



Research Article

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Unraveling Bollywood's Propaganda: A Framework for Analysing Political Narratives in Indian Cinema

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ABSTRACT

This research paper delves into the intricate relationship between Bollywood cinema and propaganda. Bollywood, India's film industry, has been a powerful force in shaping national identity and cultural norms. However, as with any form of media, films can serve as vehicles for propagating ideologies and agendas. Against the backdrop of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led government's second tenure, marked by an upsurge in propaganda-laden films, this paper seeks to develop a comprehensive framework for evaluating propaganda elements in Bollywood movies. Drawing inspiration from Herman and Chomsky's propaganda model and Matthew Alford's adaptation of it for Hollywood, this research establishes the Bollywood propaganda model. The model comprises five key filters namely, concentrated corporate ownership, advertising, sourcing, flak and the enforcers and anti-'other' as a control mechanism. This research paper underscores the applicability of the propaganda model to Bollywood, shedding light on the industry's role in shaping public perceptions and beliefs. While the model offers valuable insights, further research is needed to address the complexities and variations within the Bollywood film landscape comprehensively. Continuous exploration and refinement of the framework are essential for a more nuanced understanding of propaganda's implications in Bollywood cinema.

INTRODUCTION

The use of the media as a tool for pushing the agenda of the state is not a novel phenomenon (Egelhofer, Lecheler 2019). Mass media outlets have always been effective at influencing public opinion in sociopolitical and cultural contexts, making them one of the strongest ideological state apparatuses (Gitlin 1978). Modern societies have adeptly harnessed the 'soft power' of mass media, crafting propaganda to shape knowledge systems (Chomsky, Herman 1988). The production, distribution, dissemination, and impacts of these contents raise questions of academic and social importance.

Since the inception of the first Indian film in 1913, Bollywood—Indian film industry—has been a central player in shaping national identity and promoting normative behavior (Kumar, Chaturvedi, Mehrotra 2014: 30). So much so that the 'film is perhaps the single strongest

agency for the creation of a national mythology of heroism, consumerism, leisure, and sociality' (Appadurai and Breckenridge 1996: 8). The strong interest the political parties and governments have taken in the production of films, mostly through censorship and taxation, of cinema is striking. Then, in the 1990s, the rise of Hindu nationalism, the liberalization of the Indian economy, and the renewed affection of the Indian middle class for cinema halls, previously deserted in favor of home entertainment, generated more production and more revenue. This period coincided with a new academic interest in Bollywood, producing a growing number of studies (Gopal and Moorthy 2008, Silva 2004, Viridi 2003: 210, Prasad 2003). Bollywood films shape and impose exemplarity by broadcasting role models, figures of idealization and identification at once. Popular cinema is thus a major actor of social engineering (Kumar, Chaturvedi, Mehrotra 2014).

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Yet, similar to any other media form, these films can serve as vehicles for propagating specific ideologies, values, and agendas. Understanding the presence and impact of propaganda in Bollywood films is crucial to discerning the messages conveyed to millions of viewers worldwide. Specifically, in the second tenure (2019-present) of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led government in India, there's a noticeable rise in films containing propaganda elements.

The interconnected concept of knowledge and power (Foucault 1980) operates intricately in Bollywood; the industry generates knowledge patterns to serve power, and power shapes knowledge patterns in Bollywood through mechanisms like censorship, taxation, and more. This research paper represents a pioneering effort to establish a comprehensive framework, akin to Herman and Chomsky's Propaganda Model, tailored to the unique landscape of Bollywood cinema. The primary goal is to provide a robust tool for future researchers and analysts to critically assess and unveil propaganda elements in Indian films. Unlike traditional primary data-based studies, my contribution lies in constructing a conceptual tool designed to navigate the complex realm of Bollywood narratives, offering a framework for insightful analysis. By adapting and innovating upon Herman and Chomsky's model, I aim to contribute to a nuanced understanding of the propagandistic elements in Bollywood films and their implications on public perceptions and societal beliefs.

Literature Review

Bollywood's role as a political tool, shaping public perceptions, has drawn considerable attention in recent studies. Films like *The Accidental Prime Minister* (2019), *My Name is RaGa* (2019), and *The Kashmir Files* (2022) have sparked critical discussions about potential propagandistic elements. However, despite these insights, there exists a significant gap in academia—a tailored framework to analyze propaganda in Bollywood films post-2018.

Previous studies, such as Faiza Bajwa and Muhammad Haseeb Sarwar's (2018) exploration of films like *Raees*, *Ek Tha Tiger*, and *Tera Bin Laden*, and Azmat Rasul's (2015) inquiry into Bollywood's role as a state-sponsored tool, offer valuable perspectives. However, a comprehensive understanding of previous studies emphasizes a surge in propaganda films after 2018 (Chowdhury 2019). It becomes imperative to investigate how strong the propaganda elements are in these films and how far they affect the Indian socio-political arena. Despite the intertwined nature of Bollywood and politics, a comprehensive framework to study the state's influence on propaganda film production is notably absent. While Rasul's study draws on Herman and Chomsky's Propaganda Model, it requires customization to address contemporary propaganda strategies in Bollywood. In light of the changed socio-political scenario, revisiting the framework becomes essential.

This research paper aims to bridge this gap by developing a comprehensive framework for evaluating propaganda elements in Bollywood films. The framework will draw inspiration from two prominent propaganda models—Herman and Chomsky's Propaganda Model (1988) for news media and Matthew Alford's (2009) Propaganda Model for Hollywood, which customizes Chomsky's model to fit the film industry.

Herman and Chomsky's Propaganda Model, proposed in *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (1988), offers valuable insights into the functioning of media institutions. It focuses on the strategies employed by the politically and financially powerful elite to marginalize dissident voices. The Propaganda model identifies five key filters that control the media and shape the information disseminated to the public. These filters play a significant role in maintaining homogeneity within the media industry, posing a threat to the diversity necessary for a healthy democratic society. The first filter focuses on the size, ownership concentration, wealth, and profit-driven nature of media conglomerates while the second filter centers around advertising, which serves as the primary source of revenue for the media. The third filter highlights the media's reliance on information provided by government sources, businesses, and experts funded and approved by these powerful entities. The fourth filter, known as "flak," involves powerful negative reactions directed toward media. These reactions are used as a means to discipline the media and prevent any deviations from the established narrative. Finally, the fifth filter pertains to the use of anti-communism ideology to stifle dissident voices. Labels such as "pro-communist" and "traitor" have been used to keep progressive campaigners expressing liberal opinions on the defensive (Herman, Chomsky 1988). Overall, the propaganda model illustrates how the media industry operates as a colonized propaganda apparatus, subjugating the consciousness of media workers and promoting the interests of the powerful political and economic elite.

Matthew Alford's research on Hollywood propaganda, as presented in his book *Reel Power: Hollywood Cinema and American Supremacy* (2010) unveils the close collaboration between the U.S. military and the film industry. In *A Propaganda Model for Hollywood* (2009), Alford presents a framework to analyze how propaganda operates within the Hollywood film industry. This model consists of five key filters that influence the content and narratives presented in Hollywood films and how these films often promote pro-military and nationalistic narratives, reinforcing American hegemony and justifying military interventions (Alford 2009). The first filter is Concentrated Corporate Ownership, which highlights the dominance of a few major media conglomerates in Hollywood. The second filter Advertising revolves around the role of advertising in shaping Hollywood content. The third filter Sourcing examines the sources of information

and inspiration for Hollywood films that influence film scripts and alter narratives to align with government or military objectives. The fourth filter Flak and Enforcers addresses the resistance or criticism faced by filmmakers who dare to challenge mainstream narratives or present dissenting viewpoints. The fifth and final filter Anti-'Other' as a Control Mechanism revolves around the use of the 'Other' as a control mechanism in Hollywood films. The portrayal of certain groups, cultures, or countries as antagonistic or threatening allows Hollywood to reinforce notions of American exceptionalism and justify military interventions (Alford 2009).

Herman and Chomsky's model, which provides a foundational framework to understand propaganda, and Alford's model, which offers insights into the factors influencing narratives in the film industry. Despite differences in cultural and geopolitical contexts between the US and India, and Hollywood and Bollywood, Alford's and Chomsky's models serve as valuable references for exploring potential links between Bollywood films and the Indian state or other dominant power structures. Adapting these models to the unique context of Bollywood, this research aims to develop an updated and customized propaganda model to examine the varied forms of propaganda present in Bollywood films.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research employs a qualitative research approach aimed at developing a robust analytical framework for identifying and assessing propaganda elements in Bollywood films. Inspired by Herman and Chomsky's Propaganda Model and its adaptation by Matthew Alford for Hollywood, the study crafts the Bollywood Propaganda Model, consisting of five key filters. The qualitative design involves an extensive content analysis not limited to specific films but encompassing a representative sample from various periods, genres, and themes within Bollywood cinema. The sample is purposefully selected to capture the diversity of the industry. Data collection encompasses a systematic examination of narrative structures, thematic content, and cinematic techniques

employed across a spectrum of films. The qualitative approach enables a comprehensive exploration of common propagandistic elements, contributing to the construction of an analytical tool applicable to a broad range of Bollywood productions. This methodology is designed to offer valuable insights into the inherent propagandistic nature of Bollywood cinema, aiding future researchers and analysts in critically evaluating and unveiling propaganda elements in Indian films.

Bollywood Propaganda Model

Concentrated Corporate Ownership

In the context of Bollywood, this filter draws from Herman and Chomsky's framework, tailored to the unique ownership dynamics of the Indian film industry. Referencing both Alford and Rasul, this filter highlights the concentration of media ownership and control by a select few. In recent times, Bollywood has witnessed significant changes in its ownership structure, with a few influential entities dominating the production, distribution, and direction of films. In the 1990s, Bollywood gained industry status, attracting both public and private investors. This recognition facilitated integration into domestic and global markets, reshaping the dynamics of media ownership (Rasul 2015)

However, similar to the observation made by Alford on Hollywood, Bollywood's major production and distribution is concentrated on a few corporate entities, namely, Balaji Telefilms, Dharma Productions, Eros International Media, Fox Star Studio India, Ramoji Film City, Reliance Big Entertainment, Viacom18 Media, and Yash Raj Films. With a select group of influential individuals making decisions that shape the content and direction of the Indian culture industry, surviving with dissent voice is difficult and propagating dominant ideologies is an easy task. As Bollywood serves as a soft power for India, it enjoys considerable government support, which includes relaxed entertainment tax rules, permission for foreign investments, and access to financial support from banks and financial institutions. The government's backing aligns with the profit-making interests for these corporate entities (Table 1).

Table 1: Bollywood Propaganda Framework Filters

| <i>Variable Name</i> | <i>Description</i> | <i>Key Characteristics</i> | <i>Examples</i> |
|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|---|--|
| Concentrated Corporate Ownership | Ownership dynamics in Bollywood | Major production houses and their influence on content | Balaji Telefilms, Dharma Productions, Yash Raj Films |
| Advertising | Business interests and film content | Role of advertisers, product placement, and its impact | Nokia Lumia in <i>Chennai Express</i> , Mountain Dew in <i>Zindagi Na Milegi Dobara</i> |
| Sourcing | Dependence on government sources | Use of government narratives in film production | <i>Uri: The Surgical Strike (2019)</i> , <i>Batla House (2019)</i> , and <i>The Kashmir Files (2022)</i> |
| Flak and the Enforcers | Negative reactions and enforcement | Government responses, ban of films, criticisms faced by filmmakers | <i>Fana</i> , <i>Phantom</i> , <i>Unfreedom</i> , <i>Parzania</i> |
| Anti-'Other' as a Control Mechanism | Depiction of adversaries | Antagonising minorities by Polarised representations in film narratives | <i>The Kerala Story</i> , <i>The Tashkent Files</i> , <i>Hurdang</i> , <i>The Kashmir Files</i> |

Even in the regional film industries, a similar trend of concentrated ownership can be observed. Even in cases of industries where ownership is not highly concentrated, regional industries face significant challenges in claiming a national or international audience due to Bollywood's dominance in the Indian film landscape. As regional industries grapple with limited resources and exposure, the overwhelming reach and financial prowess of Bollywood place regional films at a distinct disadvantage in reaching a wider audience. The vast distribution networks, international recognition, and well-established market presence allow Bollywood to disseminate its narratives and ideologies on a massive scale. Consequently, the propagandistic impact of Bollywood films far outweighs that of regional ones.

Advertising

In the context of Bollywood films, this filter emphasizes the interweaving of business interests between advertisers and production houses, despite the absence of traditional advertisements within the films themselves. The prevalence of product placement techniques and merchandising deals among movie-makers fosters an environment where Bollywood filmmakers may face pressures to align their content with the preferences of corporations and governments (Rasul, 2015). This convergence of business interests can exert a subtle but substantial influence on the creative decisions of filmmakers, ultimately shaping the narratives presented on screen.

The current socio-political climate adds another layer of complexity to this interplay. Filmmakers who dare to challenge dominant ideologies risk encountering backlash and stigmatization. Labels such as 'anti-nationalist' or 'urban-naxal' may be attached to films or filmmakers who deviate from the prevailing narrative, particularly if their content contradicts the interests of powerful entities or the government. Such branding can lead to adverse consequences, including difficulties in securing advertising deals and sponsorships. Advertisers may become cautious about associating with films deemed controversial or critical of the status quo, thereby impacting the financial viability of such projects.

Therefore, for financial security, the major producers sell markets (film-goers) to buyers (advertisers). As such, the film producers compete for their patronage and – as Herman and Chomsky describe it with regard to news media – 'develop specialized staff to solicit advertisers and explain how their programs serve advertisers' needs' (Herman, Chomsky 1988). Consequently, many films are under pressure to avoid raising 'serious complexities and disturbing controversies' because this would interfere with the 'buying mood' in the media outlet (Alford 2009).

Sourcing

In contrast to the news media's heavy reliance on government sources, the film industry demonstrates

a limited dependence on governmental inputs. Films, as products of imagination, are typically free from accusations of relying on non-credible sources, unlike news reports. However, filmmakers have strategically utilized government sources and resources to create seemingly authentic films while also economizing on production costs. As shown in Table 1, movies like *Uri: The Surgical Strike* (2019), *Batla House* (2019), and *The Kashmir Files* (2022) exemplify this trend, drawing on government narratives to craft their cinematic portrayals.

While Herman and Chomsky primarily link this filter to government sources in news media, in Bollywood, it encompasses films based on post-truth narratives popularised by the ruling party. A noticeable increase in films that are based on post-truth accounts and narratives can be observed, particularly after the second tenure of the current government. Such films often rely on politically charged and polarising information, leveraging rumors and skewed historical interpretations to advance the ideals of right-wing politics and demonize minority groups. Films like these work as agents contributing to the post-truth phenomenon by creating a scenario where "Political debates are therefore no longer based on any truth or factual accuracy, but on 'post-truth', whereby truth is simply abandoned as a shared ground whereon opinions should successively be constructed" (Sharma 2019:4). For instance, critics have debunked claims made in the trailer of *The Kerala Story* (2023), which depicted "heart-breaking and gut-wrenching stories of 32,000 Kerala females (Sebastian, 2023). The 2021 US report said only 66 persons of Indian origin were on the list of ISIS foreign fighters. The Indian government, too, never estimated the number of Indian participants in the jihad of ISIS to be more than a few dozen (Bhattacharya 2023). The primary objective of films like these is to nurture extreme Hindu nationalism based upon 'Hindutva' ideology (Berglund 2004:1064-1070).

Flak and the Enforcers

Punishment or 'flak' refers to the 'negative responses to a media statement or program' that 'may take the form of letters, telegrams, phone calls, petitions, lawsuits, speeches, bills before Congress, and other modes of complaint, threat, and punitive action' (Herman and Chomsky, 2008, 26). According to Herman and Chomsky, while flak may be organized locally or consist of 'entirely independent actions of individuals', the ability to produce effective flak is related to power. The government is a major producer of flak, 'regularly assailing, threatening, and "correcting" the media, trying to contain any deviations from the established line' (Alford 2009).

In the context of Bollywood, this filter elucidates that films that nurse slightly different opinions from right-wing ideologies are criticized, banned, or threatened by the government or dominant groups. This includes examples like *Fana*, *Phantom*, *Unfreedom*, *Parzania*, *Firaq*

and *Insha Allah Kashmir*. It could be argued that patriotism rules Indian cinema and the movie-makers avoid raising issues that may not run parallel to the official policy for fear of flak from the government and the audience (Rasul 2015). A negative government reaction could spell economic ramifications for the burgeoning film industry, still in its developmental phase. Content, therefore, is carefully filtered in Bollywood products so as to please policymakers, audiences, and financiers (Rasul, 2015).

Anti-'Other' as a control mechanism

Film narratives often employ polarised representations of characters, depicting a clear distinction between 'good' and 'evil,' with the audience typically rallying behind the protagonists (Alford, 2009). In the initial stages, Indian films have often utilized subtle nationalist undertones during the independence struggle, positioning British rule as the antagonist. Post-independence, the India-Pakistan binary has emerged as a prominent narrative theme in movies (Rasul, 2015). In the most recent cinematic portrayals, Muslims and Dalit/ethnic minorities have been conveniently depicted as adversaries, while higher caste Hindus are portrayed as the 'pure' heroes. This construction of the 'Other' serves a strategic purpose, aligning with Chomsky's concept of 'dominant ideology,' which engenders fear and hatred to divert public attention away from critical social and economic issues (Chomsky and Barsamian, 2003).

In Bollywood narratives, the portrayal of an 'Other' serves as a mechanism to captivate the audience with imagined adversaries, deflecting their focus from urgent real-life issues like corruption, economic imbalances, and other critical developmental concerns (Table 1 for a simplified breakdown). By fostering fear and rage towards a perceived external threat, these films channel emotions away from socio-economic realities, effectively preventing the public from critically examining their own conditions. This phenomenon is particularly evident in recent years, with a surge in such movies enjoying patronage from the current government. This trend is exemplified by films such as *The Kerala Story*, *The Kashmir Files*, *Padmavat*, *Sooryavanshi*, and others, which strategically employ the 'Other' as a narrative device. By projecting external threats along with demonizing religious and ethnic minorities, these films foster a narrative of unity against an imagined adversary, consolidating support for certain ideologies and political agendas.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the utilization of Herman and Chomsky's Propaganda Model, with minor adaptations inspired by Alford's work, proves valuable in elucidating the underlying politics of Bollywood film output. Notably, the organizational structures driving film production bear striking resemblances to those of news producers,

underscoring the applicability of the Propaganda Model to the film industry. Additionally, Alford's adaptations for Hollywood further enhance the model's adaptability, making it better suited to understanding the propagandistic elements in the realm of cinema (Table 1). Nevertheless, it is important to recognize that the Bollywood Propaganda Model, like any theoretical framework, possesses its limitations. While it effectively captures key aspects of propaganda in Bollywood films, it may not comprehensively address all complexities and variations within the industry. As such, this calls for a continuous commitment to research and scholarly investigation to enhance the model's adequacy and relevance. While the Bollywood Propaganda Model effectively captures key aspects of propaganda in films, its true strength lies in its potential as a practical tool for researchers and analysts. This framework is not merely a review but a dynamic instrument for dissecting the intricate layers of propaganda in Bollywood cinema. In the pursuit of comprehensive and nuanced insights, further exploration and refinement of the framework are imperative to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the propagandistic elements in Bollywood films and their implications on public perceptions and societal beliefs.

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