema, laying additional academic groundwork for Hindi cinema's recognition within Film Studies.

Following this critical expansion into popular Hindi cinema, Prasad's *Ideology of the Hindi Film* (1998) provides a vital development of the topic. Despite Prasad's claim that his interrogation looks at Hindi cinema "at the most general" levels of political, economic, historical, and cultural contexts (1998: 14), Prasad's astute focus on the ideological, economical, and political connections embedded within Hindi film texts is, while influential,

[17] Such as Mishra, 1985, 1988.

[18] Nandy highlights three core themes in Hindi cinema: the rules of spectacle, the images of women, and the interface between Indian society and Western intrusions, arguing that they form an "internally consistent meaning system" that positions Hindi cinema as a "necessary new folk medium" for Indian culture (1981: 96). Thomas highlights the academic negligence of Hindi film texts, noting the "arrogant silence" around the UK broadcast of *Amar Akbar Anthony* (1977) in 1980 (1985: 117), before spotlighting that applying Western genre classifications to Hindi films may distort the nuance of the Hindi film text should they be categorized by their "musical", "comedy" or melodramatic film elements (1985: 120). In my estimation, their respective analysis ought to be considered as early examples of complex Hindi cinema analysis within Hindi cinema academia.

complicated to follow. Scholars have noted Prasad's lack of criterion of his film selection for analysis,[19] or that the historical grounding of ideology within filmmaking practices could be further investigated.[20] Nevertheless, Prasad's book is of immense importance not only to investigations that have developed from his findings,[21] but also to this thesis by substantiating that Hindi film texts *can* invite political, economic, social and historical analysis.

At the turn of the millennium, the academic literature began to spotlight an interest in pre- and post-Partition Indian cinema, re-examined in light of contemporary contexts, including nationalism and politics (I will examine these later in this chapter).[22] This re-historizing led scholars, like Rachel Dwyer, to opine that Hindi cinema has become important in fashioning India's national culture (2014: 21). These texts not only permit Hindi cinema to be considered the closest to being India's "national cinema",[23] but also highlight the several "eras" of Bollywood.[24] This notion regarding Bollywood's "eras" suggests that India's ever-evolving economic and political arenas have created distinguishable Bollywood "timelines", separated by, for example, societal changes like national identity, or economic transformations. This is important because my research begins from the era of India's economic liberalization, coinciding with the emergence of *Hindutva*'s social popularity as a political movement in the early-1990s, culminating in the Babri Masjid's demolition in 1992 by Hindu supremacists.

[19] Please see: Virdi, 2000
[20] Please see: Vasudevan, 1999.
[21] Please see: Rajadhyaksha, 1998; Srinivas, 2002, 2017; Vasudevan, 2011.
[22] Please see: Thomas, 1985, 2014; Chakravarty, 1993; Vasudevan, 1996; Bhaumik, 2001, 2004; Kumar, 2013; Chatterjee, 2014.
[23] Please see: Dwyer & Patel, 2002; Gooptu, 2011; Raghavendra, 2013; Pinto & Somashekar, 2023.
[24] Please see: Bhattacharya, 2013; Ganti, 2013; Schaefer & Karan, 2013; Dwyer, 2014; Kumar, 2015; Wiel, 2019.

II: ECONOMIC LIBERALIZATION & GLOBALIZATION

India's economic liberalization and the subsequent globalization, particularly of Bollywood, is of immense importance for this research for several reasons. Beginning in 1991, Katrin Uba asserts that India's economic liberalization came to fruition through the then Congress Party-led government's initialization of the "New Economic Policy", a policy set to re-organise the public debt and funnel money from overseas to fight India's budget deficit (2008: 863).[25] This liberalization is regarded as being instrumental in expanding India's media landscape,[26] with academics dissecting how the Indian State oversaw India's televisual media, particularly its promotion of India's only state-run television channel, Doordarshan.[27] Arvind Rajagopal notes that television in India gave "rise to [the] prominence of mass-mediated images as a centralised locus of social and political discourse" (1994: 1659), arguing that India's economic liberalization can be contextualised under the reception of Ramanand Sagar's serial, *Ramayan* (1987-1989), based on *Ramayana,* an ancient Hindu epic. Rajagopal claims that India's economic liberalization, consumerism and "Hinduisation" reinforced one another to create "new spaces into which communal discourses inserted [themselves into the public conscious] … indexed by … national television" (1994: 1659). To further this argument, Purnima Mankekar and Varsha Singh posit two findings that offer an unsettling thought: while Mankekar adds that India's economic liberalization eased the acquisition of the colour television, capturing the audience's attention which the Indian State could now manipulate (1999: 60), Singh proffers how India's post-liberalization allowed for "new avatars of the gods" (2022: 210) to develop through *Ramayan* and another serial, B. R. Chopra's *Mahabharat* (1988-1990), based on the *Mahabharata,* another ancient Hindu epic. As I will argue later, politics, parallel to this, aided this emergent pro-Hindu iconography in television during and immediately following this economic liberalization, emphasised through these two television programmes.

Prior to India's economic liberalization, Rajiv Gandhi, a member of the secularist Indian Congress political party, became India's Prime Minister following the assassination of his mother, the then-Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, by her Sikh bodyguards, in 1984. Christine Brosius points out that Rajiv Gandhi attempted to commodify and appropriate Hindu thought into politics by masquerading it as "national integration" (2002: 272) during the

[25] For more analysis of India's economic liberalization and its reforms, please see: Byres, 1998; Pedersen, 2000; Garikipati & Pfaffenzeller, 2012.
[26] Please see: Mathai, 2015; Athique, 2016; Hong, 2021.
[27] Please see: Mankekar, 1999; Rajagopal, 2001; Kaur & Mazzarella, 2009.

subsequent unrest between Hindus and Sikhs following his mother's assassination. Coincidentally, Doordarshan televised *Ramayan* during this time. According to Mankekar, *Ramayan* "participated in the creation of exclusionary discourses of identity and belonging" (1999: 221) – and Mankekar is not alone in this attestation.[28] Hindu nationalist political groups, such as the BJP, later abused the iconography of *Ramayan* and, to a lesser extent, *Mahabharat,* to penetrate the Hindu public consciousness by fashioning a new narrative of Hindu nationalism within their political ethos. I assert that this televisual, political, and economic moment in India's history directly expedited the intersection of politics, religion, and national identity in India, which spread towards India's Hindu-majority population. With scholars considering television's link to cinema as audio-visual formats reconstructing India's historical past,[29] there is no doubt that India's economic liberalization had significant implications for politics, nationalism, television, and, as I will argue, Hindi cinema.

Adrian Athique claims India's post-liberalization economy realigned India's cinematic viewing experience through multiplexes (cinema compounds of multiple screens), as well as television schedules, telecommunications, and fashion advertisements (2016: 70). Because of India's economic liberalization and the subsequent capital inflow, cinema-going in India radically changed, and the multiplex format was responsible for this, evidenced within the academic literature on its importance to the cinema phenomenon.[30]

With the emergence of multiplexes and the public now conscious of *Hindutva*'s brand of Hindu nationalism in post-liberalization India, Hindi cinema underwent changes in the structuring of Hindi film storytelling. David Schaefer and Kavita Karan argue that India's economic liberalization altered Hindi film narratives, particularly in how post-liberalization Hindi cinema displayed Western and Eastern identity markers. Their assessment finds post-liberalization *increases* in Western and modern content and *decreases* in Eastern/Indian "visible" formulations, such as the sari (traditional Indian clothing for women) or religious observations (2010: 313), but does not acknowledge the link between Western influences and the "muscularity" of *Hindutva* and Hindu male bodies, a link later investigated.[31] Meraj Ahmad Mubarki asserts that previous articulations of the Hindu body, in pre-

[28] Please see: Pollock, 1993; Rajagopal, 1994; Richman, 1995; Brosius, 2002; Mishra, 2002; Desai, 2004; Oza, 2006; Lodhia, 2015; Sengupta, 2017; Udupa, 2018; Ranjan, 2019; Deshmukh, 2021; Rezavi, 2022; Singh, 2022; Power & Paynter, 2023.
[29] Please see: Chakravarti, 1998.
[30] Please see: Athique & Douglas, 2007, 2013, 2014; Rao, 2007; Desai, 2013; Ganti, 2013; Kumar, 2013; Devasundaram, 2014; Kapse, 2015; Sahu, 2018; Chatterjee, 2018; Mukherjee, 2021.
[31] Please see: Mubarki, 2020; Paunksnis, 2023.

liberalization India, were ridiculed and downplayed, dehumanized even, due to their non-conformity with Western masculinity (2020: 227).

This non-conformity accelerated a 'masculine crisis' within the grassroots of Indian society. Following India's economic liberalization, which saw the Indian workforce accommodate women more openly, men became obsessed with traditional muscularity, seen as the last surviving remnants of cultural masculinity (Mubarki, 2020: 240). Mubarki furthers this by suggesting that the psyche of the Indian male as the "breadwinner" became challenged by India's female workforce, with men initiating a mark of difference between the genders through, amongst other contexts, hyper-sexuality, and hyper-masculinity (2020: 240). Simultaneously, Hindi cinema enabled the Hindu male body to undergo a cinematic metamorphosis as a reflection of this male attitude, aligning "the male body with American aesthetics" which allowed *Hindutva* to politicise it, presenting a trans-global transfiguration of the Hindu male body (Mubarki, 2020: 239-240).[32] As such, the multiplex format enabled this new transfiguration to reach a mass cinema-going audience, further advancing *Hindutva* muscularity through the new image of the Hindu male in Hindi cinema. Contextualizing *Hindutva* muscularity is significant to this research, and I will return to this later in this review chapter and in Chapter Three of this thesis.

The scholarly spectrum grappling with the effects of India's economic liberalization on India's media industry, and particularly on Indian cinema is sizeable, ranging in topic from a focus on the introduction of satellite and cable television,[33] film censorship,[34] and film spectatorship,[35] to the cinematic interpretations of women[36] and Muslims.[37] Throughout my readings of the connections between India's economic liberalization and *Hindutva*-centred ideals, which have been investigated through various contexts,[38] the term "global" emerges frequently, pointing to India's economic liberalization as an apt precursor to the globalization of Indian culture and, importantly, of Bollywood.

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[32] Mubarki cites *Hey Ram* (Kamal Haasan, 2000), *Mangal Pandey: The Rising* (Ketan Mehta, 2005) and *Jodhaa Akbar* (Ashutosh Gowariker, 2008) as prime examples of Hindi cinema's displays of overt muscularity following India's liberalization during the 1990s. For more, please see: Mubarki, 2020.
[33] Please see: Paunksnis & Paunksnis, 2023.
[34] Please see: Mazzarella, 2013; Bhowmik, 2013.
[35] Please see: Rajadhyaksha, 2000; Vasudevan, 2011.
[36] Please see: Oza, 2006.
[37] Please see: Islam, 2019.
[38] Please see: Sinha, 1995; Murty, 2009; Sen, 2011; Sud, 2012; Roy, 2020; Paunksnis, 2023; Ray, 2023.

Bollywood's globalization is inherently linked to its transnational qualities,[39] which, I argue, was immensely aided by the advancement of Indian television. Mankekar asserts that Rupert Murdoch, an Australian-American media magnate, and his acquisition of Star TV in July 1993, provided India's media industry its global ascendancy. Following his acquisition, Murdoch purchased a nearly fifty percent stake in Asia Today Limited (ATL), the broadcaster for Zee TV (1999: 345), allowing Zee TV to access Murdoch's media connections in the United Kingdom, Europe, and North America (1999: 356). With Murdoch's influence in enabling the globalization of India's media industry being thoroughly documented,[40] Daya Kishan Thussu asserts that Murdoch's television channels in India became popular through the localization of global genres, presented in transnational networks like the BBC or MTV, with MTV furthering their transnationality through the creation of MTV Desi (2007: 269).[41] This "localization of global genres" enabled Murdoch's Indian television channels to promote a "*desi* globalization", tapping into the overseas Indian diaspora – a consequence of India's economic liberalization – known as the "Non-Resident Indian" (NRI). The NRI, and the context surrounding it, is important for this thesis as the NRI becomes a figure of a globalized Indian identity, one that taps into the notion of an Indian collective which, I argue, enables a clear dichotomy between Hindu and Muslim sensibilities.

Television is not the only medium to tap into the globalized NRI diaspora. Rini Bhattacharya Mehta claims that *Dilwale Dulhaniya Le Jayenge* (*The True Heart Will Win the Bride,* Aditya Chopra, 1995, hereafter *DDLJ*), a Bollywood blockbuster, addressed the NRI's position narratively by foregrounding the NRI as an important national subject, discarding previous peripheral margins that the NRI occupied (2010: 1).[42] Academics, before and after Mehta, have attributed *DDLJ* with substantiating the NRI's cultural significance, either through the NRI as an overseas Bollywood consumer, through *DDLJ*'s colossal popularity and box-office success, or within *DDLJ*'s narrative.[43] Essentially, *DDLJ* projected Indian culture and traditions through its narrative, and with the NRI's new framing, *DDLJ* facilitated the beginnings of popular Hindi cinema's global spread.

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[39] Please see: Durovičová & Newman, 2010; O'Neill, 2013; Smith, 2017; Virdi, 2017; Rawle, 2018; Yang et. al, 2020; Mitra, 2021.

[40] Please see: Deal, 1996; Weissberg, 2010; Thussu, 2007, 2016.

[41] In Hindi, "desi" translates to "of the country".

[42] Véronique Bénéï asserts that JAIN TV (Joint American Indian Network) was "launched in 1995 with the aim of broadcasting religious programmes via satellite to India" and was "funded by Indian residents in North America and it counts some prominent BJP leaders as members of its Administrative Board" (Bénéï, 1998: 122). Interestingly, this appears to coincide with the 1995 release of *DDLJ* – a symbolic link between Hindu nationalist dogma and India's audit-visual industries.

[43] Please see: Uberoi, 1998; Kavoori & Punathambekar, 2008; Rajadhyaksha, 2008; Takhar et. al, 2012; Thussu, 2012; O'Neill, 2013; Punathambekar, 2013; Neumann, 2014; Chatterjee, 2022.

Scholarship on Bollywood's globalization extends beyond *DDLJ* as a Bollywood blockbuster. Some have scrutinized the popularity of *DDLJ*'s superstar actor, Shah Rukh Khan (hereafter SRK),[44] while others have examined Bollywood as an "elitist" cinema, speaking to the middle-class NRI by re-arranging narrative styles and structures to appeal to the globalized Indian mass market, which *DDLJ* accomplished.[45] Ashvin Devasundaram opines that the multiplex format (which I discussed earlier) presented a "new economic ascendancy, and the burgeoning rise of an aspirational, *nouveau riche* Indian middle class … [with] … opportunities to capitalise on the biggest film industry in the world [Bollywood]" (2014: 111). Shakuntala Rao furthers this narrative by asserting that Bollywood producers, like Yash Chopra, opened production offices overseas due to Bollywood's popularity, allowing what Sandhya Shukla calls "interpenetrating globalism" (2003: 1) – the idea that films can be made "about Indians who live abroad, and whose lives … will appeal to Indians living both in and outside of India" (Rao, 2007: 67).[46] In this aspect, Bollywood's globalization allows for new images of the Indian imagination to traverse global boundaries, and as Bollywood's global appeal soared, so too did the topic within academia.[47] For this thesis, I argue that Bollywood engages with *globalizing* India's *national* apprehension towards its Muslim population to a substantial Indian diaspora, creating a global Hindu anxiety about Muslims, particularly around terrorism (which I will discuss later in this chapter).

With Bollywood reaching unprecedented levels of popularity and global exposure, Ashish Rajadhyaksha (2003) coined a neologism for Bollywood's national and global dominating presence – "Bollywoodization". This term alludes to popular Hindi cinema's sovereignty over India's media industries with prototypical "Bollywood" tropes, creating a "cultural nationalism" which eclipses India's other regional- and language-based cinemas and wider media culture. Rajadhyaksha asserts that Bollywood is "seen as a more diffuse cultural conglomeration involving a range of distribution and consumption activities" (2003: 27), arguing that Bollywood significantly influenced the creation of India's cultural industry. Acknowledging Rajadhyaksha's revered analysis, Keval Kumar notes that "few film scholars [have] set out very clearly what the various elements of this phenomenon are" (2014: 280); I disagree. If the "Bollywoodization" of Hindi cinema can be categorized as an "era" between 1991 and 2007 (Schaefer & Karan, 2011: 713), then I attest to Kumar's point that the term "Bollywoodization" is remiss in the

[44] Please see: Gopinath, 2018; Misra, 2022; Kabir, 2023.
[45] Please see: Rao, 2007; Desai, 2013.
[46] Please see: Bénéï, 1998.
[47] Please see: Kavoori & Punathambekar, 2008; Trivedi, 2008; Kaur & Sinha, 2005; Nanjangud & Reijnders, 2022.

literature pre-Rajadhyaksha, despite Bollywood's popularity years before Rajadhyaksha's analysis. But I oppose Kumar's note that scholars have not clearly presented the contours of "Bollywoodization". Shanti Kumar not only pays due diligence to Rajadhyaksha's article but also posits a "post-'Bollywoodization'" context, providing a framework to understand the complexity between the "traditional distinctions such as Hindi language (national), regional language (sub-national) and English language (supra-national)" media in India (2022: 77). This speaks to a scholarly approach that critically engages with the future of the "Bollywoodization" of cultural media in India (and globally). As it has been applied to foreign policy previously,[48] the academic analysis of the "Bollywoodization" of India's cultural media is evident, investigated, and open to future interpretations. Understanding the definition of "Bollywoodization" is imperative to my thesis as my interrogation scrutinizes not only Bollywood's transfigurations of the Muslim image, but also how the images are typified through prototypical Bollywood tropes that enable a "globalization" of pro-Hindu, anti-Muslim imagery, a notion touched upon by others.[49]

India's globalization of its economy, as well as the subsequent "Bollywoodization" of Hindi cinema, fostered a "global Indianness" (Rao, 2007: 66): an internationally united Indian identity presenting the allure of the Indian "motherland" to a global community. Geetanjali Gangoli argues that the 1990s presented the creation of an emergent Indian identity amidst cultural globality, presented through Hindi cinema protagonists' displays of emotional and romantic dispositions that render notions of class, caste, religion, and country inconsequential (2005: 157); but I posit a different angle. My assertion is that tangential to the globality of Bollywood and the Indian identity through the NRI, issues relating to nationalism became fevered during the 1990s amidst the ascension of political *Hindutva* and religious tensions between Hindus and Muslims, especially relating to the Babri Masjid's demolition in 1992 and subsequent cross-border tensions, including terrorism, in the late-1990s. I argue that these were highlighted through the cinematic themes of nationalism and national identity,[50] and this narrativizing of nationalistic ideals permits a contextualization of an emergent Indian/Hindu nationalism in Hindi cinema.

The academic literature on Hindi cinema has underlined how India's economic liberalization and Bollywood's globalization, as well as the expansion of India's media industry, India's global diaspora, and the rise of *Hindutva*, have presented themes of nationalism/national identity and politics in Hindi film texts to domestic and international audiences. Collectively, these contexts offer a cogent foundation for structuring *Hindutva*'s cinematic

[48] Please see: Rasul & Mukhtar, 2015.
[49] Please see: Banerjee et. al, 2021.
[50] Other scholars, such as Banerjee et. al, 2021, also note similar trajectories.

presence, encouraging me to examine Hindi cinema's response to the burgeoning rise of Hindu nationalism, and how it may affect the cinematic interpretation of the Muslim subject.

III: THEMES: NATIONALISM/NATIONAL IDENTITY & POLITICAL *HINDUTVA*

For this thesis, I will focus on two themes which, I assert, provide a potential genesis towards interpreting Hindi cinema's Muslim figure: nationalism and ideas around national identity; and politics; specifically, the rise of political *Hindutva*. As these themes appear simultaneously in Hindi cinema, there is a degree of overlap, but I will attempt to separate the two, albeit acknowledging their link.

III-I: NATIONALISM & NATIONAL IDENTITY

Discussions of nationalism and national identity in India have proven eruptive and dynamic. The region's religious and spiritual traditions, alongside the turbulent political atmosphere, are widely considered in all areas of Indian cinema discourse, with Shoba Sharad Rajgopal suggesting that depictions of nationalism have become "a *fait accompli*, making it appear normative to have nationalism as the new *zeitgeist* of the postcolonial nation-state" in Hindi film narratives (2011: 21). As mentioned earlier, *Ramayan* provided the perfect visual terrain to re-negotiate what it meant to be Hindu in India, offering, alongside *Mahabharat* (to a lesser extent), a "visuality" to *Hindutva*'s nationalist rhetoric. These serials are widely considered influential in bridging India's media and political landscapes.[51] But, as this thesis is concerned with Hindi film texts, I will centre on the literature's interrogations of nationalism and/or national identity in Hindi cinema, particularly from the 1990s onwards, reflecting this thesis' time period of film analysis which coincides with *Hindutva*'s political emergence and social popularity.

Tejaswini Niranjana's article (1994) is important within Hindi cinema academia for two reasons: Niranjana's rigorous analysis of *Roja* (*Rose,* Mani Ratnam, 1992) through political and social lenses, and Niranjana's contextualization of *Hindutva*. Niranjana asserts that several Mani Ratnam films (such as *Geethanjali* [1989] and *Mouna Ragam* [*Silent Symphony,* 1986]) cultivated a middle-class audience that accustomed themselves into "the spaces of nation and secularism premised on *Hindutva*" (1994: 79). Niranjana claims that the *Hindutva* climate was able to penetrate the discourses of liberal humanism in India, forcing two notions: to re-configure and re-construct nationalist projects and the secular subject, respectively. This allowed clear identity markers to now place the Hindu figure as "secular", subsequently demarcating the "communal Muslim" through exclusionary practices (1994: 79-80). The effect this had on Hindi cinema stems from how the new middle-class Indian claims India within this new social space, and, as Niranjana points out, is played directly into the agendas pushed by *Hindutva* through the complex configurations of "mainstream" and non-exceptional characters (1994: 80). Consequently, Niranjana's interrogation of *Roja*'s political and social commentary highlights how Roja (Madhoo), the film's eponymous protagonist, simultaneously embodies "modernity" and "tradition" as a new secular-marked "Indian" identity within the contours of *Hindutva* nationalism, transcending communal boundaries (1994: 81). Niranjana's article spotlights Hindu nationalism in a Hindi film text and should be regarded as an origin point of

[51] Please see: Pollock, 1993; Rajagopal, 1994; Sarkar, 1997; Mankekar, 1999; Brosius, 2002; Mishra, 2002; Ray, 2003; Lodhia, 2015; Sengupta, 2017, 2020; Udupa, 2018; Ranjan, 2019; Deshmukh, 2021; Singh, 2022; Power & Paynter, 2023.

Hindutva's presence within Hindi cinema academia, especially since the article itself led to a debate which strengthened Ravi Vasudevan's argument that film can now be approached as a contemporary political record (2000: 2). Akshaya Kumar argues this further by suggesting that the debate enabled M. Madhava Prasad (1998) to examine the political, economic, historical, and cultural theoretical contexts within Hindi films (Kumar, 2015: 21), showcasing the influence Niranjana's article has not only in terms of my thesis' subject area, but also on contemporary Indian Film Studies scholarship as a whole.[52]

Broadly speaking, the attention to nationalism in Indian and Hindi cinema remain abundant within film studies literature,[53] and is contextualised within examinations on, for example, Chennai's Tamil cinema, known as Kollywood;[54] and in investigations of cinematic depictions, or the historic ideals of, Indian revolutionaries like Mahatma Gandhi and Bhagat Singh.[55] While interrogations of India's relationships with casteism, gender, or sexual identity, and their presence in Kerala's Malayalam cinema largely relate to the politics of identity,[56] which, I would argue, become proxy to nationalist agendas, there has been an academic boom in studying queer and sexual identities and transgenderism in Indian cinema within the last decade.[57] Nevertheless, masculinity remains a prominent focus in Hindi cinema, with Rosie Thomas arguing that depictions of unsavoury masculine qualities began to surface during the early-1990s through nationalism (2014: 274-275).[58] Parallel to these problematic masculine formations in Hindi cinema, *Hindutva* began its resurgence in the early-1990s. However, masculinity and nationalism appear earlier within the Hindi cinema timeline.

Amitabh Bachchan's "angry young man" character – a masculine character contextualized through nationalism that directly challenged the status-quo of India's economic, political, and social reforms during the 1970s – is important due to its symbolism surrounding several social contexts including nationalism,[59] with scholars further examining Indian cinema's portrayals of problematic masculinity before, during or after the 1990s

[52] Please also see: Chakravarti, 1998.
[53] Please see: Chakravarty, 1993; Bhaskar, 1998; Guneratne, 1998; Deshpande, 2007; Rajgopal, 2011.
[54] Please see: Ravi, 2008; Nakassis, 2015; Kailasam, 2017.
[55] Please see: Nandy, 2007; Srivastava, 2009; Dwyer, 2011; Elam, 2017.
[56] Please see: Radhakrishnan, 2007; Venkatesan & James, 2017; Kuriakose, 2020.
[57] Please see: Dasgupta, 2012, 2017; Singh, 2015; Dasgupta, et. al, 2016; Chatterjee, 2021; Kuriakose, 2022; Paunksnis & Paunksnis, 2023.
[58] Scholars have recognised how nationalism and masculinity in India are intrinsically tied to one another. For more, please see: Balaji & Hughson, 2014; Enloe, 2014; Pande, 2017; Jha, 2022.
[59] Please see: Prasad, 1998; Mazumdar, 2000; Dwyer & Patel, 2002; Liang, 2005; Rai, 2006; Lal, 2010; Rajamani, 2012; Chattopadhyay, 2013; Mitra, 2020; Chakraborty, 2023; Ray, 2023.

as a result of Bachchan's portrayal(s).[60] Considering the character's figurative importance, Leela Fernandes points out that India's economic liberalization in the early-1990s reimagined India through signs and symbols (2006: 40),[61] shifting the burgeoning middle-class Indian's focus from, as Sreya Mitra asserts, "collective goals to individual aspirations" (2020: 64). Consequently, Bachchan's "angry young man" protagonist now does *not* symbolize the grievances felt by Indians towards India's economic, social, and political atmospheres, rendering Bachchan's character obsolete (2020: 65). With the character now superannuated, nationalism could not be symbolized within the confines of one cinematic character. For this reason, Tejaswini Ganti moves away from specific depictions of any individual character to suggest another way in which a collective Indian nationalism is portrayed in Hindi cinema during the 1990s.

Ganti claims that nationalism, as a theme, intensified in Hindi film narratives throughout the 1990s in two ways: the globalizing of Indian nationalism through the NRI (2013: 45) – a topic extensively investigated under the contexts of nationalism and the globality of an Indian identity[62] – and the shift away from earlier perceptions of the West as inferior against the supreme prisms of culture, morality, and spirituality of India (2013: 44). Simultaneously, Ganti highlights how Hindi films began to depict a villainous terrorist figure (2013: 44), portrayed in Hindi cinema's terrorist-based narratives, which saw an upsurge in their cinematic visuality throughout the 1990s, but particularly in the late-1990s/early-2000s. I argue that the Muslim subject, within these terrorism contexts, became the new enemy of India, particularly in Partition narratives.

Partition narratives – stories which focus on the violent separation of India and the creation of Pakistan in 1947 – have been well established in South Asian and Indian cinema literature.[63] Ganti (2013) and Dwyer (2014) opine that Bollywood narratives shifted to present Pakistan, particularly in contexts relating to nationalism, around 1997, with films like *Border* (J. P. Dutta, 1997) explicitly naming Pakistan within the narrative's dialogue, something which was previously hidden in Hindi films through discreet "over there" or "the enemy" synonyms

[60] Please see: Singh, 2006; Murty, 2009; Banerjee, 2012; Srour, 2013; Dasgupta & Gokulsing, 2014; Kuldova, 2014; Shandilya, 2014; Shailo, 2018; Gopinath, 2018; Mubarki, 2020; Viswamohan & Chaudhuri, 2020; Jha, 2022; Paunksnis, 2023; Paunksnis & Paunksnis, 2023.
[61] Please also see: Chakravarti, 1998.
[62] Please see: Punathambekar, 2005; Sinha, 2012; Joshi, 2013; Kishore, et. al, 2014.
[63] Please see: Brown, 2007; Daiya, 2008; Kabir, 2009, 2010; Murty, 2009; Raychaudhuri, 2009; Asrar, 2010; Menon, 2013; Chowdhury, 2015; Mubarki, 2017, 2020; Chandra, 2018; Lal, 2018; Gairola, 2019; Siddique, 2019.

(Ganti, 2013: 45). Dwyer suggests that Hindi films proactively began to depict military unrest between India and Pakistan in relation to Kashmir (2014: 56-57), fuelling nationalistic ideas, a notion I agree with.

Partition narratives, and anxieties relating to Partition, offer an interesting point of departure to present *Hindutva* nationalism, allowing Hindi films to overtly narrate *Hindutva* sentiments which contrast with *Hindutva*'s "hidden" appearances in earlier films like *Naseem* or *Zakhm,* whereby the Hindu-right are depicted, but no synonymous terminology is used within their narrative's respective dialogue.[64] As Kavita Daiya notes, this allowed popular Hindi cinema to explore a utopian nationalism separate from Pakistan (2008: 150), with the literature now focusing on the intensity of anti-Pakistan sentiments and Indian valour.[65] The cinematic visuality of India's warring with Pakistan enables scholars to identify these narratives as expressions of *Hindutva,* specifying extreme Hindu nationalism.

While academics have documented how Bollywood has narrativized overseas atrocities, such as 9/11,[66] Hindi cinema's terrorism narratives largely draw upon the cinematic creation of an entity which places India in the grips of an existential and national crisis.[67] Varyingly, these examinations discuss how Hindi cinema pits India against neighbouring, Muslim-majority Pakistan through several narrative themes which reflect real-life conflicts, including the 1947 Partition of India, the dispute over the region of Kashmir, and cross-border terrorism. In my estimation, this not only promotes Indian and Hindu nationalism, but also provides the ideal conditions to produce unsavoury images of the Muslim subject, both nationally (in films that deal with national Indian angst towards Islamic terrorism), or globally (in Hindi-language films that deal with global Islamic terrorism).

[64] Please see this thesis' chapter two, titled "The Demolition of the Babri Masjid: An Escalation", which focuses on how these two films depict the emergence of Hindu nationalist rhetoric amidst bubbling Hindu-Muslim communal tensions before and immediately after the demolition of the Babri Masjid and its affects on the cinematic Muslim subject.
[65] Please see: Hirji, 2008; Kabir, 2009; Khan & Bokhari, 2011; Devadas, 2013; Khatun, 2016; Zafar & Amjad, 2018; San Chirico, 2020; Kumar & Raghuvanshi, 2023.
[66] Please see: Al-Rawi, 2014; Misri, 2018.
[67] Please see: Fazila-Yacoobali, 2002; Daiya, 2008; Juluri, 2008; Kavoori & Chadha, 2008; Kumar, 2008; Raj, 2008; Sharma, 2008; Richter, 2009; Mazumdar, 2011; Gabriel & Vijayan, 2012; Kumar, 2013; Clini, 2015; Molaei & Babaei, 2020; Niyaz Ahmad, 2021; Raj & Suresh, 2023.

III-II: POLITICAL HINDUTVA

Simultaneous to the academic literature's focus on nationalism and national identity in Bollywood, contexts surrounding politics have also appeared.[68] *Hindutva*'s politicisation was immensely strengthened through audio-visual media, entering popular Indian cinema via television, which allowed Hindu nationalist political groups like the BJP to pierce the Hindu consciousness through the televising of *Ramayan* and, to a lesser extent, *Mahabharat*.[69] While some studies on popular Hindi cinema have neglected to highlight potential links between Bollywood and political *Hindutva*,[70] Jigna Desai (2004) and Sikata Banerjee et. al (2021) acknowledge *Hindutva* in their respective interrogations. Banerjee et. al underlines the cultural milieu of Hindu nationalist valour in Hindi cinema (2021: 1), claiming that *Hindutva,* used as a thematic narrative device, does not sit at the periphery of thematic construction (2021: 2). The article sheds light on several contexts relating to Hindu nationalism in Hindi cinema, including Hindi cinema's link to *Hindutva* politics (particularly in the Narendra Modi-era of Indian governance),[71] globalization (including Indian and Muslim diasporas), and, of course, the othering of the Muslim figure because of the political and social implications of Hindu nationalism. Banerjee et. al's analysis is compelling, but Desai proffers a focused, engaging, and comprehensive examination of what could be the beginning of political *Hindutva*'s interventions in Bollywood, particularly around censorship.

Through feminist and queer culture perspectives, Desai notes that *Fire* (Deepa Mehta, 1996) – a transnational Indian-Canadian production narrativizing a lesbian couple (played by Shabana Azmi and Nandita Das) – elicited negative responses from liberals and *Hindutva* supporters, resulting in *Fire*'s theatrical run being disrupted by *Hindutva* apologists and also, surprisingly, by women, playing a key role in assaulting theatres and championing *Hindutva* sentiments (2004: 168).[72] Desai's analysis displays how *Hindutva* penetrates the Hindi cinematic space through the destructive protestations and condemnations of same-sex relationships and its equation

[68] Please see: Vasudevan, 2000; Gillespie & Cheesman, 2002; Desai, 2004; Raghavendra, 2014; Pugsley, 2016; Shailo, 2018; Banerjee, et. al, 2021.
[69] Please also see: Bénéï, 1998, who also discusses JAIN TV and its use in vehemently promoting nationalistic and religious programmes.
[70] For example: M. K. Raghavendra (2014) focuses on the implicit and explicit political discourses in Bollywood throughout the new millennium; Peter Pugsley's noting of Bollywood's "highly nationalistic images based around the geographic importance of India" (2016: 398); and Iqbal Shailo's (2018) comparative examination between Bollywood and Hollywood narratives in how they present geopolitical issues.
[71] Please also see: Gehlawat, 2024.
[72] The surprising nature of women evoking *Hindutva* sentiments stems from the idea that *Hindutva* is patriarchal in nature (please see Rauf, 2018; Leidig, 2020; Pande, 2022; Singh & Parihar, 2024).

to a perceived Muslim threat.[73] Although some have viewed this connection vaguely,[74] the majority have overlooked this unusual but befitting parallel between *Hindutva*'s contemptuous attitude towards homosexuality and Muslims.[75] While I adhere to Desai's argument that *Hindutva*'s targeting of *Fire* was reflective of the perceived attack on India's femininity (2004: 173), I posit an additional angle: *Fire*, unknowingly, provided political *Hindutva* a battleground within the cinematic space, broadening its presence from earlier narrative inclusions (such as in Partition narratives) to, now, an intolerant censor board for India's audio-visual media that go "against" *Hindutva*'s core ideals.

I would argue this pushed the BJP – a major nationalist political party throughout the 1990s – to see cinema as a tool that furthered their already widely successful hijacking of television imagery in *Ramayan* and *Mahabharat* earlier in the 1990s. As such, following substantial political endorsement by the BJP, the Indian government in 1998 conferred official "industry" status upon Bollywood, institutionalising its position as a key component of the Indian audio-visual sector and wider Indian society.[76]

Following this special status, academic scrutiny of *Hindutva*'s political ascension and its several transfigurations under the current premiership of Narendra Modi, since 2014, is substantial,[77] many of which explore political *Hindutva*'s relationship to Bollywood. Shakuntala Banaji argues that *Hindutva* cannibalised images through cinema, allowing political *Hindutva* to publicly posit "violence against India's non-Hindu groups … as religious actions *and* acts of nationalism" (2018: 338), while Ziya Us Salam examines how *Gadar: Ek Prem Khatha* (*Rebellion: A Love Story,* Anil Sharma, 2001) is "as jingoistic a film as Hindi cinema has ever dished out" (2018: 259), due to the narrative's solidification of communal patriotism in the Hindu mindset and the depiction of Muslims as inherently linked to India's neighbour/enemy, Pakistan (2018: 48-49). Anustup Basu is a leading exponent in examining this intricate relationship between Bollywood and *Hindutva* (2008, 2010, 2023), with *Hindutva as Political Monotheism* (2020) presenting some of Basu's most interesting interrogations.

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[73] The Shiv Sena, – another far-right Hindu nationalist political party headed by Bal Thackeray – alongside the BJP, manipulated exclusionary attitudes towards those marginalized in Indian society: the LGBTQIA+ community, women, and Muslims (Desai, 2004: 174).

[74] Please see: Goswami, 2008; Kumar, 2013.

[75] Please see: John & Niranjana, 1999; Mazumdar, 2000; Kapur, 2000; Gairola, 2002; Donnell, 2007.

[76] Please see: Bose, 2009; Punathambekar, 2013; Wright, 2015; Barat, 2018.

[77] Please see: Hansen, 1999; Jaffrelot, 1996, 2003, 2006, 2013, 2016; Bhatt, 2001, 2004; Marsh & Brasted, 2007; Shani, 2007; Ogden, 2014; Kaul, 2017; Anderson & Longkumer, 2018; Banaji, 2018; Salam, 2018; Chacko, 2019; Chatterji et. al, 2019; Kinnvall, 2019; Gopinath, 2022; Sud, 2022; Chatterjee, 2023; Chatterjee & Das, 2023; Damle & Dāmale, 2023, Murphy, 2023; Sharma, 2023; Gehlawat, 2024.

Basu argues that *Hindutva,* as it penetrated Indian politics, became a source of "political monotheism" – a collective "religious" devotion to *Hindutva*'s brand of Hindu superiority. Consequently, *Hindutva*'s hijacking of India's media to force a narrative of Hindu primacy is seen as encouraging this "political monotheism" through India's media cultures, which Basu notes showcased not only *Hindutva*'s transformative qualities, but also *Hindutva*'s ability to cut "across formations of mass culture and affect industries like Bollywood" (2020: 10). This is pertinent to my research as Basu further elaborates with a short section, "The 'Bollywoodization' of *Hindutva*".

Basu claims that since the 1990s, Hindi cinema has presented a high-Hindu ontological aesthetic – advancing a unified consciousness through the consumption of Hindu nationalist symbolism that naturalizes "an updated Hinduness as the only … viable stance of competitive patriotism that globalization inevitably calls for" (2020: 185). This "updated Hinduness" translates itself into *Hindutva* in two ways. Firstly, it not only penetrated the collective consciousness of India's Hindu-majority population, but expanded towards the global Indian diaspora, aiding in the reduction, and eventual redundancy, of other forms of Indian/Hindu patriotism. Secondly, with *Hindutva* now the "ideal" patriotic stance of "Hinduness", I argue this simultaneously became an accepted "narrative patriotic stance" within terrorist or anti-Pakistan narratives in Hindi cinema, furthering an inherent "ancient" Hindu identity opposite the Muslim subject, depicted in what Basu notes are the cinematic defaults of Muslims (such as "the face of the immigrant, the suicide bomber, the criminal, or the infiltrator" [2020: 201]). This cinematic ontology within Bollywood proffers the Muslim figure as "the target of encounter … to be understood within the auspices of Hindutva 2.0" (2020: 201) – shifting "from an order of print capitalism to an electronic one" (2020: 151) – cinema. This extreme Hindu nationalism thus emerged as the only "practical" nationalist viewpoint according to Hindu supremacists, with cinema now aiding its pro-Hindu iconography and anti-Muslim attitudes.

Whilst the Indian government under Atal Bihari Vajpayee presented a more restrained version of Hindu nationalism, Modi coupled modernization across economic, cultural, and political folds (2020: 176). Suddenly, India began to accept the "muscularity" of *Hindutva* politics, projected in India's social and cultural realms (including cinema), rendering Muslims and other minorities in India dispensable (2020: 176). Basu's assessment is timely and important to my thesis as it connects the politicization of Bollywood to the "Bollywoodization" of *Hindutva* – and vice versa.

The "Bollywoodization" of *Hindutva* is further acknowledged by Ajay Gehlawat in *Bollypolitics* (2024), scrutinizing the insidiousness of a Modi-inflected *Hindutva* and its manipulation of Hindi cinema and Hindi film

texts. Gehlawat opines that Bollywood films codified several "Modi-fications", described as "forms of coercion, fed by capital, chauvinism and myth" (2024: 38), attributed to Modi's influence on Hindi film production. Furthermore, Gehlawat suggests that Modi became a revered leader of modern-day *Hindutva,* with his influence within Hindi cinema becoming "embodied by … multiple leading artists in the industry" (2024: 6).[78] Several leading Bollywood figures – including Akshay Kumar[79] and Kangana Ranaut[80] – symbolically act as superstar avatars, becoming visual representations of the "aura" of *Hindutva* within the realm of Hindi cinema, furthering Modi's powerful reach in the domain of Indian media.

In essence, Modi is a "messianic figure invested with millennial expectations" (Basu, 2020: 166), adding to his "charismatic *avatar* … tied to a performative alignment with Indian popular cultural values performed through strategic alignments with the media industries and other digital infrastructures" (Rai, 2024: 845). Building upon these frameworks, *Bollypolitics* is, by Gehlawat's admission, "concerned with how Bollywood is changing as India grows increasingly Hindutva-ized" (2024: 39). As this thesis surveys the way *Hindutva* penetrates the Hindi cinema sphere and its effects on the cinematic Muslim figure, Gehlawat's examination of *Hindutva*'s infiltration via the backing of Hindi film stars is crucial to understanding the *Hindutva*-inflected environment within the Hindi-language film industry.

Others have discussed connections between India's political *Hindutva* climate and media discourses.[81] Dibyakusum Ray contextualizes his argument through cultural nationalism by asserting that Hindi film narratives paralleled the rise of right-wing politics (2014: 16). Ray links Ashish Rajadhyaksha's (2004) assertion of India's globalization and audiences' absorption in the spirit of high nationalism to what Atanu Mohapatra and D. D. Pattnayak further describe as presenting India's cultural nationalism as "tantamount to Hinduness" (2014: 65). Additionally, Eviane Leidig contends that the controversial appointments of Gajendra Chauhan and, later, Anupam Kher (noted for their acting and BJP-affiliation), as Chair of the Governing Council of the Film and Television Institute of India within the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting department, further hints at the BJP's attempts to introduce *Hindutva* values into the official doctrines of education and cinema (2020: 243). This

[78] Please see: Rai, 2019.
[79] Please see: Mitra, 2021; Devasundaram, 2022.
[80] Please see: Devasundaram, 2022.
[81] Please see: Ray, 2014; Leidig, 2020; Karim, 2021; Biswas & Banerjee, 2023.

worrying connection between their political appointments and Bollywood's cinematic ecosystem suggests that Hindi cinema is the ideal environment to reproduce pro-Hindu symbolism, a process already in full motion.

Collectively, India's economic liberalization and globalization became a conduit for political *Hindutva* to instil, within the Hindu population, anti-Muslim sentiments, projected first in television then, later, in popular Hindi cinema. *Hindutva*'s nationalist agenda and politically complex DNA, interwoven into the fabric of Indian society through various agents of social and economic structures, pique my interest to untangle Hindi cinema and its relationship with the Muslim figure, particularly in the contexts relating to the demolition of the Babri Masjid and cross-border/global terrorism.

I have focused on academic literature appearing *before* and *after* the films explored in this thesis were produced; this was deliberate because of the nature of this study. Through my critique of *Hindutva*'s "saffronizing" doctrines, I will re-examine *Naseem, Zakhm, Sarfarosh* and *Kurbaan* as Hindi-language film texts responding to flashpoints of unrest and violence, and how they aid in providing additional interpretations of Bollywood's Muslim subject. In contextualizing *Hindutva*'s historic formations to its contemporaneous presence in Indian politics and society, I will build upon the existing knowledge surrounding Hindi cinema's link with political *Hindutva* by ascertaining to what extent this nexus contributes to interpretations of the cinematic Muslim figure in Bollywood.

IV: THE DEPICTIONS OF MUSLIMS IN POPULAR HINDI CINEMA

Examining the Muslim figure within Film Studies literature is not new. While much of the scholarship has concentrated on Western cinemas, such as the United States, there is also significant attention to the cinematic Muslim figure in French film studies.[82] Studies of Middle Eastern cinemas, such as Iranian,[83] or South-East Asian cinemas including Indonesian,[84] have also begun to emerge. The practice of interpreting the Muslim subject in cinema has produced qualitative and quantitative studies, with scholars like Kristian Petersen (2021, 2021) compiling exhaustive anthologies that re-evaluate frameworks for identifying the imagery and symbolism of the cinematic Muslim figure.

Earlier examinations overlook a contextualization of *Hindutva* when dissecting Hindi cinema's portrayal of the Muslim figure. For example, Muhammad Ashraf Khan and Syeda Zuria Bokhari, through statistical information, assert that positive images of Muslims in Bollywood films between 2002 and 2008 stand at 4.4%, while 65.2% present negative interpretations and 30.4% of portrayals offer neutral depictions. Khan and Bokhari point to the advent of 9/11 increasing these negative portrayals in Bollywood (suggesting the globality of post-9/11 Islamophobia), and further analyse negative identity markers bestowed upon the Muslim figure, such as profession, behaviour, religious practices, and patriotism. Despite Khan and Bokhari agreeing that Bollywood films "depict and present the issue of Hindu-Muslim communal riots" (2011: 142), there is *no* further comment on this line of enquiry. Political or *Hindutva*-centred contexts are absent within their examination; instead, their conclusion simply reads that Bollywood has "considerably distorted [the] Muslim image" (2011: 14).[85] While the common thread that Muslim characters are negatively exaggerated in their depictions is exhaustive,[86] I argue that the use of quantitative

[82] Please see: Shaheen, 2003; Sardar & Davis, 2010; Bayraktoroglu, 2014, 2018; Arjana, 2015; Ramji, 2016; Ahmed, 2017; Petersen, 2017; Haider, 2020; Labidi, 2021, 2023; O'Brien, 2021; Senanayake, 2021; Serdouk, 2021; Alsultany, 2022; Eddarif, 2023; El-Bayoumi, 2023); and France (Durmelat & Swamy, 2011; Higbee, 2013; Kealhofer-Kemp, 2015; King, 2019; Mielusel, 2021.

[83] Please see: Rizi, 2015.

[84] Please see: Izharuddin, 2015, 2017; Huda, 2022; Majestya & Prayoga, 2022.

[85] Shahzad Ali et. al (2012) and Shafaat Bhat (2019) offer similar methodologies and conclusions to Khan and Bokhari. Ali et. al deduces that the systematic portrayal of negative Muslim characters in Bollywood "communicates strong political messages to its audience and tends to exacerbate the existing conflicts" (2012: 138), enabling Bollywood and Indian filmmakers to depict Muslims as terrorists, rendering them as barbaric and reprobate individuals (2012: 157-158). Similarly, Bhat argues that the imagery surrounding Muslims "have been … useful and harmful at the same time in endorsing the identity of Islam in the Indian subcontinent" (2019: 6), concluding that negative portrayals of Muslims far outweigh positive ones.

[86] Please see: Fazila-Yacoobali, 2002; Islam, 2007; Hirji, 2008; Raj, 2008; Mazumdar, 2011; Gabriel & Vijayan, 2012; Zafar & Amjad, 2018; Bhat, 2019; Niyaz Ahmad, 2021; Kumar & Raghuvanshi, 2023; Raj & Suresh, 2023.

methods to ascertain the scale of negative depictions of the Muslim subject overlooks variations within the configurations of these unsavoury portrayals of Muslims.

There are studies that comprehensively discuss problematic portrayals of Muslims without contextualizing *Hindutva*, such as Anandam P. Kavoori and Kalyani Chadha's analysis of the Muslim "Other", which I mentioned earlier in this thesis. Overviewing India's attempts to produce a post-colonial identity within a single, unified state, Kavoori and Chadha attest that the concept of "Indianness" has caused intense frictions and violent eruptions between Hindus and Muslims (2008: 132), leading to widespread levels of religious intolerance. As India struggled with an identity crisis, Kavoori and Chadha note that communal tensions threatened the pluralistic and secularistic ideals earlier championed by Jawaharlal Nehru (2008: 132), further pressured by *Hindutva*'s growth. Despite this, Kavoori and Chadha assert that aspects of Indian society were unaffected by sectarian troubles – and that the Hindi film industry was an example of secularism, unaffected, and in motion. Citing Muslim and Islamic contributions to Hindi cinema, both via industry professionals and through the cultural-linguistic symbiosis of Islamic culture,[87] Kavoori and Chadha agree that discussions surrounding the representation of Muslims in Hindi film texts are often obscured (2008: 134). As such, they highlight what they believe to be the three types of "othering" faced by the cinematic Muslim subject – "exotic", "marginal" and "demonised".

"Exotic" othering highlights early portrayals of Muslims that heighten elements of Muslim culture, exoticized through, for example, the depictions of Mughals and/or the Mughal empires, romance between Mughal emperors and Hindu princesses, and through the Islamicate culture involving the Muslim socials ("films that centred their narrative on the Muslim community and issues related to it" [2008: 136]). "Marginal" othering reflects on how Muslim characters were "a token presence but were never integral to the narrative" (2008: 140) within some Hindi films of the 1970s. While not erased from the cinematic screen, they were marginalised, contributing little to a narrative and were often assigned roles subordinate to a narrative's protagonists, who were usually Hindu. Lastly, "Demonized" othering presents, particularly from the late-1990s/early-2000s, Muslim characters who were explicated as "violent, evil, [and] driven by a visceral hatred of India and a single-minded desire to destroy it" (2008: 141). This harkens back to earlier in this chapter where I discussed the plethora of

[87] For examples of the symbiosis of Islamicate cultures in Hindi cinema, please see: Ansari, 2008; Bhaskar & Allen, 2022. Linguistically, following Partition, Urdu and Hindi became the *lingua franca* of Pakistan and India, respectively. There have been studies surrounding the linguistic nationalisms of Hindi and Urdu; for examples of this complex linguistic controversy, please see King, 1977; Tuteja, 2019; Singh & Dwivedi, 2023.

examinations that deal with Hindu anxieties surrounding the Muslim threat to India, exemplified in terrorism, Partition and anti-Pakistan narratives. Kavoori and Chadha present the inculcations of "othering" the Muslim subject, offering a thoroughly engaging discussion of Hindi cinema's troubled relationship with historic and contemporary depictions of Muslims, despite not contextualizing *Hindutva* or Hindu nationalist ideals.

Although most scholarship has neglected to critique *Hindutva* when exploring the cinematic Muslim figure, some examinations *have* acknowledged, to some extent, *Hindutva*'s influence when dissecting the allegories and symbolism embedded within problematic portrayals of Muslims in Hindi cinema. *Hindutva*'s earliest formations led to the creation of "religious" nationalism in India prior to Partition – namely Muslim and Hindu nationalism.[88] Additionally, violent events, like the Babri Masjid's demolition, further solidified these separatist nationalist identities between Hindus and Muslims.[89] Yet *Hindutva* criticisms have not been fully considered within the academic literature on popular Hindi cinema's interpretations of the Muslim figure as extensively as one would think. Rather, focus on *Hindutva*'s role in Bollywood within film academia mainly relates to cross-border terrorism; the surveillance and fear of the Muslim figure's identity; Islamicate cultures; and in the negative depiction of Muslims but *only* as a consequence to the rise and popularity of political *Hindutva,* without a deeper interrogation of these portrayals themselves.[90] While these investigations add to the growing spectrum of scholarship on *Hindutva*'s involvement in Indian cinema (either as a narrative theme or its political invasiveness in the filmmaking process), my research explores new terrain by highlighting how Hindi film texts responding to the Babri Masjid's demolition and Islamic terrorism reconfigure the cinematic Muslim subject, bolstered by a contextualization of political *Hindutva* and its links to popular Hindi cinema.

Generally, studies conclude that Bollywood has played an active role in the "othering" of Muslim characters,[91] offering unique frameworks in assessing the interpretations of the Muslim subject.[92] However, the

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[88] Please see: Seal, 1968.
[89] Please see: Van der Veer, 1994.
[90] Please see: Malhotra & Alagh, 2004; Daiya, 2008; Kabir, 2009, 2010; Murty, 2009; Asrar, 2010; Devadas, 2013; Kumar, 2013; Haider, 2014; Thobani, 2014; Khatun, 2016; Mubarki, 2017, 2020; Lal, 2018; Islam, 2019; San Chirico, 2020; Bhaskar & Allen, 2022; Ahmad, 2022; Riaz, 2022.
[91] Please see: Murty, 2009; Kabir, 2010; Devadas, 2013; Kumar, 2013; Hussein & Hussain, 2015; Mubarki, 2017, 2020; Islam, 2019; Riaz, 2022.
[92] See the following for a range of intriguing frameworks: Negotiating between Bollywood and nationalism in Partition narratives (Daiya, 2008; Prasad, 1998; Gopalan, 2022); Toxic masculinity and hegemonic patterning of Hindu nationalism (Murty, 2009); Orientalism (for further information, see Said, 1978; King, 1999; Macfie, 2002) and *Hindutva* in relation to anti-Muslim/pro-Hindu iconography (Haider, 2014); re-shaping earlier characterizations of Muslim and Christian imagery under Modi's brand of *Hindutva* (San Chirico, 2020); "Three Khans" under *Hindutva* frameworks (San Chirico, 2020; Ghosh, 2022);

scope in identifying key markers of the Muslim figure through a critique of *Hindutva* is severely hampered, and as such, I posit two areas worthy of re-examination.

Firstly, I want to re-examine Hindi cinema's response to the rise of Hindu nationalism, focusing specifically on the demolition of the Babri Masjid. I interrogate two films – *Naseem* and *Zakhm* – which deal with the Babri Masjid's demolition *before* Bollywood gained industry status,[93] especially since both films critique the validity of such an oppressive, fascist ideology.[94]

Secondly, investigations of Bollywood's Kashmiri narratives or cross-border terrorism provide the ideal mode of inspecting Hindi cinema's portrayals of the "Other" – the "enemy" – and the anxieties surrounding national identity and/or Muslim affiliations with Pakistan. This path, however, has been well examined.[95] I assert that certain nuances of Hindi cinema's *configurations* of its Muslim subject within the terrorist genre are missed, and as such, I aim to re-examine how the Muslim subject is spotlighted under contexts relating to cross-border and global Islamic terrorism through my focused critique of *Hindutva.*[96]

This research stems from a degree of urgency. Kristian Petersen notes that Muslim characters have become satirized, often negatively, in world cinema (2021: 1), leading to depictions which pigeonhole Muslim characters into "good" or "bad" character columns, limiting their narrative purpose and range and, as I have presented above, this seems to be the case within other examinations by many scholars. By analysing Bollywood's depictions of the Muslim subject with an eye to *Hindutva,* I will not simply document the stereotypical attributes engraved upon the Muslim figure. Instead, I will eliminate this broad categorization by highlighting variations of these portrayals that examinations have generally overlooked.

The culture of satirizing images is historically integrated within Hindi film texts, as Ashis Nandy claims. At the time of his article, Nandy found the accusation that Hindi cinema produced severe and damaging stereotypes of Muslims "laughable" because Hindi cinema has always facilitated cinematic caricatures, and Muslim stereotypes – positive as well as negative – are part of Bollywood's propensity for stylized exaggerations and archetypes (2003:

Hindutva and Islamicate cultures in Indian cinema (Ahmad, 2022; Ghosh, 2022); and the Muslim subject as a "sexual anomaly" in *Hindutva* discourse (Riaz, 2022 [see Rauf {2018} for further validation through an anthropological discussion]).

[93] Please see: Bose, 2009; Punathambekar, 2013; Barat, 2018.

[94] There are clear links between *Hindutva* and fascism. For more, please see: Ahmad, 1993; Sarkar, 1993; Jal, 2015; Sen, 2015; Banaji, 2018, 2025; van Zwanenberg, 2022.

[95] Please see: Hirji, 2008; Kabir, 2009, 2010; Khan & Bokhari, 2011; Devadas, 2013; Khatun, 2016; Zafar & Amjad, 2018; Daiya, 2008; Murty, 2009; Asrar, 2010; Menon, 2013; Thobani, 2014; Lal, 2018.

[96] Please see this thesis' chapter three, titled "Bollywood, *Hindutva,* and Islamic Terrorism".

81-82). Nandy does acknowledge that some films began to portray Muslims as criminals, citing *Sarfarosh* as an example of Bollywood depicting Muslim villainy (2003: 82). However, Nandy concludes by claiming that negative portrayals of Muslims are "… a healthy development; [and] certainly not worth … controversy" (2003: 81). Yet Kerry P. C. San Chirico argues that as Indian life began to change dramatically following India's economic liberalization and the ascendency of Hindu nationalism, so too did the cinematic depiction of Muslims, particularly Muslim men, now known as the "Other" (2020: 87). My re-evaluation of Bollywood's Muslim subject is imperative as problematic depictions of Muslim characters *continue* to appear within Hindi films.[97] While scholars have accepted, to a certain extent, the influence of Hindu nationalism on Hindi film narratives and within Bollywood,[98] I assert that distasteful and xenophobic portrayals of the Muslim subject have become *applauded* and *facilitated*. With India's ideological, philosophical, and existential tensions between its Hindu and Muslim populations at the forefront of *Hindutva*'s pro-Hindu, anti-Muslim rhetoric, I will investigate and scrutinize the relationship between popular Hindi cinema and *Hindutva*, and how they transfigure Bollywood's Muslim figure in the hopes of contributing to further analysis and discussion.

[97] Despite the timeline of my thesis – ranging from the early-1990s to the late-2000s – films from beyond my timeline of analysis *still* offer dangerous, xenophobic portrayals of Muslims, including: *The Attacks of 26/11* (Ram Gopal Varma, 2013); *Phantom* (Kabir Khan, 2015); *Baby* (Neeraj Pandey, 2015); *Raees* (Rahul Dholakia, 2017); *Uri: The Surgical Strike* (Aditya Dhar, 2019); *Sooryavanshi* (Rohit Shetty, 2021); *Major* (Sashi Kiran Tikka, 2022); *Fighter* (Siddharth Anand, 2024); and *Singham Again* (Rohit Shetty, 2024).

[98] Please see: Kumar, 2016; San Chirico, 2020; Karim, 2021; Prasad, 2021; Chakraborty, 2021; Roy, 2024.

CHAPTER TWO – 'THE DEMOLITION OF THE BABRI MASJID: AN ESCALATION'

This chapter explores the theme of "escalation" by analysing *Naseem* (Saeed Akhtar Mirza, 1995) and *Zakhm* (Mahesh Bhatt, 1998), films that depict deteriorating Hindu-Muslim communal relations surrounding the Babri Masjid's demolition. Christophe Jaffrelot asserts that the event "exceeded anything India had yet experienced since Partition" (2003: 9), underscoring its pivotal role in intensifying *Hindutva*'s anti-Muslim sentiment.[99] This chapter will study *Naseem*'s depiction of a subtle, progressive shift in communal attitudes leading up to this event in its narrative, followed by an analysis of *Zakhm* and its more explicit portrayal of marginalisation following the Babri Masjid's demolition in its storyline. Each film appears to present a criticism of a burgeoning nationalist mentality and, when analysed collectively, they serve as cinematic responses to the Ayodhya dispute. This chapter revisits these two narratives to highlight their depictions of two types of "escalation": the crumbling of Hindu-Muslim relations and the parallel growth of right-wing nationalism, interrogating how they portray the Muslim figure as an existential threat to India.

[99] Please also see: Mankekar, 1999; Mehta, 2015; Etter, 2020; Setalvad, 2023.

I: *HINDUTVA*, VIOLENCE, & THE DEMOLITION OF THE BABRI MASJID

The Babri Masjid was a sixteenth-century mosque built under the reign of Mughal emperor Babur by Mir Baqi in 1528. It was demolished by Hindu nationalists on the 6th of December 1992, as part of the Ayodhya dispute, triggering widespread interreligious violence rooted in a socio-religious contestation over the site, considered in Hindu scriptures to be the birthplace of the Hindu deity Rama. Paola Bacchetta asserts that, despite the mosque's 1528 construction, there was "no record of … conflict concerning it during the first three hundred years" (2000: 264), suggesting that contention over its location is a modern development. Since 1934, however, several incidents, often sparked by religious tensions, intensified Hindu-Muslim discord surrounding the site, including a 1934 outbreak of violence provoked by a rumour that Muslims had slaughtered a cow, an animal sacred in Hinduism (Bacchetta, 2000: 264).[100] Bacchetta observes how, by 1946, "earlier actors who were local religious people (Hindus, and Sunni and Shiite Muslims) gave way to new actors who were local political people" (2000: 256), who, invoking Hindu nationalist rhetoric, escalated the Ayodhya dispute by rearticulating it within a nationalist framework. This shift from religious to political agency consolidated Hindu nationalist claims that the mosque occupied a sacred Hindu site, laying the ideological groundwork for the politicization of subsequent events.

In the decades that followed, *Hindutva* gained institutional momentum with the emergence of the Bharatiya Jana Sangh (BJS, 'All-India People's Union') in 1951,[101] and the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP, 'World Council of Hindus') in 1964: political entities which amplified anti-Muslim rhetoric to further entrench communal divisions. This escalation reached a turning point in 1990 when L. K. Advani launched a *rath yatra* – a chariot-led procession from the Somnath temple in Gujarat to the Babri Masjid in Uttar Pradesh.[102] Bacchetta records that the procession, beginning on the 25th of September, was intercepted by "Mulayam Singh Yadav … with the accord of the central Government before it reached the Babri Masjid" (2000: 271), prompting the BJP to withdraw its support for the government. The ensuing political crisis led to Prime Minister Vishwanath Pratap Singh's resignation, amid growing Hindu nationalist anger at his stance against communal violence and his perceived secularism. In the

[100] Please also see: Cesari, 2021.
[101] Upon the BJS's devolution in 1977, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) was founded in 1980.
[102] For more on L. K. Advani's influence as the President of the BJP (1986-1991, 1993-1998, 2004-2005), and his impact regarding the Ayodhya dispute, please also see: Gopal, 1991; Gould, 1998; Setalvad, 2023.

following years, emboldened by growth, *Hindutva* ideologues and supporters descended upon the Babri Masjid, destroying it in 1992.[103]

Nitasha Kaul asserts that the demolition "created and roused a Hindu body politic that came to see itself along the lines of an 'awakened Hindu nation'" (2017: 526). *Hindutva*'s initial inception – from uniting the Hindu masses to developing an anti-Muslim rhetoric – allowed it to reach unprecedented levels of political and social popularity. Much like the changes in *Hindutva*'s understanding and political applications between Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, K. B. Hedgewar and M. S. Golwalkar, *Hindutva*'s disdain for India's Muslims has increased in intensity. The escalatory nature in demonising the Muslim figure aided *Hindutva*'s quest to re-historize Indian history, and the Babri Masjid's demolition was the culmination of such demonstrable, violent hatred from the ideology.

[103] For more information, please also see: Jacobsen, 2024.

II: CINEMA & THE BABRI MASJID

Ira Bhaskar and Richard Allen describe how the Babri Masjid's demolition "yielded a new idiom for Bombay cinema that represented the everyday urban landscape as a space of incipient paranoia and conspiracy" (2022: 29).[104] Interestingly, however, while some narratives, such as *Naseem* and *Zakhm*, connect their narratives explicitly within the climate of the Babri Masjid's demolition by dramatizing the event, many films focus on post-demolition violence, such as the 1993 Bombay attacks, and the tearing of Hindu-Muslim relations, with only passing reference to the Babri Masjid itself. Meenakshi Bharat asserts that the Babri Masjid's post-demolition riots, and the subsequent 1993 Bombay bombing that ensued,[105] have since featured in Indian cinema, citing Mani Ratnam's *Bombay* (1995) as an early example (2020: 78).[106] However, Bharat's focus is the link between post-Babri rioting and terrorism, naming *Fiza* (Khalid Mohammed, 2000), *Black Friday* (Anurag Kashyap, 2004), *Shahid* (Hansal Mehta, 2012), *Haseena Parkar* (Apoorva Lakhia, 2017) and *Sanju* (Rajkumar Hirani, 2018) as narratives that connect – directly or indirectly – with terrorism and either the Babri Masjid's demolition, the immediate aftermath of violence in Bombay, or the Bombay blasts of 1993.[107] Conclusively, narratives surrounding the Babri Masjid appear to disregard the actual demolition itself, instead leaning towards the dramatization of the ensuing violence following the event.

Naseem and *Zakhm* were chosen for this examination for two reasons. Firstly, in 1998, Bollywood cinema, backed feverishly by the BJP, was officially given industry status,[108] which meant that "the film industry would … be eligible for the infrastructural and credit support given to other industries" (Mehta, 2005: 136). I chose *Naseem* and *Zakhm* not only because both narratives deal with an event that mobilized modern-day *Hindutva* socially and politically, but they appear critical of Hindu nationalism, lending to further interpretations regarding the cinematic Muslim figure in their narratives. Secondly, the storylines appear to "link": while *Naseem* portrays the subtle shift within the communal Hindu-Muslim fragility amidst the growing threat of Hindu nationalism, *Zakhm* depicts the dramatic escalation of some themes found in *Naseem*, elevating three contexts: the depiction of Hindu nationalism (and the breakdown of Hindu-Muslim relations); the deteriorating image of the Muslim figure; and the film's criticism of an emergent nationalist agenda. For these reasons, I contend that *Naseem* and *Zakhm* are worthy of re-

[104] Please also see: Asrar, 2010; Ganti, 2013; Bharat, 2020.
[105] Please also see: Mazumdar, 2007.
[106] *Bombay* (1995) is an example of Tamil-language film (later dubbed in Hindi) that deals with post-Babri violence.
[107] Please see: Bharat, 2020: 77-84.
[108] Please see: Bose, 2009.

examination, particularly in how the Muslim figure is positioned within these artistic responses to the Babri Masjid's demolition and the subsequent inter-communal unrest.

Naseem is oft forgotten as a film that deals with Hindu-Muslim communal unrest, with little academic analysis.[109] This may be because *Naseem* was produced by the National Film Development Corporation (NFDC), which developed titles to counteract the growing reliance of Bollywood as the sole Indian cinema (Ganti, 2013: 24). *Zakhm*, by contrast, is a "true" Bollywood production, but is also underappreciated within academic scholarship, despite winning several awards, including the "Nargis Dutt Award for Best Feature Film on National Integration", in 1998/1999. Although there is a three-year gap between the two film productions, both offer interpretations with regards to the political birth and power of Hindu nationalism. Sheldon Pollock argues that *Hindutva* "is a perversion of India's cosmopolitan past" (2006: 575), alluding to *Hindutva*'s violent attempts at reforming India from a multireligious nation to a nation steeped in anti-Muslim rhetoric. Dibyesh Anand suggests that, in stereotyping the Muslim figure as "the irredeemable anti-Hindu, anti-India Other, Hindu nationalism generates a politics of fear" (2011: 16), facilitating exclusionary practices and violence upon India's Muslims. Consequently, I will examine *Naseem* and *Zakhm* regarding how each film positions the Muslim subject, highlighting and questioning their cinematic breakdown of Hindu-Muslim relations and how they respond to one of India's most volatile flashpoints of violence.

[109] Bharat (2020) does make mention of *Naseem,* but the analysis is limited to a single sentence.

III: CASE STUDY - *NASEEM* (SAEED AKHTAR MIRZA, 1995)

Naseem, centring on a Muslim family, focuses on the relationship between its teenage protagonist, Naseem (Mayuri Kango), and her ailing grandfather, Akhtar (Kaifi Azmi), as communal tensions escalate in the months leading to the Babri Masjid's demolition. Akhtar shares nostalgic stories of pre-Partition India, which starkly contrast to the rising hostility Naseem witnesses in her surroundings. As Naseem navigates the shifting communal dynamics, the impact of communal unrest becomes increasingly visible within her own household, affecting her father, Sajjad (Kulbhushan Kharbanda), mother, Ammi (Surekha Sikri), and brother Mushtaq (Salim Shah).

I will examine four scenes from *Naseem* to analyse how *Naseem* portrays the escalation in inter-communal tensions. My aim is to showcase that *Naseem,* set against the backdrop of the Babri Masjid, becomes one of Hindi cinema's earliest films to iterate the shifting paradigms of Hindu-Muslim relations. It offers a meta-cinematic, self-conscious critique of an India grappling with an insurgent, violent form of nationalism that seeks to disrupt historical Hindu-Muslim relations.

III-I: 'TELEVISING THE VIOLENCE'

In the opening scene, Naseem brushes her hair in the mirror, with a television depicting an event, with audible, "angry" chants which are mostly unintelligible, reflecting into the mirror. Two other mirrors close by reflect Naseem's mother and elder brother, Mushtaq, who watch the television intently (Fig. 1).

Figure 1: The television's frame, with Naseem (Mayuri Kango) in the centre, Ammi (Surekha Sikri) reflected on the right, and Mushtaq (Salim Shah) reflected on the left.

The use of the television in the film's first scene – especially since the first frame includes a message regarding the mosque's demolition, and the third frame reading "December 4th, 1992" – allows the viewer to recognise two things: the date in which the scene is set, two days before the Babri Masjid's demolition; and Naseem's indifference to the television's presence behind her (accentuated by Mushtaq and her mother's unflinching attention to it). With the camera capturing only the reflections of Mushtaq and Naseem's mother, along with the back of Naseem and her reflection, the scene establishes how the societal changes in communal tensions bypass Naseem, indicating that the viewer will also be distanced from *Naseem*'s visuality of deteriorating Hindu-Muslim relations.

Following the scene, a frame reads "June 1992", shifting the timeline. As the narrative progresses month to month, documenting Naseem's interactions in the community, the television remains a consistent narrative tool used to demonstrate both linear and cyclical time. Rita Felski notes that "those who believe that linear time is masculine and cyclical time feminine usually point to the dramatic contrast between the grand narratives of male historical time and the repetitive everyday time of women" (2000: 20), and this appears true in *Naseem. Naseem*'s linear time – the "masculine" – depicts several male characters, particularly Mushtaq, with a heightened sense of tension as the television, month on month, showcases the deterioration of Hindu-Muslim relations, displayed in a scene later in the narrative.

Mushtaq scolds Akhtar for questioning his insistence on watching Hindu-nationalist protests at the Babri Masjid. Mushtaq, irate, begins a tirade of abuse towards Akhtar, in front of Naseem and her father, Sajjad: "Do you know what is being shown on T.V.? … No, you keep telling your stories!". The scene's colour composition reveals an interesting interpretation. Here, doorway's walls are painted green, while the background, a mixture of orange and yellow, as well Sajjid's deep brown clothes, evoke hues associated with *Hindutva.* At one point, Mushtaq claims that "they" (the Hindu nationalists on the television) could take over their house in the same way Mushtaq describes the Hindu nationalists' chants that the Babri Masjid "is theirs". This colour composition symbolizes the green reflecting the Muslim household, but, as the scene progresses following Mushtaq's departure, and the green hues disappear, the general colouration turns yellow/orange, a signal of an emergent Hindu nationalist rhetoric pushing against Islam (Fig. 2 & Fig. 3).

Figure 2: Mushtaq (Salim Shah) scolds Akhtar (Kaifi Azmi) while Sajjad (Kulbhushan Kharbanda) watches from the background. Notice the green dominated the sides of the frame.

Figure 3: Sajjid (Kulbhushan Kharbanda) walks towards Akhtar (Kaifi Azmi). Notice the green disappears, replacing the frame with warmer tones of yellow, orange and brown.

In commenting on "telling your stories", Mushtaq points to Akhtar's prolonged conversations with Naseem, directly undermining Naseem's "cyclical time": her ritualistic conversations with Akhtar. However, it is not for Mushtaq to own the "grand narratives" *throughout Naseem*; it is Akhtar, through his reminiscence of a secular, pluralistic India. The television occupies the attention of the other characters (Mushtaq, Sajjad, Ammi), allowing the viewer to follow Naseem, who usually walks past them towards Akhtar's bedroom to converse. In these conversations, Akhtar reminisces upon his days of old friendships and communal harmonies. The "grand narrative" of Akhtar's reminiscing allows Naseem to occupy "linear" (masculine) time effectively. As each scene opens or concludes in a new month, the viewer watches Naseem doing every-day, mundane tasks, such as being at school, collecting fruits and vegetables at a local vendor, and going to the cinema with her friends. The "cyclical time" forces Naseem to continue her mundane chores in every-day life, whilst the "linear time" allows Akhtar to "move forward" in understanding the present by recollecting his "historical" past to Naseem. Essentially, Akhtar's

reminiscence contrasts the fragmented, everyday experiences of Naseem and the televising of communal violence, positioning Akhtar as a custodian of an older, fading vision of the nation. The television, broadcasting communal disintegration, juxtaposes Akhtar's reflections of previous prosperous relations between Hindus and Muslims. Consequently, Naseem is placed in a state of "limbo" that allows her to be nonchalant and naïve towards the breakdown of Hindu-Muslim relations around her, unlike Mushtaq, Sajjad and Ammi.

The escalation of communal tension is mediated through the television, remaining visually inaccessible to the viewer. Its presence is registered instead through illegible audio of what appears to be angry chanting and the growing anxiety of Sajjad, Ammi, and Mushtaq, whose exposure to the televised images of unrest intensifies their paranoia. In contrast, Naseem focuses on Akhtar, largely clueless to the nuances of intercommunal disruption. The television fails to penetrate the inner world of Naseem and Akhtar, who remain unaffected. As the narrative progresses, both characters appear to reach a form of personal "nirvana" – a transcendent detachment from communal discord, while others family members descend into fear and anguish.

III-II: 'THE SNAKE'

Another scene depicts an absent-minded Naseem in class, discussing a passage from D. H. Lawrence's poem 'Snake' (1923). Naseem's teacher asks Naseem an on-the-spot question regarding the poem: "What is the struggle of the poet in this poem? What did the poet think of when he saw the snake?" Naseem, confidently, gives her reply: "The poet says that his upbringing has taught him to kill a snake," and continues: "The poet regards him as a friend. And believes that if humans have the right to make use of nature, so do animals" (Fig. 4). Upon the response, a proud Naseem sits, praised by her teacher and her friend, whom Naseem sits next to, smiling at one another.

The mise-en-scène is simple: the camera, eye-level with Naseem, darts between Naseem and her teacher in

Figure 4: Naseem's (Mayuri Kango) interpretation of the snake.

the ensuing exchange, with no musical accompaniment. Instead, the scene prompts interpretations of Lawrence's poem, which reflects upon the snake's position in the world, human morality, and the ownership of the "earth". It also highlights the narrator's – and thus, the human's – attempts to control societal order, seen through the narrator's judgment of the snake's inherent danger despite not *being in danger at all.* The use of 'Snake' in *Naseem* allows for further elucidations beyond the poem, providing new interpretations when considering *Naseem*'s narrative surrounding the Subcontinent's Hindu-Muslim dichotomy.

The poem offers a meta-symbolic account of *Naseem*'s depiction of the perceived threat of the Muslim figure, simultaneously critiquing the dangers of far-right nationalism. In subaltern Hinduism, the snake, known as *nāga* in Sanskritic and ancient Hindu texts, "represent[s] the animal part of the human condition, the inner wildness before becoming civilized and converted to the doctrine" (Lange, 2019: 469). Here, I ascertain that the snake connotes Muslims – the "dangerous animal", unwanted near the "water" (India), yet whose presence the speaker (the poem's protagonist – read, progressive and all-inclusive Hindu) acknowledges.

This interpretation adheres to India's earlier incorporation of Muslims within the Indian nation state, as evidenced by the Congress's inclusive analogies in pre-Partition India as well as Sir Syed Ahmad Khan's championing of Hindu-Muslim relations in the late 19th century. Yousuf Ali and Osman Bakar praise Khan for appealing to both communities to coincide "like brothers and sisters and work collaboratively for the common good as one people" (2020: 332). Here, the "common good" is the water in the poem symbolizing India, something that Hindus *and* Muslims can benefit from, harmoniously. The poem becomes a literary hook, poetically paralleling the snake and the Muslim subject, thus driving home the fictional notion that the snake is allowed to drink the water, only because the poet either does not want to kill it or the poet's cowardice stops him from approaching. Similarly, Muslims *are* allowed to be in India, but only because Hindus either allow it or are too afraid to confront Muslims, and *not* a given birth right, as advocated by Savarkar.[110] In doing so, the snake (Muslim) and the poem's speaker (Hindu) are, largely, not at odds; but the speaker's tentativeness towards the snake's inherently dangerous nature is allegorical of India's shifting attitudes towards Muslims in a post-*Hindutva* climate.

This scene appears early in the film (therefore, early in the tension between Hindus and Muslims in *Naseem*), but re-surfaces later when Parvati, Naseem's Hindu friend who works in her husband's shop, kills a snake (implied) that enters her workplace. As Naseem walks towards Parvati's store, the camera pans to slowly reveal Parvati, armed with a bamboo brush, crouching down and facing towards the unseen snake between rice bags. As Parvati whips the brush, an ecstatic Naseem triumphs at Parvati's "victory", quoting Lawrence's poem: "The voice of my education said to me, he must be killed" (Fig. 5).

[110] Please see: Savarkar, 2021 [1923]; Golwalkar, 1939.

Figure 5: Parvati kills a snake, as Naseem (Mayuri Kango) looks on.

As previously established, the snake connotes the Muslim subject, allowing this short scene (the tensions between Hindus and Muslims have risen expeditiously by this point) to allegorically portray the potential eradication of Muslims. In killing the snake, Parvati "killed the Muslim", and in doing so at the shop, kills the "Muslim" who arrives at a spot abundant in sustenance, as Parvati struck the snake between bales of rice. Naseem laughs with Parvati, hinting not only at her blissful ignorance of the emerging Hindu-Muslim tensions within the community, but, also, wider Indian community at the time.

Tejaswini Ganti points out that "Indian films are much longer than their Western counterparts" (2013: 96) due to the inclusion of film songs. Since *Naseem* excludes an item number, the running time of the narrative is dramatically shortened. This *adds* to the depiction of escalation of Hindu-Muslim tensions presented in *Naseem.* Between Naseem's classroom reply on her interpretations of the snake and Parvati's obliteration of a snake in her store, the film has progressed less than ten minutes. Within those ten minutes, Naseem witnesses a change in her parents, who, upon Naseem's return home, turn off the television after viewing increasingly violent riots between Hindus and Muslims. By connecting the snake and the Muslim subject, this interpretation depicts a subtle yet serious connection of the "Muslim threat" within *Hindutva* discourse and the perceived potential, underlying threat posed by the Muslim figure in India. The use of the poem increases the escalation within the narrative and, consequently, *Naseem* responds by warning of the potential dangers of right-wing Hindu nationalism by providing a cinematic response to the deterioration of Hindu-Muslim relations.

III-III: 'THE COUPLETS'

Another scene featuring some sort of poetic register portrays Akhtar reciting couplets on Eid, surrounded by family and friends. Akhtar, lying on his bed, begins with lines from the 18th-century Urdu poet, Mir Taqi Mir: "Why weep when love blossoms; for one does not know what happens next," followed by, "This arid land cannot be greened…"; however, he forgets the second half. A guest – Zafar (Kay Kay Menon), a friend of Mushtaq's – completes the couplet: "Then why do you still insist on sowing!". After Mushtaq reveals Zafar is from Bhopal, Akhtar asks about Bhopal and how Zafar has celebrated Eid, to which Zafar responds morosely: "I didn't [celebrate Eid] … Eid is a day of joy, isn't it?". The camera begins to whip back and forth between Akhtar and an irate Zafar, who is angry at the mistreatment of Muslims. Sajjid notes that the news has focused on riots, as Zafar highlights how "in each piece of news nothing [there is nothing] about the dead. But we know who dies, don't we?". When Akhtar asks "who?", Mushtaq answers plainly: "Muslims". Akhtar attempts to universalise the violence by suggesting only the poor are dying, revealing generational and ideological divides within the Muslim community amidst growing communal unrest. This angers Zafar, who claims that there is only one couplet worthy of recitation from Faiz Ahmad Faiz: "There is no heaven or hell to pay for my deeds…it is here, it is here, it is here! The day of judgement is not in the future…it is here, it is here, it is here!". Akhtar responds: "No one has the right to change the poet's context" (Fig. 6), but Zafar retorts: "…great poetry is that which can change its meaning with the times!", bringing the scene to an end. Throughout this scene, there is no musical accompaniment, nor is there any "action": the camera simply whips between Akhtar and Zafar, focusing on their interactions, with the couplets spotlighting the juxtaposition between the disillusioned, angry Muslim youth (Zafar) and the tolerant, older generation (Akhtar).

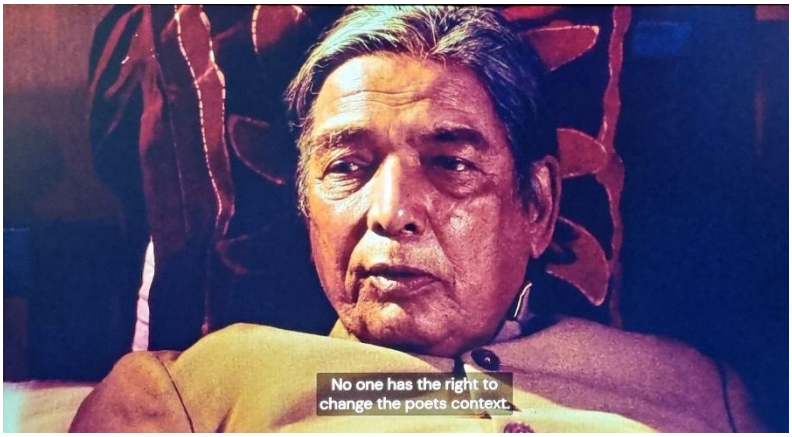


Figure 6: Akhtar (Kaifi Azmi) scolds Zafar (Kay Kay Menon) for his 'wrong' interpretation.

While the couplet underscores Akhtar's poetic sensibility (portrayed by Azmi, a poet), it also introduces Zafar as a disenchanted Muslim who interprets another couplet to reflect the immediacy of his community's suffering. In recontextualizing Faiz's couplet, *Naseem* depicts how texts can accrue new, politically charged meanings based on socio-historical conditions, paralleling the evolution of *Hindutva* reformations from Savarkar, Hedgewar, and Golwalkar.[111] Though united by anti-Muslim sentiment, these three figures reformulated *Hindutva* according to personal experiences: Hedgewar militarised it following the initial inception of Hindu-centric nationalism from Savarkar, while Golwalkar pushed toward fascistic extremes following Hedgewar.[112] These ideological shifts intensified *Hindutva*'s exclusionary stance, circulating increasingly virulent narratives. As Saumya Saxena notes, "ideas acquired different meanings and interpretation in Indian experience" (2018: 4). Similarly, Zafar's reinterpretation illustrates his paranoia and animosity toward Hindus. The scene stages a generational and ideological dichotomy within India's Muslim community – between Akhtar, shaped by the trauma of Partition, and Zafar, marked by contemporary frustration.

Zafar's attitude is characteristic of the "Muslim threat" within *Hindutva.* Kalim Siddiqui argues that the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (hereafter RSS, "National Volunteer Union") became established as a political group perceiving Muslims "as [the] 'threatening others'" (2017: 156) and those who splintered from the RSS, like Hedgewar, based their political and social notions of *Hindutva* entirely upon the "Muslim menace" (Bhagavan, 2008: 884). This leaves a vicious cycle of intercommunal hatred, and here, Zafar's hatred "changes" the interpretation of the couplet, like a "changing" of his Indian identity or allegiance. It is this direct "changing" of

[111] Please see: Savarkar, 2021 [1923]; Golwalkar, 1939. Also see: Visana (2021).
[112] For more on Golwalkar's fascist version of *Hindutva,* please see: Jal, 2015; Sen, 2015.

interpretations that causes anxiety for *Hindutva* ideologues, since *Hindutva* has actively attempted to erase Muslim culture in India,[113] and further attempting to by descending upon the Babri Masjid.

Shweta Sachdeva Jha explores the importance of poems in the Subcontinent, arguing that before the turn of the twentieth century, poetry was held to a higher regard than Urdu prose (2022: 110). *Naseem*'s depiction of poetry aids the escalation of the narrative's literal and figurative Hindu-Muslim tensions. Zafar, in adding his interpretation to the couplet, simultaneously proffers a new, contemporaneous meaning amidst the Hindu-Muslim tensions, showcasing "another interpretation of the meaning and end of life" (Embree, 1991: 385). Therefore, the act of Zafar's new explanation for the couplet signals the *Hindutva* anxiety that the presence of the Muslim figure – and their different thought to *Hindutva*'s utopian vision of a Hindu *Rashtra* ("Hindu nation") – is a plausible cause for concern for *Hindutva.*

[113] Please see: Banaji, 2018; Shibli, 2019; Khan & Lutful, 2021; Patel, 2022; Mufti, 2023.

III-IV: 'DIVORCE'

The theme of divorce first appears in a scene between Naseem and Zoya, her school friend, and is later realized with Akhtar. After Zoya tells Naseem that her father "won't return" because he has remarried, Naseem arrives back home, quizzing her mother about men remarrying, to which Ammi replies: "Because they wish to. What can be done?". Dumbfounded, the camera circles Naseem walking towards Akhtar's bedroom. It is here that Akhtar tells Naseem that a letter has arrived from her aunt in another city, assuring them of her safety amid communal unrest. But Naseem is not interested: "Grandpa…tell me, why didn't you remarry?", and Akhtar responds: "I was always afraid that she [Naseem's grandmother] would divorce me" (Fig. 7).

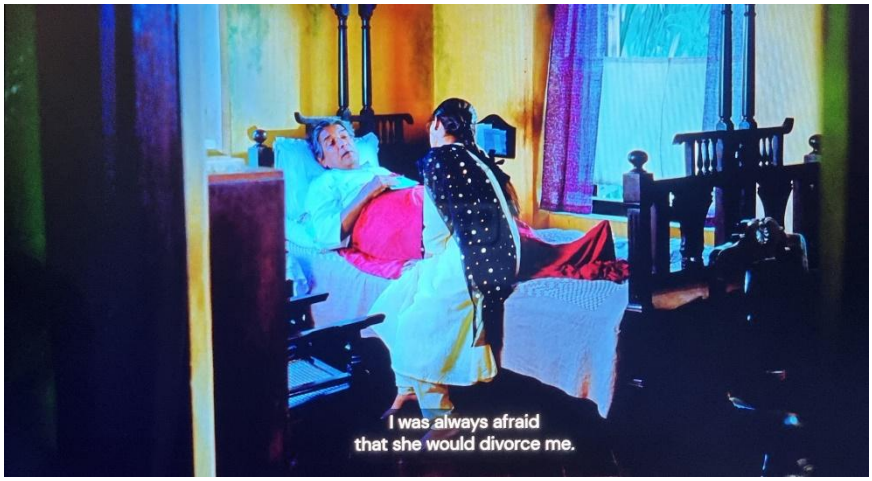


Figure 7: Akhtar's (Kaifi Azmi) fear of divorce, as Naseem (Mayuri Kango) listens.

In Islam, *talak* (divorce) and *nikah* (marriage) are governed by Islamic jurisprudential principles, with *nikah* regarded as a contractual union aimed to achieve "peace and tranquillity" and ensure "the continuation of the human race" (Zarean and Barzegar, 2016: 69). Akhtar's recollections of his married life are reflected via flashbacks, which are interspersed throughout *Naseem*. These memories contrast with the present violence, reinforcing Akhtar's emotional steadiness. This marital tranquillity extends to Naseem's parents, who remain composed despite viewing the television's imagery of communal unrest, in stark contrast to Mushtaq, who is unmarried and visibly agitated. In turn, Mushtaq's increasing hostility toward Hindus symbolise the alienation of disaffected Muslim youth in post-Partition India. Thus, marital harmony, depicted through Akhtar's reminiscence of his marriage and the union between Sajjid and Ammi, highlight the contrast between generational experiences of love and stability, and current social belonging in post-Partition India.

Whilst Akhtar discusses his fear of the *literal* divorce between himself and Naseem's grandmother, he fears the *figurative* divorce from India. Eviane Leidig chronicles how *Hindutva* anthropomorphized Durga, a major

Hindu goddess, to personify "the nation in the form of *Bharat Mata* (Mother India)", becoming a religious incarnation of India in female form (2020: 230). This allowed the concept of *Bharat Mata* to encompass both the imagination of *Hindutva* ideologies and the "physical" presence of India. Sadan Jha describes how "the anthropomorphic form of the nation, *Bharat Mata*, has been shown along with India's cartographic form, its map" (2004: 34) in numerous instances, becoming a symbol of the RSS's mission to turn India into a Hindu *Rashtra*, solidifying India as a visible, physical "mother" rather than an imagined one. Placing Durga over the map of India echoes a feminine aura, provoking the Hindu nationalist psyche. Whilst Durga, or other "Mother India" allusions are not directly mentioned, *Naseem* depicts the motherly figure of India via Akhtar's fear of the *figurative* severing between himself and India. This alludes to the notions that Muslims and Hindus have enjoyed a historical cultural symbiosis (Bhaskar & Allen, 2022); *Naseem,* therefore, appears to critique the potential expulsion of Muslims/Islam from Indian society via the growth of Hindu nationalism.

Bidisha Mukherjee describes the term *Bharat Mata* as having "gone through several phases of jingoism" (2019: 585), evidenced in *Hindutva*'s hijacking of *Bharat Mata* as a central concept within its ideals. Akhtar's fear that *India* might "divorce" him conjures emotions that signals Akhtar's potential expulsion from the marriage/nation. *Naseem,* therefore, portrays the othering of the Muslim subject by *disrupting* the idea that Muslims belong in India. In presenting Akhtar's fear of divorce, *Naseem* orients towards the potential exclusion of Muslims from Indian society by portraying faith and country – Islam and Pakistan – as intertwined threats. This fear, particularly around moving from India to Pakistan, is mentioned in an earlier scene where Sajjad, upon seeing a televised riot, asks Akhtar why he never left for Pakistan during the Partition. Akhtar replies: "Do you remember that tree in front of our house in Agra?... We liked it very much, especially your mother". This cements Akhtar's fear of a *figurative* divorce from India: he would not leave (divorce) India for Pakistan, a nation built exclusively for India's Muslims. However, the validity of this "divorce" is further materialised towards *Naseem*'s climactic ending and deserves a closer examination.

III-V: 'THE DIVORCE IS FINALISED – AKHTAR'S DEATH'

Akhtar symbolizes the "father" figure alongside *Bharat Mata*, embodying a generational connection to a more inclusive vision of India. His fear of being "divorced" from the nation resonates with his death on the 6th of December 1992 – the day of the Babri Masjid's demolition. As mentioned earlier, *Naseem*'s opening scene set on December 4th, reappears near the end, reestablishing the timeline. On December 5th, Naseem enters Akhtar's room to find him unexpectedly standing and gazing through an open window, before talking: "That tree…it's beautiful." His reflection and physical resurgence serve as a moment of clarity and symbolic transcendence, but the following day, Akhtar dies. In a new scene, the Holy Qur'an, Islam's holy book, is being read by an *imam* (an Islamic priest), and, as the camera slowly pans from the corpse of Akhtar, the diegetic sound of the Qur'anic recitation accompanies a panoramic view of the funeral attendings, ending on a silent, yet grief-stricken Naseem. I assert that Akhtar's death marks a personal and national rupture the coincides with the demolition.

The next sequence shifts to depict Zafar and a friend who, stopping at Mushtaq's neighbours, discuss the progression of the Babri Masjid's demolition, now complete. Zafar, aggrieved, pulls out a thick metal chain, but as he walks down, Akhtar's coffin passes and dominates the frame for a moment, as Zafar quietly proclaims: "You've chosen the right time to leave, grandpa…", wrapping the chain around his knuckles (Fig. 8).

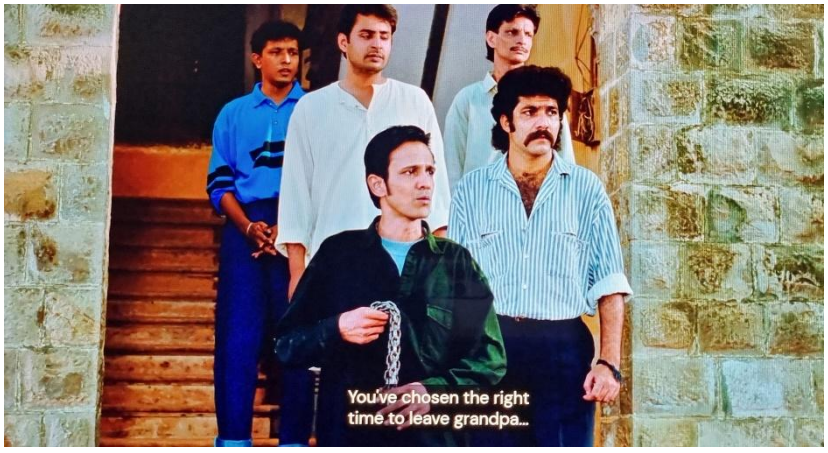


Figure 8: The disillusioned Muslim youth, with Zafar (Kay Kay Manon), centred, wrapping his knuckles in steel.

Akhtar's death and funeral, simultaneous with the Masjid's demolition, symbolizes Akhtar's fulfilment of his fear of divorce in two ways: firstly, Akhtar's death as a death of India's pluralistic tolerance and the birth of extreme nationalism; and secondly, Akhtar as a personified version of Islamic culture, "divorced" from "Mother India" via his passing and the physical demolition of the Babri Masjid, signifying the metaphorical erasure of Muslim presence and influence in India. Concurrently, Zafar stepping down from his friend's front steps, as his

friends follow, is allegorical of the mental descent of India's dejected Muslim youth. Bhaskar and Allen describe India's past as shaped by a "productive symbiosis of cultural forms and practices" (2022: 3), yet *Hindutva*'s ideological project seeks to overwrite this historic tethering by expunging Islam as a perceived foreign presence. *Naseem* visualizes the modern tenuousness of Hindu-Muslim relations, and as such, *Naseem* becomes an early instance of mainstream Hindi cinema concentrating on the consequences of Babri Masjid's demolition on the fabric of communal issues affecting India in the early 1990s.

IV: CASE STUDY - *ZAKHM* (*WOUND*, MAHESH BHATT, 1998)

Zakhm explores the immediate aftermath of the Babri Masjid's demolition, centring on Ajay (Ajay Devgn), a Hindu man whose mother, Noor Hussain Khan (Pooja Bhatt), who is secretly a Muslim, becomes a victim of intercommunal violence when she is set alight by Muslim rioters. While this occupies the main storyline in *Zakhm,* other sub-plots include Ajay's wife, Sonia (Sonali Bendre) and her fear of giving birth amid post-demolition Hindu-Muslim violence, and Ajay's relationship with Anand (Akshay Anand), Ajay's brother who aligns himself to a nationalist group led by Subodh (Ashutosh Rana). Set in Bombay, *Zakhm* alternates between two timelines, with the present being marked by communal unrest, and the past via flashbacks to Ajay's childhood, revealing complex familial tensions, including his relationship with his absent Hindu father, Raman Desai (Nagarjuna Akkineni), and his grandmother (Amardeep Jha), whose hatred for Noor stems from her Muslim identity.

Building on some themes introduced in *Naseem*, *Zakhm* intensifies its critique of Hindu nationalism by framing the post-demolition landscape as one dominated by a virulent nationalist agenda but also portrays the otherization of the Muslim figure as part of that critique. I will analyse *Zakhm*'s use of the television; divorce; flashbacks; and the Islamic burial, whilst also touching upon contexts relating to the *Bharat Mata* ("Mother India") and witchcraft. I will demonstrate how *Zakhm* reworks and escalates these motifs to depict the deepening crisis in Hindu-Muslim relations immediately after Babri Masjid's demolition.

IV-I: 'TELEVISING THE VIOLENCE'

Zakhm opens with Ajay, sat near a piano, walking towards the television's remote to turn it on. As the camera swoops from above, a newscaster offers a diegetic analysis of Bombay's violence, commenting that the "riots in Bombay actually started when a few dejected people after the demolition of the Babri Masjid lit fire to the Radhabhai Chawl in Jogeshwari". Light string instruments accompany a series of quick mid-range shots of Ajay and violence on the television (Fig. 1 & Fig. 2). As the newscaster offers a statistical death and injury toll, Ajay looks towards a bedroom door, turning the television off and walking back towards the piano before Sonia enters, who notes that it is six in the morning.

Figure 1: Ajay (Ajay Devgn) witnesses the horror of communal violence.

Figure 2: Bombay on fire.

The scene's use of the television, the establishment of the time of day and the newscaster's diegetic dialogue depict the escalation of Hindu-Muslim violence literally and metaphorically. Firstly, the television captures the attention of Ajay, the *protagonist*. The viewer also observes the horrifying violence and barbarity that Ajay is witnessing, alleviating the *imagination* of barbarity in favour of visual brutality. Secondly, the television's diegetic audio is clear and concise, sharing information regarding the senseless brutality in Bombay with the viewer. Thirdly, the time in which the scene takes place – six a.m. – indicates the "early morning" of violence within the narrative itself, proposing that the violence is in its early stages. Collectively, *Zakhm*'s opening scene echoes the escalation in the Hindu-Muslim violence, a vast contrast to *Naseem.*

The newscaster indicates that the violence began when those who were "dejected" about the Babri Masjid's destruction (Muslims) had lit a "fire to the Radhabhai Chawl in Jogeshwari". Andrej Tusicisny's documents how a Hindu family of six in Radhabhai Chawl were trapped in their one-bedroom apartment, before "someone blocked their door and threw a petrol bomb in through the window" (2013: 1), causing the family to die. A rumour began thereafter that a teenage girl in the fire was handicapped and raped by Muslim men, and it was those men who committed this massacre. This event spurred radicalized Hindu groups to aggressively respond, sparked by

inflammatory articles written in an official paper by the Shiv Sena[114] to find and eliminate Muslims. Sikata Banerjee argues that the Shiv Sena used this incident "to call the Hindu's of Mumbai to battle" (2005: 106), systematically prowling the streets for Muslims (I will touch upon this "prowling for Muslims" later in this chapter). There appears to be a clear link between the "six" members of the Hindu family losing their lives to the "six a.m." time of the scene: a metaphorical "beginning" of the Bombay riots within *Zakhm.*

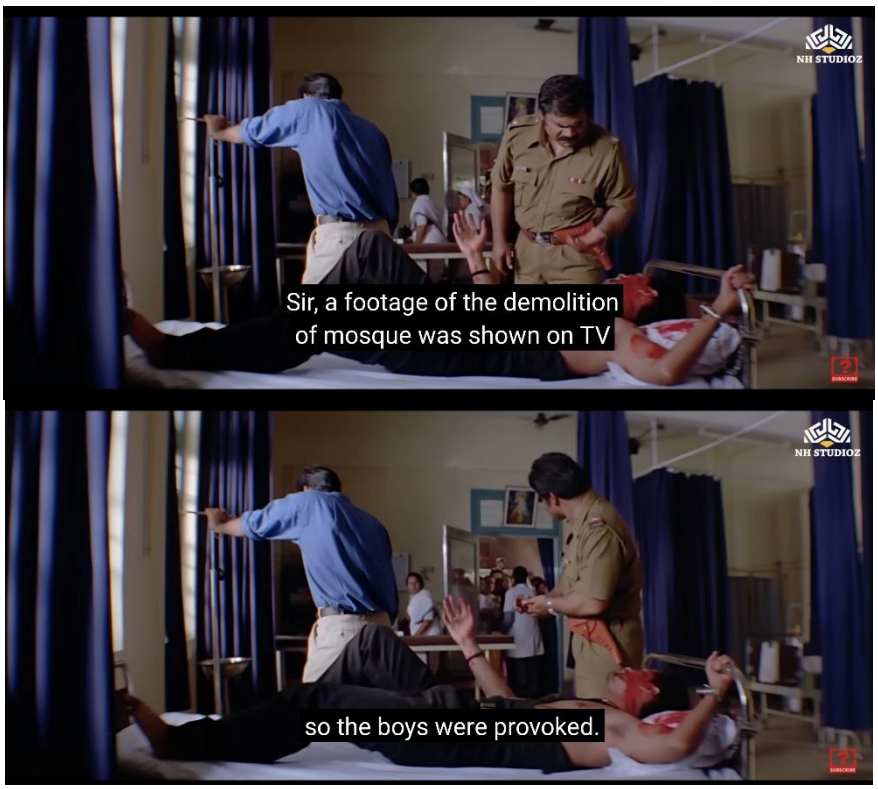
The televised news coverage operates as a narrative device that amplifies anti-Muslim sentiment by portraying Muslims as instigators of communal unrest. Staunch *Hindutva* ideologue M. S. Golwalkar claims that Jews were displaced by "the engines of destruction loose under the name of Islam" (1939: 62); a warning of Islam's "unparalleled cruelty" (1939: 63) towards *Hindutva*'s utopian vision of the Hindu *Rashtra*. In this context, *Zakhm* employs the television to reinforce the "Muslim threat" propaganda, visually and ideologically aiding the deterioration of Hindu-Muslim relations within the film. Through a clever narrative convention, *Zakhm* depicts the escalation in violence by "*escalating"* the television's function compared to *Naseem*, directly aligning media representation with *Hindutva* discourse.

The television's visualisation of violence evolves into a consequence of perceived Muslim aggression later in *Zakhm.* In a short scene, Ajay saves a Muslim man from being beaten by his brother, Anand, and a gang of Hindu nationalists, who accuse the Muslim man of trying to sell a gold pendant belonging to Noor (Ajay and Anand's mother). Anand tells Ajay that the unnamed Muslim man doused Noor and set her alight, and this is confirmed in a short scene between the Muslim man and Ajay. Tied to a hospital bed by handcuffs, the camera is stationary, with no music, as the Muslim man pleads for forgiveness: "Sir, a footage of the demolition of the

[114] The Shiv Sena is a right-wing political group which championed *Hindutva* nationalism and headed by founder Bal Thackeray (1926-2012).

mosque was shown on TV, so the boys were provoked! Sir, his mom came in front of us! So, Ayub told me to burn her! I just doused her with fuel!" (Fig. 3 & Fig. 4).

This scene demonstrates television's hypnotic effects. Through the newscaster's insinuation of the riot's origins and the Muslim assailant's confession, the television becomes a meta-commentary on the very breakdown of Hindu-Muslim relations that the film depicts. In televising the violence, the Muslim youth in *Zakhm* are provoked, furthering the *Hindutva* notion surrounding the perceived "Muslim threat" from Indian Muslims,



Figures 3 & 4: Ajay (Ajay Devgn) turns his back on his mother's attacker, as he tries to excuse his behaviour, blaming the televising of the Babri Masjid's demolition as provocation.

illustrating the apparently inherent tendency of real-world Muslim brutality from the *Hindutva* perspective. Furthermore, Noor's death at the end of the narrative, because of her burns, implies a perceived, intrinsic link between Islam and violence. As such, Ashutosh Varshney et al. assert that Hindu nationalists "speak of the violent nature of Islam and its history" (2021: 212), often calling for violence against Muslims, a sentiment reflected in an earlier scene which showcased Anand and his gang violently attacking the Muslim man. Additionally, *Zakhm* depicts Noor's assailant by portraying his acknowledgment of his participation in Noor's attack: a direct assault upon the *Bharat Mata,* further crystallizing the perceived "Muslim threat" as a tangible and viable peril within *Hindutva. Zakhm*'s televising of post-demolition violence functions as a critique of media-driven *Hindutva* propaganda, ultimately reinforcing its condemnation of far-right nationalism.

IV-II: 'BHARAT MATA'

The concept surrounding the "Muslim threat" to the Hindu *Rashtra* are explored through the *Bharat Mata* ('Mother India') and is thread throughout *Zakhm*.

Figure 5: Ajay (Ajay Devgn) explains his reason Sonia (Sonali Bendre) for not leaving India.

The theme of "mother" and "country" emerges early in *Zakhm* through an exchange between Ajay and Sonia, who wishes to move back to England. After Ajay repeatedly refuses to leave India for England, Sonia asks why she must bear the burden of childbirth amidst rising Hindu-Muslim tensions, to which Ajay insists: "This is my home. If there's a fire here, I'll put it out. Or I will get burnt in it. I won't take refuge in someone else's house", before concluding that "A mother and country can't be replaced" (Fig. 5). The scene is short, but foregrounds the emotional conflation of nation and motherhood, framing Ajay's nationalism as personal and moral, despite the surrounding communal unrest.

The scene is broken by a telephone call from a nationalist, telling Ajay that Anand wants to speak to him. As the nationalist passes by the camera, the camera lifts to showcase a vast group listening to Subodh, their leader. Menacingly, the camera zooms closer to Subodh's visage, framing him as a demagogic preacher. Anand stands close to Subodh, unaware that Ajay has heard Subodh's calls for retaliation: "We've forgotten our ancestors, their

values, and customs. … Tell me, do we let these thorns keep growing? Or with the help of youth leaders like Anand, we'll rip them off the ground and throw them!" (Fig. 6).

Figure 6: Subodh (Ashutosh Rana), centre addresses the rally, with Anand (Akshay Anand) standing to his right.

As the camera whips back and forth between Ajay and Anand, now on the phone, Ajay warns of Subodh's influence, to the annoyance of Anand. Their conversation dominates the audio throughout this scene, accompanied by several jump cuts between the two brothers. This absence of non-diegetic sound solidifies the seriousness of their conversation when Ajay and Anand learn that Noor, their mother, has not arrived to be with Ajay, underscoring the emotional cost of the unrest.

These two scenes proffer two sides to the *Bharat Mata* context, particularly around patriotism. Ajay embodies the tolerant Hindu, realised in his line "a mother and country can't be replaced". Delivered with a calm stocisim, and with light tears highlighted in a close-up shot, Ajay promotes a tolerant version of the *Bharat Mata,* realised in the parallelism of "country" and "mother". Sumathi Ramaswamy describes how *Bharat Mata* substantiated the embodiment of India's national territory (2010: 1), wrenching itself free from Britain's colonial hold. In Ajay's defiance of leaving for England, this scene signals the metaphorical detachment of the tether that binds India ("Ajay") to Britain.

By contrast, Anand's devotion to *Bharat Mata* is moulded by far-right nationalism. Ramaswamy observes that the *Bharat Mata* "came to be perceived as escalating the irrevocable rupture … between its two dominant religious communities, Hindu and Muslim" (2010: 2), marking a shift from anti-colonial attitudes to Hindu nationalist sentiments. This reorientation is evidenced in Anand's priorities by neglecting to inform Ajay that his mother has left, a signal that his imagination is captivated by a reconstituted national "mother". Kanika Sharma highlights that in Hindu tradition, the land is evoked as "*Dharti Mata* (Earth Mother)" but notes scholarly concern that the transition to *Mother India* was politically motivated by reclaiming the nation from "foreign" Islamic influences (2018: 8). This politicized vision resonates with the rhetoric that Anand supports through Subodh, where

he likens Muslims to "thorns". Subodh's militant language mirrors the metaphor-heavy prose of Savarkar and Golwalkar, allowing *Zakhm* to critique Hindu nationalist appropriation of religious and cultural symbols to propagate anti-Muslim sentiments.

The group under Subodh represents the "sons" of the *Bharat Mata.* Sharma surveys India's concept of the Mother Goddess, superimposed as a cartography of India urging "her sons to drive away the foreign rulers" (2018: 27), particularly under Hindu nationalist narratives. Sharma claims that it becomes "antithetical to Islam" (2018: 27), categorising Muslims as a threat against the "Mother", with the "foreign rulers" drawing upon language used by Savarkar and Golwalkar to paint Muslims as "invaders" of the *Bharat Mata.*[115] While Ramaswamy asserts that several variations of cartographic maps of India were "associated with Britannia and hence with the British Empire" (2010: 63), later iterations witnessed the "the monochromatic saffron flag associated with Hindu nationalism [replacing] the more inclusive tricolor national flag" (Ramaswamy, 2010: 39), becoming an explicit emblem linking *Hindutva* to the *Bharat Mata* analogy for its political and pro-Hindu sentiment. Additionally, Sikata Banerjee highlights how the Shiv Sena sought "to call the Hindus of Mumbai to battle" (2005: 106) following the riots, while Irfan Engineer notes, communal rioting in India "became the tool to mobilize and consolidate Hindus across caste and regions" (2018: 113). Throughout this scene, Subodh's language emits a certain "prowling for Muslims", explicit in his language to "purify" the country of "these thorns".

Arvind Sharma affirms that the distinction between Hinduism and *Hindutva* was pushed to the fore because "the word 'Hindu' is common to both" (2020: 43), attesting to the complex nature of their definitions. Cynthia Ann Humes elaborates further, arguing that the hijacking of "Hinduism as a unified, protean 'world' religion defined by its tolerance and vague spirituality" (2012: 189) by Hindu nationalists suggests *Hindutva*'s overlap with Hindu doctrine. In depicting two opposing perspectives towards "Mother India", *Zakhm* presents both the tolerant Hindu (Ajay) and the extreme nationalist (Anand), portraying the complex differentiation between Hinduism and *Hindutva*, respectively.

However, Prasenjit Duara argues that *Bharat Mata,* as a concept, is relatively new, and that several nationalist groups have:

[115] Please see: Savarkar, 2021 (1923); Golwalkar, 1939.

… [tried] to build [a] unity by constantly referring to *Bharat Mata* … a concept that didn't exist before the Independence movement. *Bharat Mata* is indeed a loaded term, for not only is '*bharat'* a Sanskrit word, but the rallying cry of "Mother India" reveals that, ultimately, [the] groups are appealing to politics, not to religion.

(Duara, 1991: 49)

Duara's understanding of *Bharat Mata* is portrayed through Ajay's difficulty in replacing the "mother" and "country" with one another, reflecting a "pre-independence" attitude, whilst Anand's presence, acknowledged and lauded by Subodh, highlights an unequivocal political undertone. Despite this, Ajay and Anand's kinship as brothers is allegorical of the close ties between Hinduism and *Hindutva,* further substantiating the complexity of *Zakhm*'s portrayal of the *Bharat Mata* within the context of post-demolition communal violence.

IV-III: 'THE IMPORTANCE OF *ZAKHM*'S FLASHBACKS'

Zakhm devotes over half its runtime to two flashbacks, portraying emotionally fraught events from Ajay's childhood. The first flashback depicts Raman's mother's prejudice towards Noor and Raman's subsequent re-marriage to a Hindu woman, Nimi (Namrata Dhamija). The second flashback presents the culmination of Ajay's grandmother's hostility towards Noor, the revelation of Noor's hidden Islamic faith to Ajay, the birth of Anand and Raman's death and funeral. The flashbacks evoke Ajay's present emotions and are key to understanding the escalation of tensions in a post-demolition Bombay. As I will critically analyse certain aspects portrayed in the flashbacks later in this chapter, this section is solely dedicated to highlighting *Zakhm*'s "escalation" in its use of flashbacks as a cinematic tool when compared to *Naseem.*

Beginning with the first flashback, *Zakhm* illustrates early manifestations of communal tension through the portrayal of Raman's mother, Ajay's grandmother. Depicted with a visceral hatred for Noor, young Ajay (Kunal Khemu) struggles to understand his grandmother's hatred for his mother and for himself, portrayed in a scene where he calls his grandmother to speak to his father, Raman. Several jump cuts between Ajay and Raman's mother spotlight her visceral hatred, with the absence of non-diegetic further forcing the viewer to listen to Raman's mother's words carefully: "Look, hereafter if you call my son your dad, I'll chop you off! A mistress' son!". Alarmed and upset, Ajay awakes to Arabic chants the following morning, unaware that Noor is offering Islamic prayers. This flashback moment foregrounds Ajay's emotional burden, establishing Ajay's foundational trauma which informs Ajay's outlook in the present.

Towards the end of the first flashback, Ajay's past trauma cinematically bridges to the present through a powerful diegetic smash cut. Here, young Ajay attempts to blow out smoke from a scorched piece of clothing on the ironing board (Noor became distracted after Ajay reveals Raman's marriage to her) and the film abruptly cuts to Anand in the present, shouting "I'll set everything alight!" as he violently overturns a charity stand upon arrival at the hospital Noor is being treated at. This juxtaposition links the past and present through the motif of fire but also highlights Ajay's dual role as someone repeatedly forced to extinguish emotional and communal conflagrations. The transition to the hospital scene in the current timeline underscores Ajay's unresolved trauma from his past, shaping his traumatic present.

Zakhm's second flashback escalates the story arc from the first. In this sequence, *Zakhm* spotlights Ajay and his struggle with his father's re-marriage. It also depicts Anand's birth (off-screen), itself leading to several pivotal moments towards the end of *Zakhm* via Raman's death and funeral (I will explore these later in this chapter). Importantly, following Raman's death, Noor reveals her Muslim faith to Ajay, crystallising Ajay's present moral and emotional burden.

Building upon these events, *Zakhm* employs two extended flashback sequences as a temporal articulation of Ajay's "wound" – Noor's secret Muslim faith. Unlike *Naseem*, where flashbacks are brief and sporadic, *Zakhm* constructs its narrative primarily through these retrospections, intensifying themes such as marriage, religious concealment, and familial rupture, functioning to structure *Zakhm*'s emotional and political core. The first flashback is triggered by Anwar Hashmi, a Muslim journalist who, overhearing Ajay on the phone, questions Ajay about his mother's identity. Anwar's confusion – having heard Noor call out to Allah while being wheeled into hospital - alongside Ajay's gaze at a stained-glass hospital window, prompts a "flashback-for-narrative," in which, as Lawrence Luchoomun writes, the past is recounted "for and towards the viewer" (2012: 24). The second flashback is introduced when Ajay confides in Sonia, disclosing Noor's faith. This constitutes what Luchoomun defines as a "flashback-for-narrative (to [the] listening subject)"—a past event recounted to another character within the diegesis (2012: 24), thus bridging Ajay's private trauma with collective witnessing, reinforcing the emotional weight of Ajay's "wound".

Figure 7: Noor (Pooja Bhatt) hugs Ajay (Kunal Khemu) following the revelation of her Muslim faith.

The second flashback is particularly important because, following this religious revelation, Noor demands Ajay not only to "hide this wound" (Fig. 7) from Anand (by this point, Anand was born), but also for an Islamic funeral upon her death, a moment allegorical of necropolitics in India. Achille Mbembé defines necropolitics as the sovereign "capacity to dictate who may live and who must die" (2003: 11), expanding Michel Foucault's concept of

biopower as "that domain of life over which power has taken control" (2003: 12). Marina Gržinić elaborates, arguing that necropolitical regimes create conditions under which "misery, exclusion and death" are "manufactured, administered, normalised and, ultimately, aesthetised" (2018: 17). These regimes decide not only "whom to help and how much" but also "whom not to help" (2018: 17), contributing to what Gržinić terms "racialisation": a structure of "hyperviolent discrimination, dispossession, exploitation and dehumanisation" (2018: 20) that permits political entities to decide who can live or die. Similarly, Taha Abdul Rauf, drawing on Johan Galtung (1990), explains how "structural, cultural and direct violence [achieve] a systemic exclusion of a population" (2018: 146), each contributing to the marginalisation of Muslims. Collectively, these frameworks highlight certain motivations for racialised violence, creating an "enemy" that furthers political ascension and dominance over other races. Mbembé argues that instances of power fictionalize a notion of an enemy (2003: 16); as such, I assert *Hindutva* aligns with necropolitical logic by constructing the Muslim body as a racialised "enemy," fictionalised for political consolidation and dominance. In *Zakhm*, Noor's plea for a Muslim burial reveals that even *death* is precarious; *Zakhm* foregrounds this necropolitical violence and critiques the systemic denial of Muslim life *and* death within an increasingly exclusionary Hindu nation.

Zakhm's flashbacks escalate the otherization of the Muslim subject when compared to the flashbacks utilized in *Naseem.* While *Naseem*'s flashbacks recall intercommunal harmony, *Zakhm*'s trace and spotlight Ajay's experiences with anti-Muslim sentiment, portraying a powerful confrontation between familial love and nationalist ideology through members of Ajay's family. The flashback, thus, emerges as a narrative tool for *Zakhm* to interrogate the deterioration of Hindu-Muslim relations and, in conjunction with necropolitical theory, questions the precarious status of the Muslim subject in a nation increasingly defined by nationalism.

IV-IV: 'MARRIAGE & DIVORCE'

The theme of marriage and divorce is explored extensively in *Zakhm,* depicted through Noor's inability to remarry Raman because of Raman's mother, as well as Raman's subsequent remarriage to Nimi, a Hindu. *Hindutva* apologists often refer to the term "love-jihad",[116] a predicated notion that Muslim men marry Hindu women to convert them. *Zakhm* does not depict this; rather, it places Noor at the centre of this prejudice, switching the roles, which is extremely important for both this section and the next section of this analysis.

A pivotal scene between Raman and his mother depicts this innate fear of interfaith relations. The scene begins with Raman who, upon opening his wardrobe, has a picture of Noor and Ajay behind his clothes. As he pulls back the clothes, ethereal choral music plays, and a light from ceiling elegantly illuminates the picture, almost like an angelic shrine to his beloved. As several close-ups of Noor, Ajay and Raman accompany the choral-like non-diegetic music, Raman's mother enters, and the non-diegetic music immediately halts. Raman's mother moves closer and, upon seeing the picture of Noor and Ajay, covers her eyes in horror and disgust (Fig. 8 & Fig. 9). As she begins chanting Sanskrit prayers, Raman exclaims: "I've decided, mom. I'll bring them here. Forever." As non-diegetic music, foreboding and "horror"-like in its composition dominates the audio following Raman's decision,

[116] For a more in-depth discussion on the "love-*jihad*" conspiracy, please see this thesis' next chapter.

his mother pleads with Raman not to destroy his life. Succumbing to Raman's adamance to marry Noor, his mother douses herself in petrol to kill herself, saved only by Raman's restraining.

Figures 8 & 9: Raman (Nagarjuna Akkineni) and his mother (Amardeep Jha) look at a photo of Noor and Ajay, before his mother covers her eyes in disgust.

I argue that this scene presents Raman's mother as the personification of *Hindutva,* consumed by fear that a Muslim (Noor) threatens the Hindu body (Raman), with Raman embodying tolerant and secular Hindu. There are several interpretations highlighted under this context.

Rauf describes how *Hindutva*-aligned political groups, like the Hindu Mahasabha and the RSS, weaponised the notion of the "Muslim threat" by "creating a mythology … from Alaudin Khilji … about the forceful abduction of Hindu women, their rape, pillage, and conversion" (2018: 148). As mentioned earlier, *Zakhm* switches these roles by centring Noor, a female, in this prejudicial context. This is significant because it allows *Zakhm* to critique *Hindutva* nationalism and its recruitment of women, especially since *Hindutva*'s brand of muscular nationalism has historically predicated itself on patriarchal, "muscular" standards,[117] resting "on the masculinisation of citizenship, as a male warrior or protector of the feminine nation represented as the mother" (Ghosh & Banerjee, 2018: 14).

Palak Singh and Gopal Krishan Parihar note that *Hindutva,* since at least the 1980s, have enrolled women to voice its ideology, which has continued to be negotiated (2024: 143).[118] Paola Bacchetta asserts that the Rashtra

[117] For an understanding of *Hindutva's* "muscular" predication, please see: Brosius, 2002; Murty, 2009; Banerjee, 2012; Kaul, 2017; Rauf, 2018; Kinnvall, 2019; Vijayan, 2019; Leidig, 2020; Baishya, 2022; Pande, 2022.
[118] Please also see: Das, 2006; Singh, 2016.

Sevika Samiti ("National Women's Volunteer Committee") – a separate, "female" counterpart to the RSS – not only modelled its foundation on the RSS's ideology of *Hindutva,* but allowed women to be "visible and central" within *Hindutva* discourse (1996: 140). Throughout *Zakhm,* Raman's mother quips with vile verbal abuse about Noor, disgusted at the thought that Raman would marry a Muslim, exemplifying "feminine" *Hindutva* ideals surrounding interfaith relations and the perceived "Muslim threat" in *Hindutva* discourse.[119] K. Chanderdeep Singh asserts that within the construction of militant (Hindu) nationalism, Hindu women were constructed with an overt aggressiveness, a "masculine femininity" that allowed them to be gladiator-like in their hostility (2016: 512).[120] Here, Raman's mother's emotional explosion is accompanied by a *physical* revulsion (her covering her eyes after seeing Noor and Ajay's picture); a *verbal* disgust ("Who's face did you show me today?"); and *audible* anguish in her Sanskrit chanting and foreboding music. When Raman intends to bring Noor and Ajay to live with them, her *physical* aggressiveness surfaces by grabbing Raman and shaking him, vocalising her disbelief. The accompanying crescendo of piano, strings and sitar sounds signal the "peak" of Raman's mother's angry; an audible sound-cue to her aggressive, *Hindutva*-centric personality.

Another example stems from this scene involves the ideas surrounding "victim" and "victor" mentality in *Hindutva.* K. Chanderdeep Singh asserts that the women within Hindu-nationalist doctrine "represents both as a flag bearer of family honour (and of the nation) as well as *matrishakti*, i.e. victim and victor at a same time" (2016: 493). In this scene, Raman's mother presents this duality of "victim" and "victor". Beginning with the "victim" mentality, Raman's mother embodies the archetypal "victim" within the *Hindutva* framework by positioning herself as the last defender of Hindu identity and cultural purity within her family.

This is further solidified upon Raman's mother's threat to self-immolate, functioning as a militant and gendered act of martyrdom for the Hindu *Rashtra*. Since Hindu women are seen as "carriers of culture" (Rauf, 2018: 148), her sacrifice, should Noor be allowed into the family, intimates the notion that the *Bharat Mata* becomes destroyed by the inclusivity of Muslims. However, as Raman's mother does *not* follow through, her threat elucidates that *if* the "Hindu" (Raman) panders to secularism and allows the "Muslim" (Noor) in, particularly in a sexual way (i.e., marriage), then "India" (or *Hindutva* i.e., the mother) will perish. R. B. Bhagat comments on U. N. Mukherji's "phobia of Hindus being swallowed" (2001: 4335) because of the demographic rise of Muslims in

[119] Jayanth Deshmukh describes how "Hindutva followers are against exogamy" (2021: 8) and usually keep to caste systems when marrying.
[120] Please also see: Das, 2006.

India;[121] this scene portrays the perceived detrimental consequences, particularly to Raman's mother (read, the *Bharat Mata*) to the Hindu *Rashtra* and the lives of India's "indigenous" peoples: Hindus.[122]

Additionally, this also "Others" Noor, since the Rashtra Sevika Samiti enabled Hindu women to view the female Muslim Other "as a threat to the unity of the Hindu family" (Bacchetta, 1996: 155). By depicting such a violent reaction from Raman's mother to the mere *potentiality* of Noor's existence in Raman's life, *Zakhm* reiterates Noor's "otherness": a destabiliser that threatens to contaminate the imagined Hindu domestic (Raman's mother's family), echoing *Hindutva* anxieties towards Muslim in the *Hindutva* national space. In essence, the gender switch and subsequent categorization of Noor (Muslim), Raman (secular Hindu) and Raman's mother (Hindutva) permit *Zakhm* to depict the escalation of *Hindutva*'s rhetoric differently than in *Naseem* – it is not simply a "muscular" ideology, but an ideology that has also employed women to further its anti-Muslim agenda.

Raman's mother embodies *Hindutva* anxieties surrounding Muslim lineage, expressing deep prejudice toward Ajay as a symbolic carrier of Islamic culture (I will discuss this further in this analysis later). As mentioned earlier, there is a short scene where Ajay calls his grandmother's home, seeking his father. After slamming the phone down on Ajay, she whispers: "Mudblood!" in reference to Noor's Islamic faith (Fig. 10).

Rauf describes the notion that *Hindutva* ideologues fear interreligious marriage as there is "a danger to

Figure 10: Ajay's grandmother (Amardeep Jha) slams the phone down on Ajay, before calling him a derogatory name.

their future generations" (2018: 148). Raman's eventual remarriage to Nimi, a Hindu woman, following his mother's suicide attempt, seeks to preserve the Hindu lineage and appease his mother – representing a figurative "rescue" of the nation-mother (*Bharat Mata*) from the perceived Muslim contamination. As Anjali Widge notes, "the identity of a woman in India is formed in relation to the values, meanings and symbols of Indian society"

[121] Please also see: Mukherji (1909).
[122] Please see: Savarkar, 2021 [1923]; Golwalkar, 1939.

(2002: 61); yet Noor's exclusion suggests that Islamic identity is incompatible with this framework (similar to the necropolitical contexts I mentioned earlier). Ramaswamy similarly asserts that women under Hindu nationalist discourse are tasked with "the production and reproduction of the nation itself," but must do so by remaining "essentially, authentically, and visibly 'Indian', even Hindu" (2010: 238). *Zakhm* reinforces this ideological framework through Raman's mother, whose devotion to Sanskritic rituals and rejection of Noor marks her as a "proper Hindu," thereby positioning Noor as the Muslim "Other," incompatible with Hindu-centric visions of India.

Lastly, in a shorter, pivotal scene, Raman, having been caught by Ajay witnessing his marriage to Nimi, arrives at Noor's home. Noor still wears a golden pendant, gifted to her by Raman upon their previously hidden nuptials, but hands it back: "I cannot continue to act like your wife anymore, Raman. I free you from this defiled and illicit relationship." Deeply hurt, Raman admits that he got married without telling Noor but claims he only loves Noor: "I couldn't fight for you with my mum. I lost. … Please don't take off this nuptial chain ever. Not even after I die." Crying in each other's arms, it is implied that they consummate their love, resulting in the birth of Anand later in the narrative (Fig. 11).

Figure 11: Raman (Nagarjuna Akkineni) and Noor (Pooja Bhatt) embrace.

The nuptial pendant metaphorically ties Noor to Raman. Despite his marriage to Nimi, Noor's nuptial pendant symbolizes the "Muslim" maintaining a claim on "India's history". As mentioned previously, Raman's mother can be interpreted as *Hindutva* personified: the fragility and eventual break up of Noor and Raman's relationship epitomizes the fragility and eventual breakdown of Hindu-Muslim relations through *Hindutva* sentiments. In keeping the nuptial chain, Noor cements her position in "India", but at a severely detrimental cost.

Noor, following this scene, tells Ajay that Raman "can never be ours", suggesting that Raman cannot belong to Noor due to Hindu secularism being under threat by *Hindutva* forces, embodied through the portrayal of Raman's mother. As his mother opposes Noor having any involvement in Raman's life, this interpretation befits the

Hindutva anxiety of the "Muslim threat" to the "Hinduness" of Indian life,[123] and is later materialized at Raman's funeral, itself worthy of further examination later in this chapter.

[123] Please see: Savarkar, 2021 [1923]; Golwalkar, 1939.

IV-V: 'THE WITCH'

I assert that "the witch" is *Zakhm*'s most important motif. Throughout the narrative, Noor is consistently called derogatory names by Ajay's grandmother, with epithets such as "enchantress", "low life", "witch" "cursed woman", and "mistress" commonplace in Ajay's grandmother's vocabulary. The "snake" also makes a reappearance in one short statement, completing a link with *Naseem* and escalating the tarnishing of the Muslim image, provoked by Islamophobic sentiments central to *Hindutva.*

In a short scene, Raman, Nimi and Raman's mother settle down for dinner when Ajay calls his grandmother's home. As Nimi answers, the camera focuses on Nimi as the music turns sinister in its composition: Noor has given birth to a baby boy. Following the call, the music shifts to a hopeful configuration, as Raman asks Nimi what happened. With a slight smile and tears in her eyes, Nimi tells Raman: "You should go. Shanti Nursing Home. She needs you right now. She delivered a baby boy." As Raman thanks Nimi and leaves, the hopeful non-diegetic sound abruptly stops as the camera zooms out to portray his mother, paranoid, asks a series of questions: "Where are you going? Where are you sending him? Who called? Why aren't you saying anything?". Raman tells his mother Noor has delivered a boy, prompting deprecatory epithets spewing from Raman's mother, who calls Noor a "snake" that wants to tie Raman down. While the snake was metaphorical of the Muslim subject in *Naseem,* here, in *Zakhm,* the metaphorical "snake" is applied literally to Noor. This allows two contexts to come to fruition: *Zakhm* is critical of the deplorable views of Raman's mother, and, consequently, *Zakhm, through* this critique, further alienates and "others" Noor. By using the term "snake" to denote Noor, *Zakhm* escalates the interpretation of the Muslim subject as the "snake" previously introduced in *Naseem*.

Figure 12: Raman's mother in agony at the birth of Noor's second son to Raman.

Moments later, in an explicit show of hatred Raman's mother screams in Raman's face: "She's a witch, she's a witch!" (Fig. 12). A frustrated Raman screams for her to stop, smashing their glass dining table, before

proclaiming that it is his *mother* tying him down, not Noor. Dazed at his new-found fatherhood, Raman leaves and, swerving his car to miss a vehicle, stops in the path of a truck, killing him instantly.

The scene introduces two contexts: the term "witch" to describe Noor, and Raman's comment that *his mother* ties him down, not Noor. M. Reza Pirbhai argues that Orientalist misrepresentations of Muslims were like those found in the writings of "Voice of India", a publishing house specialising in the writing and distribution of Hindu nationalist texts (2008: 43). Consequently, the scene reflects Orientalist modes of representing Muslims as "demons", and *Hindutva*'s rhetoric of the "Muslim threat", reinforced upon Noor's death later.

Aravind Jeyakumar Moniraj, who discusses witchcraft practices in India and comments on the Sanskrit term *dayan* (or *dain,* a word Raman's mother uses), describes how they are "possessed by special spirits and to control humans" (2020: 108). Two interpretations can be made with regards to the "special spirit" – Islam and the snake. As previously established, Raman's mother's prejudice towards Noor stems from Noor's Muslim faith, which could symbolize the "special spirit" that Raman's mother fears. Another interpretation arises when focusing on Raman's mother's dialogue: "That snake wants to tie you down in relationships!". As previously discussed, the snake is a revered creature within subaltern Hinduism and can be attributed to the "special spirit" that Moniraj describes. In either case, the interpretation stands that a spiritual force – malevolent in nature, be it Islam or the snake – has overtaken Noor.

Raman's mother accuses Noor of using childbirth to manipulate Raman, exclaiming, "Wasn't she satisfied giving birth to one child that she went on to give birth to another to solicit him?" – an explicit expression of her anxiety over Raman's children's Muslim lineage. Mytheli Sreenivas identifies a broader anxiety in Indian reproductive discourse, where "reproductive reformers began to represent individual reproductive practices as … a threat to progress, prosperity, and development" (2021: 6). Raman's mother's suspicion aligns with these anxieties, fearing that Noor's reproduction endangers the continuity of her and Raman's Hindu lineage. Sreenivas also cites Mahadev Govind Ranade, who advocated for religion, specifically Hinduism, rather than economics to guide reproductive reform (2021: 52), marginalising Muslim reproduction. Furthermore, the scene evokes Taha Abdul Rauf's assessment of the "Dying Race Syndrome," wherein Hindu nationalist fears of Muslim demographic growth justify aggression against Indian Muslims (2018: 147).

Raman's comment that it is his *mother* that ties him down mirrors *Hindutva*'s suppression of secularist and inclusive contexts in India. Alluding to *Hindutva*'s suffocation of India's inclusivity, Saumya Saxena argues that secularism in 1990s India became endangered due to the surge in Hindu nationalism (2018: 1), embodied here in Raman's mother's attitude towards Noor. Abhinav Mehrotra and Konina Mandal conclude that the deep-seated fragility between *Hindutva* and secularist/inclusive ideas is still prevalent (2021). Here, Raman's comment critiques *Hindutva*'s rigid framework that constantly frictions against India's secularity. Raman's mother personifies this concept fully: Raman, (secular in his nature due to his love for Noor, a Muslim) because of *his mother* (*Hindutva*), is hindered moving forward, a cinematic questioning of whether such an ideology is fit for contemporary India.

"The witch" motif is further cemented at Raman's funeral. This is the only scene in which an encounter occurs between Noor, Ajay, and Raman's mother, as well as Nimi, now Raman's widow. Noor, crying as she holds a new-born Anand, is hugged tightly by Ajay as they walk to the entrance of a temple. This moment is accompanied by non-diegetic music reminiscent of a funeral chorus, underscored by the diegetic sound of Raman's mother's wailing offscreen: "He left me forever!"

After noticing that Ajay, Noor and baby Anand have arrived, and heading towards the coffin, Raman's mother storms the scene: "What are you doing here? How dare you come here after killing my son?". The ethereal, choral-like music has stopped, and the only audio the viewer hears is the scathing dialogue. Raman's mother shrieks for Noor to leave: "You pestered him all his life! Your evil presence will condemn him even after his death! Take this mudblood away from here!" (Figs. 13, 14 & 15).

Figures 13 (top left), 14 (top right) and 15 (bottom): An escalation of hatred as Raman's mother (Amardeep Jha) tries to drive away the 'evil presence' of Noor (Pooja Bhatt) and her 'mudblood' children.

Crying, Noor explains she simply seeks Raman's blessings by touching Anand's head to Raman's photo, but Raman's mother springs forward: "Will you keep casting spells even after his death?". As the camera quickly pans between the characters in this scene (itself a signifier of the dizzying array of verbal trauma Noor is experiencing), Raman's mother slaps Ajay for standing up to her, before running towards Nimi: "What are you looking at? I beg you throw this witch and her jinxed child out! My son died as soon as he was born. Why didn't he die instead?"

Nimi, shocked, shouts at her mother-in-law and storms towards Noor before taking Anand, while Raman's mother protests: "What are you doing?". The non-diegetic sound of horror – like the one heard earlier when Raman's mother saw Noor's photo in the wardrobe – creeps in, as a defiant Nimi speaks: "I'm giving the last memento of my husband his right … I'm giving him his dead father's blessings" (Figs. 16 & 17).

Figures 16 & 17: Nimi (Namrata Dhamija) holds Anand's head to his dead father's photo, seeking his blessings, before standing by Noor (Pooja Bhatt and Ajay (Kunal Khemu).

Inconsolable with rage, Raman's mother screams: "This isn't a blessing you fool! It's a curse for you! Curse! You let a Muslim child touch the picture of my son!". The music crescendos as she slaps Nimi, dragging her to the floor: "She's a Muslim! A Muslim blood is running in her child's veins!", prompting Noor and the children to swiftly leave.

This scene depicts the *Hindutva* concept of the "Muslim threat" by retaining Noor as the "Other", evidenced by epithets associated with the occult: "witch", "curse" and "mudblood". Sophia Rose Arjana describes how the "persecution of marginals", such as Muslims, continues "to serve as signs of evil" (2015: 84), with this scene becoming a visual expression of the Muslim figure as an evil entity. Arjana points out that these "demons" would need to be "concentrated … in foreign bodies" (2015: 84) to facilitate a "legitimate" disenchantment towards the Muslim body/figure. This is evidenced in two ways: Raman's mother's description of Noor as a "witch", and her inability to disenchant Nimi.

Noor being branded a "witch" is metaphorically cast as a "bringer of death". This accusation reflects Moniraj's claim that the branding of women as witches punishes "women who question social norms" (2020: 113). Here, Noor's Islamic faith appears transgressive within *Hindutva*'s "social norm", allowing *Zakhm* to critique *Hindutva*'s resistance to Hindu-Muslim relationships. As such, the symbolic violence enacted through Raman's mother's language of witchcraft exposes how *Hindutva* facilitates the othering of Muslim women from the imagined Indian nation.

Raman's mother fails to convince Nimi that Noor is evil. As Nimi married Raman, they each married "within the same caste", echoing the bullying nature of *Hindutva* and the disdain for exogamy.[124] Since Raman and his mother share dissimilar views, and, particularly after Raman's death, Nimi personifies secularity "fighting back" the disenchantment from *Hindutva*. *Zakhm,* however, presents a darker undertone when Nimi is beaten by Raman's mother, indicative that the disagreements between secularists in India and extreme Hindu nationalists may only lead to a violent outcome whereby *Hindutva* proves too powerful an engine to overcome.

Ajay and Anand are also victims of their grandmother's slurs. Arjana comments that gender also created the monster through "monstrous births … attributed to maternal sin" (2015: 85). Here, the "maternal sin" is twofold: one, through Noor's Islamic faith passing onto Ajay and Anand, thus cursing them; and two, Ajay and Anand's birth from the Muslim, a curse itself. This is particularly evident when Nimi places Anand's head on Raman's photo, seeking his blessings, whereby Raman's mother screams that Nimi is now cursed, just as Noor is, for having allowed a Muslim to touch Raman's photo. Furthermore, Ajay and Anand are called "mudbloods" for having "Muslim blood", which can be interpreted as the boys, as well as Noor, suffering from some form of Islamic disease. Arjana argues that in a post-9/11 climate, films "focus on the depiction of our paranoia and the fear of other bodies" (2015: 172), before noting that the current Islamophobic climate calls for those bodies to be inherently Muslim and afflicted with some sort of ailments. As *Zakhm* was released in 1998, I argue that this has already begun before 9/11, and this scene depicts the "paranoia and fear of other bodies" through Raman's mother, allowing *Zakhm* to further critique *Hindutva* and the ideology's exclusionary ways in which the Muslim subject is repeatedly "othered".

[124] Please see: Deshmukh, 2021.

IV-VI: 'THE BURIAL'

Unlike *Naseem, Zakhm* depicts the burial of Noor. The visuality of Noor's grave, open and "fresh" in its preparation, visualises, in contrast to *Naseem,* the escalation of anti-Muslim sentiments. Throughout this funeral scene, a non-diegetic song plays; a female voice rings "It's a day of hope today; It's a day of celebration for me". The song signals the fulfilment of Ajay's promise to Noor: she will be buried under Islamic rites. The viewer also sees Noor's funeral procession, but now the full funeral takes place: the camera pans, at eye level, seeing Noor's body getting carried until it is near the opening of the grave. The camera angle changes to shoulder height, inviting the viewer to "participate" in Noor's death – allegorical of Bollywood's participation in the death of Islamic culture. Now, inside the grave, the viewer is met with Ajay, reaching out for Noor's corpse as she is lowered. The next shot, a low-angled frame on Ajay and Anand, depicts them placing the body inside the grave, before embracing. Ajay crouches as a black cloth is draped over the opening of the grave, and, as he weeps, Noor is depicted in heaven with Raman, embracing amidst the clouds (Figs. 18 & 19).

Figure 18 & 19: Ajay (Ajay Devgn) and Anand (Akshay Anand) lower Noor's body into the grave, after which Ajay cries, looking towards heaven.

This scene elevates the theme of death in the way Noor dies (succumbing to her burns after being attacked by a *Muslim* mob); the portrayal of an *Islamic* burial; and the lack of a coffin. In all three cases, *Naseem*'s depiction of Akhtar's death and funeral remain "subtle". The viewer does not know how Akhtar dies, does not see the burial and Akhtar is in a coffin, hidden from sight. The lack of Noor's coffin accentuates the symbolic *Bharat Mata* for Ajay: his "country" and "mother" are *literally* at one with one another, as a coffin would "separate" the earth from the body. This merging of Noor's body and the earth reflect, for Ajay, what David Kinsley describes as "the fundamental conviction that the earth itself, or the Indian subcontinent itself, is a goddess, indeed, that she is one's mother" (1987: 181). Therefore, *Zakhm* elaborates upon the whole death event: the means by which Noor's death occurs, the funeral procession, and the depiction of the burial, depicting not only the annihilation of the Muslim image, but the *literal* erasure of the Muslim body and the *metaphorical* burial of Hindu-Muslim relations.

Returning to an earlier point surrounding necropolitics, Noor's Islamic burial reflects the precariousness of her Muslim identity whilst demonstrating necropolitical thought from a Hindu-majoritarian perspective. The absence of Noor's coffin emphasizes the symbolic merging of the "maternal" and "national" body for Ajay: Noor's "exposure" to the earth (her body is draped in a white cloth, typical of an Islamic burial) is symbolic of the societal control over Muslim life and death in India. As Ashraf Kunnummal observes, Islamophobic forces (such as *Hindutva*), "communalize the majority of Indians by creating the other/enemy hybrid in the bodies of Muslim minority" (2022: 31-32). Noor embodies this hybrid: a Muslim woman and mother of Hindu children, whose death and contested burial dramatize the vulnerability of Muslim bodies under anti-Muslim, pro-Hindu, ideological pressures. Irfan Engineer further notes that "opportunistic political immobilisation included the use of anti-Muslim sentiment and other official machinery to spread *Hindutva* ideology" (2018: 113), which resonates in the film through the tension over Noor's burial rites earlier between Ajay and Anand. This burial highlights *Zakhm*'s wider criticism of Hindu-centric necropolitics by showing that Noor's fate — in life and posthumously — is regulated by social, familial, and political forces. As such, *Zakhm* critiques the mechanisms by which *Hindutva* renders Muslim life expendable, a condition *Zakhm* highlights through the emotional and moral consequences of intercommunal tensions and violence.

In conclusion, *Zakhm* critiques right-wing Hindu nationalism through the depiction of Raman's mother and Subodh, and in its portrayal of Noor, bolstering its anti-nationalistic narrative. Simultaneous to this critique, *Zakhm* depicts the otherization of the Muslim figure through Noor, but not as a discursive surrounding Islam as an evil, religious entity, but, rather, a *consequence* of a fledging Hindu-nationalist rhetoric. To conclude, *Zakhm* visualizes the grief through Ajay at the funeral, reflective of the emotional toll of intercommunal rupturing following the Babri Masjid's demolition. *Zakhm* offers a cinematically bleak view of escalatory hatred should Hindu nationalism take further hold in India.

V: CHAPTER CONCLUSION

This chapter analysed *Naseem* and *Zakhm*, arguing that both films depict the fragility of Hindu-Muslim relations in the context of the Babri Masjid's demolition. While *Naseem* focuses on the events leading up to the demolition, *Zakhm* deals with its immediate aftermath. Following my critique of *Hindutva,* each narrative presents a commentary on India's communal unrest, positioning the Muslim subject as an existential threat to *Hindutva*'s imagined Hindu nation.

Naseem depicts the slow erosion of Muslim belonging through a narrative centred on familial intimacy and socio-political anxiety. The family's growing sense of fear and exclusion is mediated through everyday dialogues, television broadcasts, symbolic motifs such as the "snake", and flashbacks to times of tranquil Muslim-Hindu relations. These elements spotlight the subtle nature of othering the Muslim subject in *Naseem*, where communal violence and demolition are never shown but strongly felt through the psychological deterioration of Naseem's family. Akhtar's death, coinciding with the Masjid's demolition, signals the abolishment of India's syncretic tradition and foreshadows the cultural marginalisation of Muslims. While *Naseem* does not explicitly espouse anti-Muslim views, it aligns, upon closer inspection, with *Hindutva* anxieties that construct Muslims as outsiders.[125]

Zakhm, however, offers a more explicit portrayal of anti-Muslim violence and the consequences of staunch Hindu nationalism. Set in the immediate wake of the Masjid's demolition, Ajay, who conceals his mother's Muslim identity, reflects the fear and shame attached to Islamic identity in a growing Hindu majoritarian climate of animosity. Noor is rendered as a "wound" that never heals – an embodiment of the perceived "Muslim threat" to *Hindutva*'s idealised vision of India. Subodh and Raman's mother express blatant Hindu-centric rhetoric, advocating for Muslim erasure, and through the intensified representation of themes first presented in *Naseem* – communal distrust, the symbolism of televisual violence, and burial rites – *Zakhm* advances its critique of *Hindutva* as an ideology that goes beyond the othering of the Muslim figure to one that seeks the erasure of Muslims within the utopian Hindu *Rashtra.*

When taken together, both narratives chart a cinematic trajectory that mirrors the ideological intensification of *Hindutva* in the 1990s. While *Naseem* signals the early signs of exclusion, *Zakhm* showcases the devastating potential effects of Muslim erasure through nationalistic fervour. Each narrative serves as a visual critique of Hindu

[125] Please see: Savarkar, 2021 [1923]; Golwalkar, 1939.

nationalism, and its capacity to reframe national identity by excluding Muslim presence. As Rachel Dwyer observes, Hindi cinema reflects "the nation's dreams and hopes, fears and anxieties" (2014: 7), and *Naseem* and *Zakhm* reveal how those fears are projected onto the Muslim subject. Using the flashpoint of the Masjid's demolition, *Naseem* and *Zakhm* offer a cinematic beginning that shifts the Muslim figure away from previous iterations that saw Muslims as influential within Indian culture and society.[126]

Each film raises concerns about the Muslim subject's place in popular Hindi cinema. While not overtly Islamophobic, *Naseem* and *Zakhm* reflect the broader cultural shift towards normalising the Muslim subject as the "Other," and, as I will discuss in my next chapter, further problematizes Muslim representation in Bollywood.

[126] Please see: Chadha & Kavoori, 2008; Bhaskar & Allen, 2022.

CHAPTER THREE – 'BOLLYWOOD, *HINDUTVA*, & ISLAMIC TERRORISM'

This chapter will highlight the construction of the Muslim figure as the terroristic Other in two Hindi-language films: *Sarfarosh* (*Fervent,* John Matthew Mathan, 1999) and *Kurbaan* (*Sacrificed,* Rensil D'Silva, 2009). I posit that both films build upon *Hindutva*-inflected prejudices that allow for new elucidations into Bollywood's Muslim terroristic figure. This character trope is deeply entrenched within contemporary Hindi cinema and, particularly since the 1990s, remains a focal point for ideological contestation and cinematic re-interpretation. As such, I will situate how the depictions of the terroristic Muslim figure align within the broader historical trajectory of Hindi cinema, paying particular attention to how this figure reflects and reinforces *Hindutva* insecurities towards Muslims in India before and after the September 11th, 2001 (commonly referred to as 9/11) attacks in New York City and the Mumbai bombings of 2008 (also known as 26/11 attacks).

This chapter is divided into two sections. Section one outlines the origins of terrorism in the Subcontinent, before examining Hindi cinema's terrorism narratives and tracing early Muslim terrorist depictions in Bollywood, focusing primarily on the Muslim terroristic figure from the late-1990s and early-2000s. Substantiated by my critique of *Hindutva,* this section analyses *Sarfarosh*'s Muslim antagonist, Gulfam Hassan (Naseeruddin Shah), spotlighting the film's cross-border terrorism narrative and how Gulfam propels it, whilst simultaneously drawing upon contemporary anxieties surrounding Indian Muslim men and terrorism.

Part two traces Hindi cinema's narrativization of global terrorism in the wake of the September 11th, 2001 attacks and the Mumbai attacks of 2008. Following an overview of India's response to these events and Bollywood's broader engagement with Islamic terrorism in the post-9/11 context, I explore *Kurbaan*'s Muslim terrorists, focusing particularly on Ehsaan Khan (Saif Ali Khan), *Kurbaan*'s protagonist. I will argue that not only does *Kurbaan*'s Muslim terrorists conform to the conventional stereotype of the "global" Muslim extremist, but that Ehsaan, along with others in the narrative, exhibits characteristics that reflect *Hindutva*'s ideological fears towards Muslims in India. In essence, this chapter highlights how both Gulfam and Ehsaan speak to broader concerns regarding Islamic terrorism but also adhere to region-specific anxieties about Muslims in India from the *Hindutva* perspective.

PART ONE - I: A HISTORY OF VIOLENCE

Terrorism in South Asia is often traced to the Partition of India in 1947, culminating in the creation of Pakistan and the subsequent conflict over the region of Jammu and Kashmir.[127] Despite Kashmir's predominantly Muslim population, the region was ruled by a Hindu, Maharajah Hari Singh, (Murphy, 2023: 121) which, following Partition, threw the region into violent skirmishes between pro-Pakistani Muslims and pro-Indian Hindus and Sikhs, aided by anti-Maharajah sentiments from pro-Pakistani Muslims. An invasion of the region by the Pashtuns (a minority ethnic group originating from northwestern Pakistan and southeastern Afghanistan), compelled Singh to ask India for help. In exchange for the region, India provided military support, and, on the 26th of October 1947, Singh acceded to India (Snedden, 2021: 4). As such, the region's volatility expedited India and Pakistan's desire "to bleed the other" through military unrest, fuelling the 1965 and 1971 wars;[128] cross-border skirmishes; and the arms race for nuclear power (Assad Ullah et. al, 2018: 61).[129]

Throughout the mid-1980s, Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (hereafter ISI) aided and abetted military insurgency in Kashmir,[130] drawing on tactics employed by the *Mujahideen* during the Soviet-Afghan War (1979-1989).[131] Around the same time, the ISI supported the organization, training and arming of several Pakistani-based jihadist groups, such as Lashkar-e-Taiba ("*Army of the Pure*"), Jaish-e-Muhammad ("*Army of Muhammad*"), and Harkat-ul-Mujahideen ("*Islamic Jihadist Organisation*"),[132] prompting the introduction of Wahhabi Islam in the region. According to Dheeraj P. C., this form of Islam "subdued the tolerant Sufi tradition of the native Kashmiri, flushed out Hindus from the valley, and subsequently acquainted the Kashmiri people with an extremist form of Islam" (2020: 561). Simultaneously, India's counter-terrorism measures forced Islamist groups to expand their terroristic activities beyond Kashmir to "unleash terror in India's heartland" (Pant & Lidarev, 2018: 183), leading to the "compound crisis of the 1990s" which saw febrile military activity on the Line of Control (LoC)[133] by Pakistani

[127] Please see: Gordon, 2008; Rai, 2009; Barnard-Wills & Moore, 2010; Ullah et. al, 2018; Snedden, 2021; Murphy, 2023.
[128] The 1971 Indo-Pak war led to the dissolution of East Pakistan and the creation of Bangladesh).
[129] On nuclear power, P. R. Chari et. al suggests that the nuclear acceleration was also aided by India's "Operation Brasstacks" in 1986 – a series of military exercises in the Jammu and Kashmir region that alarmed Pakistani officials; despite reassurances from Rajiv Gandhi, India's Prime Minister, towards Pakistan's Prime Minister, Mohammad Khan Junejo, about the exercise, "… its scale and contours were not altered" (2007: 39).
[130] Please see: Ogden, 2013; Pant & Lidarev, 2018; Dheeraj, 2020; Murphy, 2023.
[131] Please see: Ogden, 2013; Dheeraj, 2020; Murphy, 2015, 2023.
[132] Please see: Murphy, 2023.
[133] The "Line of Control", or "LoC", is a military control line separating the Indian- and Pakistani-controlled areas of Jammu & Kashmir. For more on this historically volatile border, please see: Mohan. 2013; Mato Bouzas, 2019.

and Indian military forces (Chari et. al, 2007: 80-117). This terroristic spillage prompted India to view Islamic terrorism as not only an issue of regional concern but an *internal,* existential threat.[134]

Concurrent to this, the BJP's rise in the 1990s birthed anti-Muslim terrorism (Murphy 2015: 357), resulting in the combative relationship between *Hindutva* forces and Islamic terrorism. Despite successes in Kashmir, India's counter-terrorism measures were incoherent in addressing communal tensions between Hindus and Muslims in India, eventually being replaced by law enforcement to engage with India's communal volatility (Pant & Lidarev, 2018: 186). As Chris Ogden highlights, the BJP "developed an engrained belief that associated Pakistan with irregular warfare and terrorism" (2013: 42-43), seeking ways to defend itself from the perceived existential threat(s) posed by Pakistan and by India's Muslim-minority population.

Following the destruction of the Babri Masjid in 1992 (surveyed extensively in the previous chapter), communal riots throughout northern India and various Indian cities led to the deaths of over two thousand people, mainly Muslims.[135] With communal tensions skyrocketing, Dheeraj P. C. asserts that the Bombay (now Mumbai) blasts on the 12th of March 1993 were a direct retaliation by D-Company (an Islamist-mafia/underground organization headed by Dawood Ibrahim) for the *Babri Masjid*'s demolition, giving rise to contemporary understandings of Islamic terrorism inside India (2020: 561-562). Following the riots and the 1993 Bombay blasts, terrorism in India has ranged from home-grown terrorism[136] to specific atrocities that have garnered significant national and global coverage,[137] all of which have been exacerbated by *Hindutva*'s political and social presence.[138]

Abraham Miller notes that terrorism and media have developed an irrevocable relationship because terrorism can "[write] any drama—no matter how horrible" (1982: 1). This chapter re-examines the Muslim figure as the terrorist "Other" in popular Hindi cinema, a cinema which, as I have argued throughout this thesis, has

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[134] Please see: Tankel, 2014.

[135] While Eamon Murphy has argued that that the number of deaths, particularly Muslims, in the riots is "over" 2000 (see Murphy, 2015, 2023), Hansen (1999), Talbot & Singh (2009) and Shani (2021) have suggested that the number of deaths is estimated to be around 3000.

[136] For a list of Islamic-related home-grown terrorisms, please see: Nicoll & Johnstone, 2009; Subramaniam, 2014.

[137] Such as the 1998 Coimbatore bombings in Tamil Nadu; the Mumbai train bombings of 2006; the 2008 Mumbai attacks (commonly referred to as the 26/11 attacks); the Pune bombing in 2010; the 2016 Uri attack; and the 2019 Pulwama attack.

[138] The 1998 Coimbatore bombings were conducted by the Muslim militant group al Umma, culminating in 58 deaths and more than 200 injuries; the 2006 Mumbai train massacre, killing 206 people and injuring 700+, were perpetrated by twelve hardline Islamist militants; the 26/11 attacks killed 175 people and injuring more than 300, were conducted by Lashkar-e-Taiba; the Pune bombings in 2010 were also conducted by Lashkar-e-Taiba, alongside the Indian Mujahideen, and killed 18 people whist injuring more than 54; the 2016 Uri attack, which killed 19 Indian army personnel and injuring up to 30 others, was committed by members of Jaish-e-Mohammad; and the Pulwama attack in 2019 was executed again by Jaish-e-Mohammed, killing 40 and resulting in a further 35 injuries.

ideological links to political *Hindutva.* So, how did Bollywood respond to Islamic terrorism and depict the Muslim terroristic subject?

II: BOLLYWOOD'S TERRORISM NARRATIVES

From the 1990s, Hindi films had started to narrate contemporary communal Hindu-Muslim tensions, with films such as *Mamoo* (Shyam Benegal, 1994) and, as discussed in my previous chapter, *Naseem* (Saeed Akhtar Mirza, 1995). However, in 1998, Bollywood was granted special "industry" status by the Indian government, becoming officially recognised as an important audio-visual medium following intense political backing by the BJP. Nandita Bose argues that this recognition is an important indication of the BJP's first attempt to control Hindi film production, especially since the BJP was the only political actor pushing for an active dialogue with India's cinematic enterprise (2009: 28-31). Consequently, as I will discuss below, narratives in Hindi cinema began displaying overt jingoistic nationalism through the narrativization of historic terrorism and insurgency in Jammu and Kashmir, beginning in 1999.[139]

Tejaswini Ganti claims that Hindi cinema's thematization of nationalism intensified throughout the 1990s, representing India as "under siege from acts of war or terrorism" (2013: 45), and highlights how Hindi films began to depict a villainous terrorist figure portrayed in terrorism and terrorist-based narratives (2013: 44), coinciding with the cross-border tensions between India and Pakistan throughout the 1990s. Amit Rai notes that Hindi cinema began to display "cine-patriotism": films seeking "to represent, visualize, and narrativize the sovereignty of the supposedly secular, but in practice upper-caste, Hindu Indian nation … [critiquing and fuelling] the ongoing tensions between Hindus and Muslims" (2003: 5).[140] One of the ways in which Hindi cinema could do this was the cinematic chronicling of Partition anxieties, cross-border terrorism and Kashmir insurgency, since the Kashmir dispute stems from historical agitations dating back to Partition, the genesis of the Subcontinent's Hindu-Muslim tensions.

As mentioned earlier in this thesis' literature review, Partition narratives in South Asian and Indian cinema literature have been well established,[141] with the general consensus being that Hindi cinema's terrorism narratives largely draw upon the cinematic creation of an entity which places India in the grips of an existential and national

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[139] I would like to highlight two exceptions within this timeline. *Roja* (*Rose,* Mani Ratnam, 1992) is an important Indian film discussing cross-border terrorism, and certainly one of Indian cinema's earliest. However, its Tamil-language narrative falls out-with this thesis' focus on *Hindi*-language cinema, despite its later Hindi dubbing in 1993. Similarly, *Border* (J. P. Dutta, 1997), released prior to the BJP's aegis of Hindi cinema in 1998, can be considered an exceptionally early example of Hindi cinema's renditions of cross-border terrorism.

[140] Please also see: Sethi, 2002.

[141] Please see: Brown, 2007; Daiya, 2008; Kabir, 2009, 2010; Murty, 2009; Raychaudhuri, 2009; Asrar, 2010; Menon, 2013; Chowdhury, 2015; Mubarki, 2017, 2020; Chandra, 2018; Lal, 2018; Gairola, 2019; Siddique, 2019.

crisis.[142] In terms of Hindi cinema academia, it was *Roja* (*Rose,* Mani Ratnam, 1992) that prompted scholars, such as Tejaswini Niranjana, to comprehensively examine the nexus between Indian films and *Hindutva* nationalism through social and political lenses,[143] leading Nadira Khatun to suggest that *Roja* enabled a tidal wave of Indian films that essentialized the terrorist figure through the Muslim subject, in what Khatun calls "terroristic films" (2016: 50). Since *Roja* and *Border,*[144] Bollywood has exploited the terroristic genre, prompting a surge in Hindi cinema's terroristic narrations, [145] with some of the most well-known (of this early period) being *Mission Kashmir* (Vidhu Vinod Chopra, 2000); *Fiza* (Khalid Mohammed, 2000); *Gadar: Ek Prem Katha* (*Rebellion: A Love Story*, Anil Sharma, 2001).[146] As Meenakshi Bharat proclaims, terrorism in Hindi cinema offers "tremendous inherent potential for drama, action, romance and patriotic enunciation of nationalism", compelling Hindi filmmakers to cinematize Pakistani-backed terrorism because of terrorism's association with Pakistan (2024: 65) – read, Muslims.

Bharat further asserts that broader Indian cinema appears to be one of the earliest visual art forms to survey terrorism as a theme in the Subcontinent (2020: 10), suggesting that Bollywood's historic thematization of terrorism within the *masala* genre (2020: 140)[147] is evidence of its seamless integration within Hindi cinema's storytelling typography. As Kavita Daiya highlights, popular Hindi cinema began to explore a utopian nationalism separate from Pakistan (2008: 150), and so the literature, now examining Indian nationalism and national identity, has focussed on Indian valour and anti-Pakistan sentiments in Bollywood.[148] Additionally, Dibyesh Anand's valuation that Islamic terrorism is but one constituent of the audio-visual machine in India designed "to provide … proof of the supposed barbaric and violent character of … Muslims" (2005: 207) becomes a major portent of Hindi

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[142] Please see: Fazila-Yacoobali, 2002; Daiya, 2008; Juluri, 2008; Chadha & Kavoori, 2008; Kumar, 2008; Raj, 2008; Sharma, 2008; Richter, 2009; Mazumdar, 2011; Gabriel & Vijayan, 2012; Ganti, 2013; Kumar, 2013; Dwyer, 2014; Clini, 2015; Molaei & Babaei, 2020; Niyaz Ahmad, 2021; Raj & Suresh, 2023.

[143] Please see: Niranjana, 1994; for further discussions surrounding *Roja* and Niranjana's analysis, please see: Prasad, 1998; Vasudevan, 2000; Kumar, 2015.

[144] I would also include *Bombay* (Mani Ratnam, 1995), but the title has been often excluded due to the popularity and acclaim of *Roja* and *Border*.

[145] Indian cinema has also focused on other regional/religious terrorism in India, such as: The Assam Insurgency (*Dil Se…* [From the heart…], Mani Ratnam, 1998); and Sikh Insurgency (*Maachis* [*Matchsticks*], Gulzar, 1996).

[146] There are many other films the encompass Hindi cinema's terrorism narratives, including: *Zameen* (*Land,* Rohit Shetty, 2003); *Black Friday* (Anurag Kashyap, 2004); *Fanaa* (*Annihilation,* Kunal Kohli, 2006); *Shahid* (Hansal Mehta, 2012); *The Hero: Love Story of a Spy* (Anil Sharma, 2003); *Maa Tujhhe Salaam* (*Salute to you, Mother*, Tinu Verma, 2002); *LOC Kargil* (J. P. Dutta, 2003); *Yahaan* (*Here,* Shoojit Sircar, 2005); *Tahaan* (Santosh Sivan, 2008); *Lamhaa* (*Moment,* Rahul Dholakia, 2010); *Dhokha* (*Betrayal,* Pooja Bhatt, 2007); *Ek Tha Tiger* (*There Was Once* [*a Man Named*] *Tiger*), Kabir Khan, 2012); *The Attacks of 26/11* (Ram Gopal Varma, 2013); *Phantom* (Kabir Khan, 2015); *Baby* (Neeraj Pandey, 2015); and *Sooryavanshi* (Rohit Shetty, 2021).

[147] Tejaswini Ganti categorizes the *masala* genre in Hindi cinema as a genre "notable for its unabashed goal of entertainment and the inclusion of a variety of narrative and aesthetic elements: songs, dances, comedy, action, romance, and drama" (2013: 51). See also: Dwyer & Patel, 2002; Chaudhuri, 2005; Richards, 2011; Dwyer, 2014.

[148] Please see: Hirji, 2008; Kabir, 2009; Khan & Bokhari, 2011; Devadas, 2013; Khatun, 2016; Zafar & Amjad, 2018; San Chirico, 2020; Kumar & Raghuvanshi, 2023.

cinema's negative exhibition of India's Muslim minority. I will discuss Hindi cinema's post-9/11 renditions of the Muslim terrorist later, but, nevertheless, Hindi cinema is instrumental in facilitating the disastrous imagery surrounding the terroristic Muslim figure in the wake of the Subcontinent's tackling of Islamic terrorism.

I concur with Keval Kumar's proclamation that the 1990s has allowed the BJP to abuse cinema to promote a "'cultural nationalism' … a disguise for the ideology of *Hindutva*" (2014: 280-281), with others suggesting similar notions.[149] To further this note, Sumita Chakravarty argues that this nationalism is predicated on the dreaded Other – one that is dissident and, ultimately, terroristic in nature (2000: 235). This allows Hindi cinema to produce a cinematic space that displays the utopian *imaginaire* of *Hindutva* (the Hindu *Rashtra,* or "Hindu Nation"), threatened directly by the terroristic Muslim figure.

[149] Please see: Chakravarty, 2000; Rajadhyaksha, 2003.

III: THE 'OTHER' IN HINDI CINEMA

As the 1990s and the early-2000s saw fevered tensions between India and Pakistan, the portrayals of Muslims in Hindi cinema began to shift away from criminal behaviour to the Muslim terrorist became increasingly central. Manisha Sethi argues that the "line between reel and real is fast disappearing, with political speeches seeming like dialogues from films, and films increasingly mimicking the postures of a jingoistic political discourse" (2002: 31), leading the depictions of Muslims as terrorists to become a staple within Hindi cinema, reflective of the political obsession with (Islamic) terrorism. Consequently, a surge in terrorist narratives, before and immediately after the millennium, displayed the perceived Muslim inclination towards terrorism against India, resulting in the terroristic Muslim Other appearing heavily during this time.

Sanjeev Kumar argues that identity markers of the Muslim terrorist see the character don "the *salwar kameez*, sport beards, carry AK-47 rifles and use Arab scarves" and that their "Muslimness … is foregrounded" (2013: 464) within the terrorist persona. However, there are variations. For example, home-grown terrorists, portrayed in, for example, *Fiza*, highlight internal Muslim extremists bent on the destruction of India from within. Another terrorist, the "victim-turned-terrorist" persona, as seen in *Mission Kashmir*, largely focuses on the Muslim figure who, having faced familial or personal tragedy, state oppression and/or communal violence, turns to Islamic extremism to enact revenge.

The most prominent terroristic Muslim Other is associated, to any degree, with Pakistan. Sk Sagir Ali posits that the Muslim terroristic Other is "associated with terrorism … and conflated with a Pakistani identity" (2025: 1), a sentiment echoed by other scholars.[150] Accordingly, Hindi cinema has a plethora of films that feature Muslim terrorists that explicitly express allegiances to Pakistan (even after 9/11, which I will discuss later in this chapter), including: *Maa Tujhhe Salaam* (*Mother, I Salute You,* Tinu Verma, 2002); *Fiza; Gadar: Ek Prem Katha;* and *Zameen* (*Land,* Rohit Shetty, 2003). While many appear wearing *salwar kameez,* donning beards and/or frequently recite Qur'anic phrases typified within Muslim culture, their overall association with Pakistan forefronts the terroristic character's on-screen motivations for violence against India.

[150] Please also see: Chadha and Kavoori, 2008; Kabir, 2010; Ganti, 2013; Clini, 2015; Khatun, 2016; Bharat, 2020; San Chirico, 2020

Examining Muslim characters in Hindi cinema academia has become an exhaustive topic, with the unanimity being that the portrayals of Muslims are negatively exaggerated.[151] While some of these examinations situate Bollywood's negative Muslim portrayals through quantitative research methods,[152] the majority qualitatively suggest that the Muslim terrorist is, as Sony Jalarajan Raj & Adith K. Suresh clearly state, no more than an "identity that is extremely dangerous, morally indifferent, violent, hateful, and self-destructive", essentialised within the terrorist stereotype because of India's incessant push towards Hindu majoritarianism within its nationalist narrative (2023: 364). This push became the blueprint of Muslim depictions in Bollywood's terrorism narratives, and as Hindi films, particularly in the late-1990s and early-2000s, presented Pakistan as India's existential enemy, the depictions of Pakistani Muslims became Bollywood's "favourite terrorist Other" (2023: 364).

Consequently, the Muslim terroristic figure is portrayed as a disgusting, violent "Other" bent on inflicting carnage to India through the cinematic delineation of terrorism, becoming a "product" of Hindu majoritarianism – a visual representation of *why* India needs an ideology like *Hindutva,* not only for India's prosperity, but to also draw India back towards its perceived roots of "Hindu-ness" against the formidable and invasive alien "Other".[153] Particularly in the pre-9/11 climate, Hindi cinema portrayed home-grown terrorists, such as in *Fiza* and *Mission Kashmir*, highlighting variations of Muslim extremists bent on the destruction of India from within. *Fanaa* (*Annihilation*, Kunal Kohli, 2006) is often cited alongside these as an early adopter of displaying this Muslim terroristic Other, despite its post-9/11 release.

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[151] Please see: Islam, 2007; Hirji, 2008; Raj, 2008; Khan & Bokhari, 2011; Mazumdar, 2011; Gabriel & Vijayan, 2012; Zafar & Amjad, 2018; Bhat, 2019; Niyaz Ahmad, 2021; Kumar & Raghuvanshi, 2023; Raj & Suresh, 2023.

[152] Muhammad Ashraf Khan and Syeda Zuria Bokhari assert that positive images of Muslims in Bollywood films between 2002 to 2008 stand at 4.4%, while 65.2% present negative interpretations and 30.4% of portrayals offering neutral depictions, before simply concluding that Bollywood has "considerably distorted [the] Muslim image" (2011: 14).
Shahzad Ali et. al deduces that the systematic portrayal of negative Muslim characters in Bollywood "communicates strong political messages to its audience and tends to exacerbate the existing conflicts" (2012: 138), enabling Bollywood and Indian filmmakers to depict Muslims as terrorists, rendering them as barbaric and reprobate individuals (2012: 157-158). Similarly, Shafaat Bhat argues that the imagery surrounding Muslims "have been … useful and harmful at the same time in endorsing the identity of Islam in the Indian subcontinent" (2019: 6), concluding that negative portrayals of Muslims far outweigh positive ones.

[153] Please see: Savarkar, 2021 [1923].

According to Syed Haider:

> This heightened anxiety around the figure of the terrorist and the reprehensible practice of terrorism led to further opportunities within the [Hindi] filmic texts to incorporate discourses of securiotocracy and a newly imagined role for communities from where terrorists are imagined to come to help fight terrorism and also enact their own patriotism. Reading these films in this way highlights the function the theme of terrorism serves the Indian nation state and places film as an important cultural artefact for reading an Indian imaginary.
>
> (Haider, 2019: 106)

Essentially, the cinematic Muslim terrorist becomes a metonymy for *Hindutva*-inflected fears, projected In Hindi film texts.

I explore *Sarfarosh* as a case study for this section for two reasons. Firstly, *Sarfarosh* has invited acute scholarly examinations, owed to several factors I detail below. Secondly, and most importantly for this thesis, *Sarfarosh*'s depiction of its main antagonist, Gulfam Hassan, offers a unique take on the terroristic Muslim figure, one that differs vastly from other Hindi cinematic variants. It is my assertion that further interpretations of Gulfam emerge when contextualizing *Hindutva*-laden anxieties surrounding the terroristic Muslim Other.

IV: CASE STUDY – *SARFAROSH* (*FERVENT,* JOHN MATTHEW MATHAN, 1999)

Sarfarosh follows Ajay Singh Rathod (Aamir Khan), the Assistant Commissioner of Police (ACP) from Mumbai who embarks on a personal and professional journey to break the cycle of cross-border terrorism following a terrorist attack that leaves his brother dead, and his father disabled, unable to talk. In a twist of fate, Ajay befriends Gulfam Hassan (Naseeruddin Shah), a renowned Pakistani *ghazal* singer[154] and a well-respected cultural figure in India. Hidden from Ajay, Gulfam's deep-seated bitterness towards India, a consequence of the traumatic events he experienced during Partition, is catalysed through his involvement in supporting cross-border terrorism via his secret affiliation with Pakistan's ISI, allowing him to aid home-grown and border-crossing militant groups within India, particularly in smuggling illegal weaponry.

The film, released before the 1999 Kargil War,[155] is set against the backdrop of escalating tensions between India and Pakistan, and offers socio-political and regional commentaries surrounding cross-border terrorism, the marginalization of Muslims in India (depicted through the subplot of Ajay's colleague and friend, Inspector Salim Ahmed [Mukesh Rishi]), and home-grown terrorism, fuelled further by the contextualization of historical Partition trauma. As such, the film operates an anti-assimilationist ideology, and this is especially apparent in the depiction of Muslims throughout its narrative.

Sarfarosh's Hindu majoritarianism commentary, the marginalization of Indian Muslims, and anxieties and suspicions towards Pakistan have been unanimously ascribed by scholars.[156] Kavita Daiya argues that *Sarfarosh*'s narrative of terroristic and cross-border violence is displayed through the "binary between the ordinary, middle-class, nationalist citizen Ajay as [an] innocent and upright masculine state representative, and 'terror' – variously constructed as robbery, abduction, murder, violence, Pakistani" (2011: 596), reinforcing what Madhavi Murty spotlights as *Sarfarosh*'s Hindu nationalist dogmas through its attempt to narrate social and political contexts which accord primacy towards the Hindu male through Ajay (2009: 227). Murty argues that the tethering of the Hindu male (Ajay) to the national biography forces Ajay to become "an active participant in this process or movement from conflict to resolution; he explicitly links his home and himself to the nation" (2009: 276). Murty spotlights a

[154] A *ghazal* is "a genre of Persian and Urdu poetry formed from couplets in which love, in particular, love-in-separation or *viraha,* plays a central role" (Bhaskar & Allen, 2022: 26).
[155] Please see: Lal, 2018, who notes the coincidental timing of *Sarfarosh.*
[156] Please see: Tripathi, 2001; Fazila-Yacoobali, 2002; Murty, 2009; Daiya, 2011; Khatun, 2016; Kumar, 2016; Shailo, 2016, Tripathi & Raghuvanshi, 2020.

particular scene in which Ajay's home is constantly in view in an exchange between Ajay and Salim, who stands delegitimised since his home-life is *never* depicted (or mentioned). This notion is further solidified by Sanjeev Kumar, who argues that Ajay's statement that he does "not need any Salim to help me save my country", explicitly reveals *Sarfarosh*'s Hindu *imaginaire* (2016: 249). I do not wish to belabour Salim's importance to *Sarfarosh* here, but in depicting Salim as a microcosm for "good" Indian Muslims, *Sarfarosh*'s Hindu majoritarianism becomes apparent.[157]

Daiya asserts that *Sarfarosh* connects the contemporaneous issues of terroristic cross-border violence with historical Partition trauma (2011: 595), providing what Ellen Goldberg calls "cultural horror", allowing Hindi cinema to "reiterate how the memories and ghosts of Partition continue to haunt the Indian nation" (Goldberg, 2021: 116). Additionally, Sony Jalarajan Raj & Adith K. Suresh assert that the use of Partition in Hindi film texts "follow a pattern of recreating the ethnoreligious tensions of the Hindu and Muslim communities" (2023: 357), pointing out the relationship between Partition and nationalist inclinations in Hindi-language films. In this context, I assert that *Sarfarosh*'s re-historizing of Partition memories along *Hindu majoritarian* lines is bolstered further by the depiction of Gulfam Hassan.

[157] For more on Salim's importance to *Sarfarosh,* please see: Fazila-Yacoobali, 2002; Murty, 2009; Kumar, 2016; Shailo, 2016.

V: *SARFAROSH*'s MUSLIM TERRORIST: EXAMINING GULFAM HASSAN

Sarfarosh features several negative characters – Muslim gangsters (Sultan [Pradeep Rawat] and Haji Seth [Ahmad Khan]); Pakistani military/ISI operatives (Captain Javed Abbas/Shafi [Ali Khan] and Major Baig [Shri Vallabh Vyas]); and Hindu gangsters (Bala Thakur [Rajesh Joshi], Veerun [Govind Namdev] and Mirchi Seth [Akhilendra Mishra]) – all of whom work directly or indirectly with Muslim militants/ISI operatives to funnel illegal firearms from Pakistan into India. Yet Gulfam's identity is ideologically driven and historically grounded, positing a layered and complex variation of the terroristic Muslim figure. As Meenakshi Bharat argues, *Sarfarosh*'s depiction of Gulfam avoids a jingoistic approach to characterizing his Muslim terrorist persona (2024: 68), diverging from the stereotypical image of the Muslim terrorist, instead embodying an earlier mode of Muslim religiosity; an "exceedingly [grey] and bearded affair" (Sundar, 2017: 151).

I argue that Gulfam's characterization in *Sarfarosh* articulates *Hindutva*-laden anxieties towards India's Muslims through his liminal status: his "outside/inside" dynamic allows him to traverse cultural and nationalistic boundaries by aligning his grievances with Pakistan to aid cross-border terrorism in India. Muslims as liminal beings, according to Sk Sagir Ali, "positions them as India's quintessential scapegoat", especially within the confines of *Hindutva* (2025: 11). Subsequently, this scapegoating demarcates the Muslim subject as a contaminant within the perceived "pure essence" of *Hindutva*'s vision of a utopian India. With *Hindutva*, by its very definition, as the essence of "Hinduness" tied to India (Savarkar, 2021 [1923]: 43), Muslims are essentialized as the "Other" not only because their religion and religious values are "far off in Arabia or Palestine" (Savarkar, 2021 [1923]: 53), but also because of their perceived refusal to see India as their Holyland, disqualifying them from fully incorporating into *Hindutva*'s Hindu *Rashtra* (2021 [1923]: 53). Since *Hindutva* prefers the binary coding of "Hinduness" and the "Other", and since the liminal entity "may be disguised as monsters" (Turner, 2007: 90), I will explore Gulfam's liminality to understand *Sarfarosh*'s portrayal of cross-border terrorism and the terroristic Muslim Other.

Paul Stenner refers to "liminality" as the "experiences that happen during occasions of significant transition, passage or disruption" (2017: 14); for Gulfam, Partition trauma functions as his rupture. Furthermore, Fazila-Yacoobali argues that Partition "can be seen as potentially about the phase of liminality – Pakistani-Indian and not-Pakistani-not-Indian – a liminality which is both 'structurally invisible' and deeply threatening to the 'stable state' or national order" (1999: 183), aligning with Nandini Bhattaacharya's argument that the terrorist

character is "a liminal entity or phenomenon, who throws into radical doubt the constitution, coherence, or consistency of the modern developmental nation state and its borders" (2013: 50). However, Fazila-Yacoobali does not focus on terrorism or Gulfam's relationship with it, nor foregrounds *Sarfarosh*'s Hindu nationalist dogma (although there is an acknowledgement). As such, I argue that Gulfam sits within *Sarfarosh*'s larger Hindu nationalist agenda, which is, itself, not unusual, but does limit Gulfam's screen time,[158] and, as a character, reflects *Hindutva* prejudices and anxieties towards Muslims surrounding Islamic terrorism.

[158] Several films of this era offer Hindu majoritarian agendas, but do not portray – at least, in depth – the Muslim terrorist. For example, the Muslim terrorists in *LOC Kargil* are almost non-existent, becoming an "invisible" enemy for the Indian military, whilst others, such as *A Wednesday!* heighten Islamic terrorism anxieties whilst depicting little, on-screen, of either the atrocities or the Muslim terrorists themselves.

V-I: THE PERFORMANCE OF BELONGING: GHAZALS & THE URDU LANGUAGE

Gulfam's introduction occurs at a *mehfil:* a formal, indoor event of poetry, song and dance. It is here that Gulfam's liminal state becomes immediately apparent in three distinct ways: through Gulfam's Urdu vernacular; the performance, or *ghazal*; and his introduction by Ajay's love interest, Seema (Sonali Bendre), a talent agent. When taken together, *Sarfarosh* introduces Gulfam's cultural and cross-border hybridity, positioning Gulfam as a celebrated character amongst the Indian elite whilst embodying the complexities of Muslim identity.

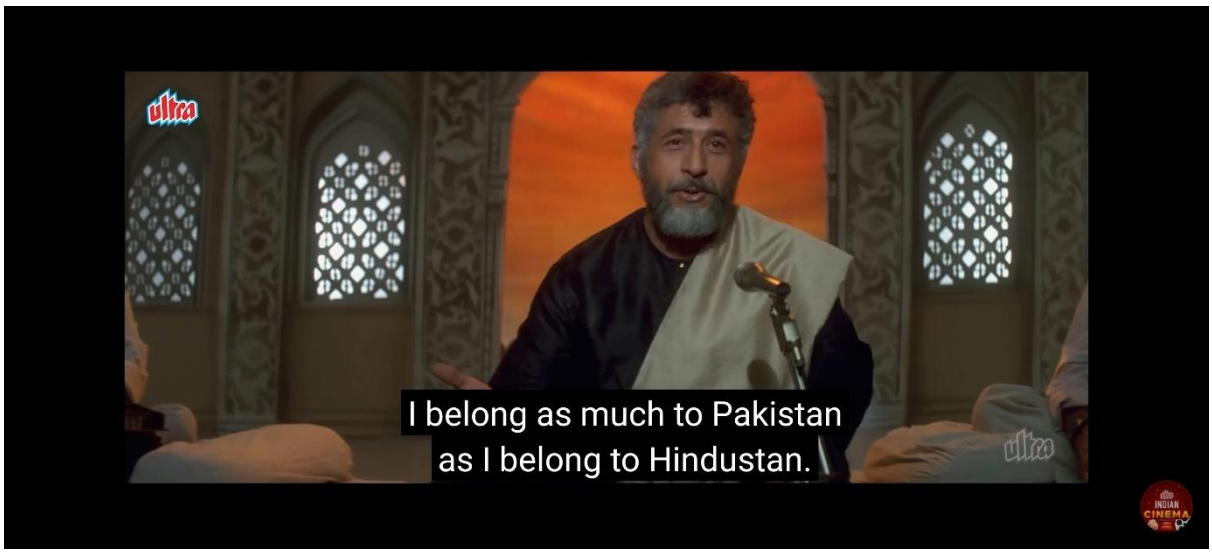

Figure 1: Sarfarosh's *antagonist, Gulfam Hassan (Naseeruddin Shah)*

The dialogue of Seema and Gulfam in this scene highlights Gulfam's liminal and cultural hybridity, allowing Gulfam to seamlessly integrate with – and be revered by – the Indian elite. Entering the scene to rapturous applause, Gulfam is framed within a spotlight whilst seated on a cushion. As Ajay also enters the scene, sitting in the audience, Seema exclaims: "Our guest this evening is world-famous. The famous singer, Gulfam Hassan. Our guest this evening is also our host". The dialogue, as well as Gulfam and Ajay's simultaneous entrances, becomes *Sarfarosh*'s first cue in highlighting Gulfam's hybrid identity. Seema addresses the crowd that, despite Gulfam spending his childhood in India but growing up in Pakistan, his "*ghazals* are written there, but his music belongs here", before Gulfam elaborates: "I belong as much to Pakistan as I belong to Hindustan. My ties to both the lands are emotional and sentimental. That is what transcends all relationships. In *ghazal,* this is what we call *mohabbat,* love. In love, man transcends all bounds" (Fig. 1). To applause, Gulfam begins a romantic *ghazal* performance*,* the

diegetic sound of his harmonium providing a sentimental yet romantic accompaniment to Gulfam's poetic, Urdu register as he sings.

Regula Qureshi notes how the *ghazal* "is the principal poetic genre of Urdu, a form of Persianized Hindi that originated as the language of Muslim culture and religion in South Asia … and serves [to express] emotion and cognition in a rarefied, universalized, yet intimate way through its main subject: love, both human and spiritual" (1990: 458). Ira Bhaskar and Richard Allen not only highlight how Urdu vernacularity was rooted in Mughal history, but also attest to how refined Urdu and song became part of the cultural syncretism between Hindus and Muslims, despite "the political struggles and the language wars of the early twentieth century [in which the] emergence of Hindi as a language that claimed descent from Sanskrit denied the shared heritage of Urdu" (2022: 4-5). This historic linguistic syncretism highlights Gulfam's seamless navigation between Indian and Pakistani sensibilities across Partition boundaries, allowing him to conceal his terrorist inclinations which are later revealed. Gulfam's initial appearance in this *ghazal* performance immediately emboldens and displays his hybrid characterization, allowing *Sarfarosh*'s Muslim terroristic Other to differ greatly from other Hindi cinema Muslim terrorists of this period.

Gulfam's Urdu vernacular accentuates historical Hindu nationalist anxieties surrounding Indian Muslims, language, and the Muslim identity in South Asian contexts. Christopher R. King posits that early Hindu nationalist thought denied the cultural traditions that assimilated with historic Muslim rule in India. King explains that this led to the "Hindi movement" whereby Hindus, supporting Hindi as India's *lingua franca*, sought "to transform the existing equations of Urdu = Muslim + Hindu and Hindi = Hindu + Muslim into Urdu = Muslim and Hindi = Hindu", resulting in the coinage of "'Hindi, Hindu, Hindustan', a three-fold assertion of the identity of language, religion, and motherland" (1994: 15).[159] Similarly, Omar Khalidi argues that Urdu has since been depicted as a Muslim vernacular, as its written form, akin to the scripting of the Holy Qur'an, not only differs from the other written Indian languages, but "links … Indian Muslims to the intellectual and religious currents in Arab countries and Iran" (1986: 395), becoming bound to a collective Muslim identity (1986: 398). Gulfam's lexicon of Urdu demarcates him as Muslim and coupled with his ability to traverse cultural lines via *ghazal* poetry, invites his celebrity amongst the Indian elite, masking Gulfam's terroristic nature. This is further supported by Abdul Shaban's argument that Urdu "is a carrier of its glorious culture and history" (2018: xxv), displayed here through Gulfam's

[159] For more on the Hindi-Urdu controversy, please see: King, 1977; Tuteja, 2019; Singh & Dwivedi, 2023.

ghazal career as well as the admiration of the Indian elite; a direct appreciation for Gulfam's high-culture alignment. *Sarfarosh*'s introduction of Gulfam in this way symbolizes the "unseen enemy" regarding Indian Muslims within the *Hindutva imaginaire.*

Gulfam's *ghazal* career is significant to *Sarfarosh* in establishing the contours of Gulfam's relationship with Ajay, as well as their opposing ideological symbolism. As mentioned earlier, Ajay reflects certain *Hindutva*-centred ideals regarding the Hindu male,[160] but Ajay admires Gulfam's musical career, later gifting Gulfam an old cassette of his performance, which is later released publicly in India. In using language to shape their friendship, *Sarfarosh* acknowledges the shared historical linguistic link, heightening Gulfam's later reveal as a terroristic sympathizer – and a sympathizer of Pakistani sensitivities – more sinister. Additionally, by using Urdu lexicon to demarcate Gulfam as intrinsically Muslim, Gulfam is symbolically distanced from the ideal "righteousness" of the *Hindutva*/Hindu male (Ajay).

With historic debates surrounding Urdu in India providing early agitations within *Hindutva* ideology, Gulfam's Urdu vernacular aids his depiction as the "enemy" hiding amongst the Indian elite – a microcosm of India and Hindus. By hiding his façade as a terrorist behind language and his *ghazal* proficiency, Gulfam becomes a dangerous terroristic Muslim Other, one that uses his liminal status to seamlessly fraternize with Indians and Ajay, concealing Gulfam's Pakistani sympathies. Gulfam's cultural camouflage, thus, draws upon *Hindutva* concerns that Indian Muslims cannot be "truly Indian."[161]

[160] Please see: Murty, 2009; Daiya, 2011.
[161] Please see: Savarkar, 2021 [1923].

V-II: PARTITION TRAUMA AND LIMINAL SPACE: THE *HAVELI* & THE GOAT

Sarfarosh depicts Gulfam's terroristic liminal Otherness through his ancestral ties to India. I assert that Gulfam's liminality through his ancestral ties to India becomes salient; it is not through the portrayal of bombings, hijackings, or terroristic activities upon India from the terroristic Muslim figure, but through his relationship with his ancestral *haveli*: a large mansion/manor house inherited by Gulfam through historical familial ties.

Gulfam's third on-screen presence (roughly half-way through *Sarfarosh*) presents the viewer with the inside of Gulfam's *haveli*; specifically, a room which appears to be his bedroom, adorned with lamps, golden and silver artefacts, and decorative, intricate designs on the walls. Here, the viewer is introduced to the goat. As the camera circles around Gulfam in a panoramic shot, sitting centre atop a pile of opulent pillows and playing his harmonium, the diegetic sound of Gulfam's ethereal-like vocalizing is abruptly broken when the goat, accidentally, breaks a lamp. The bleating of the goat, as it breaks several oil-lamps and artefacts, prompts the entrance of Mirchi and Shafi, a Hindu gangster who aids Gulfam's cross-border weaponry procurement, and a Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence officer, respectively. Shafi's introduction here, alongside Gulfam, spotlights the first on-screen link between Gulfam and *Sarfarosh*'s Islamic, cross-border terrorism storyline. Additionally, the first hint to Gulfam's anger and violent propensity also comes to the fore. After capturing the goat, and as retaliation for causing damage to the room, Gulfam, off-screen, assaults the goat as Mirchi watches in horror.

Gulfam's monologue, in a shorter scene, highlights his Partition grievances, the first indication surrounding Gulfam's reasoning for his animosity towards India at this moment (roughly half-way through *Sarfarosh*). The scene features Gulfam and the goat, in which the goat's ears are bandaged following Gulfam's assault. Gulfam laments, and, while roaming the corridors and courtyard of his *haveli,* offers a mournful monologue:

Do you know why I spared you? Because you aren't human. I never spare humans. Years ago, they made a mistake. The powerbrokers drew a border across the land. And on both sides of the line, the fools got their freedom. Freedom to decide which ass would rule. The result, you can see. Where do people like us go? This, the home of my ancestors… look at her now. Time was when she was as pretty as a bride. Now she lies abandoned. Like an unwanted widow. And I sit, the silent watcher.

(Gulfam's Monologue [1:33:03-1:33:55])

Gulfam's stately *haveli* foregrounds his liminality, symbolizing the space between India and Pakistan. Gulfam's liminal status is represented in the spatiality of the *haveli*: standing in solitude, in the Rajasthani desert in India, but near the Pakistani border, a metaphorical liminal space where Gulfam's love for India, his birthplace, but Pakistani-backed Partition trauma, intersect. The *haveli* symbolizes Gulfam's national liminality as neither

belonging to India, nor Pakistan: It is not India's, because it has been left destitute of colour and life on the outside (like a "widow"), and it is not Pakistan's, because it sits *just* outside the Pakistani nation-state. In both instances, the *haveli* – and Gulfam – lie *outside* the folds of any national space. His lamenting over the *haveli*'s state represents his internal anger towards the Indian-nation state, which has destroyed his *ghar*.[162]

The *haveli*'s long corridor, made up of concrete pillars with off-brown/red/white sandstone-like features, symbolizes the weight of traumatic and bloody experiences Gulfam has faced. There is no music in this scene; Gulfam's monologue echoes in the silence, emphasizing the methodical trail into Gulfam's deep-seated grievances. Farhan Hanif Siddiqi acknowledges how the *mohajir* (Muslim immigrants from India who have settled in Pakistan following Partition, which I will discuss later) were "at a loss because of their migrant status – without [a] home [or] … property all of which was left behind in India" (2010: 26), thereby rendering them "stateless". Here, it is in Gulfam's "statelessness" that he asks the rhetorical question of where they can go, another cue to his liminal status, which directly feeds into his Partition grievances that intensify his terrorist inclinations (Fig. 2).

Figure 2: Gulfam (Naseeruddin Shah) asks the goat a question.

Despite the *haveli*'s dilapidation, it houses several Indian artifacts in some of its grandiose rooms, contrasting metaphorically with Gulfam. Gulfam, *internally,* holds hatred for India (his heart is in "ruin" due to Partition), but holds the "treasures" of culture *outside*, i.e. his performative prowess with *ghazal* singing and poetry. The room in which Gulfam is vocalizing with his harmonium provides a stark difference to the outside of the

[162] Vazira Fazila-Yacoobali explain that *ghar* connotes "a specific physical place where you live, as well as the source of one's belonging in a family tree" (2002: 184-185), whilst *mulk* can be translated as a "country, region or territory, and here refers to a territorially defined nation, or nation-state" (2002: 186).

haveli: his diegetic *ghazal* vocalization, accompanied by a kaleidoscope of colour, signifies the internal life of the *haveli* now lost. As such, the opulent oil-lamps and colourful artefacts metaphorically align with Gulfam's love for India, destroyed by the goat – and, thus, an on-screen cue for the viewer to associate Gulfam's hatred for India. Additionally, the absence of music and the cold colour palette of the *haveli* contrasts to the warm, cultural *mehfil* scene earlier. Thus, despite Gulfam's *physical* presence when he visits India and resides in the *haveli,* the wounds of Partition – harboured by Gulfam *emotionally* and by the *haveli physically* in its state of ill-repair – parallel Gulfam's anger and anti-India sentiments, fuelling his terrorist thought and, in turn, driving *Sarfarosh*'s terrorism narrative.

The goat, whose appearance seems irreverent in *Sarfarosh,* symbolizes childhood innocence and, later, represents damaged adulthood, both of which mirror Gulfam. In destroying the vases and candles within the *haveli,* the goat does not comprehend the damage, prompting Gulfam to assault the goat's ears by biting them (the biting is implied) as punishment. During the monologue scene, Gulfam tells the goat that it was "spared" because it is not a human. The goat, thus, becomes a motif for Gulfam in two ways. "Childhood innocence" is symbolized through the goat and Gulfam being damaged through no fault of their own. This is evident in the goat damaging the vases and candles through its animalistic nature, and Gulfam with Partition, an event he had no control over. But following the goat's injuries, a consequence of its destruction of Gulfam's *haveli* room, the goat becomes symbolic of "damaged adulthood", reflecting Gulfam's inner wound following Partition contemporaneously. Furthermore, the goat is significant in another way, but I will discuss this later in this analysis. The goat, linked to Gulfam in these contexts, underlines the duality of Gulfam's terroristic nature: damaged by Partition, his wounds cannot heal despite his innocence in the traumatic separation of the Subcontinent, and as such, reinforces *Sarfarosh*'s terroristic narrative.

V-III: *"MOHAJIR"*: GULFAM HASSAN, THE OUTSIDER

Gulfam is labelled as a *mohajir*, a "refugee", further reflecting Gulfam's liminal status. The term not only enhances Gulfam's terroristic inclination through his association to Pakistan but is also used to present Pakistan as a depraved and untrustworthy neighbour. There are two scenes in which the term "*mohajir*" is used: it is used once in a scene set in Karachi, by Pakistan's ISI General (Khodus Wadia), angered by a failed consignment to India (it was thwarted by Ajay and Salim in a police operation); and repeated twice in a scene at the opening of an Indo-Pak music festival, where Major Baig (Shri Vallabh Vyas), a prominent ISI figure, is disguised as a bureaucrat visiting on "official business". As Major Baig notes how "the operation" was given to Gulfam by the General as a sign of trust to "a *mohajir*", Gulfam refers to himself as a *mohajir* in front of Ajay, Seema, and Major Baig following Major Baig's reveal of the General's view of Gulfam (Fig. 3).

Figure 3: Gulfam (Naseeruddin Shah, right) tells Seema (Sonali Bendre, foreground) what a "mohajir" is in front of a nervous Major Baig (Shri Vallabh Vyas, left).

Farhan Hanif Siddiqi asserts that Pakistan's *mohajir* community is distinctive because of their Urdu vernacular. This enabled them, following Partition, to exert influence and authority in administrative roles. This was supported by their levels of education, as many *mohajirs* had resided in urban centres during British colonial rule in India, and because of this, their administrative acumen helped them attain "special quotas" from the Pakistani State (2010: 25-26). Gulfam embodies these contexts in his *mohajir* status: he holds cultural authority amongst the Hindu/Indian elite regarding his *ghazal* poetry; his refined linguistic cadence signifies he is an

educated man; and his "special quota" reflects his ability to travel between India and Pakistan freely, with permission to reside in his ancestral *haveli*.[163]

However, his *mohajir* status comes with drawbacks. Ram Puniyani posits that, despite the Muslim elite being welcomed and compensated in Pakistan following Partition, later Muslims arriving from India into Pakistan post-Partition were "not welcome and relegated to a life of subjugation" (2018: 95). Categorizing Gulfam as a *mohajir* spotlights Gulfam's subjugation by the General, Major Baig and the ISI: he is a pawn in the ISI's operations to destabilize India from within, reflective of historic *Hindutva* suspicions that Muslims in India are linked to Pakistan in some shape, way or form.[164]

In an earlier scene, the General tells Major Baig to go to India to the Indo-Pak music festival, to "remind [Gulfam] about his promise", warning Major Baig that, should Gulfam default on the mission, he can "sit and sing with his unholy brethren-in-arts" in Pakistan. The General's statements provide two interpretations that further establish Gulfam's liminality. Firstly, the General's use of the term "unholy" to describe Gulfam's musical career harkens back to *Sarfarosh*'s introduction of Gulfam at the *mehfil* concert. By describing it as "unholy", and since we have established earlier that Gulfam's career as a *ghazal* singer promoted his integration into, and invited admiration from, the Indian elite, *Sarfarosh* establishes India as an "unholy" enemy from the Pakistani perspective. In turn, this further highlights Gulfam's liminal status, whilst simultaneously depicting the ISI as a dangerous entity to India. Secondly, the term "*mohajir*", throughout *Sarfarosh,* is only used by Pakistanis (save for Gulfam calling himself one as direct reference to Major Baig's use of the term). Both Major Baig and the General use the term to refer to Gulfam. The Pakistanis *do not* consider Gulfam their own: he will always "be Indian", and a way for the ISI, and Pakistan, to inflect maximum damage to India from the inside.

[163] This information of Gulfam's living arrangements in India is given in an earlier scene where Ajay and Gulfam meet at Gulfam's ancestral *haveli.*

[164] Please see: Golwalkar, 1966; Hansen, 1996; Ogden, 2013.

V-IV - THE CONFRONTATION

Sarfarosh's penultimate scene, staging the confrontation between Gulfam and Ajay, pushes Gulfam's liminality to the forefront. His dual existence – as both a man of culture and song celebrated in India and the Muslim terroristic Other, backed by Pakistan – is unmasked, highlighting Gulfam's antagonistic terrorist persona whilst being firmly rooted within *Hindutva*'s anti-Muslim prejudices.

Following an earlier police operation, Ajay and his team learn that Major Baig and Shafi, known as Captain Javed Abbas, are ISI operatives *inside* India, both of whom Ajay has met.[165] Having captured Haji Seth and Shafi at another location following an ensuing gunfight and procurement of illegal weapons and ammunition, Ajay and his team arrive at Bahid Fort (the area where Gulfam's *haveli* sits, as well as the location of the Indo-Pak music festival), where Gulfam's treachery becomes apparent. Due to the lack of evidence of Gulfam's involvement (which *Sarfarosh* cleverly aligns with as the audience do not *see* Gulfam *physically* engage in terroristic activities), Ajay seeds the doubt of allegiance between Gulfam and Major Baig, and ultimately tricks Gulfam into killing Major Baig, allowing Ajay to arrest Gulfam. This penultimate scene exposes Gulfam's duality and liminal status, portraying Gulfam as the personification of *Hindutva*'s deepest fears surrounding Muslims – specifically, the terroristic Muslim Other. I will explore four key points: Gulfam's justification for terrorism; Ajay's rebuttal emphasising nationalist unity and rejection of Gulfam's *qaum* (a "non-territorial identity" [Fazila-Yacoobali, 2002: 188]) over *mulk* (nation) ideology; Gulfam's liminal identity being exposed; and Gulfam's death.

[165] Ajay meets Shafi/Captain Javed Abbas when he visits Gulfam at his *haveli* earlier in the narrative, and, later, meets Major Baig at the opening of the Indo-Pak music festival. In both cases, Gulfam is present.

JUSTIFYING TERROR

The conversation between Ajay and Gulfam reveals Gulfam's justification for cross-border terrorism. With non-diegetic string accompaniment sinisterly in the background, Gulfam, pushed to the ground by Ajay, begins by telling him that "the soil you stand upon once used to be where my ancestors ruled". The camera, positioned at eye-level with Gulfam, traces his visage as he stands, reflecting his birth on the soil and the "inside enemy" propaganda situated in *Hindutva* discourse. Gulfam discloses how he and his family were driven out of their ancestral home during Partition, but as Ajay tries to reason with Gulfam (I will discuss Ajay's positioning later), Ajay laments: "…you and your men rub salt into the wound", to which Gulfam quips: "And we will do it forever. For our wound is deep. It won't heal so easily … And every time our weapons wreak havoc, you will remember … our pain! Remember the wound you inflicted on our community!" (Fig. 4).

Figure 4: Gulfam (Naseeruddin Shah) offers his reasons for his anger and terrorism sponsorship.

Gulfam's Partition trauma is offered as a reason for his terroristic activities, but he first recalls his ancestor's earlier rule of the land, hinting Gulfam's potential Mughal heritage.[166] Historically, *Hindutva* has long sought to rid ancient Mughal/Muslim rule within a contemporary Indian imaginary (Hasan, 2018: 301). As Gulfam laments how he and his family were "driven out" of India and their ancestral home, Nitasha Kaul, as I mentioned elsewhere, points towards the destruction of the Babri Masjid, which "created and roused a Hindu body politic that came to see itself along the lines of an 'awakened Hindu nation'" (2017: 526).[167] Gulfam's recounting of his violent

[166] For more on the historical Islamic and Mughal traditions and trajectories in India, please see: Bhaskar & Allen, 2022; Damle & Damle, 2023.
[167] Please see this thesis' previous chapter for more on the Babri Masjid and its demolition.

dismissal from India parallels sentiments felt and witnessed during the Babri Masjid's 1992 demolition, suggesting that Gulfam holds the familial bloodline of Mughals – a distinctive anxiety amongst *Hindutva* advocates that suggest "Indian Muslims [are] the progeny of that invader (*Babar ki aulad*)" (Pandey, 1994: 1527).[168] *Sarfarosh* tethers the attitudes felt by Muslims following the Babri Masjid's destruction through Gulfam's grievances, and since the destruction of the mosque is regarded as exacerbating anti-Hindu retaliations from Muslims,[169] Gulfam categorizes his anti-Indian grievances along the lines of his forced removal from his "mosque" – his *haveli*. Ultimately, *Sarfarosh* conjures the image that Muslims are inherently aggrieved by the events of Partition, directly feeding into *Sarfarosh*'s terrorism narrative through Gulfam.

Figure 5: Gulfam (Naseeruddin Shah) warns Ajay (Aamir Khan, left)

Additionally, Gulfam's assertion that "we will do it forever" reflects a nightmarish notion within *Hindutva*'s broader discourse (Fig. 5). Mushirul Hasan asserts that *Hindutva* propogandists have long portrayed Indian Muslims as "aggressive fundamentalists, the descendants of the depraved and tyrannical medieval rulers who demolished temples and forcibly converted Hindus to Islam" (2018: 25), citing Muslims are intrinsically rampageous (2018: 254). Gulfam embodies this rampageous attitude by warning Ajay that they – aggrieved Muslims – will continue their relentless attempt to destabilize India, backed by their traumatic Partition experience(s). Furthermore, as Sanjeev Kumar highlights, Hindi films construct a cultural archaeology of Muslims, whereby Islam becomes an antithetical pivot by which a normative Hindu majoritarianism is built, allowing for

[168] Dibyesh Anand argues that "a common abuse for Muslims in India is that they are 'Babar ki aulad' ("children of Babur")" (2011: 40-41). Babur (1483-1530) was a Mughal emperor who founded the Mughal Empire in the Indian subcontinent and is a direct descendant of Timur (1320s?-1405) and Genghis Khan (c. 1162-1227).
[169] Please see: Dheeraj, 2020.

Hindi cinema, through narratives based "on anti-India terrorism, organized crime, and divisive inter-cultural tangle among communities" to portray Muslims as obsessed about violence (2023: 892). Gulfam demonstrates his obsessive nature towards a violent offensive upon India, a nation he argues drove him and his family from his ancestral home.

Sarfarosh's tethering of Partition trauma and anti-India, cross-border terrorism directly links to Gulfam's liminal state. Uprooted from India and resettling in Pakistan, Gulfam is position in a permanent state of displacement – geographically separated from his birthplace, yet culturally tethered to it through his *ghazal* career, *haveli* memory, and childhood nostalgia. Consequently, Gulfam's liminality – a direct result of Partition – becomes foundational to his terroristic outlook: his unresolved trauma transforms nostalgia into grievance, and his cultural hybridity enables Gulfam to operate inside India. As such, Gulfam's intimacy with Partition, and the trauma of it, embolden him to become a unique Muslim terroristic Other, reflecting *Hindutva* suspicions towards Subcontinental Muslims.

GULFAM HASSAN: A NOBODY

During their conversation, Ajay, coming to terms with his idol's duplicitous nature, claims that Gulfam "belongs nowhere", spotlighting Gulfam's liminal status in two ways: he belongs nowhere *because* of his insidious nature, and he belongs nowhere *because of* it, too. Christophe Jaffrelot asserts that the Hindu *Rashtra* is a historic notion that "refers as much to a people united by blood ties, a culture and community codes as to a political framework; it is at once a society, a civilization, a nation and a state" in *Hindutva* (2019: 64–65). Championed by Savarkar (2021 [1923]) and M. S. Golwalkar (1947), the notion of *Hindu Rashta* is central to *Hindutva,* primarily to unite Hindus against a common enemy – Pakistan and Muslims (Wojczewski, 2020: 404).[170] Since the *Hindutva* stance is that India is for Hindus, and, as I have established above, Gulfam "cannot be Indian", Gulfam's liminality is clear: he does not adhere to any *mulk* (a country, region or territory), since he is rejected by the Indian state as being Pakistani; is further rejected by Pakistan for being a *mohajir,* made clear by Major Baig[171] and the ISI General; and Ajay, by arguing that it is farcical for Gulfam to talk about a collective *qaum,* given Gulfam's terrorist sympathies, destroying any notion surrounding a collective *qaum* (a people, a nation, a race, tribe or sect) (Fazila-Yacoonali 2002: 195). To further my point, consider Sultan, a "bad Muslim character", killed for privileging *qaum* over *mulk* earlier in *Sarfarosh,* while the "good Muslim character", Salim, assimilates into the Indian nation-state because he favoured *mulk* over *qaum*. Gulfam *cannot* adhere to either, since his liminality forces him to be "exiled" from both

[170] Please also see: Nizaruddin, 2020; Khan & Lutful, 2021; Shani, 2021; Natrajan, 2022.

[171] In a pivotal moment in this scene, Major Baig is offered by Ajay to kill Gulfam; as he accepts, Gulfam pleads with Major Baig, before Major Baig offers his reason: "Queens aren't sacrificed for pawns. And it won't cost my country anything were you to die. Because you aren't Pakistani! You are [a] refugee [*mohajir*]!".

India and Pakistan (Fig. 6).

Figure 6: Ajay (Aamir Khan, left) tells Gulfam (Naseeruddin Shah) that he belongs nowhere.

Drawing from the *Hindutva* perspective, Gulfam is considered more "Pakistani" since he is a *mohajir*, thus being a "foreign invader" whenever he arrives in India. As mentioned earlier, Gulfam's discussion surrounding his ancestors indicate an ancestral link to earlier Mughal histories; Gulfam, within *Hindutva,* "cannot be a proper Indian" (Kattiparambil, 2024: 142) despite his birth on Indian soil. Additionally, the *Hindutva* angst of Muslims and their perceived allegiance to Pakistan is also depicted through Gulfam's Pakistani association. Chris Ogden posits that the loyalty of Indian Muslims were *constantly* under suspicion, as they were deemed "linked to Pakistan, and by extension (through insurgency in Kashmir and elsewhere), connected to terrorism" (2013: 42).[172] As *Sarfarosh*'s terrorism narrative stems largely from Gulfam's ability to straddle between Pakistani and Indian sensibilities, thereby enables the seamless cross-border procurement of firearms into India, *Sarfarosh* constructs *Hindutva*'s doubts as justified when considering Indian Muslims and their perceived allegiance to Pakistan, especially in relation to Islamic and cross-border terrorism.

[172] Thomas B. Hansen argues similar notions (1996: 150). Please also see: Golwalkar, 1966.

GULFAM'S DEATH

Regretting his friendship with Gulfam, Ajay orders Salim to handcuff Gulfam following their conversation but Gulfam, handcuffed by Salim, escapes Salim's grip, killing himself by driving a police officer's bayonet forcefully into his throat. (Fig. 7).

Figure 7: Gulfam (Naseeruddin Shah) dies, as Salim (Mukesh Rishi) watches on.

Gulfam's death contributes to several key issues surrounding *Hindutva*'s Hindu *Rashtra.* This utopian understanding of an all-Hindu nation, according to Balmurli Natrajan, categorizes Muslims as the "Outsider", rendering them both despised and disposable (2022: 306). As I have established, Gulfam's liminality first permitted a fluid transition between Pakistan and India, allowing him to become "the enemy within" but, as a *mohajir,* he is disposable (according to Major Baig), used only by the ISI in their attempts to destroy India from within.

Gulfam's death reinforces the *Hindutva* narrative that Muslims cannot fully belong to the Indian nation unless they assimilate and pander "to an increasingly 'saffronised' public sphere or risk exclusion and stigmatisation" (Shani, 2021: 265). With Gulfam killing himself and being excluded from both the Muslim (Pakistan) and Hindu (India) nation-states, his death becomes emblematic of *Hindutva*'s attempts to remove Islamic culture in India. Since *Hindutva* advocates have historically chanted *"Jao Pakistan, ya Kabrastan"* ("go to Pakistan or your graves"),[173] Gulfam's death becomes a visual reminder to un-patriotic Indian Muslims: they must choose between an assimilated life within the Hindu *Rashta* "by adopting Hindu cultural values and social practices, thus ceasing to be 'Muslims with a distinct identity', or 'remain enemies' and thus continue to be

[173] Please see: Zamindar, 2010; Kumar, 2013; Engineer, 2018.

considered a 'threat' to national integrity and security" (Shani, 2021: 271) by facing severe – even fatal – consequences. Consequently, Gulfam's death affirms the ideals of the Hindu *Rashtra* within *Hindutva*; the Hindu *Rashtra* can only survive following the elimination of the "enemy within" – Muslims.

As mentioned earlier, the goat further functions as a foreshadowing of Gulfam's eventual death by suicide. During his monologue, Gulfam tells the goat he is "spared" because "you aren't human", establish an existential boundary between human and non-human life. The goat survives *only* because it is an animal, according to Gulfam's logic. In Gulfam's mind, the goat itself "invited" its punishment damaging candles and vases, and this is, itself, reflective within Gulfam's suicide: he cannot bare the emotional weight of his destruction (highlighted by Ajay's anger and disappointment), nor the moral destruction inflicted upon India through his affiliation with cross-border arms dealing. As such, Gulfam's mirrors his moral standing surrounding retribution: a self-inflicted retribution.

Gulfam's death culminates *Sarfarosh*'s narrative arc by resolving his terroristic, Muslim threat to the Hindu *Rashtra* posed by his liminal identity. As his liminal status encourages *Sarfarosh*'s terrorism angle, Gulfam's suicide becomes a form of narrative purification, foreclosing any possibility of a hybrid, coexistent identity within the Indian nation, reaffirming *Hindutva*'s ideological stance that the Muslim who cannot align within *Hindutva*'s utopian vision of India must be removed. As such, Gulfam's death symbolizes the erasure of liminality – and the danger posed by it – to "restore" a homogenous national space cleansed of perceived internal threats posed by Indian Muslims.

VI - *SARFAROSH* CONCLUSION

Paul Stenner refers to "liminality" as the "experiences that happen during occasions of significant transition, passage or disruption" (2017: 14); for Gulfam, Partition trauma functions as his rupture. Furthermore, Fazila-Yacoobali argues that Partition "can be seen as potentially about the phase of liminality – Pakistani-Indian and not-Pakistani-not-Indian – a liminality which is both 'structurally invisible' and deeply threatening to the 'stable state' or national order" (1999: 183), aligning with Nandini Bhattaacharya's argument that the terrorist character is "a liminal entity … who throws into radical doubt the constitution, coherence, or consistency of the modern developmental nation state and its borders" (2013: 50). Despite Gulfam's limited screen time,[174] he reflects *Hindutva* prejudices and anxieties towards Muslims surrounding Islamic terrorism.

Gulfam's portrayal of *Hindutva*-inflected anxieties allows him to be considered an engineered character that supports *Sarfarosh*'s wider nationalist narrative. As mentioned earlier, following the BJP-backed legislation that offered Indian cinema special industry status in 1998, many terrorism narratives at that time offered rudimentary depictions of the Muslim terroristic Other.[175] However, *Sarfarosh*'s Gulfam does not *strictly* adhere to the stereotypical Muslim terrorist persona, and this is what makes Gulfam's portrayal unique. He is not a brute, nor is he some sexual marauder; but that does not mean he is not dangerous. Gulfam's complexity lies in his dangerous liminal hybritiy: his Urdu vernacular and proficiency in *ghazal* poetry elevates Gulfam to an arena whereby a seamless transition between India and Pakistan are viable and his Partition traumas directly contribute to his terroristic outlook, become central to *Sarfarosh*'s terrorist narrative. Even as Gulfam dies, he grabs Ajay's gun: symbolic of the notion that, even in dying moments, a Muslim – the "Other" – should be feared.

Sarfarosh, despite being released in 1999, builds upon Hindi cinema's thematization of terrorism to present a contemporary narrative of *Hindutva*'s prejudicial intelligible in 2025. The film's commentary surrounding Salim often eclipses a reading of Gulfam in academic literature,[176] which is why this analysis sought to spotlight Gulfam's complexity as a Muslim terrorist persona, and to acknowledge his position within Hindi cinematic mythologies of

[174] Several films of this era offer Hindu majoritarian agendas, but do not portray – at least, in depth – the Muslim terrorist. For example, the Muslim terrorists in *LOC Kargil* are almost non-existent, becoming an "invisible" enemy for the Indian military, whilst others, such as *A Wednesday!* heighten Islamic terrorism anxieties whilst depicting little, on-screen, of either the atrocities or the Muslim terrorists themselves.

[175] These rudimentary portrayals, unfortunately, are still prevalent now, in films like *Uri: The Surgical Strike* (Aditya Dhar, 2019), *Sooryavanshi* (Rohit Shetty, 2021) and *Major* (Sashi Kiran Tikka, 2022),

[176] Please see: Murty, 2009; Kumar, 2016; Shailo, 2016.

the terrorist Muslim figure. I disagree with Meenakshi Bharat's notion that *Sarfarosh* "adroitly avoids the jingoistic representation of terrorism and terrorists" (2024: 68). While Gulfam, to an extent, *does* avoid being typified as the Muslim terrorist in various ways, my exploration, accompanied by an understanding of contemporaneous *Hindutva* and a re-examination Gulfam, finds that despite Gulfam's unique portrayal of the terrorist Muslim "Other", Gulfam's characterization vehemently bolsters *Sarfarosh*'s clear and unequivocal nationalist rhetoric. To this end, *Sarfarosh,* a film released at the height of Indo-Pak tensions during the late-1990s, is a prime example of Hindi cinema's implementation of the Muslim terroristic Other within the terrorism genre.

PART TWO – VII: GLOBAL ISLAMIC TERRORISM – "INDIA'S 9/11", *HINDUTVA* & BOLLYWOOD

Conducted by al-Qaeda ("The Base") – a pan-Islamic militant organisation founded in Peshawar, Pakistan, in August 1998 by Saudi-Arabian (and later Stateless) national, Osama Bin Laden – 9/11 began with four planes bound for the United States, each one hijacked by several radical Muslim jihadists. After one aircraft crashed in rural Pennsylvania due to passenger intervention, another crashed into the side of the Pentagon (the United States Department of Defence's headquarters), while the other two planes collided with the Twin Towers of the World Trade Centre in New York City. Culminating with the deaths of 2977 people, the attack positioned al-Qaeda as the globe's most perilous terrorist organisation (Klausen, 2021: 1).

India's relationship with the United States strengthened immensely following 9/11. India offered military assurances and diplomatic affirmations of solidarity, a noteworthy development given that India's Prime Minister, at that time, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, was an advocate of *Hindutva* values (Ahmad & Najish, 2018: 130). Additionally, the 2008 Mumbai attacks, commonly referred to as the 26/11 attacks (which I will discuss more later), have been frequently hallmarked as "India's 9/11". This three-day assault by Lashkar-e-Taiba, a Pakistan-based militant jihadist organization, saw Mumbai gripped by a military-style strike on several iconic locations, including the Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus, the Oberoi Trident and the Taj Mahal Palace, and Cama Hospital, culminating in 175 deaths, nine of which were the perpetrators. Despite India's historically volatile terrorism climate,[177] the attack's comparability to 9/11 in terms of media coverage, the location of Mumbai as the target (a city known for its industrial and media influence similar to New York City), and the reactions from local and global communities, have led to commentators adopting the idiom "India's 9/11" when referring to 26/11.[178] Consequently, 9/11 becomes superimposed on an Indian locale, prompting India to confront its struggles with Islamic terrorism and the global threat from Islamic jihadism.

Narendra Modi (India's current Prime Minister), a prominent *Hindutva* ideologue, has actively linked America's 9/11 tragedy to the Mumbai attacks. A gifted orator capable of commanding large audiences,[179] Modi has used rallies throughout his political ascension to elicit political power and momentum.[180] Rebecca de Souza and

[177] For detailed summaries of India's relationship with terrorism, please see: Gordon, 2008; Rai, 2009; Barnard-Wills & Moore, 2010; Ullah et. al, 2018; Murphy, 2023.
[178] Please see: Roy et. al, 2011; Das, 2012; Svensson, 2013; Axelrod & Forster, 2017; Machold, 2017; den Heyer, 2023.
[179] Please see: Jaffrelot, 2015: 154.
[180] Please see: Bobbio, 2012; Shani, 2021.

Syed Ali Hussain argue that Modi successfully bridged his *Hindutva*-centred ideals to the Indian diaspora, particularly Indian Americans, in the "Howdy Modi" rally in Houston, Texas in 2019 (2023: 139). Addressing some fifty-thousand-strong attendees to the rally (the majority being Indian American), Modi unveiled his anti-Pakistan and anti-Islam sentiments, particularly in his views regarding "the conspirators of 9/11", displaying emotive Hindu nationalist hatred for Pakistan, Islam, and Muslims. Consequently, following his speech, de Souza and Hussain assert that various news forums in India began linking 9/11 to the 26/11 attacks (2023: 151). Essentially, Modi imbricates 9/11 anxieties towards global Islamic terrorism within the folds of Hindu nationalist rhetoric, framing Islam, Pakistan and Muslims as inherent evils to be defeated through counterterrorism measures. As a result, the idiom of "India's 9/11" to categorize the 26/11 attacks reformulated Hindu nationalism as a necessary opponent to Islamic terrorism, be it local or global in nature. With 9/11 being proffered as a familiar, devastating flashback to the 2008 Mumbai attacks, scholars began considering post-9/11 Islamophobia in India,[181] particularly in how Bollywood constructs the Muslim figure in narratives dealing with global Islamic terrorism.

[181] For an understanding of Indian Islamophobia post-9/11, please see: Siddiqui, 2020; Upadhyay, 2020; Amarasingam et. al, 2022; Daudi, 2022; Patel, 2022; Sikka, 2022.

VIII: CINEMATIZING 9/11 – HINDI CINEMA & THE GLOBAL MUSLIM TERRORIST

The ferociousness of 9/11, as well as the intense global scrutiny of bin Laden, al-Qaeda, and related contexts pertaining to Islamic (global) terrorism, has prompted academic examinations of the social, religious, and global impact of extreme Islamic jihadism.[182] 9/11 forced issues surrounding terrorism to become a global concern, but as the perpetrators of 9/11 were Muslim, the focus on global *Islamic* terrorism became intensively examined. Scholarly debates have explored link between terrorism and Islamic monotheism;[183] hyper-jihadist ideologies;[184] and the global "War on Terror".[185]

As the global public consciousness viewed Muslims as the intrinsic "Other" in contemporary life,[186] the symbiotic relationship between media assemblages and terrorism-related contexts perpetuates a narrative of fear and prejudice towards Islam and Muslims, particularly after 9/11, reinforcing global Islamophobic attitudes.[187] Within global media contexts, scholars have sought to position cinema in narrating the events and the consequences of 9/11 and Islamic terrorism,[188] with Film Studies academia on 9/11 narratives focusing intently on American cinema.[189] Some studies examine cinematic interpretations of the Muslim figure, but generally trail how Hollywood and American cinema use the 9/11 atrocity as a thematic device to exhibit patriotic stances, justifying the global "War on Terror" or documenting American/Western anxieties towards Islam and Muslims through implicit metaphors and symbols.[190] While the Muslim figure's presence in Hollywood and broader American cinema

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[182] Please see: Silke, 2001, 2004; Jacquard, 2002; Wiktorowicz & Kaltner, 2003; Burke, 2004; Jordan & Boix, 2004; Neria et. al, 2005; Ilardi, 2009; Carlà, 2010; Braniff & Moghadam, 2011; Mohamedou, 2011; Scheuer, 2011; Falk, 2012; Finn, 2012; Shaw, 2012; Moghadam, 2013; Hellmich, 2014; Patman, 2015; Jalata, 2016; Ahmad, 2018; Bonino, 2018; Holbrook, 2019; Loidolt, 2022; de Roy van Zuijdewijn & Bakker, 2023; Kavrakis, 2023.
[183] Please see: Croft, 2012; Ward & Sherlock, 2014.
[184] Please see: Habeck, 2006; Sedgwick, 2012.
[185] Please see: Sukma, 2004; Hodges, 2011; Ahmed, 2013; Duffy, 2014; Cutler, 2017.
[186] Please see: Mamdani, 2002; Roy, 2005; Rauf, 2018.
[187] Please see: Dixon, 2004; Poole & Richardson, 2006; Otto et. al, 2007; Breslau et. al, 2010; Doran, 2010; Monahan, 2010; Steuter & Wills, 2010; Powell, 2011; Slocum, 2011; Alsultany, 2012, 2013; Aswad, 2013; Dimaggio, 2015; Fragopolous & Naydan, 2016; Wilhite, 2016; Gheorghiu, 2018; Finney & Shannon, 2019; Mari, 2021; Ossa, 2022.
[188] Please see: Dixon, 2004; Slocum, 2011; Fragopolous & Naydan, 2016; Wilhite, 2016; Gheorghiu, 2018; Finney & Shannon, 2019; Ossa, 2022.
[189] Please see: Dixon, 2003; Shaheen, 2003; Cettl, 2009; Prince, 2009; Birkenstein et. al, 2010; Jung, 2010; Narine, 2010; Bragard et. al, 2011; Markert, 2011; Lynchehaun, 2012; Bayraktoraglu, 2014; Westwell, 2014; Petrovic, 2015; Pope & Bryan, 2016; Ramji, 2016; Riegler, 2016; Hellmich & Purse, 2017; McSweeney, 2017; Seed, 2019; Ossa, 2022.
[190] Sophia Rose Arjana (2015) argues that post-9/11 anxieties about Muslims permeated into creating the Muslim figure as a "monster", so much so that the imagery in films such as *War of the Worlds* (Steven Spielberg, 2005) or *The Descent* (Neil Marshall, 2005) allegorically depict Muslim anxieties of terrorist cells and "terrorist underworlds", respectively (2015: 177). Similarly, Vanessa Ossa (2022) asserts that films like *Tropic Thunder* (Ben Stiller, 2008) or *Avatar* (James Cameron, 2009) showcase anxieties surrounding America's "War on Terror" following 9/11 without depicting the attacks themselves; instead, phrases such as "we don't negotiate with terrorists" (in *Tropic Thunder*), or the visual imagery of collapsed buildings and bombings elicit strong connotations of Islamic terrorism (2022: 86).

dominates discussions on pre- and post-9/11 depictions of Muslims in Western cinema,[191] scholars have accepted that 9/11 enabled a cataclysmic shift in stereotyping the Muslim figure as the terroristic Other in Bollywood. This thesis will underscore how Hindi cinema's Muslim terroristic Other symbolizes the global angst towards Islamic terrorism and Muslims in a post-9/11 milieu.[192]

Hindi cinema increasingly engages with Muslim terrorism, with notable films like *Dhokha (Betrayal)* (Pooja Bhatt, 2007), *Lamhaa (Moment)* (Rahul Dholakia, 2010), and *Haider* (Vishal Bhardwaj, 2014) offering variants of Muslim and Islamic terrorism. For example, *Dhokha* offers a glimpse into Hindi cinema's foray into gendered Islamic terrorism through the narrative's female terrorist, Sarah Khan (Tulip Joshi), while *Haider* uniquely draws upon the 1995 Kashmir conflicts, re-inventing Islamic terrorism within the folds of its modern-day adaptation of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, providing a contemporaneous look at Islamic terrorism and the "victim-turned-terrorist" character. Mumbai has been consistently targeted by Islamist extremists, with Hindi cinema responding to "every assault on its home ground" (Bharat, 2020: 73). Films like *Black Friday* (2002), *A Wednesday!* (Neeraj Pandey, 2008) and *Mumbai Meri Jaan* (*Mumbai, My Life,* Nishikant Kamat, 2008) have portrayed Mumbai engulfed in Islamic terrorism, narrating real-world atrocities. Simultaneously, and particularly after the events of 9/11, academics have examined Bollywood's narrativization of global Islamic terrorism.[193]

Surprisingly, only a handful of Hindi films present 9/11 as a thematic backdrop. Other than *Kurbaan, New York* (Kabir Khan, 2009) and *My Name is Khan* (Karan Johar, 2010) are frequently proposed as important Hindi-language films dealing with 9/11, but other films, such as *Yun Hota Toh Kya Hota* (*What If…*, Naseeruddin Shah, 2006), *Tere Bin Laden* (*Your Bin Laden,* Abhishek Sharma, 2010) and its sequel *Tere Bin Laden: Dead or Alive* (2016), *Mausam* (*Season,* Pankaj Kapur, 2011), *I Am Singh* (Puneet Issar, 2011) and *Vishwaroopam* (*The Magnificant Incarnation,* Kamal Hassan, 2013), also thematize 9/11. *Yun Hota Toh Kya Hota, Mausam* and *I Am Singh* centre around personal lives in a 9/11 or post -9/11 climate, presenting a stereotypical "Muslim terrorist" depiction in their limited on-screen time whilst portraying stories with a nuanced understanding of the attacks and their ripple effects. *Tere Bin Laden* offers a satirical look as Islamic terrorism, but the film does not depict

[191] For an understanding of the depictions of Muslims in American cinema, please see: Shaheen, 2009; Sardar & Davis, 2010; Bayraktaroglu, 2014; Arjana, 2015; Ramji, 2016; Ahmed, 2017; Petersen, 2017; Haider, 2020; Labidi, 2021, 2023; O'Brien, 2021; Senanayake, 2021; Serdouk, 2021; Alsultany, 2022; Eddarif, 2023; El-Bayoumi, 2023.
[192] Please see: Khan & Bokhari, 2011; Ali et. al, 2012; Gabriel & Vijayan, 2012; Zafar & Amjad, 2018.
[193] Please see: Al-Rawi, 2014; Misri, 2018.

Muslim/Pakistani terrorists, nor does it display terroristic activities.[194] For these reasons, I chose to look at *Kurbaan, New York* and *My Name Is Khan* for a potential examination.

Tejaswini Ganti asserts that these three films geopolitically expanded Hindi film narratives to highlight terrorist activities beyond India, such as Pakistan, Afghanistan, and the USA (2013: 49-50). In my estimation, the global scrutiny of Muslims in the West following 9/11 removed the focus from the perceived Hindu grievances about Muslims in the Subcontinent. In turn, Bollywood could, now, recapture the global attention, especially since Julia Eckert posits that 9/11 "affirmed [Hindu nationalists] in what they had long advocated, namely, that 'Islam is aggression' and that there was an acute necessity to arm oneself for 'self-defence'" (2012: 324).

Consequently, *New York* and *My Name is Khan* became celebrated examples of Bollywood's narrativization of 9/11.[195] Of the three, *Kurbaan* is frequently relegated to simple acknowledgements or used as a comparative baseline for *New York, My Name is Khan* or other Bollywood films that feature global Islamic terrorism.[196] For example, while Ehsaan and Samir "Sam" Sheikh (John Abraham), *New York*'s terroristic protagonist, are constructer similarly, *New York* attempts to sympathise with Sam by showcasing "the impact of state atrocities on Muslim men", confiduring the Muslim terrorist personal of Sam through "the abuses of an authoritarian state in the aftermath of 9/11" (Misri, 2016: 284). Since some studies completely overlook *Kurbaan*'s relevance,[197] despite *Kurbaan,* on the surface, wholeheartedly damaging to the Muslim figure, this section will concentrate exclusively on *Kurbaan*.

Shoba Sharad Rajgopal asserts that Hindi cinema has become a form of propaganda for Hindu nationalism by portraying the Muslim figure as a terrorist entity, considered the biggest threat to the Indian/Hindu way of life (2011: 241). Nadira Khatun adds that cinematizing the dichotomy between the Hindu nation and the Muslim minority as the "Other" highlights Hindi cinema's stereotypical image of Muslims, particularly in a post-9/11 context, that portray Muslims as the "enemy within", further marginalizing the Muslim figure (2016: 57).[198] Unlike *New York* and *My Name is Khan,* which problematize global Islamophobia, *Kurbaan* racializes the Muslim figure

[194] For more on *Tere Bin Laden,* please see: Bharat, 2024.
[195] Please see: Jain, 2011; Lau & Mendes, 2011; Gabriel & Vijayan, 2012; Kumar, 2013; Misri, 2013, 2016; Al-Rawi, 2014; Fedtke, 2014; Kanani, 2014; Neumann, 2014; Clini, 2015; Sengupta, 2015; Venkataraghavan, 2015; Erndl, 2016; Khatun, 2016, 2018; Bahroni, 2017; Virdi, 2017; Ahmad, 2018.
[196] Please see: Kumar, 2013; Sengupta, 2015; Misri, 2013, 2016; Khatun, 2016; Virdi, 2017.
[197] Please see: Jain, 2011; Devadoss & Cromley, 2018.
[198] Please also see: Steuter & Wills, 2010; Kumar, 2013.

through global anxieties surrounding the "Muslim terrorist" persona, mirroring global Islamophobic prejudices that Muslims are an existential threat to global peace. Furthermore, Ipsita Chatterjee spotlights how Muslims, portrayed as terrorists following 9/11, enabled the BJP to stimulate the relationship between the "local Other" of the Muslim figure in India and the globalized discourse surrounding Islamophobia (2009: 144). Chatterjee's analysis furthered this interest in reexploring *Kurbaan.* However, Karim H. Karim argues that *Kurbaan,* alongside *My Name Is Khan* and *Azaan* ("Prayer Call", Prashant Chadha, 2011), as a film production, counters *Hindutva*-coloured productions (2021: 51). Unfortunately, Karim does not elaborate further, and this is problematic since *Kurbaan* demarcates the Muslim figure as the terrorist *explicitly* within the fold of *Hindutva* prejudices whilst paralleling global anxieties towards Islamic terrorism.

IX: CASE STUDY – *KURBAAN* (*SACRIFICED*), RENSIL D'SILVA, 2008

Kurbaan takes place several years after 9/11 and follows Avantika Ahuja (Kareena Kapoor-Khan), a Hindu professor who, after moving to America from India with her Muslim husband, Ehsaan Khan (Saif Ali Khan), uncovers Ehsaan's terrorist sympathies and perfidiousness.

I assert that Ehsaan – *Kurbaan*'s main Muslim antagonist – is a "glocal" terrorist, one who is positioned within the global consciousness of Islamic terrorism whilst simultaneously grounded in *Hindutva* anxieties. This chapter focuses on two key areas: the conspiracy surrounding "love-*jihad*"; and Muslim masculinities. When contextualized alongside *Hindutva* ideals, Ehsaan embodies both these *global* and *localised Hindutva*-centred prejudices, enabling new interpretations of the Muslim figure as the terrorist in Hindi cinema to surface.

IX-I: FORBIDDEN LOVE - THE "LOVE-JIHAD" CONSPIRACY

The conspiracy of "love-*jihad*" arises from *Hindutva* hardliner's view that Muslim men, in an insidious attempt to demographically shift the Hindu-Muslim populations in India, forcefully convert Hindu women, depicted as "the carriers of culture … and the future generations" through trickery and marriage (Rauf, 2018: 148).[199] The neologism of "love-*jihad*" surfaced in 2005, consolidating the Hindu women's new-found rejection towards arranged marriage and the Hindu nationalist fear of Muslim domination in India (Frøystad, 2021: 2).[200] Since then, academic coverage – particularly since Modi's 2014 election victory – has focused on "love-*jihad*" and its importance in *Hindutva* thought.[201] *Hindutva* ideologues have vehemently pushed for political and social legislation against the perceived "love *jihad*", be it through securitization, the transformation of political issues surrounding Hindu nationalist anxieties of Muslims as a matter of urgent security (Malji & Raza, 2021), or in *Hindutva* politics, particularly through Hindu nationalist statecraft (Neilsen & Nilsen, 2021).

"Love-*jihad*" has translated into print media, posters, and television. Purnima Mankekar argues that anti-"love-*jihad*" campaigns are instrumental to *Hindutva*'s attempts to transform India from a secular and democratic polity to an all-Hindu-Indian authoritarian nation, evoking a sense of historic sexual violence against Hindu woman by Muslim men in pre-colonial times and as recent as Partition (2021: 697-699). This led to *Hindutva* embracing intertextuality (the connections of current Hindu nationalist texts with previous ones, such as *Essentials of Hindutva* [1923] or *We, or Our Nationhood Defined* [1947]) and citationality (the citing of said texts to bolster pro-Hindu rhetoric in contemporary books) to consolidate conditions built for violence against the Muslim figure (2021: 699). Tanika Sarkar asserts that this places the Muslim subject as the epitome of degeneracy, deserving of vengeful Hindu retribution for "historic" and "future" dangers towards the Hindu female body (2002: 2874). Despite Sarkar mentioning the use of the radio by Modi to manufacture tales of Muslim proclivity towards violence (2002: 2873), and Mankekar briefly mentioning television, these two articles do not observe cinema's use in depicting *Hindutva*-laden anxieties towards inter-religious marriage and Hindu women-Muslim men relations.[202] I

[199] Please also see: Yuval-Davis & Anthias, 1989; Kandiyoti, 1991; Pande, 2022.
[200] Piedalue et. al asserts that the "love-*jihad*" conspiracy came into public conscious since 2009 (2021: 749).
[201] For further information on the "love-*jihad*" conspiracy, please see: Rao, 2011; Gupta, 2018; Sarkar, 2018; Strohl, 2019; Basu, 2020; Tyagi & Sen, 2020; Frøystad, 2021; Piedalue et. al, 2021; Mody, 2022; Krishnan, 2023; Nagar, 2023; Sathi, 2023; Sharma & Jenkins, 2024.
[202] Please also see: Punwani, 2014, which also discusses the relationship between *Hindutva*-led Islamophobic rhetoric and media, but does not consider cinema.

argue that *Kurbaan* is an early example – and one of the only examples – of Hindi cinema's utilization of the "love-*jihad*" conspiracy to bolster its representation of a dangerous *globalised* Muslim terrorist "Other".[203]

Romance is one of Bollywood's most defined thematic characteristics.[204] As Jyotika Virdi asserts, inter-communal love – particularly Hindu-Muslim sexual relations – has "in the history of Hindi cinema … been impossible to enunciate" (2003: 74). Virdi *does* cite *Bombay* as an early example of inter-religious love, but that the narrative itself did "not end in the success of the transgressive Hindu-Muslim marriage" (2003: 209). Despite prototypical Bollywood romance permeating throughout *Kurbaan*'s first half, depicting the inter-religious love between Avantika and Ehsaan feeds into Ehsaan's terrorist inclination.

[203] Other examples of the "love-*jihad*" conspiracy in Hindi cinema include: *The Kerala Story* (Sudipto Sen, 2023). There are other films, however, that focus on inter-religious marriage/relationships, including: *Gadar: Ek Prem Katha* (2001); *Ishaqzaade* (*Lovers,* Habib Faisal, 2012); and *Raanjhanaa* (*Beloved One*, Aanand L. Rai, 2013).

[204] For an overview of Hindi cinema's thematizing of romance/love, please see: Chakravarty, 1993; Dwyer & Patel, 2002; Virdi, 2003, 2017; Gokulsing & Dissanayake, 2004; Matusitz & Payano, 2012; Ganti, 2013; Dwyer, 2014; Anwer & Arora, 2022.

IX-II: "LOVE-*JIHAD*" IN *KURBAAN*

At the start of Avantika and Ehsaan's relationship, Ehsaan, working in the same college where Avantika works, persists that the two have coffee. Following a few "coffee dates", Ehsaan proposes that the two watch a movie. In the scene, set in the staff room, the camera closes in on Avantika, who is apprehensive at the idea of the two lecturer's courting, but Ehsaan, slowly advancing towards Avantika, gently holds her face and kisses her. Avantika, visibly uneasy in a close-up shot, first resists before succumbing to Ehsaan's romantic advance. A song sequence, "Shukaran Allah" ("Thank you, God"), which features Urdu vernacular, light string instruments and ethereal vocals, begins, accompanying a montage that details their blossoming romance over the next little while.

Following the song sequence, Ehsaan and Avantika discuss moving to America as Avantika received a position at New York University. Decided that Ehsaan would travel with Avantika, the two meet with Avantika's father, who expresses concerns over Avantika marrying a Muslim: "I just believe the lesser differences between two people, the easier it is to adjust". Ehsaan replies respectfully: "If we marry against your wishes, Avantika will always feel sad. She'll never be really happy". Avantika's father asks Ehsaan if he should just give his daughter away without a thought, to which, with a gentle tone, Ehsaan proclaims: "No, don't give away your daughter. Just accept a son".

The montage and the scene with Avantika's father intensify *Kurbaan*'s "love-*jihad*" agenda when, later, Ehsaan's terrorist sympathies are revealed. Brian Larkin argues that Indian film songs can substitute a character's intense emotions (2005: 303). Here, the song's accompaniment of the romantic montage suggests the overwhelming love between Avantika and Ehsaan. The song's use of "Allah" – the Arabic word for "God" and most associated with Islam[205] – is also significant. The song's lyrics, steeped in Urdu linguistics, has a poetry-like cadence which, Divia Patel and Rachel Dwyer argue, in the Hindi film song, enables an eroticism and affection to flourish (2002: 61). The song and its recurring vocals of "Allah" attaches a *religiosity* to the film's depiction of a Muslim man (Ehsaan) in an inter-religious relationship, and eventual marriage, to a Hindu woman (Avantika). This suggests not only of a religiosity to their blossoming ardour but also associating their romance with *Islamic* romanticism. Furthermore, the song's Urdu vernacular is metaphorical of the poetic, ethereal-like love between Avantika and Ehsaan, while their tryst within the grounds of Humayun's Tomb (a Muslim monument) symbolizes

[205] Although, Middle-Eastern Christians have also, historically, used the term to denote "God".

the historical syncretism between Hindu and Muslim cultures in India (Fig. 1).[206] The purity of their romance, realised through the song's montage, allows *Kurbaan* to portray the "genuine" inter-religious love between *Kurbaan*'s protagonists. In doing so, Ehsaan's reveal later in *Kurbaan* provides a twist as he is depicted as a perfidious lover with terrorist inclinations.

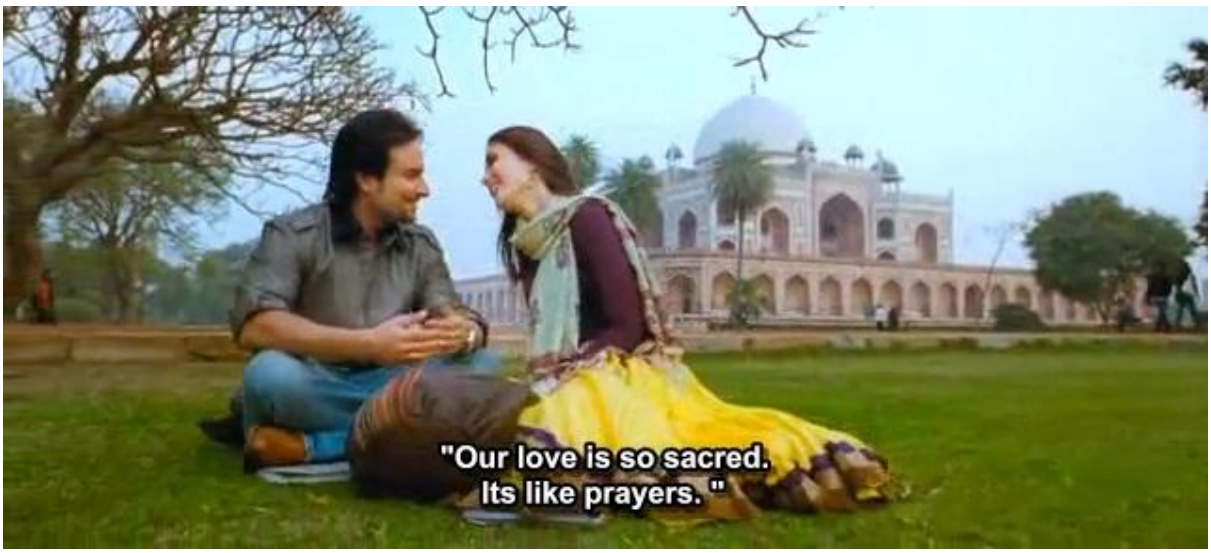

Figure 1: Ehsaan (Saif Ali Khan) & Avantika (Kareena Kapoor-Khan) during the initial bud of their romance. Seen in front of Humayun's Tomb.

Furthermore, K. Moti Gokulsing and Wimal Dissanayake highlight Hindi cinema's contradictory relationship with on-screen kissing. They argue that although kissing is seen as a private activity between lovers, kissing is an inherently Westernized form of public affection, rending it difficult to reconcile within Hindi cinema (2004: 80-81).[207] In *Kurbaan,* it is within the college – the "hidden" – that Avantika and Ehsaan share their first kiss, but as they passionately kiss in public *after* the item number, the "hidden" romance becomes "visible", allowing *Kurbaan* to display the now "accepted" love between Avantika and Ehsaan. Additionally, by visually aligning Ehsaan and Avantika's public kiss – a Westernized form of affection – *Kurbaan* further situates their romance within a global modernity. However, since Ehsaan is a perfidious lover (later revealed), this display marks him, within the *Hindutva imaginaire,* dangerously transgressive.

Ehsaan and Avantika seeking permission from her father to marry reflects tensions surrounding Hindu-Muslim relations. The scene allegorically depicts the Hindu male (Avantika's father) succumbing to the Muslim

[206] For a more detailed analyses on Hindu-Muslim/Hinduism-Islamic syncretism in India, please see: Burman, 1996; Tausch et. al, 2009; Narayanan, 2016; Talib & Mitra, 2017; Engineer, 2018; Singh, 2023.
[207] Although, Gokulsing & Dissanayake go on to describe the ways in which this can be subverted in Hindi films, citing tribal dresses, wet saris and the "behind the bush" trope that suggest the "vulgarity" of sexual activity in the Indian cultural space (2004: 80-81).

figure (Ehsaan), with Ehsaan successfully "penetrating" into the Hindu family. Avantika's father's submission to Ehsaan is an example of the *Hindu* figure's emasculation, validating Ehsaan's strong *Muslim* masculinity. Taha Abdul Rauf argues that strong Muslim masculinity leaves Hindu masculinity with the impression it is not "masculine" enough for the female subject (2018: 148), contributing to *Hindutva*'s perceived endangerment to the Hindu race. Ehsaan's relationship with Avantika elicits a reluctance from Avantika's father, itself metaphor of Hindu anxiety towards inter-religious marriage. In seeking Avantika's father's permission and attaining it, Ehsaan embodies the characteristic that Muslims, according to *Hindutva* anxieties, are the "foreign invader",[208] while Avantika's father is depicted as subordinate to Ehsaan's Muslim masculinity, suggestive of historic Hindu effeminacy.[209] This is further evident when Avantika's father quizzes Ehsaan – he leans forward, in a dominant mode of physicality, but, by the end of their conversation, it is Ehsaan who has leaned forward, and Avantika's father sits back, slumped in his chair. As the scene ends, this becomes a marker of Muslim masculinity besting Hindu masculinity: while Ehsaan attains his, Avantika's father is defeated (Fig. 2).

Figure 2: Ehsaan (Saif Ali Khan, right) leans forward while Avantika's father sits back. Avantika (Kareena Kapoor-Khan, centre) solemnly looks down.

This anxiety from Avantika's father mirrors *Hindutva*'s fears involving the perceived deception through which Muslim men sexually engage with Hindu women.[210] When taken together – the song sequence, the kiss, and Avantika's father's eventual approval – the scene's offer a romantic disposition to *Kurbaan* akin to traditional Bollywood storytelling, enhancing Ehsaan's insidious nature later in the narrative.

[208] Please see: Savarkar, 2021 [1923].
[209] Please see: Mill, 2010 [1819]; Sinha, 1995.
[210] Please see: Rao, 2011.

The prototypical Bollywood romance in *Kurbaan* is effective when, later, *Kurbaan*'s "love-*jihad*" anxiety is realized for Avantika and the audience. Once in America and after their marriage, Avantika calls Ehsaan to come home to surprise him that she is pregnant. However, Avantika decides to investigate the whereabouts of Salma (Nauheed Cyrusi), a Muslim neighbour who earlier revealed that she is being abused by her husband, Hakil (Asheesh Kapur). Sneaking into the neighbour's basement, Avantika over-hears Bhaijaan (Om Puri), the patriarch of the family/group, Hakil, Aslam (Areesz Ganddi) and Hamid (Rupinder Nagra) plotting to blow up a plane filled with U.S. envoy personnel and media. In the basement, she finds Salma's corpse and shrieks, alerting the Muslim men who pursue Avantika back to her house. Upon Ehsaan's arrival, Avantika exclaims: "They killed Salma…all of them…Bhaijaan…They're bombing a flight". Ehsaan calms Avantika down, persuading Avantika to come back into the house where, upon entering, Ehsaan shouts: "You can all come out now". As Bhaijaan and the others appear, a series of flashbacks depict Ehsaan's manipulation of Avantika into joining Avantika in the United States, for the sole purposes of committing a terrorist attack (Fig. 3). Avantika, horrified at her perfidious lover, runs upstairs before accusing Ehsaan of Salma's murder, declaring: "Kill me and also kill the child growing inside my body. Kill me, Ehsaan!". As a stunned Ehsaan watches, Avantika has a rag forcefully placed over her nose and mouth by the others, falling unconscious.

Figure 3: Avantika (Kareena Kapoor-Khan) unearths Ehsaan's *(Saif Ali Khan) deception as a terrorist.*

As mentioned elsewhere, Taha Abdul Rauf argues that *Hindutva* political groups re-historized Alauddin Khilji – a powerful ruler of the Khilji Dynasty between 1296 and 1316 – within the contexts of historic raping sprees by Muslim invaders (2018: 148). In *Kurbaan*, the revelation of Avantika's pregnancy solidifies Ehsaan, now exposed as a perfidious lover, as the embodiment of *Hindutva* anxieties in two ways: the Muslim "invader", as seen

previously through Ehsaan's integration into the Hindu family fold through his marriage to Avantika; and sexual deception, functioning as a menace to Hindu women.

Figure 4: Avantika (Kareena Kapoor-Khan) is smothered by Muslim extremists.

The scene represents the collective Muslim/Islamic *muscular* assault on India. Eviane Leidig notes that Durga, a major Hindu deity, is often personified as *Bharat Mata* ("Mother India"), and that Islam – the "harbinger of evil" – is categorized in *Hindutva* as a threat to the daughters of *Bharat Mata*, promoting the idea that an "an attack on a Hindu woman is an attack on the nation itself" (2020: 230-231).[211] This display of overpowering Avantika encapsulates this perceived threat towards the Hindu *Rashtra*: as the Muslim men hold down the *Bharat Mata* (Avantika), their assault crystalizes the perceived Muslim assault on India – an immense anxiety amongst *Hindutva* ideologues (Fig. 4).

Kurbaan's depiction of Ehsaan's terrorist sympathies reinforces not only post-9/11 anxieties about Muslims globally but contributes to Muslims as being inherently dangerous towards the Hindu female figure, localizing the fear within the *Hindutva imaginaire*.[212] *Kurbaan*'s portrayal of inter-religious relations between Hindu women and Muslim men, seen in the romantic coupling of Avantika and Ehsaan, allows *Kurbaan* to adhere to the prototypic Bollywood theme such as love and romance, but by situating their "romance" within a narrative drawing from global Islamic terrorism, *Kurbaan* portrays Ehsaan as a sexually-deceptive terrorist. As such, Ehsaan becomes

[211] Please also see: Rauf, 2018; Natrajan, 2022.
[212] Please see: Rao, 2011; Gupta, 2018; Rauf, 2018.

glocalized, symbolising anxieties that speak to *both* global and local prejudices towards the Muslim identity through the cinematic terrorist Muslim persona.

SECTION TWO - X: MUSLIM MASCULINITIES

Kurbaan portrays anxieties surrounding Muslim masculinities, heightened through the portrayal of the Muslim terroristic "Other". As previously established, contemporary *Hindutva* has abused the imagery displayed in *Ramayan* (1987–1989) and *Mahabharat* (1988–1990), establishing a united "Hindu" identity, with scholars noting the link in masculine contexts between the television renditions and ancient Sanskrit texts themselves.[213] Notions surrounding the "effeminate" Hindu and "masculine" Muslim bodies have existed since the colonial period in India's history, before being articulated within contemporary *Hindutva*.

Tanika Sarkar argues that the degeneration of the Hindu male body began because of several natural afflictions during the late-seventeenth and early-eighteenth centuries, symbolizing India's degenerative masculinity (1992: 220). This later enabled the British empire to "feminize" the Hindu male figure, emasculating India within its colonial subjugation. Simultaneously, as James Mill notes, Hindus and Muslims can be differentiated by temperament, arguing that the Muslim subject appears "more manly, more vigorous" than their Hindu counterparts (2010 [1819]: 646). Mill highlights Muslim lineage to earlier Mughal conquerors, allowing Muslims to exude a manliness opposite the weakness displayed by the Hindu figure (2010 [1819]: 631).

K. N. Panikkar asserts that colonial intrusion necessitated "an alternative to colonial cultural practices" and "revitalization of traditional institutions" (1995: 105). Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, a nineteenth-century poet and journalist, redefined Indian society by appropriating imagery associated with Lord Krishna (Das, 2023: 6). In essence, Chattopadhyay creatively retaliated against the perceived masculinity crisis (Sinha, 1999: 448), promoting Hinduism as "a likely candidate which could provide Indian nationalism with a viable cultural foundation of nationhood" (Chatterjee, 1993: 75).

Chattopadhyay's re-imagining of Krishna as a "hard", righteous, didactic god-protector preserved an "inherent" moral and cultural system (Nandy, 1983: 23–24). Sarkar notes this presents him as the first Hindu nationalist to "create a powerful image of an apocalyptic war against Muslims" (1994: 182), a notion adopted by Swami Dayanand Saraswati and Swami Vivekananda.[214] In particular, it was Vivekananda that influenced V. D. Savarkar – the "founding father of *Hindutva*".[215] Madhavi Murty explains that Saraswati articulated Hinduism's

[213] Please see: Sengupta, 2017; Singh, 2022; Brodbeck, 2023.
[214] For more on Vivekananda's influence, please see: Chatterjee & Das, 2021.
[215] Please see: Kumar, 2013; Shani, 2021; Damle & Damle, 2023.

"grandiose" nature opposite Christianity and Islam (2009: 273), while J. Barton Scott suggests his adherence to *brahmacharya* – celibacy – "ascended him towards the pinnacle of Hindu masculinity" (2014: 376).[216] Vivekananda, drawing from religious scripture like the *Bhagavat Gita*, promoted a muscular component to his ideas,[217] envisioning an India built with the body of a Muslim, but equipped with an ancient Vedic (Hindu) mindset (Kakar, 2012: 205).[218]

Following Vivekananda, scholars have cited Savarkar's muscular identity politics and Golwalkar's extreme variant targeting Muslim subjects.[219] Contemporaneous *Hindutva* roots the Muslim figure's body in visceral fear,[220] forming an "anxious masculinity", aided by *Hindutva*'s stereotyping of Muslim males as violent beings with a salacious appetite (Anand, 2007: 259–260). The bedrock of *Hindutva* is steeped in panic over Muslim "muscularity" and the urgency to cultivate its own "muscularity".[221] In *Kurbaan*, this panic is symbolized in Ehsaan's masculinity, depicted in his muscular body and propensity for violence.

[216] Please see Sohini Saha (2022), in which Saha argues that the practice of *brahmacharya* embodies the concept of the phallus amidst the masculine construction in India.
[217] Please see: Nandy, 1983; Sarkar, 1992; Panikkar, 1995; Sinha, 1999; Banerjee, 2003, 2005, 2006; Dalmiya, 2009; Murty, 2009; Chattopadhyay, 2011; Gupta, 2011; Roy & Hammers, 2014.
[218] Please also see: Roy & Hammers, 2014.
[219] Please see: Hansen, 1996; Copland, 2002; Banerjee, 2003, 2005, 2006; Anand, 2005, 2007; Nussbaum, 2008; Jha, 2013; Nandy, 2014; Visana, 2021; Barua, 2023; Sabastian, 2024.
[220] Please see: Banerjee, 2012; Rauf, 2018; Kinnvall, 2019; Leidig, 2020.
[221] Please also see: Kasim, 2020.

X-I: HINDI CINEMA & MASCULINITY

Several transfigurations of the male body in Hindi cinema parallel social and political changes in postcolonial India. Meraj Ahmed Mubarki argues that the 1970s displayed "the muscle-bound, body-building heroes of the post-secular era" – the era of Hindu nationalism (2020: 238). As such, scholars have recognised the nexus between nationalism and masculinity.[222] Mubarki suggests that the 1990s saw Hindi cinema depict the masculine male body akin to "traditional" American muscularity, caused by several events in the 1970s and 1980s, including the forced-sterilization of men below the poverty-line during the Emergency,[223] and the assassination of Indira Gandhi in 1984 (2020: 239-240). These events, collectively, provided the landscape of effeminizing the Hindu figure in recent memory. As Šarunas Paunksnis asserts, however, the dawn of *Hindutva* in the 1990s has fought against the effeminate Hindu male imagery, attempting to transform India into becoming "as strong as the colonial power which meant countering the imposition of unmanly Hindu by the British" (2023: 44). Bollywood reflects this in how the Hindu male hero symbolized the *nouveau riche* middle-class Indian community. India's economic liberalization at the beginning of the 1990s, and the globalization of Hindi cinema, happened parallel to the burgeoning rise of *Hindutva* both socially and politically. Consequently, Hindi cinema during the 1990s shifted away from the "angry young man" character popularised by Amitabh Bachchan throughout the 1970s/1980s,[224] presenting a new male Hindu hero body that speaks to globalized understandings of American masculinity *and* *Hindutva* muscularity (Mubarki, 2020: 248).

Mubarki acknowledges how Bollywood films began to depict "trauma" narratives (2020: 241) soon after: narratives that Bhaskar Sarkar asserts situate the Muslim figure under endless suspicion (2009: 36). These can range from films about Partition (*Gadar: Ek Prem Katha*, *Pinjar* [*The Cage,* Chandraprakash Dwivedi*,* 2003] and *Sadiyaan* [*Centuries,* Raj Kanwar, 2010]; cross-border terrorism (*Roja, Sarfarosh, Fanaa and A Wednesday!*) or recent films surrounding "ancient trauma" (*Jodhaa Akbar* [Ashutosh Gowariker, 2008], *Padmaavat* [Sanjay Leela Bhansali, 2018] and *Panipat* [Ashutosh Gowariker, 2019]. According to Dibyesh Anand, *Hindutva* can now present the image of the peaceful "Self" and of the threatening "Other" (2011: 1). *Kurbaan*, therefore, becomes an excellent example of Hindi cinema re-focusing the audience on *Hindutva*'s perception of the Muslim subject as an

[222] Please see: Balaji & Hughson, 2014; Enloe, 2014; Pande, 2017; Jha, 2022.
[223] Please see: Biswas, 2014; Gupte, 2017, for more information on India's mass-sterilization during the Emergency.
[224] The importance of Amitabh Bachchan's "angry young man" character, particularly around its symbolic representation of disdain towards India's economic, political, and social reforms during the 1970s is well-documented. Please see: Prasad, 1998; Liang, 2005; Rajamani, 2012; Mitra, 2020.

ontological menace. *Kurbaan*'s 9/11 backdrop presents the perceived *globalized* threat of the terroristic Muslim figure whilst establishing a perceived "Other" that seeks to destroy the Hindu *Rashtra* in *Hindutva.* It is in this notion that Ehsaan embodies the *physical* threat of Muslim masculinity in the *Hindutva* doctrine, permitting *Kurbaan* to a fitting example of Bollywood cinematizing the "glocalized" threat of Muslim masculinity.

XI: *KURBAAN*'s MUSLIM MASCULINITIES

Earlier, I touched upon the symbolism between Ehsaan's Muslim masculinity and the Hindu effeminacy of Avantika's father, but *Kurbaan* also depicts the masculine Muslim figure in two other distinct ways: through violence and sexual deception. There is a difficulty in establishing the contours of "Muslim masculinity". Maleeha Aslam notes that the study of masculinities within the contexts of Islam or Muslims are rare (2012: 116). While there have been some studies on Muslim masculinities in Indian and Hindi cinema,[225] this section reexamines *Kurbaan*'s masculine Muslim construction of the terroristic Muslim Other.

[225] There have been studies on Muslim masculinities in cinema but *not* in the context of cinematic Islamic terrorism. For Malayalam cinema, please see: Kasim, 2020. For Hindi cinema, please see: Misri, 2013, 2016. Deepti Misri's research does discuss a post-9/11 rendition of Muslim masculinity in Hindi cinema but largely focuses on *New York's* love-triangle relationship amongst its ambiguous/Muslim protagonists, and only offers a basic comparison to *Kurbaan* without a focus on the nuances *Kurbaan's* Muslim masculinities present through a critique of *Hindutva.*

XI-I: VIOLENCE, MASCULINITY & MUSCULARITY

Beginning with the perceived Muslim proclivity towards violence, *Kurbaan* depicts several instances of overt violent acts perpetrated by Muslim fanatics.[226] Focusing primarily on Ehsaan, his physique – large, broad shoulders, a chiselled jawline, and an athletic build – is an effective *physical* characteristic of the terrorist Muslim figure that represents the perceived Muslim inclination towards violence. Simultaneously spotlighted under *Kurbaan*'s post-9/11 milieu, Ehsaan becomes more than a simple "bad" Muslim character.

Kurbaan's depiction of Ehsaan calm and collected demeanour tricks the audience into viewing Ehsaan as a likeable personality with an approachable façade – a far-cry from "tramps and gun totting *Jihadis*" (Khan & Bokhari, 2011: 2) that the Muslim terrorist in Hindi cinema is traditionally associated with. However, this is broken down when Avantika realises Ehsaan's terroristic sympathies, and, following Ehsaan's terroristic inclinations, *Kurbaan* depicts three key scenes which showcase Ehsaan's violent nature. This violent nature manifests itself in an escalation of Ehsaan's violent propensity: he murders Altaf, a corrupt airport security officer who took money in exchange for aiding Tahir onto flight 116, killing international and American delegation and journalists, including Rehana (Dia Mirza), Riyaaz's (Vivek Oberoi) fiancé; Ehsaan's shootout with the police, culminating in the death of fellow Muslim terrorist Hakil and the deaths of three police officers; and Ehsaan's role in *Kurbaan*'s penultimate scene, ending with the deaths of Bhaijaan, Aapa (Kirron Kher), Bhaijaan's wife and several police officers before Ehsaan's death, where it is implied he kills himself.

These three violent occurrences underscore *Hindutva* anxieties surrounding violent Muslim masculinities, categorizing Ehsaan as the violent "Other". Taha Abdul Rauf asserts that this "othering" of the Muslim subject has significantly increased in a post-9/11 climate, forcing a global assumption that equates the Muslim figure with religious hysteria and terrorism (2018: 151),[227] which *Kurbaan* demonstrates in obvious ways. Ehsaan's physical strength symbolizes a particular "muscularity" that *Hindutva* fears, itself borne to combat what Mrinal Pande calls the "hypermasculine enemy" – read, Muslims (2022: 413). The escalation in Ehsaan's violence erupts – from the singular, close-quarters murder of Altaf; to the "honour" killing of Hakil (he shoots him to stop him from surrendering to the police following a car crash) and the murders of three officers; to, finally, *Kurbaan*'s ending

[226] For example, Tahir's bombing of flight 119; Aslam's detonation of a train in the New York subway; or Hakil's off-screen murder of his wife, Salma.
[227] Please also see: Mamdani, 2002; Roy, 2005; Williams, 2015.

where he murders multiple officers before, off-screen, seemingly, killing himself. These violent acts are indicative of not the perceived Muslim proclivity for violence (Rauf, 2018: 149), but also the "self": that Muslim violence is a danger even to Muslims.[228]

This hyper-masculine foe, as Maleeha Aslam chronicles, provides a trajectory that leads to a "masculine liberation" in the form of terrorism. Aslam argues that one of the worst consequences to 9/11 was the "War on Terror" in Iraq and Afghanistan, perpetuating the idea that the "death of the 'other'" can be celebrated (2012: 139). In turn, a fractious Muslim male population inside Iraq and Afghanistan are witnessing large-scale violence at the hands of Western powers, promoting a "Muslim frustration". This "Muslim frustration" is built upon the foundation of immense exasperation, by Muslims, towards the West's treatment of Muslims in a post-9/11 climate. This, in turn, leads to Muslim men – particularly from war-torn Iraq and Afghanistan – to undertake violent, terroristic activities portrayed "as potentially significant tools for regaining self-worth and masculine efficacy" (Aslam, 2012: 203), thereby justifying their "hyper-masculine" aggressiveness and domineering personalities (Aslam, 2012: 90-91).

Kurbaan displays this "Muslim justification for violence" through Aapa and Bhaijaan, with *Kurbaan* endeavouring to "sympathize" with the Muslim terrorist figure through Aapa's reveal of Ehsaan's past.[229] In a short scene, Aapa explains to Avantika why Ehsaan concurs with Bhaijaan's anti-Western views, following Avantika's questioning of the women in how they can sleep next to men who have the "blood of so many innocents on their hands". Aapa shares her experience: having moved to Pakistan following her marriage to Bhaijaan, her two younger brothers, staying in Kabul, were killed in America's invasion of Afghanistan. As Aapa recounts the traumatic death of her six-year-old nephew Salim, mercy-killed by Bhaijaan, Aapa laments: "What was this poor child's fault? What did he do wrong? … Just because these Americans thought that there were terrorists hiding in Afghanistan. For a few terrorists, they ruined an entire country. We are just killing a few of them". With tears streaming Aapa's face, Avantika questions their intentions of killing innocent American civilians, but Aapa resists: "He [Ehsaan] had been married only a few years when the Americans dropped bombs on his village in Pakistan. He lost his wife and his four-year-old son in those attacks. His eyes were dead when he met Bhaijaan. Then he found a purpose. A cause. He has found his way to Allah" (Fig. 5).

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[228] Please see: Rakic & Jurisic, 2012

[229] This attempt to sympathize with the terrorist is also depicted in *New York* (2009), released in the same year as *Kurbaan*.

Figure 5: Aapa (Kirron Kher) tells Avantika about Ehsaan's traumatic past.

Ehsaan's "finding his way to Allah" symbolizes the complex connection between Muslim and *Islamic* masculinity. Aslam strives to differentiate the two by understanding the terms "Islamic" and "Muslim" as "two separate but interconnected identities … Islamic masculinities are *thought* to be what ideally Muslim masculinities *ought to*" (2012: 90). *Kurbaan* portrays this fraught connection by suggesting that Ehsaan's terroristic sympathies are propelled under the guise of religious "vengeance", depicted through Ehsaan's hyper-masculine nature that seeks to reclaim the self-worth and masculine efficacy. This becomes further realized following James Dingley's argument that terrorists "may be … deranged or disgruntled individuals seeking revenge on 'society' for personal problems" (2018: 9). Since Ehsaan is not "deranged" in the "traditional" sense (an intelligent, well-spoken individual who has a career as a professor), *Kurbaan* portrays Ehsaan's violence as inherently connected and conditioned *by his Islamic faith*. As Eviane Leidig asserts, it is Muslim men who are consistently coded as fanatical terrorists rooted in Islam, itself viewed as a violent faith (2020: 230). As such, Ehsaan becomes *Kurbaan*'s violent "Other", a visual "proof" of *Hindutva*'s hegemonic need to "save" the Hindu *Rashtra.* Simultaneously, *Kurbaan*'s 9/11 narrative allows Ehsaan to symbolize Western and Indian anxieties surrounding Muslim men and, in doing so, to Muslims as a global menace.

Aside from Ehsaan's Muslim masculinity, Bhaijaan appears to exhibit a "muscular" form of Islam. Wahhabism is often categorized as a militant and austere form of Islam,[230] and *Kurbaan* depicts Wahhabi-militancy through Bhaijaan's characterization. Mohammed Ayoob and Hasan Kosebalaban argue that Western discourse has,

[230] For more on Wahhabism, please see: Ayoob & Kosebalaban, 2009; DeLong-Bas, 2009; Mandaville, 2022; Bunzel, 2023.

since 9/11, connected the attackers' terroristic motives to Wahhabism – or "fundamentalist" Islam (2009: 1). Since Wahhabism presents a rigid version of Islam, Bhaijaan personifies "Wahhabism".

Marko Rakic and Dragisa Jurisic, reflecting on wider post-9/11 discourses surrounding Islamophobia, argue that Wahhabism is the "biggest threat to [the] survival and [the] superiority of … Western civilization" (2012: 651). *Kurbaan*'s penultimate subway terrorist attack reproduces this discourse by symbolizing Bhaijaan – the spearhead of this operation – as "the biggest threat to Western civilization", accompanied by Ehsaan and other Muslim extremists. Additionally, Rakic and Jurisic further stress that "modern Wahhabism openly advocates religious and inter-ethnic intolerance" (2012: 651), and *Kurbaan* enacts this rhetoric through Bhaijaan's use of the term "*kafir*" to describe Avantika (a Hindu) and Americans, indicative of an intolerant viewpoint. Rakic and Jurisic additionally note that Wahhabism "creates a climate suitable for the birth of extremism" (2012: 651). As mentioned earlier Aapa reveals how Ehsaan's "eyes were dead when he met Bhaijaan. Then he found a purpose", directly positioning Bhaijaan as a representative of strict Wahhabi teachings that fosters Ehsaan's terroristic and violent outlook.

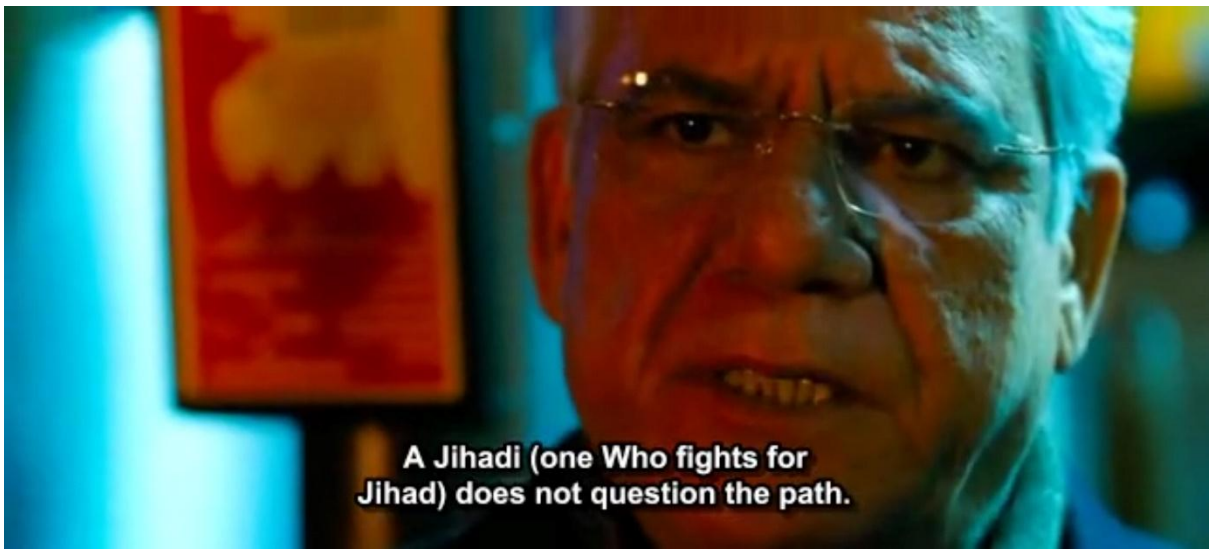

Figure 6: Bhaijaan (Om Puri) displays his militant Islamic perspective.

Bhaijaan's Muslim masculinity is further spotlighted through his suspicion of Riyaaz, *Kurbaan*'s "good" Muslim archetype.[231] Since Wahhabism places an emphasis on returning to conservative Islam, Rakic and Jurisic

[231] Meenakshi Bharat argues that Hindi cinema "mouths the secular imperative by either underscoring the archetypal binary of the 'good Muslim' against the 'evil Muslim' terrorist, thus recognising the possibilities of the 'good', or rationalizing the terrorist's option of violent insurrection" (2020: 138). For *Kurbaan,* I argue that it is to further demonize the Muslim terrorist. Please see: *Sarfarosh* (1999); *Mission Kashmir* (2000); *Fiza* (2000); and *A Wednesday!* (2008) for the "good Muslim, bad Muslim" dichotomy in Hindi cinema's terrorist narratives.

note that Wahhabism is also intolerant of *other* Muslims – especially Sh'ia and liberal Islamic teachings (2012: 650-651). Throughout *Kurbaan,* Bhaijaan presses Ehsaan on his decision to include Riyaaz in their plans, and scrutinizes Riyaaz in a pivotal scene: "Do you know why we succeeded [on 9/11]? It's passion for one's religion. Something only a true Muslim will understand. That's why we could sacrifice ourselves for Allah without a second thought. … Can you sacrifice yourself?". This becomes profound later when he assesses Riyaaz by instructing him, in front of Ehsaan, to execute a deli worker. Bhaijaan's face, lit red and with a close-up shot, symbolizes the rage and hatred for the *kafir,* whilst the blue hues on Riyaz's face indicate his innocence in this ordeal. Riyaaz, shocked, asks: "But Bhaijaan…why him? I can't…". Bhaijaan interrupts: "A *jihadi* does not question the path" (Fig. 6). As Rakic and Jurisic explain, Wahhabi-centred Muslims have been vocal in recruiting faithful Muslims to *jihad* ("holy war"), including Muslims who do not conform to Wahhabism (2012: 651). This short scene reflects Wahhabi Islam (Bhaijaan) opposite "liberal" Islamic thought (Riyaaz). Consequently, Bhaijaan's Wahhabi-like perspective on Islamic values is "muscular" in its very nature, symbolically harkening towards the distinct "fire and sword" mentality that consumed Savarkar with fear.[232]

[232] Savarkar writes that the "barbarians [Muslims] … are superior to them [Buddhists] in strength alone – strength that summed up its creed in two words – Fire and Sword!" (Savarkar, (2021 [1923]: 10). This quotation itself is a strong indicator of Savarkar's disdain for Muslims and alludes to his perception that Muslims are inherently violent.

XI-II: EHSAAN'S SEXUAL PROWESS

A noted characteristic within the *Hindutva*-inflected fears surrounding Muslim masculinity is inter-religious sexual relations. The academic literature on *Hindutva* has extensively highlighted the perceived sexual nature of Muslim men, and how it is an intrinsic and historical menace to Hindu women.[233] Since these notions are like those surrounding the contexts of the "love-*jihad*" conspiracy, I will focus on one scene that effectively portrays this *Hindutva* anxiety in *Kurbaan.*

As mentioned earlier, following the revelation of Ehsaan's perfidiousness, Avantika screams that she is pregnant. Her pregnancy represents the growth of the Muslim demographic in India. To prove my point, Avantika is symbolic of the *Hindutva* viewpoint surrounding Hindu woman and, as Taha Abdul Rauf argues, *Hindutva* primarily positions the Hindu woman body as valuable only for their reproductive functions and child-bearing abilities (2018: 148).[234] More telling is Ehsaan and Avantika's unborn child. Tanika Sarkar argues that Muslim children, born or unborn, become "a promise of future growth" (2002: 2876): with Avantika exemplifying the "carrier of … culture" (Rauf, 2018: 148), *Kurbaan* promotes the *Hindutva* fear of a potential Muslim future. In portraying Avantika as the "carrier" of a Muslim foetus, Avantika becomes a "victim" of the sexually deceptive Muslim terrorist – Ehsaan. By impregnating Avantika, Ehsaan symbolizes the Muslim "muscular dominance" over the *Bharat Mata* – "Mother India". Moreover, the Muslim figure as the "enemy within" in *Hindutva* discourse is realised in Avantika's pregnancy: inside the *Bharat Mata,* there is, *literally*, an "enemy within". Conversely, Avantika's pregnancy illustrates the *Hindutva* angst that Muslims are systematically diminishing Hindus *physically* (through having sex with Hindu women) and *demographically* (a fear that Hindi-Muslim interreligious pregnancies lead to a demographic shift in Hindu/Muslim numbers, in favour of Muslims).[235]

In a more explicit display of this metaphorical *Hindutva*-centred apprehension surrounding Muslim masculinity and Muslim sexual disposition, a scene depicting Ehsaan and Avantika having sex cannot be ignored. Avantika, to help Riyaaz find more information regarding the targets of the upcoming subway bombings, lures

[233] Please see: Sarkar, 2002; Anand, 2011; Kaul, 2017; Rauf, 2018; Kinnvall, 2019; Leidig, 2020; Deshmukh, 2021; Shani, 2021; Frydenlund & Leidig, 2022; Mody, 2022; Tebaldi, 2022
[234] Please also see: Pande, 2022.
[235] For more on this demographic fear, please see: Bhagat, 2001, 2022; Sarkar, 2002; Baber, 2004; Rauf, 2018.

Ehsaan away from his desk where the plans are hidden, leading to them to engage in sexual intercourse (Fig. 7).

Figure 7: Avantika (Kareena Kapoor-Khan) & Ehsaan (Saif Ali Khan) in bed.

Sudhir Kakar asserts that stereotypes around the Muslim subject in *Hindutva* elicit images of "[a] perceived ferocity [and] rampant sexuality" (1996: 107). Here, Ehsaan lies on top of Avantika, his muscular back paralleling *Hindutva*'s prejudices of the masculine Muslim male that seeks to destroy the impetus of *Hindutva*'s vision for a Hindu-nation state – the *Bharat Mata.* Avantika's long hair – covering nearly an entire side of her pillow – is a subtle hint to the eroticism in Hindi film texts.[236] The scene's hues, a mixture of orange and red (traditional "saffron"-like colours) becomes a motif of the *Bharat Mata,* cementing the imagery of the Muslim man's sexual dominance of women within the "utopian" Hindu *Rashtra.* Despite *Kurbaan*'s 9/11 milieu, this particular scene mirrors focused anxieties surrounding *Hindutva*'s anti-Muslim dogmas.

This sex scene between Avantika and Ehsaan also contributes to how images are formed to create agenda-specific contexts. Christine Brosius articulates how *Hindutva* uses media to perpetuate its ideological propaganda, particularly around the imagery of the "aggressive Muslim" archetype opposite the "tolerant Hindu" subject, amongst other dichotomies (2002: 292). *Kurbaan*'s omission of the Hindu male "Self" re-focuses the audience to *Kurbaan*'s new cinematic dichotomy – the purity of the *Bharat Mata* (Avantika) and the sexual "readiness" of Muslim masculinity (Ehsaan). *Kurbaan* re-constructs an *imaginaire* of the Muslim "Other" through what Dibyesh Anand calls "*porno-nationalism*" – the "obsessive preoccupation with the predatory sexuality of the putative Muslim figure and the dangers to the integrity of the Hindu bodies" (2011: 1).

[236] Please see: Orsini, 2006: 36.

Through this scene, *Kurbaan* represents the *Hindutva* fear of the aggressive, sexualised Muslim figure in India, destroying their ideals of a utopian Hindu-nationalist state. Since Ehsaan parallels the sexual, aggressive and terroristic Muslim figure, Dibyesh Anand's assessment that images of the "Other" (here, the terrorist "Other") can promote the mobilization of Hindu nationalist supporters (2011: 153) makes sense: *Kurbaan* galvanizes a xenophobic canvas of Muslim debauchery not only through the representation of "love-*jihad*" but also through Ehsaan's Muslim masculinity. In doing so, Ehsaan becomes an example of an anti-Muslim, pro-Hindu Bollywood production that makes use of its 9/11 backdrop to further "other" the "Other".

XII: CHAPTER CONCLUSION

This chapter examined the portrayal of the Muslim terroristic Other in popular Hindi cinema, with a case study centred on *Sarfarosh* and *Kurbaan*. Throughout this analysis, I have highlighted how the Muslim terroristic "Other" – a staple in Bollywood's terrorism narratives – is not only engineered within the terroristic genre, but engineered as a manifestation that reflects and perpetuates *Hindutva*-inflected prejudices.

Further to my critique of *Hindutva,* Gulfam Hassan's liminality in *Sarfarosh* and Ehsaan Khan's "glocalized" characterization in *Kurbaan* offer a refined understanding of the broader socio-political anxieties towards Muslims. While both films deal with variation of Islamic terrorism, they both offer unique and compelling depictions of the Muslim terroristic "Other". *Sarfarosh*'s Gulfam reflects region-specific fears surrounding cross-border terrorism and perceived allegiances to Pakistan, whilst *Kurbaan*'s Ehsaan (and others in the narrative) resonate with global concerns about post-9/11 Islamic terrorism, retaining specific *Hindutva*-inflected fears. While both characters are two sides of the same terroristic coin, they present vastly different reflections of *Hindutva* anxieties. I agree with Sanjeev Kumar's proclamation: "in film after film, irrespective of the genre, the recurring image of the Muslim is that of a terrorist", before noting that the visual binary need not matter because "like the devil, beware the Muslim, who can take any form" (2013: 464).

Gulfam's liminality drives *Sarfarosh*'s terrorism narrative by not only reinscribing Partition trauma to contemporaneous cross-border tensions, but also through the allegory of *Hindutva*-inflected fears surrounding Indian Muslim's perceived propensity for betrayal from within. Similarly, Ehsaan embodies two major areas of concern for the Hindu nationalist, but *Kurbaan*'s 9/11 narrative allows Ehsaan to simultaneously embody the global angst towards Muslim men and Islamic terrorism. To a great extent, I contend that Bollywood's terroristic Muslim "Other" – a character entrenched within Hindi cinema's terrorism narratives – offers an opportunity to understand, and critique, *Hindutva* and its anti-Muslim doctrine. This chapter spotlighted, through a close analysis of Gulfam and Ehsaan, that the Muslim terrorist in Hindi cinema is not simply a one-dimensional character: they are complex and layered, far more than previously thought. They are well-engineered "Others", offered as a visual representation of the menace towards the Hindu *Rashtra,* and have become integral to the terrorist genre in Hindi cinema that has dominated the cine-sphere in India since, *at least,* the 1990s. This is alarming because Hindi cinema has the ability to produce Muslim characters that speak to regional and global anxieties. Consequently, if Gulfam and Ehsaan – two examples within a catalogue of Hindi cinema's terrorism portrayals – can be further

highlighted following my critique of *Hindutva,* then an urgent re-assessment is needed. Hindi cinema's portrayals of the terroristic Muslim "Other" *must* continue to inform future scholarly debates to truly understand Bollywood's othering of the Muslim figure.

CONCLUSION

This thesis asked:

Following the demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992 and the September 11th, 2001 attacks, to what extent does Hindutva, and its socio-historical and political contexts, influence the cinematic representations and interpretations of the Muslim figure in popular Hindi cinema?

The primary aim of this research was to examine how Hindi film texts represent the Muslim figure. As the research progressed and challenges emerged, the thesis became increasingly concerned with how Hindi film narratives dealt with violent flashpoints, and how these events intersected with *Hindutva* to inform the cinematic Muslim subject. For this thesis, a close textual analysis of four Hindi-language films – *Naseem* (1995)*, Zakhm* (1998)*, Sarfarosh* (1999) and *Kurbaan* (2009) – was accompanied by a contextualization of the socio-political presence of *Hindutva,* backed by the academic examinations relating to, for example, communal fractures, nationalism, national identity, cross-border anxieties and global terrorism.

KEY FINDINGS

I: THE BABRI MASJID – *NASEEM* & *ZAKHM*

Naseem and *Zakhm* foreground the communal disintegration between Hindus and Muslims leading up to, immediately before and immediately after Babri Masjid's demolition. Both films offer a cinematic response to the rise, and acceptance, of right-wing Hindu nationalism, *critiquing* the escalation of anti-Muslim dogma.

Naseem foregrounds its critique through the depiction of the initial bud of intercommunal tension through Naseem (Mayuri Kango), who converses with her ailing and nostalgic grandfather, Akhtar (Kaifi Azmi), set against disintegrating communal tensions. *Naseem* employs various thematic and metaphorical devices to showcase the escalation in communal hatred: the use of the television; poetry; the ideas of divorce; and Akhtar's death. These contexts were central to analysis in highlighting how *Naseem* displays a cinematic critique of an impending eruption between Hindus and Muslims, highlighted further by contextualizing the Babri Masjid's demolition and *Hindutva*. *Naseem* reflects larger debates surrounding the fracture of intercommunal hatred, effectively critiquing the potential damage caused by the rise of right-wing Hindu nationalism, exemplified through the narrative employment of the Babri Masjid's impending destruction.

Following from *Naseem,* almost in continuum, *Zakhm* takes place immediately after the Babri Masjid's demolition, focusing on two timelines. The present timeline follows Ajay (Ajay Devgn), as he grapples with his Hindu-nationalist brother Anand (Akshay Anand) whilst holding onto his "wound", his mother Noor's (Pooja Bhatt) secret Islamic faith. *Zakhm* "escalates" certain themes and metaphors found in *Naseem*: the television; the use of flashbacks; divorce and marriage; and the culmination of Noor's funeral/burial, all reappear, but *Zakhm,* additionally, draws upon contexts relating to the *Bharat Mata* ("Mother India") and Noor as an all-encompassing "witch". Similarly to *Naseem, Zakhm* critiques Hindu nationalism, but the nature of this critique is explicit in comparison. This is shown in the depiction of specific characters (Subodh [Ashutosh Rana] and the mother [Amardeep Jha] of Raman [Nagarjuna Akkineni], Noor's ex) who uphold the core tenets of *Hindutva*, showcasing several cases of anti-Muslim dogma and pro-Hindu patriotism.

Naseem and *Zakhm* catalyse the Babri Masjid's demolition, critiquing *Hindutva* and Hindu-nationalist rhetoric in different ways. *Naseem* registers the disintegration of intercommunal tensions obliquely: through silence in the household; from the attitudes of Naseem's family members; and suggested through the outside world's increasing

unease within the local community. This extends to the ending, in which the demolition has only just begun, leaving the viewer with a *sense* of demolition, *not* the full-scale horror. *Zakhm*, however, traces the aftermath of the destruction *explicitly*, either through the current timeline of intercommunal violence, or in the flashback sequences which show intense anti-Muslim bigotry.

Naseem does *not* position the Muslim subject as the "Other" but rather hints at the potential for the othering of the Muslim subject should nationalist rhetoric prevail. This is evidenced through recurring symbols of the snake; through Zafar's disillusionment; and, ultimately, through the Babri Masjid's destruction, coinciding with Akhtar's death. Collectively, these moments submit to the declining cultural symbiosis in India. *Naseem* becomes a cinematic response on the potentiality of Hindu nationalism and how it could disrupt the pluralistic ethos in India.

Zakhm takes a different, escalatory route in its critique of Hindu nationalism. *Zakhm* actively frames the Muslim figure as the "Other" within *Hindutva*'s repertoire of suspicion. However, it does not pursue this negative stereotyping of the Muslim subject; instead, *Zakhm* appears to refrain from overt derogatory Muslim depictions in favour of foregrounding a critique of Hindu nationalism, instead portraying Noor's otherization as a direct consequence of rising Hindu nationalism.

Collectively, *Naseem* and *Zakhm* demonstrate Hindi cinema's use in narrativizing the Babri Masjid's demolition a site to analyse the dangers of Hindu nationalism. Unfortunately, there seems to be a lack of Hindi-language films that directly deal with the destruction of the Babri Masjid. Consequently, I assert, to a large extent, that *Naseem* and *Zakhm* are unique examples in their critique of *Hindutva* amid the backdrop of such a violent and *Hindutva*-centred event.

II: THE TERRORISTIC MUSLIM "OTHER" – *SARFAROSH* & *KURBAAN*

Sarfarosh and *Kurbaan* exemplify the construction of the Muslim terroristic "Other" within Hindi cinema, but through different historical and political climates. *Sarfarosh* situates its terrorism narrative within the volatility of the India–Pakistan border, using the trauma of Partition to reflect *Hindutva*-inflected anxieties through Gulfam Hassan (Naseeruddin Shah). Released a decade later, *Kurbaan*, set in a post-9/11 climate, contextualizes the globality of Islamic terrorism. It concerns itself with global anxieties surrounding Islamic terrorism but simultaneously articulates *Hindutva* anxieties around the "love *jihad*" conspiracy and Muslim masculinities through Ehsaan Khan (Saif Ali Khan). Together, both narratives demonstrate Bollywood's framing of terrorism to promulgate a derogatory depiction of the Muslim figure. However, in rooting Gulfam and Ehsaan within *Hindutva* anxieties and prejudices, both characters become more than "negative Muslim characters".

Sarfarosh promotes the Muslim terroristic "Other" through narrativization of cross-border terrorism, reflecting the volatile India–Pakistan border at the turn of the century. By situating terrorism in this context, *Sarfarosh* becomes a cinematic commentary on pressing anxieties of the late-1990s. However, in drawing from historical traumas of Partition, *Sarfarosh,* cleverly, presents a layered terroristic Muslim "Other" than offers further interpretations following my critique of *Hindutva.*

Gulfam's construction as a *ghazal* singer who attracts widespread adoration in India despite his desire for revenge dramatizes *Hindutva*'s anxiety towards Indian Muslims as the "enemy within." His ability to operate across national boundaries, under the guise of cultural affinity, cloaks his terroristic sympathies and it is this liminality that makes Gulfam particularly distinctive in Hindi cinema's terrorist genre. As a *mohajir*, Gulfam is not considered fully Pakistani: he is, and always was, a migrant who has not fully integrated into the Pakistan-nation state. Simultaneously, Gulfam is *not* Indian, despite his birth in India and being displaced because of Partition, which further positions Gulfam as an outsider to the Indian nation. It is within this liminal status that Gulfam becomes bitter towards India, in turn motivating his antagonism. Importantly, *Sarfarosh* presents Gulfam's bitterness as the catalyst to *Sarfarosh*'s terrorism narrative, allowing his Muslim terroristic persona to reflect *Hindutva* anxieties, including national and cultural belonging, and suspicion.

Sarfarosh not only reiterates the trope of the Muslim terrorist that pervaded Bollywood immediately after 1998 but aggrandizes Gulfam as a cinematic embodiment of *Hindutva*'s ideological fears surrounding Muslims in

the South Asian context. Following a contextualization of *Hindutva,* I contend, to a large extent, that Gulfam is a compelling construction of the Muslim terroristic "Other" in Hindi cinema of the time, *precisely* because his liminality feeds *Hindutva* insecurities surrounding Muslims.

Following the September 11th, 2001 attacks in New York City, a shift in cinematizing the Muslim figure as the terroristic "Other" occurred in Bollywood. *Kurbaan* was chosen as a case study because the film relocates the terrorism away from India, positioning its terroristic Muslim "Other" in post-9/11 United States of America. Despite this, however, *Kurbaan* tethers its main Muslim terroristic "Other", Ehsaan, to *Hindutva*-specific concerns, allowing for additional interpretations to surface.

Ehsaan is first presented as a gentleman: his demeanour, charm, and romantic pursuit of Avantika (Kareena Kapoor-Khan) present Ehsaan as a progressive, liberal Muslim, far removed from the negative imagery associated with Muslim men in a globalized post-9/11 climate. However, Ehsaan's duplicitous nature as a terrorist sympathiser is an explicit mirroring of *Hindutva*'s perceived notions that Muslims are inherently deceptive and violent beings. Consequently, Ehsaan symbolizes the post-9/11 discourse that paints Muslims as threats to Western security. But in aligning Ehsaan with prototypical *Hindutva* anxieties, it is my assertion that Ehsaan becomes a "glocal" terroristic Other – one that speaks to global *and* "local" *Hindutva* prejudices.

Ehsaan's relationship with Avantika symbolizes the "love-*jihad*" paranoia, cinematized within the narrative by becoming the means for Ehsaan to travel to America to commit terrorist atrocities. Their intimate involvement reflects an imagined *Hindutva* angst that Muslim men "lure" Hindu women into relationships for personal gain; here, the gain is to get to America to enact acts of terrorism. Additionally, Ehsaan's duplicities are further dramatized through discourses about Muslim masculinities. Threaded throughout *Kurbaan,* Ehsaan's physical body becomes a visual marker of historical muscularity, threatening the core principles of *Hindutva* muscularity. Consequently, Ehsaan is not a character marked by the "traditional" binary like other terroristic Muslim "Others" in Hindi cinema that wear "the *salwar kameez*, sport beards, carry AK-47 rifles and use Arab scarves" (Kumar, 2013: 464). Therefore, in my estimation, Ehsaan, built upon a foundation of *Hindutva* fears and anxieties whilst simultaneously exemplifying the terroristic, post-9/11 "Other", is unique when compared to, for example *New York*'s Sam (John Abraham). To a large extent, I assert that Ehsaan stands alone as a complex and concerning Muslim terroristic "Other" in the post-9/11 milieu.

Sarfarosh and *Kurbaan* demonstrate Bollywood's ability to promote the terroristic Muslim "Other" not simply as negative stereotypes of Muslim characters, but flawed characters who embody *Hindutva* prejudices. This chapter has touched upon other characters, but Gulfam and Ehsaan's motivations – central to their respective narratives – remains immensely important to this thesis. While Gulfam speaks to localized, South Asian contexts regarding Muslims in the Subcontinent, Ehsaan mirrors global and domestic fears, positioning the terroristic Muslim "Other" as a relevant global danger. Collectively, however, Gulfam and Ehsaan are coded within their terrorism narratives, linked by the historical chain in Hindi cinema's repertoire of Muslim terrorist characters, even across a decade. I argue that both characters become imagined as a threat through the terroristic genre in Hindi cinema, whether through historical liminality or through global apprehension towards Muslims. Nevertheless, the Muslim terroristic "Other" operates as a symbolic anchor for the cinematic articulation of *Hindutva*'s Hindi *Rashtra.* To this end, in portraying Gulfam and Ehsaan as terrorists, Bollywood secures the cinematic Muslim subject as its most dangerous antagonist.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Following this thesis' investigation, I propose several avenues worthy of re-examination.

Future research into the Muslim figure and the relationship between *Hindutva* and popular Hindi cinema could expand beyond the four films analysed in this thesis. With the evolving nature of *Hindutva* currently in motion, perhaps a re-examination of other films from before and after the timelines presented in this thesis could proffer interesting and damaging interpretations, leading to a richer understanding of how Bollywood constructs the Muslim subject across multiple genres.

Another recommendation would be to examine India's other regional film industries beyond Bollywood, dissecting the cinematic Muslim figure with an eye to *Hindutva.* Collectively, this may reveal different engagements with *Hindutva* and Muslim identity outside of the Hindu-majoritarianism seen in Northern India. In comparing popular Hindi cinema with, for example, Malayalam, Telugu, and Tamil cinema, this research could be used as a foundation for future engagements in those cinemas. Furthermore, this could be expanded to include different genres within those cinemas, illuminating how the Muslim figure functions within the enclave of *Hindutva* discourse in cinemas which are overshadowed by Bollywood's colossal nature.

Another area of exploration would be the interrogation of the Muslim *female* figure in Hindi cinema. The intersection of Bollywood and *Hindutva* has been well-established in this thesis, so interrogating female Muslim characters could invite several intersections and analysis from other conceptual contexts, including gender, sexuality, and religious identity. Navigating how this female Muslim figure is depicted, with an eye to *Hindutva,* may proffer additional interpretations of the cinematic Muslim subject, shedding light on *Hindutva*'s prejudicial imprint of Muslim women in Hindi cinema.

An area of personal interest would be to examine the notable and disturbing readings surrounding the depictions of Mughals in Hindi cinema. In scrutinizing Hindi cinema's rendition of the Mughal empire, future research may highlight the *Hindutva*-inflected anxieties surrounding historic Mughal cultures and traditions. Moreover, by looking at earlier Indian cinema and linking it to present-day depictions of Mughals under Narendra Modi, a thorough excavation of the portrayals of Mughals and how they engage with contemporary *Hindutva* anxieties surrounding historic Muslim power, sovereignty, and masculinity offer a compelling avenue to explore.

A critical study of Shahrukh Khan, Salman Khan, and Aamir Khan – three Muslim actors widely regarded as some of the finest Hindi-language actors in Bollywood – would be a welcome addition to general Hindi cinema studies. All three actors' stardom rose during the 1990s alongside the ascendancy of *Hindutva*. An interesting interrogation into *how* they managed to sustain their superstardom could call into question how their film roles and public personas intersected with nationalist narratives, shaping perceptions of Muslim identity and Hindu-Muslim relations in mainstream cinema despite the rise of Hindu majoritarianism.

This project sought to demonstrate that the interpretations of Muslim figure in Hindi cinema can be further understood when contextualizing the changing socio-political climates in modern-day India. Specifically, this thesis focused on the emergence, and subsequent dominance, of political, right-wing Hindu nationalism. In critiquing *Hindutva* discourse and showcasing the potential devastating effects of the ideology to intercommunal tensions, *Naseem* ponders on the position of the Islamic culture and the Muslim figure in a modern, "monotheistic" India, while *Zakhm,* explicit in its critique, establishes no good outcome towards the Muslim figure, whilst also displaying the potential hazards posed to the liberal Hindu not aligned with *Hindutva. Sarfarosh* and *Kurbaan*'s respective depictions of the Muslim terroristic "Other" need not be read as, simply, "negative characters" in Bollywood; they *must* be read as reflections of the angst, fear and prejudice espoused by *Hindutva.*

These four examples are best read as cinematic sites where cultural anxieties and nationalist aspirations converge. What appears evident is that the Muslim figure in Hindi cinema is not singular, nor static; it is shifting, forcefully flowing along the *Hindutva* current.

The core of this research underscores the power of *Hindutva* and its relationship with popular Hindi cinema. Hindi cinema is used as both a weapon and as a mirror: a weapon through which a nationalist dogma like *Hindutva* – whether it is critiqued, like in *Naseem* and *Zakhm,* or used effectively to bolster certain anti-Muslim rhetorics, like in *Sarfarosh* or *Kurbaan* – can consolidate dominance; and a mirror, reflecting the deep fractures of Indian society. This particular attention, in 2025, is timely: with Narendra Modi currently in his third term as India's Prime Minister, the nexus between Hindi cinema and *Hindutva* marks a dangerous arena for the Muslim figure. This crucial nexus between *Hindutva* and popular Hindi cinema still occupies a volatile, yet crucial position within India's cinematic imagination.

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Border. (1997). [film]. Directed by J. P. Dutta. India: J. P. Films.

Dhokha (*Betrayal*). (2007). [film]. Directed by P. Bhatt. India: Vishesh Films.

Ek Tha Tiger (*There Was Once* [*a Man Named*] *Tiger*). (2012). [film]. Directed by K. Khan. India: Yash Raj Films.

Fanaa (*Annihilation*). (2006). [film]. Directed by. K Kohli. India: Yash Raj Films.

Fighter. (2024). [film]. Directed by S. Anand. India: Viacom18 Studios; Marflix Pictures.

Fire. (1996). [film]. Directed by D. Mehta. India: Kaleidoscope Entertainment; Trial by Fire Films.

Fiza. (2000). [film]. Directed by K. Mohammed. India: The Culture Company; UTV Motion Pictures.

Gadar: Ek Prem Khatha (*Rebellion: A Love* Story). (2001). [film] Directed by A. Sharma. India: Zee Telefilms.

Geethanjali. (1989). [film]. Directed by M. Ratnam. India: Bhagyalakshmi Enterprises.

Haider. (2014). [film]. Directed by V. Bhardwaj. India: UTV Motion Pictures; VB Pictures.

Haseena Parkar. (2017). [film]. Directed by A. Lakhia. India: Swiss Entertainment.

I Am Singh. (2011). [film]. Directed by P. Issar. India: Reliance Entertainment.

Ishaqzaade (*Lovers*). (2012). [film]. Directed by H. Faisal. India: Yash Raj Films.

Jodhaa Akbar. (2008). [film]. Directed by A. Gowariker. India: Ashutosh Gowariker Productions Private Limited.

Kurbaan (*Sacrifice*). (2009). [film]. Directed by R. D'Silva. India: Dharma Productions.

Lamhaa (*Moment*). (2010). [film]. Directed by R. Dholakia. India: G. S. Entertainment.

LOC Kargil. (2003). [film]. Directed by J. P. Dutta. India: J. P. Films.

Maa Tujhhe Salaam (*Mother, I Salute You*). (2002). [film]. Directed by T. Verma. India: Indian Movies.

Major. (2022). [film]. Directed by S. K. Tikka. India: Sony Pictures International Productions; G. Mahesh Babu Entertainment; A+S Movies.

Mausam (*Season*). (2011). [film]. Directed by P. Kapur. India: Vistaar Religare Film Fund; Eros International Media Ltd.

Mission Kashmir (2000). [film]. Directed by V. V. Chopra. India: Vinod Chopra Productions.

Mouna Ragam (*Silent Symphony*). (1986). [film]. Directed byD M. Ratnam. India: Sujatha Films (GV Films).

Mumbai Meri Jaan (*Mumbai, My Life*). (2008). [film]. Directed by N. Kamat. India: UTV Motion Pictures.

My Name is Khan (2010). [film]. Directed by K. Johar. India; U.S.A.; U.A.E.: Fox Star Studios; Fox Searchlight Pictures; Dharma Productions; Red Chillies Entertainment; Image Nation Abu Dhabi.

Naseem. (1995). [film]. Directed by S. A. Mirza. India: National Film Development Corporation of India (NFDC).

New York. (2009). [film]. Directed by K. Khan. India: Yash Raj Films.

Padmaavat. (2018). [film]. Directed by S. L. Bhansali. India: Bhansali Productions.

Panipat. (2019). [film]. Directed by A. Gowariker. India: Ashutosh Gowariker Productions; Vision World Films.

Phantom. (2015). [film]. Directed by K. Khan. India: UTV Motion Pictures; Nadiadwala Grandson Entertainment.

Pinjar (*The Cage*). (2003). [film]. Directed by C. Dwivedi. India: Lucky Star Entertainment

Raanjhanaa (*Beloved One*). (2013). [film]. Directed by A. L. Rai. India: Colour Yellow Productions.

Raees. (2017). [film]. Directed by R. Dholakia. India: Red Chillies Entertainment; Excel Entertainment.

Roja (*Rose*). (1992). [film]. Directed by M. Ratnam. India: Kavithalayaa Productions.

Sadiyaan (*Centuries*). (2010). [film]. Directed by R. Kanwar. India: Inderjit Film Combines.

Sanju. (2018). [film]. Directed by R. Hirani. India: Vinod Chopra Films; Rajkumar Hirani Films.

Sarfarosh (*Fervent*). (1999). [film]. Directed by J. M. Matthan. India: Cinematt Pictures.

Shahid. (2012). [film]. Directed by H. Mehta. India: UTV Spotboy; AKFPL (Good Bad Films); Bohra Bros.

Singham Again. (2024). [film]. Directed by R. Shetty. India: Jio Studios; Reliance Entertainment; Cinergy; Devgn Films; Rohit Shetty Picturez.

Sooryavanshi. (2021). [film]. Directed by R. Shetty. India: Reliance Entertainment; Dharma Productions; Cape of Good Films; Rohit Shetty Picturez.

Tahaan. (2008). [film]. Directed by S. Sivan. India: Santosh Sivan Productions; iDream Productions.

Tere Bin Laden (*Your Bin Laden*). (2010). [film]. Directed by A. Sharma. India: Walkwater Media.

Tere Bin Laden: Dead or Alive. (2016). [film]. Directed by A. Sharma. India: Walkwater Media.

The Attacks of 26/11. (2013). [film]. Directed by R. G. Varma. India: Alumbra Entertainment.

The Descent. (2005). [film]. Directed by N. Marshall. United Kingdom: Celador Films; Northmen Productions.

The Hero: Love Story of a Spy. (2003). [film]. Directed by A. Sharma. India: Time Magnetics Pvt. Ltd.

The Kerala Story. (2023). [film]. Directed by S. Sen. India: Sunshine Pictures.

Tropic Thunder. (2008). [film]. Directed by B. Stiller. United States; Germany; United Kingdom: DreamWorks Pictures; Red Hour Productions.

Uri: The Surgical Strike. (2019). [film]. Directed by A. Dhar. India: RSVP Movies.

Vishwaroopam (*The Magnificant Incarnation*). (2013). [film]. Directed by K. Hassan. India: Raaj Kamal Films International.

War of the Worlds. (2005). [film]. Directed by S. Spielberg. United States: Paramount Pictures; DreamWorks Pictures; Amblin Entertainment; Cruise/Wagner Productions.

Yahaan (*Here*). (2005). [film]. Directed by S. Sircar. India: Sahara One Motion Pictures; Red Ice Films.

Yun Hota Toh Kya Hota (*What If...*). (2006). [film]. Directed by. N. Shah. India: Cat Films.

Zakhm (*Wound*). (1998). [film]. Directed by M. Bhatt. India: Pooja Bhatt Productions.

Zameen (*Land*). (2003). [film]. Directed by R. Shetty. India: V.R. Entertainers.