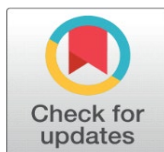
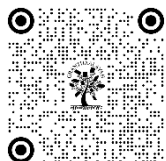


BOLLYWOOD AS A SITE FOR CREATING COLLECTIVE MEMORY: A CASE STUDY OF SELECT MOVIES

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ABSTRACT

Memory like history have and will always remain sites for discursive struggle wherein institutional mechanisms will continuously try to control and shape it. Throughout history, mass media has been one of major tools that various actors have used to shape the discursive struggle of history and memory simultaneously. Both of them serve as crucial sites of resistance for the disenfranchised groups.

Mass media in the form of cinema has always been a crucial site for this discursive struggle for both memory and history. In the present-day visual culture, Television and cinema have emerged as major sources from where we get to know about glorious histories, past struggles, and triumphs. Be it biographical series or movies, fictionalized accounts of war memorialized into blockbuster movies, or state commissioned actualities/documentaries; the cinematic representation caters to collective re-imagination of past events and renders them into sites for shaping collective memory and thus identity.

During WWII, both Hitler and Stalin used films as tools for propaganda as this medium has potential to shape one's understanding of history. State and non- state actors throughout history have used cinema to establish, reinforce and even mold historical events into hyper-emotionalized audio-visual texts, which over a period naturalizes or blurs the lines between real and represented history.

This paper will focus on how content and transmission of popular memory via cinema in India takes place. The focus will be on how mass media in the shape of cinema reinforce the existing mnemonic hegemony, which in turn shapes collective identities and pasts of the public.

Engaging with political economy the paper will further examine how economic conditions shape popular memory simultaneously leading to erasure of certain histories. The concept is to investigate how social, economic, and political circumstances indirectly encourage and exclude specific narratives in order to sustain dominant power dynamics in collective recollection across different races, classes, and genders through the medium of cinema.

The premise is to not only understand mass media content act as an agency to the production and sustaining of memory but also highlight the various factors behind this materialist approach of memory leading to erasure and disenfranchisement of other histories and memories. This involves interrogating the ownership, production, and consumption of memories propagated through television and cinema in India.

Keywords: Collective Memory, Cinema, Political Economy, Bollywood, History, Identities

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. MEDIA MEMORY AND HISTORY

Lowenthal 1985, says, the remnants of the past are pervasive; Objects and ideas that have recognizable origins, much like our own thoughts and actions, constantly surround us. Traces of history, memories, and artifacts permeate the human experience. Regardless of whether it is acknowledged or dismissed, given attention or disregarded, the past is ever-present.

It is through this past that we learn to form our identity, shape our values, and negotiate our place in societies. Earlier school and family as an institution used to inform us about our histories. However, since the media has become a dominant sociological institution, it would be safer to say that in the 21st century, our engagement with history has become predominantly mediated. Various types of media, such as print, television, film, photography, radio, and the internet, have become the primary means of documenting, constructing, preserving, and sharing both public and personal histories in the modern era. These mediums are the most effective tools for gaining insight into the past century, during which many of these forms of media were created and advanced [Garde-Hansen \(2011\)](#).

From biographical shows to historical dramas, biopics and entire broadcast channels dedicated to history; media allows representation of histories in a way that they become part of not only our collective memory but popular culture as well. From WWII stories to disasters like Chernobyl, the media representation in the form of cinema not only allows us to revisit the histories even of which those media forms were not a part. Nevertheless, selective picking and choosing (which is inherent to media representation) brings forth one dominant understanding of history, making it part of the collective fabric of how people perceive these events in histories and in such history itself. [David \(1985\)](#)

Modern theories and methods of historical study demonstrate how the composition of history has influenced our understanding of identity; the same goes for cinema. How we represent our histories through movies/ media will have a tremendous impact on how we perceive not only ourselves but our world-view and other's perception about us as well.

According to Michel Foucault, observing history is inevitably influenced by one's own cultural background, temporal context, and personal values. Our perspective shapes how we perceive events and determines which details we choose to emphasize, ultimately shaping the narrative we construct and the identities, we highlight [Fraser \(2017\)](#). Understanding the power of cinema to record and represent history will become more crucial to study when we see the cinematic language through the lens of symbolic interactionism and semiotics wherein meaning and values are negotiated within a context which then get naturalized through the repeated use.

1.2. MEDIA: THE FIRST DRAFT OF HISTORY

Although the concept of memory has traditionally been associated with visual and spatial imagery, dating back to the ancient "*art of memory*" and continuing through the Renaissance, the ascendancy of cinema and moving images in the late 1800s has resulted in the visual aspect becoming the primary determinant of how memory is depicted and comprehended. [Kilbourn \(2013\)](#). Memory has emerged as an ideal landscape and subject matter for the media to showcase its abilities:

Journalism, often dubbed as the "*first draft of history*," also serves as the initial version of memory, making assertions about what events of today will be regarded as significant in the future [Kitch \(2008\)](#), p. 312.

What is also critical to highlight are the two dominant ways Cinema uses/interacts memory. Firstly, cinema as a site for storage and archiving of memory/history. Secondly, cinema drafting memory/history through its inherent nature of re-presentation, which involves selective picking and choosing of aspects of reality.

The paper Bollywood as a vehicle for mediating collective memory asks the basic questions like, How did the films affect those who saw them? In what capacity did cinema operate within the broader context of popular culture during its era? And how did it affect the collective memory of the public. Furthermore, it will also be interesting to see how cinema acts as a site for creation and propagation of popular memory. An important aspect in this will be the journey begins where personal and collective memory meet in stories about cinema and cinema going and about what these meant, and still mean.

Alison Landsberg provides additional insight into the notion of memory by introducing the concept of prosthetic memory. This refers to a scenario where an individual who did not directly encounter a particular historical event or narrative is exposed to it through an immersive setting such as a museum or a cinema, resulting in the formation of a prosthetic memory. During this point of interaction, an individual undergoes an encounter that enables them to connect themselves to a broader historical narrative. Rather than merely comprehending a historical account, the person acquires a personal and profound recollection of a past event in which they did not participate. The resulting prosthetic memory has the potential to shape the person's political outlook and sense of self. [Landsberg \(2004\)](#)

Through the concept of Prosthetic Memory, memory thus transforms into a location that can satisfy the requirements of nation-building through various means. A fine example of this can be seen in the way movies were used for propaganda during WWII. Even films intended for a general audience frequently contained implicit messages promoting Nazi ideology [Hales et al. \(2016\)](#).

During WWII, both Hitler and Stalin used films as tools for propaganda as this medium has potential to shape one's understanding of history. While Soviet Union propaganda was overt, but Nazi filmmakers would keep the propaganda a bit subtler. Goebbels aimed for the majority of German films to be considered genuine works of art [Petley \(2002\)](#). State and non-state actors throughout history have used cinema to establish, reinforce and even mold historical events into hyper-emotionalized audio-visual texts, which over a period naturalizes or blurs the lines between real and represented history.

2. OBJECTIVES

- 1) To explore how Bollywood movies function as vehicles for the creation of collective memory.
- 2) To explore the influence of Cinema viz a viz Bollywood as a dominant medium in shaping collective memory and influencing public perceptions of the past historic events.
- 3) To investigate the influence of Bollywood as a prominent form of popular cinema on shaping perceptions of national identity and gender roles, thereby contributing to the collective memory of a nation.

3. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

3.1. BOLLYWOOD

The English-language media in India coined the term "*Bollywood*" in the late 1970s to describe the Hindi-language film industry based in Bombay (now known as Mumbai since 1995). In May 1998, a process of economic restructuring began in Bollywood when the Indian government authorized the Bombay film industry to secure financing for its movies through commercial investments, foreign funding, and bank loans, a departure from the past when productions were not supported by multinational corporations or global sponsors.

This opened new horizons for Bollywood and aesthetic makeovers. In 1998, the Hindi film industry (Bollywood) began using the fast-paced editing methods popularized by Music Television (MTV) to revamp its musical sequences, as seen in the film *Dil Se* (1998). This approach continued in the visually extravagant style of filmmaking, which began with the release of Sanjay Leela Bhansali's *Hum Dil De Chuke Sanam* in 1999, according to [Wright \(2015\)](#) :2.

Despite Indian cinema being the world's largest national industry since 1971 and a multilingual, multilocal entity yet it is wrongly treated in popular imagination as an extension of Bollywood [Mehta \(2020\)](#): 20. India has multiple film industries, producing feature films in about 20 different languages, with the Hindi language film industry based in Bombay (Bollywood) being one of the largest. According to the source, the Bombay film industry produces around 150-200 films each year. With the combined output of all its film industries, India has become the largest producer of feature films in the world." [Ganti \(2004\)](#). Mehta mentions that Bollywood constitutes less than 15 percent of Indian cinema's total output in the twenty-first century (20).

[Ganti \(2004\)](#) has classified Hindi cinema in post-independence India into three major periods, which correspond to three significant events that, in her opinion, have influenced the social and political environment of life in independent India. The first phase of filmmaking was influenced by the achievement of independence, which initiated the complex responsibilities of nation-building and economic growth. This era was heavily influenced by the approach of India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, who sought to identify and address the problems facing the new nation and his perspectives on India's global position.

The author argues that the films produced in the second era were significantly different from those of the first era. The second era was set against the backdrop of the early 1970s, characterized by widespread social and political unrest, and growing dissatisfaction with the government, which ultimately led to the state of emergency declared by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in 1975. [Ganti \(2004\)](#) identifies the third era of Hindi filmmaking as being influenced by the economic liberalization process that began in 1991, as well as the emergence of Hindu chauvinism and fanaticism in the political mainstream. This era is also characterized by the presence of television, which was not the case in the previous two eras. Filmmaking during this period has had to adapt to the competing presence of television. To contrast with the two preceding eras, during which films dominated the media landscape due to either the absence of television (1950s) or its limited presence (1970s), the third era of filmmaking (since 1991) has had to adjust to the increasing competition from television.

Bollywood also reflects linguistic diversity of India as its songs and dialogues apart from Hindi carry traces of other regional Indian languages like Urdu, Punjabi,

Gujarati, Malayalam etc. [Anjaria \(2021\)](#) notes that while there are several Bollywood songs that combine Hindi with Punjabi, such as "Shava Shava" from *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham (2001)* and "Lohri" from *Veer-Zaara (2004)*, it is less common to mix Hindi with other Indian languages. However, there are some examples of this, such as the Gujarati-English song "I'll Miss You" from *Secret Superstar (2017)* and the Hindi-Malayalam mix in "Jiya Jale Jaan Jale" from *Dil Se (1997)*. Additionally, characters who speak Bengali, Marathi, Gujarati, and Tamil in Bollywood films often incorporate a few words from their respective languages into their Hindi dialogue to ensure it remains understandable to a broad audience.

The emergence of global streaming platforms has widened the potential viewership of Bollywood films, increasing their popularity. Platforms like Netflix and Amazon Prime allow viewers across the geographic barriers to watch Bollywood films with subtitles. Although remaking of Bollywood films goes back to 90's but the number has increased gradually e.g. Hollywood blockbuster *Fear (1996)* was a remake of Bollywood film *Darr (1993)*, *Pearl Harbor (2001)* was a remake of Bollywood film *Sangam (1964)*, Bollywood film *3 Idiots (2009)* was remade in Mexico as *Tres Idiotas (2017)*. *A Common Man (2013)*, Sri Lankan thriller film, was an official remake of *A Wednesday (2008)*.

3.2. FILMS AND REALITY

Commercial Indian cinema is considered to be the most powerful means of communication in Indian society [Butalia \(1984\)](#). It has played a significant role in shaping the national identity since the first film was made in India in 1913. According to [Appadurai & Breckenridge \(1996\)](#), cinema is the most influential medium in creating a national mythology of heroism, consumerism, leisure, and sociality. Film is believed to have an unparalleled capacity to provide an "emphatic reconstruction" of historical events, allowing viewers to witness and understand the lives of people in the past (Raack as cited in Rosenstone, 1995). Therefore, films are considered to be an effective tool for educating people about history.

According to [Fluck \(2003\)](#), the combination of sound and image and the iconic quality of the images in film create an illusion of unmediated and direct representation. This illusion has led critics like Robert Warshaw to describe film as providing an "immediate experience."

3.3. CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Since paper aims to see how through Bollywood, cinema/films become a site where audiences mediate their memories and identities; the paper will bank on the conceptual framework of Collective Memory and Prosthetic memory along with the theoretical framework of Political Economy to achieve so. The term "collective memory" was first introduced by sociologist Émile Durkheim and later developed by his student Maurice Halbwachs. [Maurice \(1992\)](#) explained that people usually acquire their memories within society and recall and recognize them through social interactions. In group formations, collective memory is not only created through commemorative activities among group members but also by using publicly available symbols, rituals, and technologies.

According to [Olick et al. \(2011\)](#), collective memory is the past that is actively remembered and shapes our identities. Halbwachs (1994) views collective memory as a social construct that reflects the dominant ideas of a society, influenced by factors such as family, religion, social class, politics, and economics. This theory suggests that collective memory is shaped by cultural specificity and responds to the

needs of a particular society at a specific time. The social frameworks of memory often aim to foster social cohesion and are thus linked to a culturally and historically specific group of people.

As discussed above, the concept of Prosthetic memory refers to making or experiencing memories of those events/ narratives through reel life but which one does not have experienced in real life.

The aim to use the lens of Political Economy is to critically understand the structures at play. Since it aims to study the power relations between politics, mediation, and economy; the framework of Political Economy will help to better understand how using films, larger institutional structures suppress certain memories leading to erasure and present a collective memory which is homogenous and sometimes furthers a certain ideology.

Sample: The sample taken for this study consists of three Bollywood movies spanning three different themes but all connected by the fact that the three movies are derived from actual events. Taking movies based on real life events will help to achieve the objective of the study to show how prosthetic memory comes into play and shapes our understanding of history and past. Furthermore, the themes taken are India-Pakistan Partition, War and Sports. Three diverse themes, which collectively shape up the major discourses and emotions of India. This was again done consciously to be able to relate how popular/collective memory is transferred through films. The re-presentation of the events based on real life takes a different slant through omission and exaggeration of actual timeline and thus presents a capsule of not only history guide but also emotional, social, and cultural guide as to perceive the events through the movies.

1) Chak De India

Story/Plot:

The movie *Chak De! India* (2007) directed by Shimit Amin is based on the life of Mir Ranjan Negi, a former Indian goalkeeper who faced career struggles after India's 1-7 loss to Pakistan in the 1982 Asian Games final. After 16 years, he returned to the field as the goalkeeping coach for the women's team. The character of Kabir Khan, played by Shah Rukh Khan, is inspired by Negi, and he transforms a group of untrained girls into a cohesive team that plays for each other. The team goes on to win the gold medal at the 1998 Asian Games in Bangkok.

Analysis:

Movies like *Chak De India*, are a good medium for inspiring an audience and can be used to inspire loyalty, conviction and courage among the audiences. The film focuses on gender issues, nationalism and team spirit and gives a rare look at the national game of India, Hockey, which is often overshadowed by cricket.

While Jaideep Sahni's screenplay attempts to redeem the lost, glory of Indian hockey but also deals with patriotism, teamwork, and empowering women in sports. *Chak De India* is a masterpiece in the sports genre of Bollywood and one of its kind motivational movies that portrays winning spirit over obstacles.

What also works for this movie in terms of creating collective imagination is the way the coach is treated with shame and dishonor after losing the match to Pakistan. This is further heightened with changing the name and character of the real life coach Ranjan Negi into Kabir Khan a Muslim, played by Shahrukh Khan, as the coach in the movie. Tapping into the collective antagonism towards Pakistan, the movie further creates the collective identity of what it means to be Indian.

Blaming himself for bringing shame and loss to the entire nation, the coach is shown in a relentless ambition to right the wrongs through the women's hockey

team. This is reiterated in the movie repeatedly, reminding the audience about the downfall of once a famed player.

Additionally, the movie also successfully draws attention to disparity towards women sports in India and the state of neglect and patriarchy that women athletes go through. Thus, tapping into the established collective patriarchal memory of society. The movie not only successfully creates a prosthetic memory for the actual 1998 Asian games which were completely forgotten but along with it also helps to strengthen the collective identity of being an Indian, while portraying sports and nationalism and along with that the struggles of being a woman in a patriarchal society.

2) Shershaah:

Story/Plot:

Shershaah is a 2021 Hindi biopic film based on the life of Captain Vikram Batra, a war hero who was killed during the Kargil war of 1999. The film is directed by Vishnu Varadhan and written by Sandeep Shrivastave. Sidharth Malhotra and Kiara Advani play prominent roles in the movie, which sheds light on the life of Captain Vikram Batra, who was posthumously awarded India's highest gallantry honor, Param Vir Chakra, on August 15, 1999. In the film, Sidharth Malhotra portrays a double role as both Capt. Vikram and his brother Vishal Batra. Captain Vikram was commissioned in the Indian Army's 13th Battalion Jammu & Kashmir Rifles in 1997, and his code name was "*Shershaah*."

Analysis:

Movies inspire their audiences by "emotionalizing" and dramatizing the subjects [Wanger \(1941\)](#):381. To invoke that emotional feeling of loss, the funeral scene of Capt. Vikram Batra was shot at the same place in Palampur, Himachal Pradesh where an actual funeral was held years ago in the presence of Capt. Vikram's twin brother Vishal Batra. Kiara Advani, who portrays the character of Dimple Cheema in the movie, shared in an interview with Indian Express that during one emotional scene, even though the crew and co-actors who were not in the frame were not supposed to cry, she could hear sniffles all around her. She further stated that the entire cast and crew resonated with the feeling of immense gratitude for the sacrifice of Captain Vikram Batra, and it felt like they were not just performing, but re-living the events of July 11th, 1999.

While Capt. Vikram's demise was previously portrayed in *LOC: Kargil* (2003), with Abhishek Bachchan playing the role of the war hero and portraying him as a "model citizen" who was willing to sacrifice everything for the country, *Shershaah* takes a more fact-based approach, allowing the audience to revisit Capt. Batra's contributions during the Kargil War with a greater emphasis on historical accuracy.

The Indian film industry, Bollywood, has a well-established tradition of producing military-themed movies, and the Kargil conflict has been the subject of eight successful box office hits. This particular film has succeeded in accurately portraying significant aspects of Captain Batra's life. Unlike most of the Bollywood movies that go overboard with melodrama, makers have chosen to put a right balance while portraying the character of Dimple (played by Kiara) and the film makes sure her sacrifice is known. [McCahill \(2021\)](#)

3) Earth 1947

Story/Plot:

The movie is based on Bapsi Sidwa's novel 'Cracking India' and is set in Lahore, depicting events leading up to and during Partition, seen from the perspective of Lenny, an eight-year-old girl from a well-off Parsee family. Through Lenny's eyes, the film offers a personal view of Partition and portrays it as a history of gender relations, presenting a unique voice in the portrayal of this historical event.

Analysis

The representation of the Partition experience through words and images started in the late 1940s, but it's only in recent decades that literary critics and film scholars have started to analyze these works. Movies about the India-Pakistan partition are significant for dealing with memory, trauma, and politics. Therefore, *Earth* can be viewed as a historical source that tries to construct a particular imagination of the nation. Through Lenny's story, *Earth* narrates not only the personal story of an eight-year-old child but also reflects the tumultuous history and politics of the region. Mehta depicts the Partition not only as an event that affected women's bodies but also as an event that fought on expressions and agencies associated with the body by placing Shanta's rape in the paradigm of jealousy instead of communalism." [Gurumurthy \(2021\)](#)

The way the movie handles the issues of gender and partition is commendable, very much unlike the other movies based on India-Pak Partition which through the dominant representations in historiography try to justify and give legitimacy to the violence that occurred during the Partition, particularly towards women, by portraying it as an unfortunate but necessary consequence of the events. Another way the movie treats gender issue the way the plot of the film revolves around partition but the slant of gendered violence is too unmistakable unlike the role of women as paraphilia in majority of Indian cinema. [Radstone & Schwarz \(2010\)](#)

This depiction creates a counter-history making the movie a site for negotiating the memory of not only the Partition but also the social norms and values present in the society at that time. The prosthetic memory of someone watching the movie who has not witnessed the partition becomes coloured through the depiction of the events in the movie and thus becomes the basis to understand the past.

4. CONCLUSION

Filmmakers reconstruct history by selectively presenting facts that align with their intended message or due to limitations in budget or resources. Therefore, it is important to evaluate films based on the prevailing sociopolitical context and the era in which they were produced. Additionally, films must be understood as constructing a particular version of history.

Films have a significant impact on cultural influence and can help create lasting public memories of historical events or figures. Bollywood, through its films, has contributed to this phenomenon by producing movies like *Paan Singh Tomar (2012)*, *Bhaag Milkha Bhaag (2013)*, *Mary Kom (2014)*, *Manjhi- The Mountain Man (2015)*, *Neerja (2016)*, *Haseena Parkar (2017)*, *Raazi (2018)*, *Manikarnika: The Queen of Jhansi (2019)*, *Gunjan Saxena: The Kargil Girl (2020)*, *Shershaah (2021)*, and *Major (2022)*, which have become deeply embedded in the Indian collective memory.

Robert Rosenstone accurately pointed out that, in our culture, visual media has become the primary source of historical messages, a century after the invention of

motion pictures [Rosenstone \(1995\)](#): 3. However, films produced solely for box office numbers have no obligation to present a factual representation of the past, as their goal is profit rather than accuracy. Due to the limitations of commercial films, facts can be twisted, timelines conflated, and endings revised for perceived audience satisfaction, as noted by [Weinstein \(2001\)](#): 28. While movies can easily influence our perception of history, they do so by popularizing one particular aspect of reality, often by heightening or exaggerating it (which is also a symptom of the visual medium). This selective cherry-picking is done while considering various constraints such as ideological stance, socio-political and cultural conditions.

As [Chakravarty \(2011\)](#) rightly puts Movies are commonly viewed as a miniature version of a country's social, political, economic, and cultural aspects. It is a space where interpretations are discussed, customs are established and reinvented, and identities are acknowledged or discarded, all of which are highly contested.

Indian popular cinema (Bollywood) presents an interesting case study from this perspective. It has and still plays a very important part in creation of collective memory and identity through collective imagination on screen. Also, important here is to underlie the role of agents like directors, producers and other personnel who make the film happen and also who are aligned to ensure their financial profit via the movies.

According to [Therwat \(2010\)](#), this has led to the creation of a set of works that prescribe and enforce certain norms and values, which have influenced and often shaped ideas about national identity, gender roles, and societal acceptability. As a result, popular cinema has become a significant player in the social engineering of a nation, contributing to its collective memory.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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