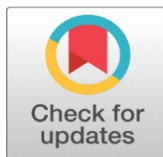


RE-EXAMINING THE CULTURAL POLITICS AND THE MARATHI AND NON-MARATHI DIVIDE IN CONTEMPORARY MARATHI CINEMA

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ABSTRACT

The Marathi films serve as a cultural battleground, mirroring the socio-political dynamics between Marathi and non-Marathi communities in Mumbai, Maharashtra's economic capital. This paper examines how Marathi films like *Mi Shivaji Raje Bhosale Boltay* (2009), *Arjun* (2011), and *Balkadu* (2015) address the perceived marginalization of Marathi people in Mumbai. The films project a complex narrative of displacement, focusing on the effects of migration, socio-economic disparities, and the erosion of Marathi identity. Central to this analysis are themes of cultural consciousness, business stereotypes, and emotional ties that Marathi people hold to Mumbai as both a geographical and symbolic space. Through each film, the conflict is explored between the local 'Marathi Manos' and non-Marathi settlers, particularly those from Gujarat, who are often portrayed as the economic elites in the city. This paper aims to study how the characters in the films are depicted to challenge stereotypes to maintain their dignity and cultural identity, presenting a discourse on regional pride. Ultimately, this study asserts that these films contribute to a larger Marathi socio-political revival by addressing issues of economic displacement, cultural assimilation, and community solidarity. However, these narratives also risk falling into propagandistic tropes, promoting an 'us vs. them' mentality. This paper explores whether these films succeed in providing the fine line between cultural commentary and political propaganda.

Keywords: Cultural Politics, Identity, Marathi Cinema, Migration, Displacement, Harmony

1. INTRODUCTION

Mumbai, widely regarded as India's financial capital, has long been a space of cultural intersections shaped by decades of migration from across India and abroad. This diversity has enriched the city but has also ignited socio-political tensions, particularly between the Marathi-speaking locals and the non-Marathi immigrants, especially those from Gujarat and North India. This paper aims to dissect how contemporary Marathi cinema addresses this divide, with a specific focus on three films: *Mi Shivaji Raje Bhosale Boltay* (2009) directed by Santosh Manjrekar, *Arjun* (2011) directed by F. M. Ilyas, and *Balkadu* (2015) directed by Atul Kale. Through analysing these films, I will examine the narratives of displacement, cultural identity, and socio-economic changes while also questioning whether these films transcend political propaganda or contribute to a genuine cultural renaissance for the Marathi community.

Mumbai, originally a cluster of seven islands inhabited by the Koli fishing community, has a rich history shaped by successive rulers, including the Mauryas, Portuguese, and British. The British East India Company transformed Bombay into a key trading and industrial hub in the 19th century. Post-independence, Mumbai became India's financial capital,

and its name was changed from Bombay to Mumbai in 1995 to honour the local Koli goddess Mumbadevi. Marathi people have been integral to Mumbai's growth, contributing as labourers in its mills, pioneers in arts and literature, and political leaders advocating for local interests. The notion of Mumbai as a city for Marathi-speaking people emerged in the 1960s during linguistic reorganization and industrial shifts. The Shiv Sena, founded in 1966, championed the rights of Marathi workers and cultural preservation, popularizing the slogan 'Mumbai for Marathi Manos'. This movement intertwined Mumbai's cosmopolitan identity with its Marathi roots, shaping its socio-political landscape.

Mumbai, often described as the lifeblood of Maharashtra, holds immense cultural and symbolic significance for the Marathi community. Historically, it has been the centre of economic and cultural activity, offering opportunities to people from diverse backgrounds. However, the influx of non-Marathi migrants, coupled with the economic dominance of communities like Gujaratis and Marwaris, has led to a perceived erosion of Marathi culture and influence in the city. Mumbai's identity has always been tied to its role as a hub of migration and commerce. The multiculturalism in Mumbai is both celebrated and contested in the films. Alyque Padamsee, an actor, producer and filmmaker, describes Mumbai as "a hurricane of activities, a typhoon that runs the year round. A passionate city and a hotpot of people living together" (Padamsee, 2008). In the last few decades, the Marathi-speaking community in Mumbai has felt a growing sense of displacement. Factors such as large-scale migration, the proliferation of non-Marathi businesses, and political neglect have contributed to this sentiment. This has manifested in the rise of regional political movements, most notably through the Shiv Sena and its offshoot, the Maharashtra Navnirman Sena (MNS). Both parties have sought to reassert Marathi pride and protect Marathi-speaking citizens' rights in Mumbai. Marathi cinema reflects and amplifies this sociopolitical discourse. These films do not merely depict the Marathi protagonists as victims of exploitation by the non-Marathi community but also as active agents fighting to reclaim their lost dignity and rightful place in Mumbai's cultural and economic landscape. The idea of the 'Marathi Manos' – a proud, hardworking individual deeply connected to Mumbai – is central to the narratives of *Mi Shivaji Raje Bhosale Boltoy*, *Arjun*, and *Balkadu*. Through their protagonists, the films articulate the emotional bond Marathi people share with Mumbai, framing it not just as a city but as a cultural homeland.

Baweja lists a number of Bollywood films mirroring the class division in terms of different spaces, reflecting the broader social and economic changes in Mumbai, where the rise of private spaces and gated communities is increasingly marginalizing the poor (Baweja, 2025, p. 20-21). Bollywood has produced numerous films that are set in Mumbai, earlier known as Bombay, exploring the challenges of living life in Mumbai, reflecting the complexities of urbanization and its impact on society. Films like Saeed Akhtar Mirza's *Albert Pinto Ko Gussa Kyon Aata Hai* (1980), Mira Nair's *Salaam Bombay!* (1988), Mani Ratnam's *Bombay* (1995), Ram Gopal Varma's *Rangeela* (1995), Mahesh Bhatt's *Yeh Hai Mumbai Meri Jaan* (1999), Kiran Rao's *Dhobi Ghat* (2010), Ritesh Batra's *The Lunchbox* (2013), Hansal Mehta's *CityLights* (2014), etc. depict the struggles of individuals navigating migration, poverty, and social disparities in the sprawling metropolis. Urbanization of Mumbai has not only expanded the city's boundaries but also fuelled crime and the rise of the underworld, a theme prominently portrayed in the gangster cinema genre. Films such as *Zanjeer* (1973), *Deewar* (1975), *Don* (1978), *Satya* (1998), *Vaastav* (1999), *Ab Tak Chhappan* (2004), *Black Friday* (2007), *Shootout at Lokhandwala* (2007), *Once Upon a Time in Mumbai* (2010), *Agneepath* (2012), *Haseena Parkar* (2017) etc. reflect the evolving dynamics of crime and the underworld in Mumbai, capturing the city's darker undercurrents alongside its vibrant culture. Though set in Mumbai, these films do not include the cultural divide victimizing the Marathi people as depicted in the Marathi films *Mi Shivaji Raje Bhosale Boltoy*, *Arjun*, *Balkadu*. In *Mi Shivaji Raje Bhosale Boltoy*, the protagonist, Dinkarrao Bhosale, faces both personal and professional humiliation, often at the hands of non-Marathi elites. His experience mirrors the broader concerns of many in the Marathi community who feel marginalized in a city they helped build. Similarly, the film *Arjun* addresses how wealthy Gujarati businessmen have taken over much of Mumbai's economic landscape, furthering the displacement of local Marathi communities. In contrast, *Balkadu* draws inspiration from the legacy of Shiv Sena supremo late Balasaheb Thackeray, offering a romanticized vision of the Marathi community's past strength and pride.

The present paper intends to deal with the diverse relationship between Marathi identity, economic displacement, and the role of cinema in addressing these concerns. The paper is broadly divided into four sections. The first section studies how Marathi cinema challenges stereotypes associated with economic displacement, particularly highlighting the business acumen and entrepreneurial spirit of the Marathi community. The second section explores how cinema has been instrumental in reawakening Marathi consciousness, fostering a sense of pride, dignity, and self-respect. The third section examines the profound impact of displacement on Marathi identity and the anxieties it has generated. Finally, the fourth section analyses the 'Pro-Marathi' agenda in cinema, exploring how filmmakers have used their art to address issues of Marathi identity and cultural pride.

2. CHALLENGING STEREOTYPES: ECONOMIC DISPLACEMENT AND BUSINESS ACUMEN

The two entities, art and life, are not merely imitations of each other but rather exist in a state of profound interconnectedness. Cinema acts as a mirror reflecting societal values, political philosophies, group behaviours, and even aspects like speech and dress. However, this reflection is not unidirectional. Just as cinema mirrors society, it also influences it. The values, ideologies, and aesthetics portrayed in films are absorbed by society, shaping how people think, behave, and interact. This constant exchange creates a dynamic where art and life become intertwined, making it difficult to distinguish between the two. Cinema in South Asian societies is not just an entertainment but a significant cultural and social force that reflects beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours (Ahmed, 1992, p. 289). Such beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours are the core of the films selected for my analysis. One of the recurring themes in the films is the stereotype that “Marathi people cannot do business”, a notion deeply embedded in cultural discourse. This section explores how the films challenge and subvert this stereotype. However, recent Marathi films have actively challenged this narrative, presenting characters who break free from these stereotypes and succeed in the business world. One such film is *Arjun*, where the protagonist, Arjun Pawar, is depicted as a middle-class Marathi youth who, despite being fatherless, exhibits remarkable courage and ambition. Having completed an MBA in Finance and ranked first at his university, Arjun is determined to build a successful business. This determination surprises his mother, who, like many in Marathi households, has internalized the belief that job security is preferable to entrepreneurship. When Arjun shares his business aspirations with her, she is incredulous, remarking, “Listen, Arjun, Marwaris and Gujaratis are born businessmen. We are Marathi. Isn’t it better for us to find a steady job and settle down? We can’t do business”¹ (Ilyas, 2011, 0:04:40).

This mindset, as depicted in the film, is widespread in Marathi households, where pursuing a job is often seen as synonymous with stability and success. Yet, Arjun rejects his mother’s defeatist outlook, arguing that success in business is not about one’s ethnic background but rather about possessing the courage and confidence to pursue one’s goals. He questions why Marathi people often limit themselves to running small roadside stalls like *Vadapav*, *Pavbhaji*, or *Zunka Bhakar Kendra*, instead of aspiring to big ventures. Arjun believes that this reluctance to venture into larger businesses stems from childhood conditioning, where parents instil the belief that “Marathi people cannot do business”*. He challenges this internalized stereotype and remains steadfast in his determination to become a successful entrepreneur, defying societal expectations. The film also highlights how even Marathi businessmen perpetuate these limiting beliefs. Arjun encounters Mr Mahajan, a fellow Marathi entrepreneur with connections to Ratan Shah, a wealthy Gujarati businessman. Despite recognizing Arjun’s academic potential, Mahajan advises him to pursue a corporate job instead of stepping into the field of entrepreneurship. “Marathi people should not do business”*, Mahajan asserts, reinforcing the stereotype that Arjun is trying to break (Ilyas, 2011, 0:11:55). However, Arjun firmly counters this notion, stating that success in business is not contingent upon being Marathi or non-Marathi. The conflict deepens when Ratan Shah, dismissing Arjun’s aspirations, tells him, “You’re a Marathi. Business is not for you. You people should only do jobs”* (0:54:48). Shah’s condescending attitude toward the Marathi people sparks a powerful response from Arjun, who reminds Shah of the contributions that the Marathi people have made to his success. “Marathi people have made you the successful businessman today. When you came to Mumbai, you had nothing. It was the Marathi people who built your empire”*, shouts Arjun (0:56:34). This confrontation underscores the central message of the film: that Marathi people are fully capable of excelling in business and that their achievements should not be dismissed or overshadowed by ethnic stereotypes.

The film also exposes how powerful business lobbies work to undermine aspiring entrepreneurs like Arjun. Ratan Shah, feeling threatened by Arjun’s resolve, deceives him with the help of Mahajan, resulting in Arjun’s wrongful imprisonment. However, instead of backing down, Arjun vows to dismantle Shah’s entire business empire, which he believes was built on exploiting Mumbai and its Marathi inhabitants. Against all odds, Arjun emerges victorious, becoming a successful businessman and symbolizing the breaking of long-held stereotypes surrounding the business capabilities of the Marathi people. The film’s conclusion offers a hopeful vision for the future. Arjun’s success in exposing Ratan Shah’s corruption and establishing Brahma Business Park represents a shift in power dynamics. It demonstrates that with determination and strategic thinking, marginalized communities can overcome systemic barriers and claim

¹ An asterisk (*) is used to denote my translations.

their rightful place in the city's hierarchy. Arjun's call for unity among the Marathi people, coupled with his acknowledgement of Mumbai's multicultural reality, underscores the possibility of coexistence and shared prosperity.

Ratan Shah's character in the film reflects the success and influence of non-Marathi entrepreneurs who have historically controlled key sectors such as real estate, trade, and finance. His dismissive attitude towards Marathi struggles is emblematic of the cultural insensitivity often attributed to non-Marathi elites. Dialogues like 'Mumbai belongs to whoever controls the stock market' encapsulate a practical, business-first mindset that prioritizes profits over cultural or social considerations. The film highlights the collective strategies employed by non-Marathi communities, particularly Gujaratis and Marwaris, to maintain their economic stronghold. Through syndicates and networks, they wield significant influence over industries and government policies. This adaptability and unity stand in stark contrast to the individualism often associated with Marathi entrepreneurs. Unlike other people, Marathi people isolate themselves, which makes it challenging for Marathi individuals to compete on an equal footing. However, the film also critiques the exploitative practices of figures like Ratan Shah. His manipulation of stock markets and the use of fake companies to amass wealth reflect the darker side of his success. By exposing these unethical practices, the film portrays the moral high ground held by characters like Arjun, who fight for transparency and fairness. The eventual downfall of Ratan Shah symbolizes the limits of unchecked greed and the strength of those who stand for justice. Despite these critiques, the film acknowledges the contributions of non-Marathi communities to Mumbai's growth. Characters like Ratan Shah are not portrayed as outright villains but as complex individuals driven by ambition and survival instincts. Their success is a testament to Mumbai's status as a city of opportunities, where anyone with determination and resources can rise to prominence. The historical and symbolic references in the film further deepen the Marathi perspective. Invoking figures like Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj and Tanaji Malusare, Arjun draws parallels between historical struggles for sovereignty and contemporary battles for economic independence. His rallying cry to Marathi youth to 'fly the flag in the stock market' serves as both a metaphorical and literal call to action, urging them to reclaim Mumbai not through violence but through strategic and collective economic initiatives.

Arjun's journey reflects a broader shift in Marathi identity from victimhood to empowerment. Through his journey, the film *Arjun* not only challenges the traditional stereotypes that have constrained Marathi people but also offers a narrative of empowerment. It presents a new vision for Marathi identity rooted in ambition and the determination to succeed in the modern business world. Through Arjun's journey, the film challenges the notion that business acumen is exclusive to non-Marathi people. Yet, despite these attempts to challenge stereotypes, the films occasionally reinforce them by depicting non-Marathi businessmen as exploitative and morally corrupt. Ratan Shah embodies the stereotype of the greedy, unscrupulous Gujarati businessman. By framing the narrative in this way, the film complicates its own message of empowerment, suggesting that success for Marathi people can only be achieved by defeating non-Marathi competitors rather than through coexistence.

3. REAWAKENING THE MARATHI CONSCIOUSNESS: PRIDE, DIGNITY, AND SELF-RESPECT

The reawakening of Marathi consciousness forms a central theme in *Mi Shivaji Raje Bhosale Boltay*, *Arjun*, and *Balkadu*. These films depict the struggles of Marathi people in Mumbai who, feeling humiliated and disrespected by non-Marathi, are eventually driven to resist and challenge the forces of oppression. As Mumbai's demographic shifts increasingly favour non-Marathi people, these films portray the suffocating environment for Marathi people who feel marginalized in a city that was once their cultural stronghold. Through these narratives, the films explore the deep sense of injustice and domination experienced by Marathi individuals in their daily lives. In *Mi Shivaji Raje Bhosale Boltay*, Dinkarrao Marotirao Bhosale, a middle-class Marathi man working as a clerk in a bank at Nariman Point, epitomizes this sense of helplessness. Throughout the film, Bhosale endures a series of humiliations. At a shop, he is humiliated for merely touching an expensive piece of cloth he cannot afford, with the shopkeeper bluntly telling him it's beyond his reach. Similarly, at a fish market, the vendor refuses to let him touch expensive pomfrets and instead directs him toward cheaper fish. Even in his professional life, Bhosale is treated with disdain. His branch manager, V. Gopal Krishnan, humiliates him when he requests for a loan. Bhosale accepts these insults passively, seemingly resigned to his diminished status until his dormant Marathi consciousness is awakened.

The film presents how Bhosale's frustrations reach a peak when his childhood friend, Chandekar, now a politically influential MLA, becomes a symbol of the corrupt elite. Chandekar gives admission to students from Sindhi, Gujarati, Marwari, and Punjabi backgrounds with less than 50% score in his engineering college by accepting hefty donations. Yet, he denies admission to Bhosale's son, Rahul, who, despite scoring 95% marks, is rejected simply because Bhosale

cannot afford the donation. Bhosale confronts Chandekar, exposing how education has been commodified to exploit the vulnerable. This revelation eventually leads to Chandekar's resignation from his ministry post, symbolising a rare victory for the underrepresented Marathi community. The theme of reawakening is also evident in Bhosale's daughter, Shashikala, who dreams of becoming an actress but faces rejection in Bollywood due to her Marathi identity. She adopts the stage name 'B Kala' to hide her Marathi background, hoping to fit the industry's stereotypes. A director named Gidwani is impressed with her audition but dismisses her as soon as he discovers her true surname, declaring that "Marathi heroines cannot make it in Hindi cinema"* and labelling her 'too down-market' (Manjrekar, 2009, 0:10:51). He believes that Marathi girls lack the sophistication to put on the western clothing and due to their vernacular accent in English, Marathi girls get disqualified for leading roles in Bollywood. Facing these entrenched stereotypes, Shashikala urges her father to change her surname to something more common in the Hindi film industry, such as Khanna, Chopra, or Kapur, believing this will give her a better opportunity to do films in Bollywood.

However, Bhosale refuses to comply with this suggestion, expressing his disappointment over the idea of abandoning one's roots for the sake of getting an opportunity for fame. Bhosale marches into Gidwani's office and reminds him of the substantial contributions of Marathi people to various fields, including the Hindi film industry. In a moment of self-reflection, Gidwani admits that his real surname is Gaikwad, and he had changed it to Gidwani to hide his Marathi origin. This moment of vulnerability from Gidwani leads to a poignant realization about the pressures Marathi individuals face in order to succeed in fields dominated by non-Marathi stereotypes. Bhosale encourages Gidwani to embrace his Maharashtrian identity rather than conceal it. In a powerful turning point, Bhosale's awakening also extends to his daughter. He instils a renewed sense of pride in Shashikala, who abandons her plans to conform to the Bollywood mould and instead embraces the Marathi film industry. By signing four Marathi films under her real name, she defies the stereotypes associated with Marathi surnames and confidently asserts her cultural identity. Thus, the film reveals the deep-seated prejudices within India's entertainment industry and critiques the broader societal trend of discarding regional identities in pursuit of national recognition.

Through these characters, *Mi Shivaji Raje Bhosale Boltay* emphasizes the need for Marathi people to reclaim their pride, dignity, and self-respect. The film advocates for a cultural reawakening, where 'Marathi Manos' no longer feel the need to abandon their heritage to fit into a system dominated by outsiders.

4. MARATHI IDENTITY AND THE FEELING OF DISPLACEMENT

Kumar Ketkar, the editor of *Loksatta*, a prominent Marathi newspaper, reflects on Mumbai's transformation in an interview. He recalls, "There were once 65 textile mills, all owned by Gujaratis and Marwaris, employing a Marathi workforce that comprised 98 per cent of the labour. Today, those mills are gone, replaced by high-rise buildings, shopping malls, multiplexes, and the wealthy elite. In all this, nothing remains of Marathi culture. Lalbaug, once the heart of Marathi life, has vanished" (Ketkar). This disappearance of Marathi cultural strongholds is a theme explored in *Arjun*, which showcases Hutatma Chauk, a site commemorating the sacrifices of 106 martyrs in the struggle led by the Samyukta Maharashtra Samiti to retain Mumbai with Maharashtra. The protagonist, Arjun, laments that, despite these sacrifices, Marathi people are now selling their homes and lands to non-Marathi people, losing their place in the city. "Where is the Marathi man in Mumbai today?"* asks Arjun, as he observes the daily influx of outsiders while the native Marathi population diminishes (Ilyas, 2011, 1:03:24). Ketkar further critiques the failure of politicians to address Mumbai's growth responsibly. He argues that by neglecting the city's development, they have allowed non-Marathi people to dominate its economy. "If you remove Mumbai and its income, the rest of Maharashtra would be worse off than Orissa or Bihar", he states, highlighting the city's critical importance to the state's financial health (Ketkar, 2010). Arjun echoes this sentiment, accusing corrupt Marathi politicians and brokers of selling Mumbai to non-Marathi people, reducing the city to nothing more than an asset to be exploited. He also directs his ire towards corrupt law enforcement officers who have become complicit in the dispossession of Marathi people. In *Arjun*, the conversation between Jay Thackeray, a Marathi resident, and Ratan Shah, a Gujarati businessman, highlights this insider-outsider divide. Shah, a powerful figure in Mumbai's share market, covets Thackeray's land in Parel, seeking to build lucrative housing towers. Despite Shah's claim that his long tenure in Mumbai and his ability to speak Marathi make him 'almost a Marathi', Thackeray rejects his proposition, insisting that his land should only be sold to a fellow Marathi. For Thackeray, the land is not merely an asset; it symbolizes his heritage and motherland. Shah, in contrast, represents the non-Marathi elite who view Mumbai's land as a commodity for financial gain, underscoring the conflicting perspectives of ownership and belonging in the city.

In *Balkadu*, a dramatic clash between Marathi and non-Marathi men in a crowded Mumbai local train poignantly highlights the growing cultural divide in the city. The scene revolves around a non-Marathi passenger who speaks in Hindi and refuses to adjust for a Marathi man. Balkrishna, the film's protagonist, interrupts their conversation, reminding them that non-Marathi people thrive in Mumbai because of the accommodating nature of the Marathi people. This tension escalates when the non-Marathi passenger boldly claims that Mumbai does not belong to anyone's father, provoking Balkrishna to hear the fictional voice of Bal Thackeray: "What are you waiting for? Slap him! Mumbai is ours, and our voice should be heard"* (Kale, 2015, 0:33:36). Balkrishna's physical retaliation mirrors Thackeray's own assertive rhetoric, which is a recurring theme in pro-Marathi films like *Balkadu*.

Balkadu portrays two contrasting reactions to the displacement faced by Marathi people. On the one hand, there are those who, like Kadam's father, yield to pressure from Gujarati and Marwari businessmen, selling their properties and relocating outside of Mumbai. On the other hand, characters like the roadside cobbler Baliram refuse to leave the city despite repeated attempts to evict him forcefully. Baliram's attachment to Mumbai is profound, as he sees the city not merely as a place of residence but as a nurturing figure akin to a mother. Baliram's defiance is symbolized by his refusal to respond to a court notice, written in English, demanding that he vacate his shop. "Writing in Marathi is a sin for them"*, he states, highlighting his frustration with the systemic exclusion of Marathi language and identity from institutional processes (Kale, 2015, 0:53:29). Despite being evicted multiple times, Baliram repeatedly sets up his shop, driven by an unshakable determination to remain in the city. He proudly recounts rejecting a lucrative offer from a Marwari businessman to buy his house, preferring instead to live out his days in Mumbai. His story serves as a powerful metaphor for the Marathi people's resistance to cultural and economic displacement. Through these characters, *Balkadu* emphasizes two key messages. First, it seeks to raise awareness among Marathi people about the threats posed by selling their land and leaving Mumbai. Second, it reinforces the idea that Mumbai is emotionally and culturally intertwined with Marathi identity, a bond that should not be severed at any cost. The film, thus, becomes both a call to action and a testament to the Marathi community's strength in the face of mounting challenges.

5. THE PRO-MARATHI AGENDA IN CINEMA

The Pro-Marathi agenda in Cinema is considered by some as a cultural revival and some as a propaganda. The films, *Mi Shivaji Raje Bhosale Boltoy*, *Arjun*, and *Balkadu*, portray a binary perception of Mumbai. For instance, a reviewer labelled *Balkadu* as "outright propaganda", a sentiment equally applicable to *Mi Shivaji Raje Bhosale Boltoy* and *Arjun* (Gosavi). All three films are driven by a clear pro-Marathi agenda, with protagonists representing the Marathi working class who rise up against the exploitation of the locals by non-Marathi people. Through these films, the perceived loss of control over Mumbai is a central theme. These cinematic narratives often depict non-Marathi people as exploiters of the city's resources, with Marathi citizens relegated to a peripheral role. The films portray a stark dichotomy between the 'insiders' (Marathi locals) and 'outsiders' (non-Marathi migrants), an "us versus them" dichotomy effectively framing Mumbai as a battleground for cultural and economic control.

In the film *Balkadu*, the Marathi protagonist, Balkrishna, draws inspiration from the speeches of Balasaheb Thackeray, who is represented as a symbol of Marathi strength. The film romanticizes the idea of reclaiming Mumbai from non-Marathi dominance, presenting an idealized version of the Marathi struggle. *Arjun* invokes figures like Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj and Tanaji Malusare and seeks strength to fight against those who oppress the Marathi people. Similarly, *Mi Shivaji Raje Bhosale Boltoy* uses Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj to evoke Marathi pride and instil a sense of cultural superiority. Though the filmmakers of *Balkadu* have denied any direct connection to *Mi Shivaji Raje Bhosale Boltoy*, the thematic similarities between the two films are undeniable (Admin, 2015). Both films centre on the resurgence of Marathi pride and identity in the face of socio-political marginalization. In *Mi Shivaji Raje Bhosale Boltoy*, the presence of Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj awakens Bhosale to his warrior ancestry, inspiring him to reclaim the lost dignity of the Marathi people in Mumbai. This symbolic reawakening of Marathi consciousness is similarly echoed in *Balkadu*, where the voice of Bal Thackeray serves as a rallying call for Marathi resurgence. While *Mi Shivaji Raje Bhosale Boltoy* uses the visual imagery of Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj's apparition, *Balkadu* invokes Balasaheb Thackeray's influence purely through his voice, which serves as a potent symbol of Marathi resistance. Balasaheb Thackeray's rhetoric inspires Balkrishna, a simple history teacher, to confront the exploitation and oppression imposed on Marathi by non-Marathi people in Mumbai. Both films ultimately serve as a reminder of the struggles faced by the Marathi community and provide a blueprint for reclaiming their place in a city that has increasingly marginalized them. Much like Arjun Pawar, Balkrishna expresses concern over how the Marathi cultural markers in Mumbai are gradually wiped

out. He reflects nostalgically that once, the roads, footpaths, and shops of Mumbai were Marathi. Therefore, there was value to the voice of the Marathi, which holds no value today. Determined to reclaim Mumbai, Balkrishna vows not to leave the city, even if it means enduring hardship. He calls on fellow Marathi people who have relocated to return, saying, “The roads, the lanes, the houses, the air we breathe in Mumbai—these belong to us”* (Kale, 2015, 2:06:03). The film closes with a powerful image of the Marathi people returning to Mumbai, rejuvenated with new strength and commitment. This serves as a warning to safeguard Mumbai from becoming merely a commodity in the hands of non-Marathi people.

In *Mi Shivaji Raje Bhosale Boltoy*, the lethargy and helplessness of the Marathi community are scrutinised through the character of Dinkarrao Bhosale, a middle-class man overwhelmed by the socio-economic challenges faced by his people in Mumbai. Bhosale laments the diminished value of Marathis, stating, “Today, all businesses are controlled by Gujaratis and Sindhis. Hotels belong to Udupis and Punjabis, and even Nepalis run Chinese food stalls. People from Uttar Pradesh, who came here for menial jobs, now hold significant positions in ministries, tax offices, and customs. Where is the Marathi man today?”* (Manjrekar, 2009, 0: 45:58-0:46:18). In a visionary encounter, the apparition of late Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj responds to Bhosale’s despair by posing a series of probing questions: “Who stopped the Marathi people from entering business? Why didn’t they start ventures like the Gujaratis? Has any Udupi ever prevented Marathis from opening hotels? North Indian hold good positions in government due to their education. Aren’t your children bright enough to study for Civil Service?”* (0:46:19-0:46:34). It challenges the notion that external forces are solely responsible for Marathi decline, emphasizing that it is the lack of initiative and perseverance within the community itself that has contributed to its struggles. He urges Bhosale to acknowledge that “Marathi people themselves are responsible for their backwardness”* and advises him not to scapegoat outsiders to mask the community’s own inadequacies (0:47:05). This revelation serves as a powerful message, urging the Marathi people to take accountability for their situation and act to change it. Thus, these films cannot be tagged as mere ‘propaganda’ since they also question the position of ‘Marathi Manos’ and call for introspection before pointing fingers at the non-Marathi people for their own backwardness in various fields.

6. CONCLUSION

The films, *Mi Shivaji Raje Bhosale Boltoy*, *Arjun*, and *Balkadu* represent important cultural artefacts that reflect the socio-political anxieties of the Marathi community in Mumbai. These films offer a nuanced critique of displacement, marginalization, and economic exploitation while simultaneously promoting a sense of pride in Marathi identity. By challenging stereotypes and promoting a reawakening of Marathi pride, these films emphasize the emotional connection the Marathi community has with Mumbai. While some of the films may be viewed as propagandistic, their underlying message of strength and identity preservation remains relevant, offering insights into the complexities of cultural integration in a city as diverse as Mumbai. However, these films also risk perpetuating exclusionary narratives, framing Mumbai’s multiculturalism as a threat rather than a strength. While these films have sparked a renewed sense of Marathi pride, they have been critically examined here for their potential to oversimplify complex socio-economic issues. The depiction of non-Marathi people as exploiters and Marathi people as victims may resonate with local audiences, but it overlooks the broader context of Mumbai’s cosmopolitan identity. Multiculturalism. An examination of the multifaceted relationship between Marathi identity, economic displacement, and the role of cinema in addressing these concerns has been conducted in this paper. The analysis has explored how Marathi cinema has challenged stereotypes, fostered a sense of pride and dignity, and addressed the anxieties associated with displacement within the Marathi community.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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None.

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